

## **Pushing the Boundaries of Real: Dystopian World of *The Queue***

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**Abstract:** The debut novel by Egyptian writer Basma Abdel Aziz has been translated from Arabic by Elisabeth Jaquette. It explores the troubled relationship between the individual and the totalitarian state in an unspecified place that implies the world in general or the post-Arab Spring Egypt in particular. Most of the power rests with the state, resulting in a lopsided system. It has been placed alongside the dystopian writings of George Orwell and Franz Kafka because of its doublespeak and surreal atmosphere. The menacing presence of an overbearing authority and its extremely efficient mechanism to control people's lives through surveillance lurk throughout the novel. The ambience of fear under oppressive regimes, reminiscent of the twentieth century classics *1984* and *The Trial*, has been recreated but with a difference in setting that is the Middle East. The paper is significant as there has been a dearth of scholarship on utopian writings from the region. Secondly, it is important to take note of the increased output of dystopian writing from this region in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** Arab Spring, Egypt, Dystopia, Authoritarianism, Utopia, Real

Utopianism has been defined by Lyman Tower Sargent as “social dreaming—the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live (3).” He is of the view that utopianism has various manifestations and that there are one or more utopian traditions. He contests the common assumption that the Christian West is the fountainhead of the genre. But utopia as a genre of literature has certain formal characteristics that are most common in the Christian West, especially because the genre is identified with Thomas More who belongs to the Christian West. He admits though, that the scholarship on non-western utopianism has been virtually non-existent. However, body utopias and intentional societies, part of the pre-contact utopian tradition, have been found in Arabic. Most scholars agree on this point that the twentieth century is the age of dystopia. As compared to other periods, the twentieth century seemed to reject hope, says Sargent. He held:

The catalogue of the twentieth century has been read as nothing but failure—World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, the Middle East, Northern Ireland, the Gulag Archipelago, the rising rate of violent crime, the Cold War, the apparent failure of the welfare state, ecological disaster, corruption and now the upsurge of ethnic and tribal slaughter in Eastern Europe and Africa. Not surprisingly this has led to pessimism about the ability of the human race to achieve a better society, and the dystopia—warning that things could get even worse—became the dominant utopian form. (Sargent 26)

Consequently, content of many dystopias has been driven by war, fascism, totalitarianism, supremacy of science and technology, patriarchy, environmental degradation and so on. The

21st century has not fared better, and the similar mood of dejection and hopelessness continues which is clearly reflected in the contemporary fiction. Several utopian scholars have explored the role of dystopian fiction as social and political criticism. Sargent defines dystopia as a “non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of that contemporary society” (9). Accordingly, *The Queue* bears close resemblance to a Middle East country though the writer has not directly referred to the real happenings in the history of Egypt anywhere in the text. Her work rides the wave of dystopian writing that has overtaken Middle East post Arab Spring. Alexander Alter in his article in *New York Times* observes that the current wave of dystopian and surrealist fiction from Middle Eastern writers stems from the frustration and chaos following the Arab Spring. He says a bleak; apocalyptic strain of post-revolutionary literature has emerged in the region. A shift away from realism is clearly discernible. Dystopian themes are not entirely new in Arabic fiction, but they have become much more prominent in recent years, publishers and translators say. The genre has proliferated in part because it captures the sense of despair that many writers say they feel in the face of cyclical violence and repression. At the same time, futuristic settings may give writers some measure of cover to explore charged political ideas without being labeled dissidents (Alter). Arab Spring refers to a series of uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Syria in 2011 which revived hopes among Arabs for better governance, freedom and human rights. The revolutions had held promise of democracy and greater social freedom which has remained elusive in these countries except for Tunisia. Since the revolution, the optimism has largely waned. The euphoric writings of the Arab Spring have given way to the dark, grim tales of future. The omnipotent authority has come down heavily on art and creative writing. In the case of Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down after thirty years of rule. However, the government that replaced the former proved to be even worse, says Layla al-Zubaidi, co-editor of a collection of post-Arab Spring writing titled *Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution*. In Egypt, under the strict rule of the former General and current President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the government has shut art galleries, raided publishing houses and seized copies of books it considered controversial. More than five hundred Muslim Brotherhood officials were sentenced to death in March 2014. In Michael J. Totten’s words his regime reeks of Stalinism. The currency of dystopian writing in such an atmosphere is understandable for the genre gives voice to a collective sentiment of frustration.

