Reviewers Sharp as a Knife: The Reception of *Lā Sakākīn fī Maṭābikh Hādhihi al-Madīna* by Khaled Khalifa

Nienke Weiland
Student number: 1047965
Supervisor: Judith A. Naeff
31 May, 2017
Leiden University
MA Middle Eastern Studies

سوف تمر هذه العاصفة

This storm will pass

(A phrase that circulates on the internet both in Arabic and English)

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Note on Transliteration and Translation

In this thesis, the guidelines formulated by the department of Middle Eastern Studies at Leiden University[1] were used for the transliteration of Arabic names. These names, of people and newspapers or magazines, are printed in italics, so that it is clear they were originally written in the Arabic script and can be retrieved in the original texts that way.

Names that were written in the Latin script already have not been changed, even if, especially on *Goodreads*, there were spelling errors in them. This was done to enable retracing them in the source texts, and also because users may well deliberately have written their names like this in an act of creatively producing language. It would have been a shame to lose that information. Names of characters from the novel follow the orthography of those in the Dutch translation by Djûke Poppinga.

Furthermore, the translations of Dutch into English are my own, as well as those from Arabic into English. The dictionary by Hans Wehr[2] has been very helpful in this process, as well as the Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic by Hinds and Badawi[3], for pieces of text written in dialect.

---

[1] "Transcriptie Systeem van het Arabisch", *Leiden University*, accessed 24 August, 2017, http://media.leidenuniv.nl/legacy/transcriptie-arabisch-1.pdf.
[2] Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 4th ed. (Urbana, U.S.: Spoken Language Services Inc., 1994), via ejtaal.net/aa/.
[3] Martin Hinds & El-Said Badawi, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic*, via ejtaal.net/aa/.

Introduction

Recent years have shown dramatic developments in Syria. After successful protests in Tunisia and Egypt, revolts started occurring in various Syrian cities as well. They targeted Bashar al-Assad and his Baʿath-party, which had ruled with an iron hand since the military coup that took place in 1962. The first inhabitants turning to the streets in January 2011 lived in Derʿa, where according to Paulo Gabriel Hilu Pinto the main causes for unrest were "increasing poverty, decreasing governmental investments and services in rural regions, violent repression, and resource-draining corruption."[4] From here, mass protests spread to other regions, as these factors must have been present there, too. Although they started out peacefully, protesters were soon brutally repressed by the government, leading to a militarization of the conflict. Armed groups fighting al-Assad came into existence, while a part of the population still supported him. As Pinto describes, "the fault lines of Syrian society" became deeper, leading to social fragmentation and polarization, and at some point "the dynamics of civil war were present throughout the country."[5] Furthermore, other countries, among which the USA, Russia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, increasingly became involved in the conflict, supporting certain factions and undertaking combative actions against others. This, in combination with continued violence of the government against its people, led to hundreds of thousands of casualties, an even larger number of refugees, and the precarious political situation that exists until today.

Writers and poets in and outside of Syria have addressed these events and produced impressive literary works related to them. For instance, Samar Yazbek, Dima Wannous and Ghayath Al-Madhoun in their writing touch upon themes like violence, dictatorship, war, and longing for one's country after having to flee from it. Khaled Khalifa is also often mentioned in this context. He was born in 1964, as he told Matthew Davis (an American writer who lived in Syria and Jordan for a year), into a large family of thirteen children living in the poorer part of Aleppo. He started writing poetry in childhood already, and discovered fiction when he was in University. After graduating from Law College, where he says to rarely have attended class, he served in the army for two years, as is obligatory in Syria. After that, he moved to Damascus where he established a literary magazine together with his friends, *ʼAlif*, and wrote his first novel, published in 1993, called *Ḥāris al-Khadīʿa*, 'The Guard of Deception'. For economic reasons, he started living with his parents again, who were worried about his literary activities and feared confrontations with the regime. He moved back to Damascus and started writing television scripts, which finally provided him with financial security.[6] After *Dafātir al-Qurbāṭ*, 'The Gypsy Notebooks', his third novel published in 2000, *Madīḥ al-Karāhiyya*, In Praise of Hatred, appeared in 2006, following thirteen years of work. It deals with the uprisings in the late 1970s and 1980s that led to armed clashes between Islamists and the government, and is set in Aleppo. The story is told through a female protagonist, who comes of age during the book and through family members becomes more and more involved in the conflict. Apart from this novel, not much was written about this violently crushed rebellion, which the Syrian authorities only refer to euphemistically as the 'event' or

---

[4] Paulo Gabriel Hilu Pinto, "Syria," in *Dispatches from the Arab Spring: understanding the New Middle East*, edited by Paul Amar & Vijay Prashad (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013): 206.
[5] Idem, 234.
[6] Matthew Davis, "The Writer and the Rebellion," *Guernica*, 15 November, 2013, accessed 15 May, 2017, https://www.guernicamag.com/the-writer-and-the-rebellion/.

'incident'.[7] The book is officially banned in Syria, but was shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, often called the Arabic *Booker*, in 2008. This nomination granted Khalifa a lot of international publicity.

In 2013, *Lā Sakākīn fī Maṭābikh Hādhihi al-Madīna* appeared, a novel he worked on for six years. It was published simultaneously by *Dār al-ʿayn* in Cairo and *Dār al-ʿadab* in Beirut. The story follows an aristocratic family living in Aleppo, that disintegrates more and more due to the influence of the ruling party. It covers around forty years: from the year 1963, the year of the military coup, when the unnamed narrator in the novel is born, to the death of his brother Rashid in the early 2000s. He has two sisters, one of which, Suad, is born disabled. She dies at an early age, to the mother's relief, who had always felt ashamed of her. Sawsan, the other sister, is very angry at her mother for this. She goes through turbulent life phases. First a light-hearted schoolgirl, she becomes a paratrooper and starts a relationship with Munzir, a prominent party member. After he abandons her, she briefly seeks relief in the Islamic religion, followed by resentful years full of frustration, and finally finding some rest and having a baby. Rashid, her brother, is a gifted violin player. He never feels completely at ease, and at one point in the story goes to Iraq to fight with a group of *mujahideen*, but he gets caught and betrays his former comrades. Back home, he cannot find happiness anymore. His uncle, Nizar, also plays and composes music. His homosexuality is not accepted by a large part of his family, yet he still has relationships with men and takes care of his relatives. The mother of the family married a man from the countryside, came to live in his village, after which he left her for an American woman and moved to the United States. Together with the children, she goes back to Aleppo, where she comes to feel less and less well, always complaining about a lack of oxygen. She has a sister, Ibtihal, who adores the Ottoman era and would rather have been alive in the past. Another frequently appearing character is Jean, a former French teacher of Sawsan who lived in Switzerland but returned to Aleppo to take care of his blind mother.

The English translation, called *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*[8], was published in 2016. The Dutch translation by Djûke Poppinga appeared in 2015 already. Its publication received quite some attention - partly because it had won the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in December 2013 and was nominated for the IPAF in 2014, but probably also due to Poppinga's renowned status as a translator and its first chapter being published in the book *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline*[9]. That is how I came to read the novel. Around the same time, some classmates organized a few 'conversation lunches', where we could meet Syrian refugees, eat and talk together. Of course, I was interested in what they thought about Khalifa's book. However, when I asked them about it, they looked at me blankly. No one had actually heard about it, let alone read it. Maybe this shouldn't have come as a surprise to me, given the fact that they had gone through a lot, and likely needed their energy for much more than the privileged act of reading a novel. The group of people I met, additionally, formed only a fraction of the total Arabic-speaking population. However, the meetings still led to a number of questions forming in my head. Which people did read the book? And what do Arabic readers actually think of *Lā sakākīn*? Does their judgement differ a lot from so-called 'Western' readers? Moreover, what are ways to approach an answer to

---

[7] "Thirty-Three Years Later the Ghost of Hama Massacre Lingers On," *Middle East Revised*, 2 June, 2015, accessed 18 May, 2017, https://middleeastrevised.com/2015/02/06/thirty-three-years-later-the-ghost-of-hama-massacre-lingers-on/.

[8] Khaled Khalifa, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, trans. Leri Price (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, September 2016).

[9] Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen, Nawara Mahfoud, eds. *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline* (London: Saqi Books, 2014).

these rather broad questions? Although there was research available on the reception of translated Arabic literature into, for example, the English language, it was harder to find studies on the reception of books within the Arabic world itself. It is nonetheless relevant to analyse how Arabic readers themselves experience and value books, as it can reveal a lot about reading culture in that part of the world, as well as about more general conceptions readers hold with regard to politics and social values.

Audience Reception and Arab Literary Criticism

The subject of this thesis is the reception of *Lā Sakākīn fī Maṭābikh Hādhihi al-Madīna* in the Arabic world. Reception has been the subject of a considerable amount of academic research. As Jennifer Silva states, "reception theorists argue that meaning emerges processually in the interaction between the text and the socially situated audience." In their research, they try to "capture the concrete ways in which audiences make sense of texts within a particular historical and cultural context."[10] To gain a deeper understanding of this way of thinking, it might be helpful to examine how 'reception studies' have developed, as these concepts have not always been thought to be of importance.

The New Critics, for instance, are often mentioned as a major way of thinking preceding reception theory. This formalist school of literary criticism, influential from the 1930s to 1950s, assumed that meaning could be deduced 'objectively' from a text by analyzing it closely. Meaning, according to these academics, was embedded in the text, instead of being formed by other factors than the words themselves.[11] From the 1960s onward, academics within the Marxist British tradition, among them Stuart Hall, emphasized the role of ideology in interpretation. In their view, texts are encoded with "dominant understandings of reality" by powerful groups. Through discourse, audiences will negotiate or even resist the intended meaning of the text in the process of decoding it.[12]

Another way of thinking, often referred to as reception aesthetics, was introduced by members of the 'Konstanz School' in Germany, including Hans-Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. These two scholars affirmed "the critical function of reception in the constitution of the work of art"[13], though in different ways. Jauss challenges the idea of an established collection of texts forming a 'canon'. Instead, he investigates literary history as a dynamic process, especially influenced by reception, "the ways in which the new artwork enters the domain of the already received."[14] A notable concept in his theory is the 'horizon of expectations', described as the common "framework within which those of a particular generation in a culture understand, interpret, and evaluate a text or an artwork. This includes textual knowledge of conventions and expectations (e.g. regarding genre and style), and social knowledge (e.g. of moral codes)."[15] Iser is "concerned primarily with the individual text and how readers relate to it."[16] He views the text as 'constituted in and by its reading', whereby it is in itself incomplete, containing indeterminate 'gaps' or 'blanks'. The reader produces meaning by filling these in subjectively. This does not mean that the text is open to any interpretation, as the 'gaps' are still controlled and directed in some way by the text.[17]

Apart from this German tradition, a related branch of theory has developed, called reader-response criticism. This, Holub states, is an umbrella term that contains diverse systems, spread across the world.[18] Two of them are important to mention here. The

---

[10] Jennifer M. Silva, "Reception Theory," in *Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture*, ed. Dale Southerton (Thousand Oaks; SAGE Publications, Inc., 2011), 1202, online, EBSCOhost, accessed 2 December, 2016.

[11] "Formalism," in *Dictionary of Media and Communication*, eds. Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), accessed 13 January, 2017, DOI: 10.1093/acref/9780199568758.001.0001.

[12] Silva, "Reception Theory," 1202.

[13] Jeremy Lane, "35. Reception Theory and Reader-Response: Hans-Robert Jauss (1922-1997), Wolfgang Iser (1926-) and the School of Konstanz," in *Modern European Criticism and Theory: A Critical Guide*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 278.

[14] Lane, "35. Reception Theory," 280.

[15] "Horizon of Expectations," in *Dictionary of Media and Communication*.

[16] Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London, New York: Methuen, 1984), 83.

[17] Lane, "35. Reception Theory," 282-283.

[18] Holub, *Reception Theory*, xii-xiii.

subjectivists, one of them the American critic Norman Holland, "draw on psychoanalytic theory, seeing readings as driven by deep psychological needs".[19] The focus of research can also be more social rather than individual, as is true for the work of Stanley Fish. He introduces the phrase 'interpretive communities' to refer to both writers and readers of particular genres of texts who share certain reading strategies.[20]

This attention to the role of reception and the role of the reader in making meaning of and interpreting texts can provide valuable insights to the research carried out in this thesis. It provides useful concepts in thinking about how literary works gain meaning and are interpreted. As Wendy Griswold points out, for example, Jauss's 'horizon of expectations' can help explain why "different categories of receivers may be expected to exhibit systematic differences in their perceptions and interpretations of the same object."[21] Accordingly, they may also assess this same object differently, which leads to another area of research: that of value judgments.

Esther Op de Beek states that in the second half of the twentieth century, scientific thinking about value and the validity of value judgments changed drastically, from an essentialist to a 'relativist' theory of value.[22] An article by Barbara Herrnstein Smith was a significant contribution to this turn. She wrote that, in contrast to the constant amount of attention that interpretive criticism gained, value and evaluation were neglected and even evaded by academics. An important reason for this, she said, was an unquestioned belief in the inherent superior value of works belonging to the traditional academic canon. She advocates a way of thinking, however, that acknowledges that "all value is radically contingent"[23] or accidental. It depends significantly on the "*classification* of an entity and the functions it is expected or desired to perform".[24] Then the object, also aesthetic ones like works of literature, will be judged by an individual on the basis of how effective it is in performing these functions.

Apart from looking at evaluation as a personal process, she looked at the way members of certain groups tend to arrive at similar judgments, making them seem universal: "Although value is always subject-relative, not all value is equally subject-variable. Within a particular community […] tastes and preferences will tend to be similar".[25] Mechanisms of "cultural transmission"[26] are at work that cause individuals, by influencing each other, to interact with their environment in comparable ways.