### **Dystopian World of *The Queue***

The paper examines the way Aziz’s novel goes beyond the limits of realistic presentation. It focuses on formal strategies employed by Aziz which have to be explained with reference to the content. However, both are yoked to the fundamental purpose of dystopian writing: “to prompt readers to change the world by elaborating on its evils in terms of other worlds” (Murphy 36). To approach any dystopian work, it is beneficial to investigate the authorial intention. In an interview Aziz talks about the genesis of her novel. She began writing *The Queue* in September 2012 after her return from France. A psychiatrist by profession, she is based in Cairo. While visiting Downtown Cairo, she came across a long queue of people waiting in front of a closed government office. Two hours later when she walked past the place, the queue was still there. She was amazed to see that the same people were standing there; the

queue had grown longer with no sign of the gate opening up. This gave Aziz the idea of a short story that eventually assumed the proportions of a novel. She wondered why they stood there endlessly without protesting. They could have left the place in frustration. She started writing in a frenzy chalking out the lives of people who had learnt to be patient with the authority. Her characters rescheduled their lives in order to stand in the queue and wait for the gate to open. “It reached the point that I felt I was on the verge of becoming someone like many of the characters, a dutiful and submissive citizen whose life is dictated by the totalitarian authority. The closed gate slowly came to symbolize a regime that represses people, determines their behavior, turns them into identical copies of one another, and strips them of their will,” (Aziz). Aziz admits that the fictional form gave her the freedom to comment on the totalitarian authority.

The story is set in an unnamed Middle Eastern city where an unknown authority called the Gate has assumed power. Unlike other notable dystopias, *The Queue* is not the story of a utopia gone wrong. The author refrains from naming the country, the authorities or the events and deliberately uses the euphemistic substitutes like Disgraceful Events or the Gate. The 2011 uprising against Mr. Mubarak is called “the first storm” whereas a later civilian revolt that ended in bloodshed is referred to as “the disgraceful events.” The author intentionally drops many details and leaves a number of things vague, unexplained and hence less than real. This creates the distance between the contemporary world of readers and the imagined world of the dystopia. It is a brilliant device that enables the author to evade censorship. At the same time, it exposes the government tendency to rewrite official history by naming. “The Gate had appeared rather suddenly as the First Storm died down, long before the Disgraceful Events occurred,” (Aziz 31). The explanation is rather cryptic. Initially people were ignorant of the role the Gate played in their lives.

Then one day the Gate issued an official statement detailing its jurisdiction, which extended over just about everything anyone could think of. This was the last document to bear the ruler’s seal and signature. As time passed, the gate began to introduce a few new policies, and soon it was the singular source of all regulations and decree. Before long, it controlled absolutely everything, and made all procedures, paperwork, authorizations, and permits—even those for eating and drinking—subject to its control. (Aziz 31, 32)

A long queue outside a closed government building acted as a trigger for Aziz to write this bleak story. But she does not stick to the rules of verisimilitude and her queue extends through the novel, crossing into other cities and her imagination extends further and further with it, confesses Aziz. All dystopian worlds are distanced from the real world spatially and temporally. Patrick D. Murphy is of the view “While authors who want their work to touch immediately the life of the reader benefit greatly from the utilization of spatial and historical distance to fabulate a utopia or dystopia, they also face the danger of having that same distance sever the didactic signals of their chosen genre” (25). Aziz does place her story in an anonymous city but she uses the pseudo-documentary framing to reduce the dystopian distance

between tenor and vehicle. This formal device, says Murphy, is more verisimilitudinous because of its appeal to journalistic and academic writing conventions.

The medical file of its protagonist which is being read by Dr Tarek sets off the narrative. Once the narrative starts rolling, Aziz creates a microcosm around the queue, taking advantage of the fictional form. People begin to eat, drink, sleep, run business, hold religious discourse while waiting for their turn to petition the powerful authority. The queue is the metaphor for conforming citizens. Gradually everybody starts falling in line. The protagonist, 38-year-old Yehya Gad el-Rab Saeed has been accidentally shot during the Disgraceful Events. A bullet is lodged in his pelvis but he cannot get it removed without the permission of the government. So, he has to join the queue to get the permit. Other people have their own reasons to wait in the queue. Um Mabrouk wants a permit for treatment of her ailing daughter. She has already lost her elder daughter owing to delay in the completion of formalities. Shalabi has come from the village as he wants his deceased cousin to be declared a martyr. Ines is facing a reevaluation of her recruitment as a teacher because she happens to appreciate a student's assignment that is critical of the government. "The dystopian rulers live in a mysterious realm of absolute completeness where they decide everything while their subjects are plainly gaps," (Mihailescu 217). There are many more instances of government overreach which keep on increasing until they reach a climactic point. Yehya's condition deteriorates with the passage of time and even the slightest movement causes him a lot of pain. Aziz transgresses the boundaries of verisimilitude while describing the condition of Yehya. Yehya's partner Amani, friend Nagy and a journalist Ehab try to help him out of this crisis but to no avail. The impenetrable and opaque authority, the Gate, has an ever-watchful system in place to control its people's lives. "It is the higher, abstract, and inscrutable things that engulf and dismiss the lower diversity of details and plurisignifications, the 'the richness of life,'" (Mihailescu 217). Mihailescu insists that dystopias offer shrinking worlds which can't consider all imaginable details.

To the shock of Dr Tarek, who is handling Yehya's case, the latter's file is periodically and secretly updated. The Gate has been controlling the fate of its people meticulously through paperwork. If the application of Yehya for surgical removal of bullet is rejected, the file will be closed permanently with a "red tape." The metaphor of red tape comes alive in Aziz's hands. There is such an absolute control over all activities obvious and natural that virtually nothing happens. This condition has been articulated as ideal by the main character of *We*, written by Zamyatin. The character named D-503 says, "The ideal (clearly) is the condition where nothing happens anymore," (23). The text works against the normalization of the government excesses. The author tries to make strange what has become all too conventional "the dystopian features of the present and the possible horrors of the future" (Murphy 25). The characters are doomed to give in to the absurd demands of the system with a banal inevitability. People have to procure the ominous Certificate of True Citizenship if they want to apply for a job. The queue hardly inches ahead, applications of ordinary citizens remain pending, people keep waiting for their turn to receive medical treatment. The priorities of the state or the Gate are quite different. The government is very particular about its announcements and decrees, keen to clean the square and its image, to remove the last trace of violence inflicted by the government and to conspire against its citizens by spying on them.

Basma Abdel Aziz handles the plot brilliantly. The novel is divided into six sections, each section corresponding to a new entry in Yehya's file as it is read by Dr Tarek. The plot reinforces the theme of authoritarianism and government overreach in a city where the life of an individual is measured by additions to his or her record. Records are maintained religiously in the state. The dystopian world becomes comprehensive after a massive process of reduction. It does not have room for realistic detailing. The document no. 4 of Yehya's file, which also includes inputs from his childhood, adolescence and university life, states, "In addition to anxiety and irritability, other symptoms include an irrational belief that he (Yehya) can alter reality" (Aziz 102). An individual's capacity to change things is a threat to the state. Ehab's report which was rejected by his editor in chief was rubbished by Yehya as well. He believed that it made no sense. The use of the term rumours for the real happenings is an example of the subversion of language famously called Orwellian doublespeak. The state manipulates facts and promptly issues an official version of the events:

The story simply made no sense—it contradicted all the other accounts in all the other papers, as well as every statement released by the Gate, and it went against the committee's latest fatwas, too. Ehab's report was just based on rumours that there were citizens injured by government bullets who hadn't come forward, that others were blind to their injuries. Rumours that they had disposed of the bullets removed from people's bodies, and then denied that the bullets had ever existed ...” (Aziz 182)

Calin Andrei Mihailescu believes, "Twentieth century dystopian novels bring to life such cases of fall from the state of knowledge (where there exists a difference between understanding of arbitrariness and necessity) to a state of lack of knowledge (where whatever is the case is happening because of necessity and is, therefore, good). Dystopias are the strongest case to date for the inverse fall from the paradise: the fall into nothingness" (218). The queue is the central trope around which the life of the novel's characters revolves. However, the Gate, the Northern Building are the important pillars of this authoritarian rule aided by the newspaper "The Truth," and a dubious phone company Violet Telecom, through which the government controls the masses. Standing in the queue is the national pastime and people move away from it only occasionally. Yehya and his friends stray from the queue only to retrieve his X-ray from the Zephyr hospital which clearly shows the bullet in his body. All the X-ray reports have mysteriously disappeared from the hospitals. After the Disgraceful Events, all X-ray machines have been removed from the hospitals. Meanwhile Yehya is gradually dying a slow death. He has traces of blood in his urine. Carmen Maria Machado remarks, "The Queue is the newest in the genre of totalitarian absurdity: helpless citizens—some hopeful some hopeless—struggling against an opaque, sinister government, whose decrees, laws, propaganda, and red tape would be comical if they weren't so deadly serious." She compares the fiction to Vladimir Sorokin's novel of the same name, Kafka's *The Trial*, Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*. All of them create a surreal and nightmarish world of dystopian bureaucracy where simple jobs are obfuscated by long winding procedures akin to Dickens' offices of circumlocution.