Renate von Heydebrand and Simone Winko continue in this strand of thought, and describe evaluation as "the act of relating properties to standards", which is explained on the basis of "*categorizing assumptions*": "the conditions which have to be met […] in order that

---

[19] "Reader-response Theory," in *Dictionary of Media and Communication*.
[20] "Reader-response Theory," and "Interpretive Community," in *Dictionary of Media and Communication*.
[21] Wendy Griswold, "The Fabrication of Meaning: Literary Interpretation in the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies," *American Journal of Sociology* vol. 92, no. 5 (1987): 1081, University of Chicago Press, accessed 1 November, 2016, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2779997.
[22] Esther Op de Beek, "Een Literair Fenomeen van de Eerste Orde, Evaluaties in de Nederlandse Literaire Dagbladkritiek, 1955-2005: Een Kwantitatieve en Kwalitatieve Analyse," PhD diss., 14, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, 2013, accessed 21 December, 2016,
http://repository.ubn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/2066/120595/120595.pdf?sequence=1.
[23] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 10, no. 1 (1983): 11, University of Chicago Press, accessed 10 January, 2017, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343404.
[24] Idem, 13.
[25] Idem, 16-17.
[26] Idem, 27.

properties may be related to value".[27] With this they mean, for instance, under which conditions a poem is thought to be beautiful. They furthermore state: "Like criteria of value, these assumptions are partly conventionalized, and their validity is a matter of social or group-specific agreement, but they are also partly influenced by individual factors."[28] So, members of a group will often have similar views about what an artwork needs to be appreciated, but people may also have specific tastes due to their personality or experiences in life.

There are two valuable points of insight these researchers offer to this thesis. Firstly the fact that it is useless to value reviews for their truth-value, cognitive substance or logical status. They should rather be seen as informative of an individual's needs and standards. Secondly the fact that within a community, to a certain extent, people will share tastes and preferences. These, in turn can be researched. This thesis does just that by merely examining and describing, instead of judging, the content of reviews, and by dividing readers into different groups, analyzing tendencies in the ways they experience a particular literary work.

Social media
The means of communicating these preferences and dislikes is a noteworthy factor, too. As will be described more elaborately later on, part of the material for this thesis is attained from conventional news websites, while another quantity was published on a social medium. Many scholars and journalists awarded social media a crucial role in bringing about political and social change, especially with regard to the revolutions that took place in the Arabic world a few years ago. This conviction was nuanced by others. Habibul Haque Khondker, for example, argued that the new media "played a critical role especially in light of the absence of an open media and a civil society", though it constitutes only one of many factors.[29] He also says that the "outcomes of the spread of the new media are likely to remain uneven in different parts of the MENA region", but still foresees a notable role for them in future political developments.

The idea that the internet may disrupt balances of power is not new, it was hypothesized already in 1995 by Mark Poster. He wrote that texts located and disseminated on the Internet "are reconstructed in the act of reading, rendering the reader an author and disrupting the stability of experts".[30] Because anyone can express his or her opinion on the internet, the division between producers of content and receivers, present in a large part of the traditional media, becomes less rigid. Especially on social networking sites, users communicate on an equal level, as everyone has disposal of the same features of the website. This makes possible a digital occurrence of 'social reading', broadly defined as "reading as a social practice".[31] Wayne Booth coined the term *coduction*, to refer to reading as "a communal enterprise rather than a private".[32] Joachim Vlieghe, Geert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soetaert have noticed how this phenomenon enables readers to switch more easily between different roles, for instance occasionally assuming those of critic or even literary

---

[27] Renate Heydebrand von & Simone Winko, "The qualities of literatures," in *The Quality of Literature: Linguistic Studies in Literary Evaluation*, ed. Willie van Peer (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2008), 227, accessed 7 December, 2016, online, EBSCOhost.
[28] Idem, 227.
[29] Habibul Haque Khondker, "Role of the New Media in the Arab Spring," *Globalizations* vol. 8, no. 5 (2011): 675, Routledge, accessed 15 December, 2016, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14747731.2011.621287.
[30] Mark Poster, "CyberDemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere," Irvine: University of California, 1995, accessed 19 December, 2016, http://faculty.humanities.uci.edu/poster/writings/democ.html.
[31] Joachim Vlieghe, Geert Vandermeersche & Ronald Soetaert, "Social media in literacy education: Exploring social reading with pre-service teachers," New Media & Society vol. 18, no. 5 (2014): 802, online, Sage Journals, accessed 15 January, 2017, DOI: 10.1177/1461444814547683.
[32] Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 72.

teacher.[33] A more narrow definition of social reading is "readers' communication on books through the use of digital media".[34] Vlieghe et al. remark how this takes place in hybrid platforms that "combine traditional bookishness with the ability to interact across a range of different media".[35] Considering reading as a communal exercise helps us concentrate on communication about books, instead of merely examining the subject matter of reviews. It puts a focus on the exchange of information and opinions, making it easier to delineate differences in this area between the various media used.

When thinking of reading as a social practice, it can be imagined that this process has an effect on the way a reader sees his or her society. By expressing an opinion, a person often articulates a worldview, too, that may or may not be accepted by other readers. It might also be rejected, but still bring about a change, however small, in the way others think. Continuing this strand of thought, 'social reading' could be seen as an aspect of civil society. Larry Diamond states that this "involves citizens *acting collectively in a public sphere* to express their interests, passions and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state and hold state officials accountable." He goes on to say that it is an "intermediary entity, standing between the private sphere and the state".[36] It is composed of different organizations, which relate to the state in some way but do not aim to win formal power. Moreover, it encompasses pluralism and diversity, and each group signifies a partial representation of interests.[37] In the rest of his article, he describes the democratic functions civil society can have, among others keeping governments in check, and the development of democratic attributes like "tolerance, moderation, a willingness to compromise and a respect for opposing viewpoints."[38]

Continuing on this subject, Philip N. Howard writes: "The internet has three roles in supporting civil society in the Muslim world. First, it has an ideational function. It is the means of introducing diverse new values, ideas, and interests into new social settings. Images—with more or less ideological meanings—are available to many people who would not otherwise see them. Ideas are tested and questioned." Furthermore, he attributes an organizational function to it, by providing an infrastructure for arranging meetings or sharing information independent of other media, and a symbolic function, "as the sign of modernity in civic life and civil discourse."[39]

A more comprehensive concept to describe the structure in which people express their views about political and social issues is the public sphere, as described by Habermas. This is, according to Gemma Edwards, a "normative and historical concept that refers to the politically significant space(s) in society created by public discourse", which in turn is concerned with "issues of moral importance to the public and is both 'rational' and 'critical' in nature."[40] Furthermore, he notices a degradation of this public sphere over time, principally

---

[33] Vlieghe et al, "Social Media", 801.

[34] Klagenfurt University, Austria, "Call for Papers: Reception of Literature in Reading Communities. Social Reading face to face and online," accessed 9 January, 2017, https://www.uni-klu.ac.at/germ/downloads/CALL_Reception_of_Literature.pdf.

[35] Vlieghe et al, "Social Media", 813.

[36] Emphasis in original. Larry Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1994): 5, accessed 28 May, 2017, http://muse.jhu.edu/article/225379/pdf.

[37] Idem, 6-7.

[38] Idem, 7-8.

[39] Philip N. Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 142, online, accessed 17 January, 2017, http://philhoward.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Howard_Digital-Origins-of-Dictatorship-and-Democracy.pdf.

[40] Gemma Edwards, "Public Sphere," *Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture*, ed. Dale Southerton (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2011), 1177, accessed 4 August, 2017, via eBook Collection (EBSCOhost).

due to the emergence of mass media, under the influence of power and consumerism or money.[41] Edwards states, summarizing views of different scholars, that the internet may reverse this degradation, as discourse can be "more open, more equal and more critical" there, than is the case with traditional mass media.[42] However, she writes, "concerns remain […] about the quality of online communication, which is largely anonymous and fragmented" and it "may be as prone to colonization [by political and corporate actors] as other public spaces".[43]

This thesis, among other things, tries to find an answer to the question if the medium used to publish reactions influences the criteria according to which readers judge a book. It is therefore interesting to see if the reactions displaying political or social values can be categorized under the concepts of 'civil society' or of 'the public sphere'. This makes it easier to determine the extent of 'activism' within them. Furthermore, this knowledge can contribute to the theories about both these concepts, serving as a case study describing a recent phenomenon.

Developments in literary criticism
Several academics have written about trends in the way literature is, and over time has been, valued within the Arab world. They generally agree this was done from very early on. Roger Allen, for instance, writes: "The process of criticism, *qua* the evaluation of literary works, is evident in abundance in every period of Arabic literary history and can be traced back to the very beginnings."[44] As he further on describes, it took the form of poets commenting on each other, as well as of scholars checking the authenticity of the recording process and then analyzing and classifying poems.[45] One term, *badī'*, is particularly important here, influentially used from the ninth century on. According to Allen, this word may be translated as 'figurative language', and it indicates a 'new concern with poetic ornamentation'.[46] By the eighteenth century, Pierre Cachia states, the term referred to an emphasis on the 'form of words'.[47] M. M. Badawi disapprovingly calls it "a disproportionately large interest in the formal and purely linguistic aspects of literary works".[48] Whether it should in fact be seen as a negative phenomenon is a different question, but the field certainly started changing around the turn of the twentieth century.

Contacts with the West, in the form of missionary schools, translations, widely circulating magazines and Arab students enrolling in European education systems, caused the spread of new ideas about literary texts and vocabulary to describe and value them. A literary current that became prominent was 'Arab romanticism'. Cachia says it "was to colour virtually all of the first half of the twentieth century in Arabic writing", and he finds in all instances of criticism on Romantic works "a marked concentration on the emotional power of the individual poet or writer".[49] Allen states this was closely connected to the then prevailing

---

[41] Idem, 1179.
[42] Idem, 1181.
[43] Idem.
[44] Roger Allen, *The Arabic Literary Heritage: The development of its genres and criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 362.
[45] Idem, 362, 365.
[46] Idem, 370-371.
[47] Pierre Cachia, "The Critics," in: *Modern Arabic Literature*, edited by M.M. Badawi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 417, accessed 19 December, 2016, DOI: https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/10.1017/CHOL9780521331975.013.
[48] M.M. Badawi, "Commitment in Contemporary Arabic Literature," *Journal of World History*, Vol. 14, 4 (1972): 860.
[49] Cachia, "The Critics," 434-435.

pan-Arabist and local nationalist sentiments.[50] In the meantime, while literary criticism until then had focused mostly on poetry, "new genres of fiction were steadily gaining popularity."[51] From the 1950s on, after many Arab states gained independence, the critical focus shifted from romanticism to 'commitment' or *iltizām*. Verena Klemm and Badawi show this concept has incorporated different ideas, ideologies and interpretations over time, though Badawi says it denotes "at least a certain measure of nationalism, Arab or otherwise", and could be described as "the need for a writer to have a message, instead of just delighting in creating a work of the imagination."[52]

An interesting note is made by Cachia, in his book published in 1993: "Although the dominant concern of most of the present-day Arab critics is manifestly ideological, a number of them have been attracted by the basically linguistic techniques developed in the west for dealing with literary texts." He further on shortly describes how these critics have had to search for, and sometimes invent, Arabic technical terminology to write about these originally Western concepts, like 'structuralism'.[53] At the same time, the engagement of writers with society has remained important until the present day, even if this is not without risks for them. Cachia writes that the "later committed writers are by definition political activists who incur the ire of the authorities", and that "there is a heroic dimension to modern Arabic writing."[54] Allen also mentions the "spirit of defiance" of the Arabic novel, as well as "the spirit of experimentation".[55] These characterizations, together with the overview of trends within Arabic literary criticism, will be helpful for this thesis in analyzing the material. Keeping these considerations in mind, it is easier to recognize them in the texts of reviewers, and to check if the described criteria still play a significant role in evaluation or not.

---

[50] Allen, *The Arabic Literary Heritage*, 394.
[51] Idem, 402.
[52] Badawi, "Commitment," 859.
[53] Cachia, "The Critics," 440-441.
[54] Idem, 441-442.
[55] Allen, *The Arabic Literary Heritage*, 314.

Method

If we assume, as reception theorists do, that meaning is created by an "interaction between the text and the socially situated audience",[56] the importance of readers and their social context is emphasized. Moreover, if value is supposed to be contingent, while "within a particular community […] tastes and preferences will tend to be similar", because of mechanisms of cultural transmission,[57] it follows that to a certain extent evaluations by different members of the same community will display similarities. These can be researched. Therefore, in this study the focus will be on value judgments of different groups of readers. The object to be evaluated is the novel by Khaled Khalifa. Central questions regarding the reception of this work are: What do readers think of the book, do they like or dislike it? And more importantly, what are their reasons for this?

The central research question follows from these considerations: According to which criteria and norms do readers evaluate Khaled Khalifa's *Lā Sakākīn fī Maṭābikh Hādhihi al-Madīna*? Important successive questions are: Do these differ among socially varying groups of readers? Is it possible to distinguish different 'interpretive communities', as Fish called them, defined by their reading strategies or cultural background? How can these differences be explained? Are they, for instance, influenced by the kind of media used? In this section, the method for investigating these questions will be described.

First of all, different sorts of material were acquired, belonging to two main categories: reviews published on official webpages related to newspapers on the one hand, and Arabic reactions on the website *Goodreads*[58], on the other. Apart from six Arabic reviews connected to newspapers, two reviews that appeared on websites independently producing online content were also assigned to the first category, as they were not just written in a personal capacity but apparently had to adhere to directions from the editors of the pages. One text that was selected at first, was left out after it became clear that parts of it were copied from another book review.[59] Additionally, eight reviews in Dutch and English were taken from prominent newspapers and magazines. The second category consists of a large selected amount of texts written by users of *Goodreads*. This website, as will be described in detail later on, is a social networking site where people can rate and describe books they have read. Sometimes on their profiles more personal information is displayed, like age, country of residence or country of birth. Readers can also respond to reviews written by other users, but these responses, sometimes even turning into discussions, could unfortunately not be included here, as they would have expanded the scope of material beyond the limits of feasibility for this thesis.

The users writing in Arabic on this website will be treated as one audience. Of course, the question arises if this is justifiable. In the *Handbook of Media Audiences*, it is stated that readers as a collective body "may share socioeconomic and/or demographic characteristics, may be targeted as a group, and may respond to or resist literary messages. Furthermore, members of the collectivity may influence one another through interaction or because of a shared identification."[60] From this point of view, the mentioned approach seems sensible. Users of *Goodreads* are for a large part quite young, many of them between around fifteen

---

[56] Silva, "Reception Theory," 1202.
[57] Herrnstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value," 16, 27.
[58] لا سكاكين في مطابخ هذه المدينة by Khaled Khalifa, *Goodreads*, accessed 9 December, 2016, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18480662?from_search=true.
[59] The article is still included in the Bibliography, in order for this assertion to be verifiable. Large parts of ʿAlī al Masʿūd's article on *Al-Ḥiwār al-Mutamaddin* seem to have been copied from Haytam Ḥusayn's piece on *Al-Jazīra*. The latter one appeared two months earlier, and is therefore taken to be the original.
[60] Wendy Griswold, Elizabeth Lenaghan, and Michelle Naffziger, "Readers as Audiences," in *The Handbook of Media Audiences*, ed. Virginia Nightingale (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 20.

and thirty years of age, and are literate and educated enough to use the website. Those are similar demographic characteristics. The website enables contact and interaction between members. Also, a shared identification of being 'Arab' appears to be present. Edmund Ghareeb ascribes this to emerging pan-Arab media networks, and says these are "encouraging increasing cultural unity among the Arabs by acknowledging their diversity, by helping to reflect and mobilize public opinion on issues of common concern, and by overcoming some narrow regional loyalties." [61] From this remark, it may be deduced that language in this case can be a significant criterion to demarcate the audience. If, despite this common identification, at any point during the study it was necessary to distinguish between users mentioning different countries on their profiles, this always remained an option. Other identity markers, such as age, class, gender, education, political conviction or religion, are unfortunately not as visible on the pages as countries of origin. Some users display their gender or age on their profiles, but this does not happen often enough to lead to meaningful conclusions.

The division between reviews from newspapers and personal reader responses online is thought to be functional because it yields interesting results on the effects caused by the distinct possibilities the different forms of media offer. As Ghareeb writes: "The media in the Arab world continue to suffer from governmental censors […] and from religious groups and organizations which seek to censor writings or art works which challenge religious dogma or public morality."[62] Therefore it might be that professional reviewers have to be more careful while writing. They may also be more neutral, or write down their views in more elaborate or sophisticated terms, as writing is their occupation. It might likewise be that *Goodreads* offers a platform for users to ventilate their political opinions and a space for civil society to emerge, an effect that has been ascribed to social media a lot recently.[63]

Different methods were considered for the analysis of the materials, among which an approach based on the model of Von Heydebrand and Winko, used in a dissertation by Esther op de Beek.[64] In her research, which she conducted together with Yvette Linders, she describes reviews published in Dutch newspapers over a period of fifty years, from 1955 to 2005. They worked out a number of aspects that reviewers discuss, and then drafted a list of characteristics on the basis of which these are valued (like humor, clarity or originality). Of every text, they then determined the aspects valued, and the basis on which this was done.[65] Their method is very systematic and verifiable, but turned out to be less useful for this thesis. Defining and classifying every single value judgment in the material would consume more

---

[61] Edmund Ghareeb, "New Media and the Information Revolution in the Arab World: An Assessment," *Middle East Journal* vol. 54, no. 3 (2000): 416, accessed 27 January, 2017,
http://www.globalmediapolicy.net/sites/default/files/4329508.pdf.

[62] Ghareeb, "New Media," 417.

[63] For instance: "Social Media have clearly altered the nature of civil society and also have an impact on democratic and political engagement, particularly among civil society organisations." Website of the European Economic and Social Committee, "Social Media and Social Networking as agents of Participatory Democracy and Civic Empowerment", 2013, accessed 5 August, 2017,
http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.publications.27568.
Or: "Because people are increasingly at ease in the Web's multidimensionality, marketers, government, and civil society are migrating massively to the networks people construct by themselves and for themselves." Manuel Castells, "The Impact of the Internet on Society: A Global Perspective," *MIT Technology Review*, 8 September, 2014, accessed 5 August, 2017, https://www.technologyreview.com/s/530566/the-impact-of-the-internet-on-society-a-global-perspective/.

[64] Ester Op de Beek, "Een Literair Fenomeen van de Eerste Orde, Evaluaties in de Nederlandse Literaire Dagbladkritiek, 1955-2005: Een Kwantitatieve en Kwalitatieve Analyse," PhD diss., Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, 2013, accessed 21 December, 2016,
http://repository.ubn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/2066/120595/120595.pdf?sequence=1.

[65] Idem, 111-113.

time and space than was available within the parameters of this MA research project. Moreover, carefully describing the corpus of texts is not the main objective of this study. It rather aims to connect findings to the theoretical concepts described before and to notice differences between various audiences and kinds of media used.

Another method of analyzing reviews is adopted by Wendy Griswold. In her research, she asked the question: "Does a cultural object, such as a literary text, have a stable set of meanings, or do its meanings derive from the social context of its reception?"[66] In order to find an answer, she determined of a large number of reviews if they were favorable or not, which information was included about the author, if remarks were made about literary style and the subjects and themes that appeared in them. Afterwards, she combined the answers of the different groups of people she studied, and found that social presuppositions indeed were influential in the production of meaning. Her division of reviewers into different audiences indicated that her method turns out to be effective for this study, too. The categories she used served as inspiration, as will be discussed in more detail later on.

Importantly, Griswold's realization that she is dealing with "an educationally elite segment" of society applies to this research as well. Professional reviewers make up only a miniscule part of people living in the Arab world, just as only a relatively small part of the Arabic-speaking population can write and read and has access to a computer connected to the internet. She writes: "Since such an elite is culturally dominant, however, I suspect that reviews do indicate certain characteristic "ways of seeing" found in the societies as a whole."[67]

The four dimensions she describes (Evaluation, Author, Literary Style, Subjects and Themes) were adapted to best suit the objectives of this thesis. Firstly, the category of overall evaluation can be used to get a general impression of how readers judge *Lā Sakākīn fī Maṭābikh Hādhihi al-Madīna*. Griswold surveys multiple novels of the same writer and determines if reviewers are either 'favorable' or 'mixed or unfavorable'. This study looks only at one novel, so there is no development in time to be seen, but the results of this dimension are no less important. Also, a third category is added: 'neutral', used if the review is solely descriptive and does not convey any value judgment. The evaluations expressed in the reviews taken from newspapers are determined and described, while for the reactions on *Goodreads* the rating system using stars on the website is used.

Furthermore, also belonging to this dimension, the remarks on prizes and nominations for Khalifa's novel are counted. Griswold writes that "When a novel published in one country is read in another, [...] the novel comes to its new readers prefigured by its reputation as a great or at least popular work."[68] She sees this as something rather negative that could distort the results of research. However, in the case of the Arabic novel discussed here, this condition is likely be true for all three audiences. Not only Western reviewers might take into account external valuations, but also Arabic reviewers and readers, as they come from a wide variety of countries. Therefore, instead of leaving this factor out of the question, this thesis acknowledges and analyzes it.

The first chapter discusses literary style. Following Griswold's approach, "the amount of discussion [reviewers] gave to literary style, [and] the types of stylistic issues they mentioned"[69] are enumerated. In accordance with the theory described before about trends in Arabic literary criticism, this information is divided into the sections of 'style', 'structure' and 'emotion'. Also, literary references in reviews are described. Griswold writes: "Reviewers'

---

[66] Griswold, "The Fabrication of Meaning," 1078.
[67] Idem, 1083.
[68] Idem.
[69] Idem, 1093.

frame of literary references set a "horizon of expectations" that influences readers' responses to any book".[70] This is relevant to this study as well because it studies exactly these responses, and the frame of literary references can help explain, for each group of readers, why they judge the book in a certain way.

In the second chapter, remarks about the author himself are analyzed. As Griswold brings forth, "A reviewer brings forth biographical information about the author that seems […] noteworthy to the review's readership." Therefore, it is interesting to see which facts are mentioned. Nationality, birthplace and autobiographical features are paid attention to, in addition to information about the author's role in opposing the Syrian regime. His Facebook-posts on the political situation, for instance, quoted by Matthew Davis, about which Khalifa said "he wasn't directly working for the revolution though he was broadcasting it."[71] Also, the open letter he wrote in February 2012, in which he accuses the regime of genocide, explains the situation and asks the world for solidarity, is taken into account.[72] Or the fact that, while attending a funeral of a friend, he was beaten by security forces and had his left arm broken.[73] These kinds of details would associate Khalifa with the principle of *iltizām* and classify him as an engaged writer, whether the reader agrees with him or not.

After general evaluation, author and literary style, the analyses focused on subjects and themes. These do not correspond directly to those of Griswold, which is understandable when considering her remark: "the coding categories came from the reviews [themselves]".[74] Instead of imposing a predetermined list of topics, the subjects and themes mentioned were selected because of their reoccurrence in the texts. In the remainder of the second chapter, the topics mostly connected to 'politics and truth value' are covered, while in the third chapter those that have to do more with 'social norms and shame' are discussed, with special attention to the homosexual character of Nizar.

Summarizing, this leads us to the following questions asked about the reviews:
1. Are they favorable, neutral, mixed or unfavorable? How is the book judged overall?
2. Are the nomination for Booker, the Naguib Mahfouz award or other external recommendations mentioned?
3. What do they write about style, structure or emotion?
4. Which literary references are present in the texts?
5. Is any information about the writer and his views mentioned?
6. Which remarks do reviewers make about politics and truth value?
   a. In which geographical context do readers see the book?
7. What do reviewers convey about their views on social norms?
   a. How do they talk about the homosexual character Nizar?
   b. Which remarks are made in connection with 'shame'?

Part of these questions can be researched quantitatively, for instance, by simply enumerating the references to literary prizes or by counting the occurrence of certain words, as Griswold does, too. At other times, however, it is better to consider the complete texts and cite relevant full sentences, because this provides more context and therefore a better understanding of why certain remarks are made. Sometimes in this study, quantitative results will be complemented or elaborated on using the qualitative method. The answers to all the foregoing questions will lead to a conclusion about the way reviewers value Khalifa's novel

---

[70] Idem, 1094.
[71] Davis, "The Writer and the Rebellion."
[72] Khaled Khalifa, "Letter from Syria," *The World Post*, 9 February, 2012, accessed 8 December, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/khaled-khalifa/syrian-revolution_b_1265563.html.
[73] Davis, "The Writer and the Rebellion."
[74] Griswold, "The Fabrication of Meaning," 1096.

and the way this can be explained, for instance with regard to their social background and the media forms they are using.

      Before moving on to the analysis by answering the questions mentioned before, some general comments on the differences between the official reviews and the *Goodreads* reactions will be useful. These give a first impression of these kinds of texts and their specific characteristics. The first aspect that stands out is length. The fifteen reviews examined all (save one) comprise around one and a half to two A4 pages of text, while the 294 online reactions are generally shorter than that, given a number of exceptions. Also the way in which they are presented varies. The reviews are published on websites of newspapers, or in one case: an online blog. They are shown with a title, often one picture and a smooth, varied layout. This gives them an official appearance, and indicates the adherence of the writer to predetermined guidelines, at least to some extent. On *Goodreads*, reactions are published purely on personal title. They moreover contain features that are virtually absent from the formal reviews, namely:

- the extensive use of pictures in some reactions (*Ilhām Mazyūd* included a drawing of smiling people committing suicide in different ways, and wrote: "this came to my mind after I finished the book". Furthermore, kaire included a picture of Che Guevara in his reaction, followed by photographs of al-Assad and female paratroopers.
- smilies made up of punctuation marks
- dialect (Aya Fawzy writes: "*ana baḍrub nafsī bi-l-gazma annī 'arait riwāya zayy dī*": 'I hit myself with a shoe for reading a book like this', which contains a lot of typically Egyptian words and grammar.)
- English words (Nuha Ahmed: "*fī baʿḍ al-aḥyān* disturbing *kānat*", and Esraa: "*wa akhīran* I did it :D")
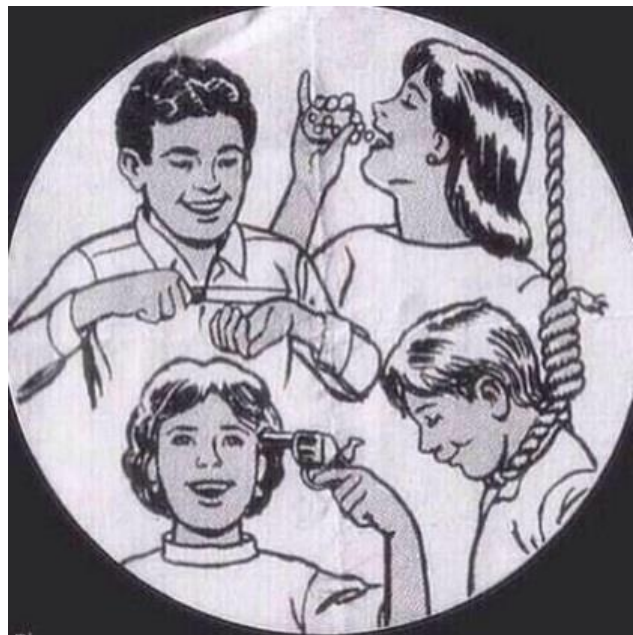

Figure 1 – Picture, artist unknown (it also appeared on the cover of an album by the Turkish rock band Kaç canım kalmış, but they did not know who produced it, either)

      Also, humor is pervasive in the *Goodreads* reactions. Some readers come up with plays on words of the title of the novel. For instance, *Yāsmīn Thābit*: "I would have liked a knife, to stab it into my heart after I came to the idea of reading this novel", or Maysa Ballout: "# no morals in this city". Others use expressive language, sometimes used to comment on political figures. Mohamed Shady referred to Hafez al-Assad as "with his swollen head", and Bashar "who has a neck like a giraffe". Strangely, one reaction, by Sameh Abousenna, turned out to be just copied from another user, Basma. Apparently, plagiarism is not something that just occurs in official reviews.