Kafkaesque atmosphere of the dystopia adds to its chilling terror. Drawing from her experience of counselling torture victims, Aziz creates a nightmarish world. Amin Malak claims that while dystopias may be fear-laden horror fiction ... the emphasis of the work is not on the horror for its own sake, but on forewarning... [T]he aim is neither to distort reality beyond recognition, nor to provide an escapist world for the reader, but “to allow certain tendencies in modern society to spin forward without the brake of sentiment and humaneness (10).” When Amani transgresses the line drawn by authorities, she is subjected to inexplicable torture. “First the color drained from her imagination, then so did the light, so that her mind too became black. Gradually she began to forget faces...were it possible that her memory was being stolen from her” (152). The torture, Amani is subjected to, seems unreal. Aziz keeps the methods of torture vague but the effect is devastating. Amani wondered whether “they” had taken her off the face of the earth, out into space, and had left her naked on a dark uninhabited planet. The regime has an uncanny ability to bend the will of the individuals. It becomes difficult for the reader to pin point the real cause of citizens’ predicament. While the system silently encroaches on civil liberties, the inability to know what’s ailing the system is disconcerting. However, the novel is not that far removed from reality so as to be relegated to the class of dream literature. Murphy elaborates if a work simply enables escapism it will only encourage social inaction and facilitate the continuation of the status quo. On the contrary it leads to a feeling of discomfort urging social action by implicitly or explicitly commenting on the contemporary reader’s situation.

The man in the galabeya, representative of religion, colludes with the government. The High Sheikh, the source of all fatwas, quotes the Greater Book and urges the believers not to be swept away by rumours:

Assertions that people had been injured in the Events were clearly no more than lies and fabrications, spread by an anti-religious minority who had suffered injuries themselves. Most people in the nation were believers (thank God) and so he had no reason to fear for them, not even in the face of bullets ... if a believer were to be struck by a bullet (despite his prayers and supplication), his faith would guide him to the understanding that it was *God himself* who’d struck him down. (Aziz 181)

One trait that is common to all totalitarian states is the control over media. There is a continuous attempt to rewrite history. Aziz uses exaggeration to emphasize her point. The only paper that has circulation is state controlled and is ironically named the Truth. In an opinion poll conducted by the Centre for Freedom and Righteousness on the performance of the government, the results were the same as that of the previous year. “Citizens had unanimously endorsed its governance, laws, and court rulings—wholeheartedly and dutifully supporting the just decrees that had recently been issued. Those conducting the poll had therefore decided not to conduct one again. To simplify matters, they would announce the previous poll’s results on a set yearly date” (68).

Amani is haunted by nightmares since she confronted the representatives of the regime on disappearance of Yehya’s X-ray. But she caves in at the end. She starts believing with the

regime that it was all a simple fiction. A weight had finally lifted from her chest. “Then she tried to convince Yehya that the bullet that had pierced his side and lodged itself in his pelvis was a fake bullet, that it wasn’t important to remove it, and that he no longer needed to trouble himself with the matter of who shot him. But Yehya was not convinced, and he did not stop bleeding” (213). This naiveté of the narrator is an effective formal strategy of dystopia. Ultimately the two female characters with rebellious streak, Amani and Ines, are forced to conform while Yehya resigns to his fate. The defeat of the different was obvious in this kind of world. “Dystopias acknowledge the demise of individual differences as a way of keeping order in power and power in order. Dystopias are stories that contrast the failure of the main character with the unstoppable advance of society towards totalitarianism. The loss of the self is the character’s final acknowledgement of, and ultimate contribution to, society’s being definitely victorious” (Mihaiescu 215). The readers have a sense of closure as Yehya’s file traces the 140 days of his life after the bullet injury. The indeterminate ending adds to the horror and intrigue of the novel.

### **Conclusion**

*The Queue* treads carefully between reality and dream. Aziz magnifies the horrors of a totalitarian state through exaggeration and ambiguity. She achieves the cognitive function and didactic purpose of her fiction by making her dystopian world similar to contemporary life in Egypt. Foregrounding through exaggeration a few of its elements, she achieves the fine balance that prevents the escape of the readers into the fantasy world. In the process, the novel pushes the boundaries of real and assumes transcendental dimensions. In fact, *The Queue* rises above the critique of the fallout of the Arab Spring and becomes universally applicable to any place, any period of history with only minor variations.

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