1. Literary Value

An interesting quote with regard to the first question appeared on the website *The Culture Trip*, in an article about Syrian writers. About Khaled Khalifa they write: "his works have received an excellent reception in other parts of the Arab world, particularly in Lebanon and Egypt where they have been republished, and have been met with wide-spread praise internationally."[75] The question arises if the reviews and reactions studied here reflect this comment, or not.

In the table below, general evaluations of the novel in reviews are displayed. It shows that Arabic reviewers are mostly favorable or neutral, but also a significant number have a mixed or unfavorable disposition. The English and Dutch reviewers react more positively, with a majority of them judging the book favorably. Sometimes it is difficult to assess whether a reviewer is positive or rather neutral. For example, M Lynx Qualey writing for The National was included in the 'neutral' category because she does not use any definitively subjective words to describe the book. In the last paragraph of her article she writes "At the heart of Khalifa's book is a serious question", and she seems to agree with the general thought of the novel. However, as this section focuses on language that clearly indicates either appreciation or disapproval, this sentence was not counted as a marker of praise.

Evaluation	Number of Reviews in Arabic	Number Reviews in English / Dutch
Favorable	3	4
Neutral	2	3
Mixed	1	1
Unfavorable	2	-

Figure 2 - General Evaluation, Official Reviews

In the second table, the ratings of *Goodreads* can be seen. The number of reviewers who did not rate the book are placed before those who gave it one star, as they often write that they 'did not seem the book worthy of any stars' and therefore in general are most negative. Here, a fairly different picture emerges. The majority of users give the book only one or two stars. Positive reactions rated with four or five stars are definitely noted, but they form a smaller number.

Goodreads Stars	Number of reactions
Not rated	24
1	80
2	59
3	67
4	42
5	22

Figure 3 – General Evaluation, Goodreads

---

[75] "10 Syrian Writers You Should Know," The Culture Trip, accessed 6 May, 2017, https://theculturetrip.com/middle-east/syria/articles/10-syrian-writers-you-should-know/.

From these results it is justifiable to state that the quote cited before should be nuanced, as especially the Arabic reviews and reactions are not merely as positive as it suggests. It is possible that the impression of the writer of the article was influenced by the prize the book received, which will be treated in the next paragraph.

Prizes and Nominations

As mentioned before, Khalifa's novel won the Naguib Mahfouz Prize in December 2013 and was nominated for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, often referred to as the 'Arabic Booker', in the beginning of January 2014. Hernnstein Smith describes in her article how these forms of praise attribute to the process of literary canonization. She mentions 'the awarding of literary prizes' as one of many different "forms of evaluation [… which] have functions and effects that are significant in the production and maintenance or destruction of literary value".[76] A bit further on, she states that "all these acts, at the least, have the effect of drawing the work into the orbit of attention of a population of potential readers; and, by making it more accessible to the interests of those readers […] they make it more likely both that the work will be experienced at all and also that it will be experienced as valuable."[77] Accordingly, awards have two main effects: increasing the number of readers and raising the literary value attributed to the work.

By looking at the reviews, which incidentally show exactly the same results for both groups, it becomes clear that the Naguib Mahfouz Prize (from now on referred to as NM) is referred to relatively often, while the Booker is mentioned a lot less. These numbers do not speak for themselves, however, as three of the Arabic reviews appeared before the nomination for Booker was announced, and two of them prior to the award of NM.

Mentioned	Number of Reviews in Arabic	Number Reviews in English / Dutch
Naguib Mahfouz Prize	4	4
Booker	2	2
None	3	3

Figure 4 – Mention of Prizes, Official Reviews

Even keeping that in mind, the *Goodreads* reactions again provide a rather different result. In them, the word 'maḥfūẓ' appears twenty-five times, while 'būkir' (Booker transliterated in Arabic) turns up 107 times. Often the word is mentioned more than once in one reaction, so this number does not equal the number of people reffering to it, but it is still clear that the nomination is relatively often discussed.

The studied reader responses corroborate the idea that literary prizes draw attention to a book. Different users of *Goodreads* say they started reading the book after they heard about its nomination. Also Aliya Tala'at writing for *Arageek* remarks that "one of the factors encouraging interest in this novel is its nomination for the Booker Prize, one of the most famous in the Arab world".[78]

Hernnstein Smith's second thought, of the literary prize making the book more likely to be experienced as valuable, is disputable in this context. In the formal reviews, the NM or Booker are not critized, but they are on *Goodreads*. For example, Diaa Eldeen writes in

---

[76] Herrnstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value," 25.
[77] Idem.
[78] 'Aliyā' Tala'at, "Lā taqra' riwāya 'Lā tūjadu sakākīn fī maṭābikh hādhihi al-madīna'", *Arageek*, 1 September, 2014, accessed 31 January, 2017, http://www.arageek.com/2014/09/01/dont-read-this-novel.html.

protest: "If I wanted to write a book that entered the Booker, I would do two things. Firstly, discuss a case having to do with revolution, […] secondly, filling the novel with sexual suggestiveness". Also Mohammed Al Fandi disapproves of the nomination: "Now at least I know that the members of the Naguib Mahfouz Prize committee are either 'donkeys' or corrupt". Another user, *'Abdallah al-Ya'qūbī*, speaks out against literary critics in general: "courtesies and hypocrisy are perfect descriptions for the cover of the book […] the critics of this book describe what is not in it". The opposite opinion is also expressed, for instance by Nora: "It deserves, in all worthiness, the nomination for the Booker." In short, users of *Goodreads* do not just accept the authority of prizes. These rather seem starting points of discussion, whereby readers feel free to express their personal views of the book.

Style
In 2016, author and scholar Mai Al-Nakib related how, at book readings, she is usually asked more questions about the political situation in the Middle East than about her fiction, or about literary aesthetics. Moreover, she sees a larger trend in this: "In short, the Arab world is viewed as a place of politics and nothing but." According to her, this causes readers to miss important aspects in works of Arabic literature, "leaving out the nuances and incongruous specificities that enrich understanding."[79] Seen in this light, the third question is an important one. What is written about language and literary characteristics of *Lā Sakākīn*? Do Western reviewers indeed neglect this aspect of the book? What about Arabic readers?

To begin with, David L. Ulin, reviewer of Barnes & Noble expressed his admiration for Khalifa's style: "slipping from character to character with a fluid, even dreamlike grace."[80] He also praises the first sentence, saying: "It's an almost perfect opening: reflective, memorial and yet still active." Robin Yassin-Kassab, connected to The Guardian, describes the novel's style as "lyrical, sensuous and so semantically rich that at times it resembles a prose poem". Jennifer Senior from The New York Times is of mixed opinion: "lush, pungent prose, some of it overripe, like a fermented banana. But some of it is also beautiful."

The reviewer of Al-Quds al-'Arabi, Aḥmad Ṣilāl, who was quite negative about the book in general, also does not appreciate the style and mentions "little expressive and aesthetic patience", and "absence of comfortable, beautiful, high language". The reviewer of Al-Wakīl, regarding this subject, writes about "this style, that […] Khalifa associated closely with himself": "thickness, shorthand, long sentences, rude, shocking, even repulsive". It is not totally clear if this comment should be taken as criticism, or more of just a finding, as the rest of the text seemed approving of the novel's content. Surely positive comments from Arabic reviews about literary qualities are: details of the characters "drawn meticulously, lively conveyed by the pen of an artist who tries to make every one of them unique […] in any case, we believe in them" (Bahā' Jāhīn for Al-Ahrām), "The narrative is of a high lively density" (Jīnā Sulṭān for Al-Nahār) and Al-Safīr, by voice of Saḥar Mandūr, mentioning 'some suspense', 'love for the characters' and 'smoothness'.

On *Goodreads*, reviewers also treat literary qualities. Terms that emerge regularly are *rā'i'*: great (26 times) and *jamīl*: beautiful (33 times). Some users elaborate on this issue, like *Inshirāḥ Shablāq*: "To be fair, the writer stands out for his refined sense for selecting vocabulary, thick descriptions and wonderful metaphorical expressions". Mohamed Magdy zinhom refers to "Strength of the style, clarity of the language", and Nabih Farkouh mentions

---

[79] Mai Al-Nakib, "Arab Literature: Politics and Nothing But?" *World Literature Today:* Vol. 90, no. 1 (January, 2016): 30-32, accessed 26 April, 2017, https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2016/january/arab-literature-politics-and-nothing-mai-al-nakib.

[80] The reviews mentioned here and in the following text will not be referred to each time by a footnote, but can easily be found in the Bibliography at the end of this thesis.

a "pleasant style". On the other hand, the word *mumill*: boring appears 24 times. *Mundhir al-Qabbānī* calls the style 'utmost weak', and Mohamed Faiez states: "I think that praise for the book comes forth from sympathy with the thought of the novel, not out of liking on an artistic level". This last comment indicates that style and content are seen as separate domains, of which one can be liked without appreciating the other and vice versa.

Referring back to the beginning of this paragraph, it became clear that the English and Dutch reviewers noted their opinion on literary style, just as well as their Arabic counterparts and the online respondents. This opposes Al-Nakib's sense that reviewers are not interested in style. It does not mean to negate her experience at book readings, though. Perhaps she meets journalists there from a slightly different industry, or maybe the subjects treated in book reviews simply differ from reports on a meeting with a writer. Positive and negative comments concerning style were present among all three groups of readers.

Structure

The structure of the book is one of its outstanding features. One of the characters is also the narrator for a large part of the book, but time and again the perspective shifts into an omniscient narrative. Furthermore, stories and characters are introduced in a sometimes seemingly random manner, and are repeated in different words after a few pages.

There are quite some comments on this and how to interpret it. The reviewer of Barnes & Noble says that the narrator "is everywhere in the book without exactly being anywhere, much like the dictatorship itself". Margot Dijkgraaf, writing for Dutch newspaper NRC, states: "His style is far removed from the often logically built up novels from the Western tradition. The chaotic world he sketches is mirrored in the confusing and disruptive composition. […] Events already described before come by again, as in a spiral, so that as a reader you lose grip on the story and feel the ground falling from under your feet. And that seems exactly Khalifa's intention. It is that which happens to the inhabitant of Aleppo." In The National, it says: "The shambling, multigenerational narrative resembles the city itself". The reviewer of Al-Safir notes the connection between form and meaning, too: "The style of narration reflects the content of the life [depicted]."

On the Belgian website of Cobra, Inge Vrancken describes the book as a "tangle of stories and relation […] in beautifully constructed sentences". The reviewer of The Guardian makes mention of a "multiple focus and enormous scope", and states the book is "intricately plotted, chronologically complicated". The New York Times writes the novel is "episodic rather than linear; it is more about an atmosphere, both emotional and physical, than any defining event." Jorn de Cock, writing for Belgian newspaper De Standaard writes: "Khalifa's family history is never linear and very structured."

Arabic reviews often mention the hidden narrator. Al-Quds al-'Arabī's reviewer furthermore states that "long sentences form a trial to understanding", and he disapproves of the writer's tendency to experiment. On Arageek, structure is described negatively, too: "characters are transferred illogically from place to place and from one time period to another, until the reader feels to have skipped part of the novel". On the other hand, the reviewer writing for Al-Safir states that "The style of narration reflects the content of the life [depicted]", even though sometimes "things get a bit mixed up for the reader."

The reviewers of Goodreads also write about its complicated chronology, and write comments ranging from 'a bit incoherent' to, like Rana Abu Shamat: "without any structure or cohesion". Also the narrator is often thought to be confusing, with readers asking how he can be aware of all kinds of detailed information the character himself could not actually know - except if family members would have been unthinkably open with him. Another noteworthy comment was made by Sepp: "devoid of dialogue! This is really the model of the

Arabic novel that asks patience and time of the reader, without rewarding them for that". Looking back to the comment in NRC, the idea emerges that Western and Arabic novels are thought to differ from each other fundamentally on this point. Whether there is truth in this statement is disputable, of course, but the impression apparently is there. Others are positive about structure, like Sumayah.t: "I liked its uncommon narration".

Structure is thus seen in different lights. The English and Dutch reviews, while acknowledging it is sort of 'uncomfortable' for readers of the book, appreciate the chaotic composition. Both Western and Arabic reviewers note the connection between structure and content of the novel. Whereas Arabic reviewers at times are negative about the frame of the book, especially *Goodreads* respondents often do not enjoy it. There are exceptions to that last statement, however.

Emotions

This paragraph focuses on emotions mentioned in the reviews. Especially thinking of the romantic current prevalent for some time in Arabic literary criticism, it is interesting to see whether the tendency to concentrate at the 'emotional power of the individual poet or writer' is still present or not. In The National, the book is rather neutrally described to be "guided by a single powerful emotion", namely: shame. The reviewer for Cobra writes about "a black, somber thought", "gloomy", while The Guardian simply states: "sad but beautiful".

Two Arabic reviewers experienced the heaviness of the book in different ways. The one writing for Al-Nahār wrote: "The gloom of the novel is excessive, and almost deprives the characters of their choices." Meanwhile the reviewer for Al-Safir stated: "The book tells of a great sadness, but doesn't fall on the heart like that."

In the online reactions, a few words regarding emotions kept showing up, namely *ḥuzn*: gloom, sadness (27 times), *ka'āba*: sorrow, grief (17 times) and *ka'īb*: depressing (20 times). *ṣadma*: shock (10 times) and *ṣādma*: (11 times) were also regularly represented. Another one was *mustanqa'*: swamp, morass (8 times). One user, *Basma al-'Awfī*, commented on the book saying: "so much blackness it isn't normal". Readers also described the book as gripping, like Yasmeenafb: "I connected a lot […] until I grew old with those who aged and died with those who passed away".

It shows that the emotions the novel provokes are important for all three groups, among whom negative ones prevail. The extent to which these emotions overwhelm a reader differs, however, as well as the words by which they are described.

References

The last aspect of the literary status of the novel is covered by the third question, regarding other books and writers mentioned, which may thus influence the way readers experience the novel. Herrnstein-Smith also writes, with regard to canonization, about a "network of intertextuality", that contributes to "circulation in a particular culture".[81] Following from this, the citation of a work in relation to another can connect them in the mind of the reader. If one of them was embedded in a certain literary environment already, this may promise more appreciation for the other book. The first work also profits from the renewed attention for it. Furthermore, Griswold writes: "One might expect that reviewers from each society would tend to refer to writers from their own culture", a prediction that only partly materialized in her own research.[82] Is this the case for *Lā Sakākīn*?

In The Guardian, *The Yacoubian Building* by the Egyptian writer Alaa al-Aswany is cited, accompanied by the remark that Khalifa treats the topic of homosexuality "with greater

---

[81] Herrnstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value," 30-31.
[82] Griswold, "The Fabrication of Meaning," 1094.

sensitivity and sympathy". Al-Ahrām refers to *Al-Marhūm* by the Egyptian writer Ḥasan Kamāl, and says Khalifa's novel is even more somber than that one. Both these comparisons serve to distinguish the works around a shared theme, namely homosexuality and death and societal problems, respectively. The reviewer from De Standaard says the novel makes him think of works by Gabriel García Márquez, and compares Khalifa to Saadallah Wannous, a Syrian author who died in 1997. Al-Nahār brings up *Shame* by Salman Rushdie.

On Goodreads, Alaa al-Aswany is relatively prominent too, being mentioned in six reactions. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez is also brought up by Abdulrahman Aldeek. Furthermore, many different authors are referred to. To give an impression of the variety of literary references, an imcomplete list of them is given here. *'Abdallah* cited *Crime and Punishment*, Dostojevski, while Suzie Toumeh mentioned *Beirut 75* by Ghada Samman. Also Turkish writers are present: Nagy Hussien names Alif Shafak, Nuha Ahmed mentions Youssef Ziedan, next to Haruki Murakami, who is Japanese. Sadeel Nasarat referred to *L'étranger* by Albert Camus and *Husayn 'Abd'Alī* to *Sāq al-Bambū*, by Saud al-Sannousi. This last novel won the Booker in 2013, and the importance attached to this prize is again also demonstrated by frequent referrals to other books nominated for it. It is notable that other contemporary Syrian writers, like the three mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, are hardly mentioned. Only in the article for NRC, Moustafa Khalifa, who wrote about life in Syrian prisons, and Samar Yazbek are mentioned. Apparently, Khalifa is generally not so much connected to them in the minds of readers. On the website, sometimes non-literary sources are also cited. Huthaifa Alomari, for example, mentions 'Six feet under the city', an American television show, and Somia Osama names a song by the Lebanese band *Mashrū' Laylā*.

These occurences can be explained using Jauss' concept of 'horizon of expectations', as well. As described, he looks at perceives literary history to be a dynamic process and studies the ways 'a new artwork enters the domain of the already received'. It could well be that the reviewers writing in English and Dutch have a different framework regarding 'textual knowledge of conventions and expectations' than Arabic readers, as they come from different literary traditions. However, it is quite difficult to describe what this difference entails exactly. As the comment in NRC proves, so-called 'Western' readers may think that the novel's illogical chronology is typical for Arabic novels, yet a number of reviewers writing in Arabic judged this feature negatively. Many statements about style, structure and emotion show similarities between the different audiences. The references are hard to separate, too. Though it must be affirmed that the Arabic critics did refer mostly to other Arabic works, English and Dutch reviewers mentioned Arabic novels and writers as well, and *Goodreads* reviewers refer to writers of many different nationalities and even to phenomena which are not books. From the comments studied here, it might thus be deduced that the 'horizons' of the three groups have begun to coincide to a certain extent, without becoming homogeneous.

2. Politics

Writer
This chapter will, instead of looking mostly at formal and literary features of the book, discuss its content, and especially subjects related to politics. The first way of doing this is by answering the fifth question, about facts regarding the writer personally. These characterize Khalifa in a certain way. For instance, he might be seen as politically engaged or not, as a committed activist or rather as someone who keeps far from politics.

In two Arabic reviews this kind of information comes particularly to the fore. The first one, of Al-Quds al-'Arabi, is negative in view: The characters are made to symbolize "the absolute evil existing in the dreamlike regime" and the book is written "with a large precision of *iltizām*" to dismiss the rulers and their decisions. Khalifa is referred to as the 'recalcitrant writer' (*al-riwā'ī al-'aṣiy*), who is 'desiring to rebel'. The political thought of the novel is "a sum of truths determining our attitude towards life". Aḥmad Ṣilāl, in short, thinks the book is unbalanced and imposes a point of view on the reader. On the other hand, in Al-Wakīl al-Akhbārī, Khalifa's work as a scenarist is mentioned, as well as more biographical information expressed in admiration: he "explained war and power cuts in a letter after refusing to leave Syria", "recently had a heart attack from attending a book signing event", and "lives under continued bombardments [...] in Damascus".

In the English and Dutch reviews, these sorts of facts come up in an even more elaborate way. Cobra's reviewer writes: "Through his characters, Khalifa criticizes the Syrian regime about silencing every opposition voice, by that climate of fear and by torture." Furthermore, a paragraph of information about Khalifa is added: he still lives in Damascus, is an outspoken critic of the regime, most of his work is banned in Syria and he was beaten by associates of the regime at the funeral of a friend. This last point is also mentioned in NRC: "Despite the physical aggression of which he, like other Syrian authors, became a victim, he keeps living in Damascus. As representative of the Syrian people, which suffers under the regime, he considers silence to be a disgrace."

In two texts, his points of view experienced as progressive are emphasized. The reviewer for De Standaard also names numerous personal facts about Khalifa, among which him living in Damascus, and he writes that he experiences: "desperation about a necessary revolution which for a liberal thinker like Khalifa for the time being still cannot offer an attractive alternative." In the Guardian, the following quote attributed to Khalifa is cited, with regard to his conception of literature: "it is the duty of writing to help break down taboos and clash with fixed and backward concepts". And so, he is portrayed as an author who tries to change society while writing, attempting to move the social and political climate into a more liberal direction.

On *Goodreads*, one term used to describe the writer, or his book, or his ideas, appearing numerously is *jarī'*: bold, courageous (9 times in total). Moreover, relatively little is written about the writer, apart for several noteworthy comments. Wafaa Ali Darwish explains: "as he said in one of the televised interviews, his novel is a social study for which he chose a hard, shocking style, and of a confrontation with the truth of reality. He wanted to break the moral illusion." Ahmed Arshi writes: "I met the writer in 2008 and his thoughts and points of view appealed to me", but he got distracted while reading the book. *'Ā'isha 'Adnān al-Maḥmūd*'s comment is rather declamatory: "I don't deny that there is a beautiful revolutionary soul that inhabits the pages of the novel", though Sepp simply states: "brave, considered that the writer lives in Syria". Two readers have been following Khalifa for some time already. Namely, Ahmed writes: "Khaled Khalifa develops himself with remarkable steps", and *Maḥmūd Aghyūrlī*: "I hope you are [indeed] refused the Booker, as I remember

well what happened previously when *Madīḥ al-Karāhiyya* was nominated and how politics violated [you]". The emphasis on Khalifa's confrontation with the authorities indeed characterizes him as a committed writer. *Yūsuf Baʿlūj*'s statement confirms this: "a novel that added to the Arabic literary engaged (*multazim*) path".

So, among all groups, but especially the official reviewers, Khalifa's political engagement is emphasized. It seems that those who do not agree with his points of views also do not like his novel very much. On the other hand, the 'Western' reviewers oftentimes assume him to be progressive and liberal, and this seems to add value to the novel for them. On *Goodreads*, personal information on the author is not so much discussed, apart from a number of outstanding remarks.

Place

To gather information about the relationship readers see between politics, truth value and the novel, the geographical area they think the book is about should be established. Before that, it might be interesting to note the background of the literary critics in this study. By looking on websites of the newspapers, in articles or other pages like *Facebook*, it was found out that three of the Arabic reviewers came from Egypt, two from Lebanon, two from Syria, and one most probably from Syria or Jordan. Of the 'Western' newspapers consulted, two were mostly oriented towards the United States, one of them was British, one Dutch, two Flemish or Belgian, one Egyptian and the last one provided news for the United Arab Emirates.

On *Goodreads*, profiles of readers can provide clues on where they come from. Of course, theoretically people can fill in anything, it cannot be checked here. However, there is no incentive on the site to give false information, and untruthful facts still reveal with which countries readers associate themselves most, so this study takes these statements as general indications of readers' origins. Furthermore, is should be noted that some reviewers fill in more than one country, one for 'birth country' and one for the country they live in. These instances were all counted and recorded in the table below.

Nationality, association	Number of reviewers
Egypt	86
Syria	32
Saudi Arabia	20
Gulf States (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, United Arabic Emirates, Yemen[83])	43 (4, 12, 1, 6, 19, 1)
Neighboring countries of Syria (Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Turkey)	36 (1, 5, 12, 6, 11, 1)
North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya)	19 (5,7,4,3)
Euro-American countries (Armenia, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Norway, Romania, Sweden, USA)	16 (3, 1, 2, 3, 1, 1, 1, 2, 2)

Figure 5 – Background Reviewers, Goodreads

---

[83] Although Yemen is technically not one of the Gulf States, it was added to this group, because this was the category it fit most of all.

As becomes clear, the majority of users comes from Egypt, followed by Syria and Saudi Arabia. While the formal reviews were written by authors and critics from a relatively small region (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and possibly Jordan), users of *Goodreads* live in a large variety of countries, stretching from Morocco to the Persian Gulf. Also, a considerable number of them apparently live in European or North-American countries, as they mentioned these on their profiles.

Furthermore, readers' assumptions about which geographical region the book deals with, had to be established. Of course, Aleppo and Syria are often mentioned, in both the reviews and online reactions. Al-Wakil refers to the two areas in one sentence: "the house of the family symbolizes Aleppo, which in turn symbolizes the nation". Mamdūḥ Farrāj al-Nābī, reviewer for Al-'Arab, writes: "The story resembles an elegy on the city of Aleppo", and De Standaard: "parallels to the Aleppo of today [are] often not hard to find." Also, Iraq is quite often mentioned, as part of the story takes place here. For example, The National states: "Rashid joins an ultra-conservative religious group and […] heads off to Baghdad in 2003 to fight American forces." Therefore, the places mentioned in the book are important clues for readers to connect the story to Syria and Iraq, and they assume that the book gives them information about these places.

A tendency that appears from the online reactions is the involvement of pan-Arabic sentiments. Phrases like 'I as an Arabic reader' (Arageek) or 'our Arab countries' (*Ilhām Mazyūd*) indicate a feeling of shared identity. Often, this is combined with a sort of defensive or apologetic stance, and a marked awareness of how the Arab region, or more generally the 'East' is perceived in the rest of the world. For instance, Wafaa Ali Darwish writes: "Oh, I am ashamed this book was translated to six other languages, introducing to the other our ancient Arabic literature." Nada EL Shabrawi asks: "Which […] picture do we want the world to paint of us?" and Omar Sayed Taqi poses this question: "Is it logical that we, the conservative East, have such an amount of blunt pornography in our novels"? *Ibrāhīm 'Abjī* writes: "I believe that the literature in our countries is in a constant state of decline". It thus becomes clear that users of *Goodreads* fairly often feel the book to cover more than just Syria, as the following statements illustrate. Mohamed Abd El Rahman: "The novel talks about Syria in particular, and about the disintegration of our Arabic societies in general", and Bent: "As if the pain of our *umma* comes to life from the East to the West". Sahar Kamal remarks, negatively: "It is as if all the freedom problems in the Arabic world needed to be discussed within the confines of this work!" So, a certain amount of Arab readers feel that the book does not just cover Syria and Iraq, but think it also deals with the Arab world in general. They infer that the society described in the book represents Middle Eastern, or Islamic society, as well.

A number of readers also associate the content of *Lā Sakākīn* with the Egyptian situation. Given the number of users who mention Egypt on their profile, this may not come as a vast surprise, but it is still remarkable. Ahmed, for instance, writes: Aleppo "makes me think of Cairo, of what happened to it and what it has become." Also, more elaborate comparisons are made between the two countries, like Muhammed saying: "I thought we lived under oppression […], but compared to Syria living under the Ba'ath regime…" Hussien Fawzy states: "All the time I asked myself: could we be carried to the misery, destruction and ugliness that happened to them because of the military rule? A friend of mine answered me: you already live in it, maybe even worse. It is as if you ascend from your body and look at your actions from a neutral point of view."

There are a few mentions of other Arab countries. Ḥusayn 'Abd 'Alī calls the character to which the title refers, who kills himself rather than dying of hunger, "a direct reference to our friend Bouazizi". Also, Bchara presumably from Beirut in Lebanon writes: "it made me aware of how the Syrians think about my country".

Furthermore, *Asīl Kawjān* relates the novel to the atmosphere in a part of the United States: "The description of Aleppo almost made me think of one of the neighborhoods in Chicago or New York … drowned in darkness day and night". Interestingly, the reviewer of Barnes & Noble shares this orientation, though in a more political way, and writes: "There are parallels here to America's current upheaval".

As became clear, reviewers and online respondents came from a number of countries, where, among the Arabic ones, Egypt and Syria were predominant. This had its effect on the area readers thought the book dealt with. Apart from Syria and Iraq, which are specifically mentioned in the book, also other Arab countries, and especially Egypt, were embedded in readers' discussions of the novel. Interestingly, also the United States was mentioned two times. It shows that readers quite often relate the content of the book to their own situation.

Truth-value

Having established with which areas the novel is associated, the next issue of study is the relation between literature and reality, and whether readers think the places mentioned are truthfully represented or not. Political orientation may play an important role in this, though this factor is not very divergent, as there seems to be hardly any support for the regime among reviewers. This, in turn, is logical as staunch defendants of the government would probably not write about or even read Khalifa's book at all. A quote from the review on Barnes & Noble, to start with, confirms a general connection between politics and literature: The novel offers "a bigger vision, reminding us that all politics are personal, in the sense that they affect us at the level of our daily lives".

Other remarks concentrate more on specific areas described in the book, and many Western reviewers trust the writer in explaining the situation to them. In NRC, it is written: "How could it have come so far in Syria? That is what Khalifa shows us in his work." Cobra's reviewer states the book is "often based on true facts", and that it "sheds a light on how the country could end up in the situation it is in now". A noteworthy statement is made by The National's reviewer, saying that "Neither the Ba'ath Party nor Hafez or Bashar Al Assad are named. Yet the dates make the identity of the "Party" and its leaders clear." De Standaard, in addition, writes about Iraq, saying: "Rachid's odyssey is an interesting memory of how the precursors of IS originated." Arabic reviews often write in a similar tone. Al-Ahrām states: The novel "doesn't describe the swamp of the revolution [today], but explains it", and Al-Safir: "A mosaic of the reality that produces the results we know of."

On *Goodreads*, users are more skeptical about the truth-value of the book, or at least more mixed of opinion. Looking at the appearance in the reactions of the words *wāqi'ī* = actual; realistic (23 times) versus *mubāliġ* = exaggerated (29 times) gives a first impression of this circumstance. Quite a few readers who associate themselves with Syria commented on truth value. Some agree with Khalifa, like Samer Zydia: "parallel life […] is exactly what I perceived in my country", and Mohammad Khier: "There was a negative inclination in the novel towards rural families, but I think this tendency is present in our society, we see it daily". Rihab, on the other hand, opposes the picture the writer paints: "This isn't the society in which I live … I am from a poor family, but I don't suffer from the lowness, deviance and moral disintegration I read about in the novel … the regime, the authorities, the government, the country are we, the people". Others, like Hussam, merely feel to have gathered information: "I knew little of the black past of my country."

Readers from other countries also regularly have strong opinions about the novel's representation of reality. Arageek's reviewer stated: "Khalifa chose a disfigured family that doesn't represent Syrian society." Israa Shalltoot wrote on *Goodreads*: "Does he really want to convince us that Aleppo is like that? That Syrian society is like that? Even America is not

that much in decay". Some use percentages to express this view, like Ayah Ezz El-Dein: "I don't think this family represents more than 5% of Syrian society" and Mahmoud abobakr: "I think it equals no more than 1% of reality…" On the other hand, there is also a reader who considers the actual situation to be worse than the book. He, Awab AlShwaikh, states: "I don't know how the writer can draw such a rosy picture of the suffering of the Syrian people, in comparison with the dark black reality."

Others do believe in the book's truth value. Amr Taysir, namely, concentrates mostly on politics: "[Indeed, the President] doesn't go any meter on the street without hundreds of guards, despite the images broadcasted on television time and again of millions of people shouting for him in support marches", while Anood Alsuwaity looks at it from more common people's point of view: "how ugly this bitter, cruel reality is in which we live". The pan-Arabic thought also comes up again, as in the (opposing) reactions of Nour Hassaniya: "It doesn't resemble Arabic or Islamic countries", and of *Ilhām Mazyūd*, adversely: "It was already noted by some that the problems thrown into the novel are really present in our Arab countries".

Emotions like indignation and shame, which will be described more elaborately later on, are also connected to politics and truth-value. Readers quite frequently take the novel as an insult to Syria. Arageek's reviewer writes: "I […] refuse to narrow down Syrian society to such an ugly picture of shame and dishonorable relations that come close to forbidden adultery, only to arouse certain interests in the readers or to illustrate the extent of the open-mindedness of the writer." Rasha articulates a similar view: "I refuse to confine Syrian society within such an ugly picture". Seba states: "The novel is actually offensive to Syrian society" and *Raghm Qāsim*: "I have a better image of Syria in my head." Nour Hassaniya declares: "It hurt reading these immoralities about the people of the respected country [Syria]", and Tarik.m emotionally: "I think Khaled Khalifa is competing with the biggest haters of the Syrian people and the Muslims alike!" Dimah Kabbani's remark is more specific, namely: "Aleppo doesn't deserve this cruelty".

Thus, most reviewers (Arabic, English and Dutch) feel the book conveys real facts and represents the situation in Syria truthfully, whereas *Goodreads* respondents are not so convinced about that. Reactions are mixed, as some of them do believe in the truth-value of the book. Others think the story is exaggerated, or just not realistic. These judgements seem to originate partly in actual personal experiences, but also in feelings of shame, as several readers take the story to be an offense to Syria.

Government and the people

An aspect that connects the writer's political engagement with truth value is the government's accountability, and how justified it is for the writer to associate the Syrian authorities with societal problems. In an interview, he said that he would not like to see his novel being reduced to just one genre, or a fixed interpretation, and stated: "My work isn't a political bulletin".[84] On the other hand, the messages he posted on Facebook and the other biographical details mentioned before do indicate that he is an opponent of the authorities. Even though, as said before, support for the regime is marginal in the reactions, some users oppose Khalifa in his critical stance. Here, Stuart Hall's theory, described earlier, on the role of ideology in interpretation is applicable. The few times that readers defend or to some extent excuse the Syrian government, it is clear they are 'negotiating' or 'resisting' the intended meaning of the

---

[84] Sayyed Mahmoud and Mohammed Saad, "INTERVIEW: Khaled Khalifa Syria's memory of pain," *Ahram Online*, 17 February, 2014, accessed 7 December, 2016, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/18/0/94411/Books/INTERVIEW-Khaled-Khalifa-Syrias-memory-of-pain-.aspx.

text. They read the book, and then come up with their own views about its ideological perspective. Seba, for example, writes: "Implicating the dictatorship as the cause of corruption that existed before its presence, is a discharge of all responsibility for its continuation". In other words, it is unfair and ineffective to blame only the government for the situation in Syria. Kamar Muhamed thinks of another factor than politics that could bring about order: "As if there is no religion, nothing ruling the people except for its regime". Others emphasize the accountability and freedom of action of humans themselves, like yoyo: "I don't see that the regime is one hundred per cent responsible for the weakness of these people. As life, however difficult and suffocating, in the end only consists of choices." Abeer Saleh states: "I think the role of people themselves is bigger than that of any regime".

Something that became clear from the remarks before already, but may be accentuated again, is the fact that through these online comments about novels, readers frequently express personal opinions about politics. Two of them will be quoted here. Hovig Isgenian indicates his aversion against Islamist groups: "Aleppo will only succeed in rising again from this catastrophe, if it stops taking sides with the Islamists who turned the city into a large abbatoir". Nuha Ahmed says: "sadly, changes in our countries are always to the worse", expressing her general dismay at rulers in Arabic countries. Here, it becomes clear in practice how a social medium can serve as a civic site of deliberation, on which users can articulate their views. As is explained more elaborately in the next chapter, this expressing of opinions can be seen as a meaningful aspect of the public sphere.

3. Social Morals

The studied comments and evaluations reveal a lot about the underlying standards and assumptions that readers have, as was shown before with regard to politics. This chapter will describe how readers express their ideas on social norms, and what these ideas in fact are.

Three comments generally referred to the relationship between literature and convictions related to society, and made use of a shared concept. *Ḥusayn ʿAbdʿAlī* writes about the novel that "it breaks the taboo of the trinity of politics, religion and sex". Husam "found this novel wants to 'climb' the three taboos in the Arabic world: religion, politics and sex, all in one book." Also Hatem Rhmany draws in these "three things that spin our Arabic worlds and minds". Apparently, this is an established combination. This assumption is illustrated by journalist and writer Maarten Zeegers, who states in his book *Wij Zijn Arabieren* that he went to Syria to do research on the 'body' of the Arabs. He describes: "The Arabic word for body is *jassad* and the consonants form an acronym that stands for the three things that in the Middle East are not talked about in public: *jins*, *siyasa* and *dien*, meaning sex, politics and religion."[85]

The first component, sex, indeed is a theme with which readers are preoccupied a lot. A clear difference emerges between the reviewers on one side, and the readers writing on a merely personal title on the other. Some of the literary critics mention this topic, but often in a neutral tone. In the New York Times, for instance, the reviewer states that Mr. Khalifa is "conjuring some of the most graphic depictions of sex […] I've read all year." The word 'graphic' does not automatically imply a certain judgement. In the article in NRC, the author hints at the subject by saying that Sawsan is a "daughter who from time to time loses every moral compass", but does not go into this much more. The reviewer from Al-Safir is not shocked by explicit passages and simply states: "Sawsan fights death with sex."

On *Goodreads*, however, a lot of readers are negative about the 'sexual scenes' or descriptions. The word for pornography or freethinking and anarchism, *ibāḥiyya* is mentioned thirty times in the online reactions, *ʿihr*: adultery or whoredom, sixteen times. Furthermore, words like *muzʿij*: disturbing, unsettling (10 times), *ġaṯayān*: nausea, sickness (9 times) and *ishmiʾzāz*: disgust, aversion (8 times) are regularly used. Wafaa Eltawansy writes: "Is this the level of literature that wins prizes nowadays? Shame remains on who reads even one letter of it". Moaz Mohammed specifies his negative opinion: "Too bad that sex was present in a number of descriptions". However, some users accept or appreciate the erotic parts of the book, like Basem Omar, who states: "Sex is something natural", and Nagy Hussien: "I think sex in this novel is a means for the heroes to sink deeper into their parallel lives".

Also social relations more generally are dealt with. The reviewer of Al-ʿArab talks about the effect the regime had on people living in Syrian society, and especially how it caused the "disfigurement of their relations". Further on, relationships between characters in the book are described as "murība": suspicious, questionable. This opinion is reflected in certain words used time and again on *Goodreads*, namely *inḥilāl* = dissolution, disintegration, decay (28 times, in combination with *ʾakhlāqī* = moral, 8 times) and *tafassukh* = breaking into fragments, falling apart (17). In addition, the love of Rashid for his sister Sawsan is described negatively a number of times, as either being immoral or illogical.

So, it is clear that sex is an important topic to the novel, and readers indicate that this indeed is a taboo in Middle Eastern societies (as it is in many areas of the world). Whereas the official reviewers are not so much shocked by the subject, many readers, though not all of them, on *Goodreads* are. They often judge the book negatively because of the explicit sexual

---

[85] Maarten Zeegers, *Wij Zijn Arabieren* (Amsterdam: Rainbow, 2003), 9-10.

scenes it contains, and describe social relations between the characters of the novel with a certain amount of pity or disapproval.

Homosexuality

Dina Georgis writes about homosexuality, with a focus on the Arab world. She states: "In all cultures, shaming and the fear of shame encourage obedience to social moral codes, and what is considered shameful is never culturally static." She goes on to explain, however, that she sees the situation in the Arab world to be somewhat particular, due to societal circumstances: "At the same time, it is probably not a generalization to say that the fear of social retribution and ostracization in a culture that intensely values family ties and religious/sectarian loyalty is the emotional reality for most Arabs."[86] She furthermore notes a difference between her own experiences, being queer in the United States, and those of people featured in a book of true stories about homosexuality set and published in Lebanon. With the latter, she notices "an openness to talk about shame"[87], without seeing this emotion as "an obstacle to political liberation."[88] She feels that these individuals felt less of a need to show the outside world they were queer, and notices, with a certain amount of surprise, that among them shameless pride is not an imperative. Summarizing, she states that the Lebanese "queer women and trans persons are not simply or naively appropriating Western queer epistemology. Rather, they are cultivating and negotiating their sexualities under a variety of local and geopolitical pressures."[89] It is interesting to see that these observations appear to be true for the homosexual character in Khalifa's book, too, and that readers react rather positively to this.

In *Lā sakākīn*, this character is impersonated by the uncle of the family, Nizar. In the book, his life is described, his relationships and the hardships he has to endure. As a musician, he earns his money playing in nightclubs. Before that, after writing an eminent piece of music and selling it, he moved to Beirut where he fell in love with a man and lived happily for a time, until he ran out of money. Back in conservative Aleppo he feels less comfortable, not in the least because several members of his family are embarrassed of him. At one point, they indeed send him to prison, where he is raped by a Sheikh. Yet, when he is free again, he continues to take care of his family members. He becomes involved with Madhat, as his wife, but this man treats him cruelly and Nizar finally leaves him. Furthermore, he has a friend, Michel, who moved to Paris early in the story and continues living there steadily with a boyfriend.

The character of uncle Nizar provokes many statements among readers about the way he is depicted in the book and about homosexuality in general. A remark in The Guardian probably explains at least some of the references to the Egyptian writer mentioned before: "[Khalifa] is by no means the first Arabic novelist to write about homosexuality, but he treats the topic with greater sensitivity and sympathy than, for instance, Alaa al-Aswany". Different reviewers describe the way Nizar struggles with his social environment. The National mentions the distressing fact that the grandfather "is so horrified by his son's sexuality that he makes sure Nizar is sent to prison". Al-Safir portrays it this way: "Nizar doesn't oppress his homosexual inclination for the sake of society. Rather, with difficulty and persistence, he carves out a context for himself within society and on its shores."

Returning to Georgis' statements mentioned earlier, about the group of queer people in Lebanon, it might be safe to say they apply to the character of Nizar as well. Although others

---

[86] Dina Georgis, "Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame in *Bareed Mista3jil*," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45 (2013): 233-251, accessed 23 May, 2017, DOI: 10.1017/S0020743813000056.
[87] Idem, 234.
[88] Idem, 243.
[89] Idem, 234.

are embarrassed by him, he is not ashamed of himself. At the same time, he does not seem to show off his identity in an excessive way and is mostly driven by a desire for true love. As Lynx Qualey remarks, Nizar's identity actually fluctuates somewhat throughout the story: "He seems at first to be claiming a female and feminine identity. Later, he is male-identified but gay. Still later, he seems to neuter himself — with the exception of a few kisses — in order to live safely and comfortably."[90] This points to him developing and negotiating his sexuality and continuously looking for ways to reconcile it with his social environment.

Intriguingly, Nizar is seen in a highly positive light by most reviewers. The New York Times, for example, writes that Nizar "leads the life with the most integrity." The literary critic writing for The National states: "At times, the book seems to shy from Nizar's sexuality. Yet he is the story's moral center and his family's refuge […] acting with decency and love." Arabic reviewers repeatedly take on this opinion, too. Al-Ahrām writes that Nizar "despite his societal burden / handicap, passes as the most successful and balanced [of the characters]". Al-ʿArab calls him "the only character in balance with himself". Al-Nahār maintains that homosexuality characterizes the Bourgeoisie, with its internal emptiness. However, it is stated, "the only one who seems able to be receptive is homosexual Nizar, and Sawsan as the female copy of him". So, homosexuality in general is not judged positively, but the actions of the gay character in the book are.

An interesting remark in this regard is made by Sayed Mahmoud on Al Ahram English: "The novel portrays a non-stereotypical homosexual, sympathizing with his human dilemma. It is not blind to his humanity and his delicate spirit, which faces ostracism." The question arises what this reviewer means by the words 'non-stereotypical'. Maybe it has to do with the tendency described in the status quaestionis, of Arabic homosexuals on purpose not coming across as gay too much. It could be that this reviewer has an image in mind of homosexuals as always extremely outgoing, purposely provoking and taking part in, what he thinks to be, immoral behavior. Apparently, Nizar does not respond to this expectation.

Also on *Goodreads*, this idea seems to be prevalent. There are several reactions with a similar essence as the one by Amal Yousef: "The only character I sympathized with and loved was uncle Nizar, despite his homosexuality." Some readers seem irritated by the relatively large part of the text devoted to Nizar, like Fatma Ayari: "As if the ultimate concern of the Syrians […] is establishing gay rights", or do not like the subject of queerness at all. Suzie Toumeh, for instance, says: "I gave it only two stars because it was the first Arabic book I have read in which one of the main characters was a transgender!"[91] Others, although they are a minority, are much more accommodating. Malsam, for instance, writes: "Do homosexuals love each other and are they looking for a pure, clear relationship, without the sexual longing? Then what is the problem?" Marianna Altabbaa remarks: "In the details we also find the sufferings of a gay man, which come across as realistic".

Two themes which are not so often talked about are 'women's issues' and 'religion', even though they seem quite closely connected to this topic. The first one was discussed at a meeting organized by the Amsterdam Centre for Middle Eastern Studies. Khalifa's novel was praised by the panel for its literary qualities, but there was also criticism on "the way in which the degradation of society is linked to female and homosexual characters" in the book.[92] The member of the panel who expressed this opinion most, Rehab Chaker, may be the same *Riḥāb*

---

[90] M. Lynx Qualey, "Queerness in Khaled Khalifa's 'No Knives in the Kitchens of This City," *Arabic Literature (in English)*, 23 September, 2016, accessed 29 May, 2017, https://arablit.org/2016/09/23/queerness-in-khaled-khalifas-no-knives-in-the-kitchens-of-this-city/.

[91] Please refer to the *Rectification* at the end of this thesis, on page 45, for important additional information on this quote.

[92] Josephine van den Bent, "Nadwa! De winnaar van de IPAF 2014," *Zemzem* 1 (2014): 82.

reacting on *Goodreads*: "My objection against the writer is his insistence on the connection between the decay and disintegration of Aleppo […] and many female characters and homosexuals who imitate women. I ask myself, why?" In the review of Al-Ahram English is written about "parallels between political authority and masculine authority inside a society, and its deterioration". That sentence associates 'deterioration' with the control of politicians and men, instead, and therefore indicates an actually opposite point of view. Secondly, religion is not mentioned as often as might have been expected. One of a few statements clearly pointing towards that topic is made by Ghadamamostafa, who is negative about the writer's depiction of it: "Religiousness, as usual, is a man with a beard, calling for *jihād*".

In summary, readers recognize homosexuality to be an important component of the book. Of the Arabic readers, the reviewers and those on *Goodreads*, quite a lot of them express a negative opinion about this sexual orientation and form of identity itself. However, uncle Nizar is often praised for his personal qualities. It might be that Khalifa indeed tried to break down a taboo here, by introducing an admirable gay character in his story. Women's issues are not so much talked about, on the other hand, and when they are, different points of view emerge about them. Religion is hardly discussed at all, but it might be that people who have very pronounced views about Islam would not read the novel anyway.

Shame

Another issue that is relevant to this study and has been researched, mostly in anthropology and other social sciences, are the mechanisms of shame and social humiliation. This thesis devotes a separate section to 'shame', instead of including it with the emotions mentioned in the first chapter, as it is set apart by a much stronger social dimension. According to definition 1a of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, shame is "a painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety".[93] Jennifer Biddle, in her comprehensive article, indicates that a feeling of self-failure is also closely connected with shame. She underlines that the emotion plays an important role in identity making, in the process of 'differentiating the self from the other', and at other times in 'recognizing the self in the other', in the case of vicarious shame.[94] Somewhat further in the article, she makes the significant comment that "shame also works to silence".[95] These are important features to keep in mind while reading *Lā Sakākīn* and the reactions to it. It could be that shame plays a notably large role in Syrian society, in the novel itself, or in the way readers judge the book.

Many reviewers agree on the fact that shame is a recurring motif in the book. As the New York Times writes: "Shame flood these character's veins. Shame about their lust. Shame about their children. And shame, above all, about their failures to fight tyranny." Also The Guardian ascribes an important role to it: "Shame is a key theme, and the general rage for orthodoxy". The National, after calling it the single powerful emotion in the book, states that "Slowly, shame eats away at the character's lives."

Remarkably, it is seldom explicitly linked to family ties and religious or sectarian loyalty, which were mentioned in Georgis' research, but rather to national political factors. The National continues: "People are crippled by shame: ashamed to work for the Party and to march in Party demonstrations but also ashamed to stand against it as well." Also the New York Times refers to this more political dimension of shame: "How to justify participating in Baath Party parades, and throatily chanting party songs, and heartily praising party

---

[93] Merriam Webster Dictionary, "Shame", accessed 23 May, 2017, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shame.
[94] Jennifer Biddle, "Shame," *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 26 (1997): 230, accessed 23 May, 2017, DOI: 10.1080/08164649.1997.9994862.
[95] Jennifer Biddle, "Shame", 232.

propaganda?" This is closely connected to an article by anthropologist Lisa Wedeen. She writes about acting 'as if', which she describes as "an important feature of Syrian political life: the regime's demand that people provide external evidence of their allegiance to a cult whose rituals of obeisance are often transparently phony."[96] Thus, people took part in forms of praising the regime and its leader that were oftentimes so absurd they could not signify genuine admiration for the regime. She states it works in a way that "no-one is deceived by the charade, but everyone […] is forced to participate in it".[97] The participation in these rituals rather indicates the power the government possesses to make its subjects perform certain actions, and that is has control over their body and presumably also their imagination.[98] Reviewers sense that this must be a source of shame for the Syrian citizens, whereby the notion of self-failure that Biddle referred to, might be helpful to understand this.

Not only critics writing in English and Dutch touch upon this subject, their Arabic counterparts do so as well. The reviewers of Al-Jazīra and Al-'Arab both dedicate a significant paragraph to the emotion. The first one, Hay<u>t</u>am Ḥusayn, mentions it in the title, too: "[the title of the novel] and the categories of shame". In the article, the emotion is mostly connected to the political situation. It calls 'the destruction of the country' the large shame, followed by the deformation and incrimination of the people. Then, there is the "shame that manifests itself in the secrecy of the prisons" and shame carried by others, in relation to Heba, a character whose clothes were teared off her body in the street by paratroopers. However, it concludes, "the real shame sticks to those that try to liquefy the value of the society and its people, which they formed on the basis of their wants, illusions and concerns with control and exploitation", referring to the regime. Al-'Arab concentrates more on a social dimension, namely the shame that character Jean describes in a letter to his son, the shame of the mother for her disabled daughter, Sawsan's shame after an operation to restore her hymen, the shame of the family for Nizar. On *Goodreads*, shame is at times also connected to politics, as Huda's statement demonstrates: "What is disgrace except for the shame of the authority and dictatorship that brings a person to forgetting he is human!" Dina Mohammed articulates the rather dark view that "Suicide and surrender are presented as solutions to get rid of this shame and suffering".

The reactions online in addition display another manifestation of shame, namely in readers' judgement of the novel. It seems the feeling plays a large role in their evaluations. The statement cited before, in relation to the sexual scenes of the novel, by Wafaa Eltawansy: "Shame remains on who reads even one letter of it", expresses this sentiment well. Many readers describe feeling ashamed after reading the erotic descriptions, and seem dismayed the writer exposed them to these kinds of details. This is often why they give the book a negative rating. Some of them even react angrily, demonstrating the intensity of the emotion. Also, shame here functions as a way of identity forming, by means of statements along the lines of 'how is it possible that in an Arab / Eastern / Islamic book so many explicit scenes appear'? In other words: 'in my worldview, one ought to be ashamed around these issues, instead of just mentioning them'.

Here, Jauss' 'horizon of expectations' comes into view again, but now with regard to social knowledge, among which moral codes. It becomes clear that a majority of the reviewers on *Goodreads* has a different framework with regard to eroticism and homosexuality in literature than most of the reviewers writing for newspapers. This can be

---

[96] Lisa Wedeen, "Acting "As If": Symbolic Politics and Social Control in Syria," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (1998): 504, accessed 24 May, 2017, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417598001388.
[97] Lisa Wedeen, "Acting "As If"", 511.
[98] Idem, 516.

caused by different factors. Maybe age plays a role. It could, for example, be that the younger generation has become more conservative around these issues. Reading experience might also be important, as readers who have encountered other novels with explicit sexual scenes before are probably less inclined to be shocked by these. Nationality, education and social background are likely to be of influence, too, but it is impossible here to determine which ones determine the so-called 'horizon' most.

Humanity
On the other hand, a number of reviewers and readers notice, and look favourably upon, a forgiving attitude on the part of Khalifa towards his characters. It is often mentioned in the Arabic reviews. Al-Ahrām states that "[The novel] talks about people being corrupted by what is around them, whereby Khaled Khalifa doesn't forget they are human", while Al-Wakīl mentions "that intense state specific to the human being that loses his humanity" as an important theme. Al-Nahār describes Sawsan's situation as "a warning of the destiny that awaits one who grows old without receiving happiness", demonstrating compassion with that character's actions. These statements, instead of delineating difference, emphasize a shared essence between people, and the realization that behavior can be quite dependent on the circumstances. The reviewer writing for the New York Times expresses an awareness of this, too, by mentioning "the erratic standards of human behavior in dictatorships". Barnes and Noble's reviewer treats this in a bit more general manner, calling fiction "a way to bridge the gap between ourselves and what we like to call the other, a reminder of our essential, shared humanity".

Also on *Goodreads*, this kind of comments appears. For instance, fatma states that the book is about "how oppression and fear change human nature and get out the worst in them", whereby she expresses disapproval about the characters' actions, but at the same time ascribes these to the political situation in Syria. Nosa writes, in a comparable fashion: "The novel tells a story of the crushing of dreams and attempts to move towards a better life".

It seems that Iser's theory described before, on indeterminate 'gaps' or 'blanks' in a text which are subjectively filled in by the reader, is supported by the paragraph above. A number of reviewers have picked up this strand of thought on humanity, while others did not mention it at all. The text, then, must have been open to different interpretations, whereby each reader 'completed' the text with his or her own disposition and experiences.

Civil Society
Having read about the convictions of readers with regard to politics and social morals, it is interesting to wonder whether contributions to civil society are involved here. The user who inserted a picture of Che Guevara in his reaction and then elaborately denounced the regime comes to mind. In March 2014, when he posted this, calling for revolution was probably less controversial already than a few years before, but still he definitely tries to make people enthusiastic about political changes. Others who criticize the Syrian government, albeit in a somewhat more neutral manner, also perform activism in a way. Expressing their viewpoints implies a want for developments in the situation.

Counting these texts as components of civil society might be a step too far, however. The definition Diamond came up with, implies 'collective action', he is talking primarily about groups and organizations. Formal reviewers surely do not seem to be included in these concepts, as they just write on personal title, but *Goodreads* users don't really fit this part of the definition, either. Although it is possible to find likeminded people on the website and communicate with them, there is no association to which they all belong. On the other hand, Diamond's statement about civil society being an 'intermediary entity' perhaps is true for the

politically and socially colored *Goodreads* reactions. They can be read by a diverse audience, even by internet users who did not sign up for the website, so cannot be seen as part of the private anymore. Clearly, they are not part of the state either, and must then be positioned somewhere in between.

      The functions Howard mentioned of the internet in support of society also come across as applicable. That is, two of them, as *Goodreads* does not provide an infrastructure for arranging meetings, or at least, this was not demonstrated in the reactions. It may, nevertheless, serve a symbolic function as 'a sign of modernity in civic life and civil discourse'.[99] Users of the website are enthusiastic about literature and probably take pride in writing and reading about this, meanwhile demonstrating their intellectual capabilities. Also the first function he mentioned, the ideational one, could play a role here, as indeed 'new values, ideas and interests'[100] are introduced to people who would not otherwise see them. *Goodreads* does provide a platform for disseminating ideas and having discussions. Whether the democratic attributes which Howard mentioned are cultivated that way, remains something to be researched, as the content of readers reacting to one another on the page could not be analyzed in this thesis. In short, the website of *Goodreads* does not fit the description of civil society, yet it displays specific characteristics of it.

      However, they may be included with the somewhat broader definition of the 'public sphere', as described by Habermas. They indeed form places where 'issues of moral importance, important to the public' are discussed, as this thesis showed. Users expressed their views on social and political issues, indirectly shaping a picture of their ideal society. Interestingly, Habermas' observation that the public sphere increasingly "assumes advertising functions" and that "it can be deployed as a vehicle for political and economic propaganda" more and more[101], may be less applicable to social media than to the traditional ones. Webpages are much more easily influenced by 'common people', compared to newspapers, radio and television. Authoritarian regimes usually hold a tight control over these last ones, but it is more difficult for them to regulate online content. On the other hand, the concerns cited before about the quality of online communication, it being "largely anonymous and fragmented" [102], are relevant with regard to *Goodreads* as well, most likely reducing the actual political influence of the discussions on the page.

---

[99] Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship*, 142.
[100] Idem.
[101] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Polity Press, Blackwell Publishers Ltc., 1989), 175.
[102] Idem.

Conclusion

In this thesis, a range of textual material has been researched, providing information that adds to the fields of reception studies, literature studies and that of social reading. The findings time and again contradicted seemingly established facts or statements.

In the first chapter, for instance, its 'excellent reception […] particularly in Lebanon and Egypt' and 'widespread praise internationally' were called into question, as the Arabic reviews and reactions were not as positive as suggested. Particularly on the website of *Goodreads* this was the case, where a majority of readers rated the book with only one star out of five. The reviews in English and Dutch clearly expressed more acclaim, but also a number of them were of neutral or mixed opinion.

Secondly, the literary prizes the book has won or was nominated for were looked at. The critics now and then brought them up, but only seldom markedly disagreed with them. In the online reactions they were mentioned much more often, but also frequently criticized in lively terms. In one reaction, the authority of literary critics in general was challenged.

Furthermore, the assertion that 'Western' reviewers are not so much concerned with the style, literary qualities and structure of Arabic novels was opposed, as they were found to actually discuss these aspects in their reviews. In the Arabic texts, apart from *iltizām* or commitment, the emotional power and build-up of the book proved to be important, too.

The literary references in the texts, especially on *Goodreads* and in the English and Dutch reviews, were quite varied. The latter ones referred to other Arabic writers and one from South America, while in the online reactions, writers from a range of nationalities were cited. Therefore, it could not be maintained that the context in which the book was received was disposed only towards works from the 'own culture', rather these frameworks of literary references thus demonstrated a certain amount of overlap.

The second chapter treated the political side of the novel and the way readers experienced it. First, it looked at the persona of the writer and analyzed how he was characterized. Biographical information about him seemed to play the largest role in the official reviews, where it most often portrayed him as an engaged writer (except in one of the Arabic reviews, where he was disapprovingly called 'recalcitrant', and 'rebel'). On *Goodreads*, this sort of information is mentioned less frequently. Yet when it is brought up, the writer is described as courageous and committed.

Most readers feel the novel talks about Aleppo and Syria, but other associations were there as well. On *Goodreads* there was a trend of thinking in pan-Arabic terms, of readers who considered the novel to be about the Islamic world, the Arabic world or the 'East' in general. Others related the book to their own countries, in particular to Egypt, and notably even to the United States.

A substantial number of reviewers felt the political situation sketched in the novel indeed applied to Aleppo and Syria, and trusted Khalifa in explaining the situation to them. Readers reacting on *Goodreads* were more critical, or held a mixed opinion about the truth value of the book. Some of them reacted angrily, seeing the novel's depiction of reality as an insult to Syria and its citizens.

Additionally, a minority of readers resisted the political thought of the book, in a way defending the Syrian government. Other reactions showed that the content of the novel proved to be an incentive for expressing personal opinions with regard to politics.

In the third chapter it became clear the writer deals with taboos in his work, especially with the 'trinity' of sex, politics and religion. Although religion is not so much discussed in the reactions, the scenes containing sex form a main reason for Arab readers not to like it. Here, a marked difference can be noted between the reviewers, who mostly discuss these

explicit descriptions in a rather neutral way, and the users of *Goodreads*, of whom a large number forcefully disapproves of them. Interestingly, thus, Arabic reader responses on this 'open' social medium are not necessarily more liberal or progressive than those published in newspapers.

This distinction is also perceptible in their consideration of the gay character in the book and homosexuality in general. On *Goodreads*, homosexuality is commonly seen in a negative light. However, this impression is nuanced by the positive judgement which readers hold of the character of Nizar. In the formal reviews as well, he is described as a balanced person, the one 'leading the life with the most integrity', successful and decent.

Shame was discovered to be an important theme in the book. It was connected to politics several times, and to the powerlessness the Syrians felt for a long time with regard to their regime. It was also an influential emotion that readers seemed to feel, especially those reacting on *Goodreads*, while reading the novel. As it is an uncomfortable emotion, this probably caused a significant part of the negative ratings.

Then, it was examined if the reviews could be seen as belonging to civil society. For the texts by professional critics this was not so much the case, since they mostly discussed the book in a strictly literary context. The users of *Goodreads*, however, in their reader responses at times tried to convince others of their political or social points of view. Considering the fact that they do not form a coherent group defending a certain interest, they did not conform to the definition of a component of 'civil society' as such. However, the website does fulfill the ideational and possibly also the symbolic function ascribed to it. In further research, it would be interesting to investigate how readers react to one another. This would have provided too much material for this thesis, but could provide insights about democratic attributes which discussions on the website might cultivate.

In short, the criteria and norms according to which readers evaluate Khalifa Khalifa's *Lā Sakākīn fī Maṭābikh Hādhihi al-Madīna* are varied, they involve views on literary qualities and style, political convictions, social morals and values, as well as personal emotions. It was interesting to see that sometimes the Arab and 'Western' texts indeed differed from each other and its reviewers could thus be distinguished into two groups. The general evaluation, for example, was more positive in the English and Dutch texts, and these also included more personal information about the writer and his progressive stance. However, there were also many points at which the reviewers shared views, such as the fact that both groups mentioned information on literary qualities and structure, they mostly accepted the truth-value of the book and acknowledged the importance of shame. Maybe the biggest difference could be noticed between the professional reviewers and the users of *Goodreads*. The last ones were overall more conservative, and regularly adopted a critical stance towards authority, indeed pointing towards, as Klagenfurt University suggested, "the individual's self-empowerment against literary expertocracy"[103] as a feature of contemporary social reading.

It is possible that these readers have less faith in institutions in general, as a large part of them live under authoritarian regimes or in countries that suffer from corruption. Further research could indicate if this is different among readers who live in democratic countries with relatively low corruption, and to what extent this factor influences readers' criticism. The divergence likely also has to do with the kind of media they are using, as social media can be influenced directly and one can easily connect with other users on these. Even by looking at the language used, and the amount of pictures and 'smilies' inserted in the online content, it becomes clear that conventions are not strictly followed on the site, and the texts often have

---

[103] Klagenfurt University, Austria, "Call for Papers."

an informal quality to them. The reviews and literary prizes, however, were influential to these readers too, given the fact they were mentioned a lot.

Therefore, this thesis underwrites the importance of looking at a combination of sources from different audiences and media, to get a more complete picture of the reception of a literary work. Although it is acknowledged that the information given here by far does not represent the totality of readers in the Arab or 'Western' world, it at least gives a more complete view of the way *Lā Sakākīn* and possibly Arabic books in general, are judged by a diverse public, and of the conceptions about society that surface in the process.

Bibliography

- Allen, Roger. *The Arabic Literary Heritage: The development of its genres and criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Badawi, M.M. "Commitment in Contemporary Arabic Literature." *Journal of World History*. Vol. 14, 4 (1972): 858-879.
- Biddle, Jennifer. "Shame." *Australian Feminist Studies*. Vol. 12, No. 26 (1997): 230. Accessed 23 May, 2017. DOI: 10.1080/08164649.1997.9994862.
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988.
- Cachia, Pierre. "The Critics." In: *Modern Arabic Literature*, edited by M.M. Badawi, 417-442. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Accessed 19 December, 2016. DOI: https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/10.1017/CHOL9780521331975.013.
- Chandler, Daniel and Rod Munday, eds. *Dictionary of Media and Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Accessed 13 January, 2017. DOI: 10.1093/acref/9780199568758.001.0001.
- Diamond, Larry. "Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation." *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1994): 4-17. Accessed 28 May, 2017. http://muse.jhu.edu/article/225379/pdf.
- Fanack Chronicle. Accessed 18 February, 2017. https://chronicle.fanack.com.
- Georgis, Dina. "Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame in *Bareed Mista3jil*." *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45 (2013): 233-251. Accessed 23 May, 2017. DOI: 10.1017/S0020743813000056.
- Ghareeb, Edmund. "New Media and the Information Revolution in the Arab World: An Assessment." *Middle East Journal* vol. 54, no. 3 (2000): 395-417. Accessed 27 January, 2017. http://www.globalmediapolicy.net/sites/default/files/4329508.pdf.
- Goldstein, Philip & James L. Machor, eds. *New Directions in American Reception Study*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Accessed 10 January, 2017. Online, EBSCOhost.
- Griswold, Wendy. "The Fabrication of Meaning: Literary Interpretation in the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies." *American Journal of Sociology* vol. 92, no. 5 (1987): 1077-1117. University of Chicago Press. Accessed 1 November, 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2779997.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Polity Press, Blackwell Publishers Ltc., 1989.
- Haque Khondker, Habibul. "Role of the New Media in the Arab Spring." *Globalizations* vol. 8, no. 5 (2011): 675-679. Routledge. Accessed 15 December, 2016. http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14747731.2011.621287.
- Herrnstein Smith, Barbara. "Contingencies of Value." *Critical Inquiry* vol. 10, no. 1 (1983): 1-35. University of Chicago Press. Accessed 10 January, 2017. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343404.
- Heydebrand, Renate von & Simone Winko. "The qualities of literatures." In *The Quality of Literature: Linguistic Studies in Literary Evaluation*, edited by Willie van Peer, 223-239. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2008. Accessed 7 December, 2016. Online, EBSCOhost.
- Holub, Robert C. *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*. London, New York: Methuen, 1984.
- Howard, Philip N. *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Online, accessed 17 January, 2017. http://philhoward.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Howard_Digital-Origins-of-Dictatorship-and-Democracy.pdf.
- Klagenfurt University, Austria. "Call for Papers: Reception of Literature in Reading Communities. Social Reading face to face and online." Accessed 9 January, 2017. https://www.uni-klu.ac.at/germ/downloads/CALL_Reception_of_Literature.pdf.

- Klemm, Verena. "Different Notions of Commitment (*Iltizām)* and Committed Literature (*al-adab al-multazim)* in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq." *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures* vol. 3, no. 1 (2000): 51-59.
- Lane, Jeremy. "35. Reception Theory and Reader-Response: Hans-Robert Jauss (1922-1997), Wolfgang Iser (1926-) and the School of Konstanz." In *Modern European Criticism and Theory: A Critical Guide*, edited by Julian Wolfreys, 278-284. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.
- Nakib, Mai al-. "Arabic Literature: Politics and Nothing But?" *World Literature Today* vol. 90, no. 1 (2016): 30-32. Accessed 10 January, 2017. Online, EBSCOhost.
- Nightingale, Virginia, ed. *The Handbook of Media Audiences.* Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Olesya, Tkacheva. *Internet Freedom & Political Space*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013. Online, EBSCOhost. Accessed 12 October 2016.
- Op de Beek, Esther. "Een Literair Fenomeen van de Eerste Orde, Evaluaties in de Nederlandse Literaire Dagbladkritiek, 1955-2005: Een Kwantitatieve en Kwalitatieve Analyse." PhD diss., Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, 2013. Accessed 21 December, 2016. http://repository.ubn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/2066/120595/120595.pdf?sequence=1.
- Pinto, Paulo Gabriel Hilu. "Syria." In *Dispatches from the Arab Spring: understanding the New Middle East*, edited by Paul Amar & Vijay Prashad, 204-242. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Poster, Mark. "CyberDemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere." Irvine: University of California, 1995. Accessed 19 December, 2016. http://faculty.humanities.uci.edu/poster/writings/democ.html.
- Rugh, William A. *Arab Mass Media: newspapers, radio, and television in Arab Politics*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004.
- Silva, Jennifer M. "Reception Theory." In *Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture*, edited by Dale Southerton, 1202-1206. Thousand Oaks; SAGE Publications, Inc., 2011. Online, EBSCOhost. Accessed 2 December, 2016.
- Vlieghe, Joachim, Geert Vandermeersche & Ronald Soetaert. "Social media in literacy education: Exploring social reading with pre-service teachers." New Media & Society vol. 18, no. 5 (2014): 800-816. Online, Sage Journals. Accessed 15 January, 2017. DOI: 10.1177/1461444814547683.
- Wedeen, Lisa. "Acting "As If": Symbolic Politics and Social Control in Syria." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (1998): 503-523. Accessed 24 May, 2017. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417598001388.
- Zeegers, Maarten. *Wij Zijn Arabieren*. Amsterdam: Rainbow, 2003.

Information Khaled Khalifa and the novel:
- Bent, Josephine van den. "Nadwa! De winnaar van de IPAF 2014." *Zemzem* 1 (2014): 78-83.
- ----- "Het favoriete boek van Djûke Poppinga." *Zemzem* 2 (2014). Accessed 20 December, 2016. http://zemzemtijdschrift.nl/node/35.
- Chaker, Rehab. "In naam van de literatuur." *Zemzem* 11: 1 (2015): 151-154.
- Davis, Matthew. "The Writer and the Rebellion." *Guernica*, 15 november, 2013. Accessed 7 December, 2016. https://www.guernicamag.com/features/the-writer-and-the-rebellion/.
- Halasa, Malu, Zaher Omareen & Nawara Mahfoud, eds. *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline*. London: Saqi Books, 2014.
- Khalifa, Khaled. "Letter from Syria." *The World Post*, 9 February, 2012. Accessed 8 December, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/khaled-khalifa/syrian-revolution_b_1265563.html.
- ----- *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābikh hādhihi al-madīna.* Al-qāhira: dār al-ʿayn li-l-nashr, 2013.
- ----- *Er Zijn Geen Messen in de Keukens van deze Stad*. Translated by Djûke Poppinga. Breda: De Geus, 2015.
- ----- "Silence is disgraceful too." Video, *Louisiana Channel*, 29 August, 2013. Accessed 8 December, 2016. http://channel.louisiana.dk/video/khaled-khalifa-silence-disgraceful-too.

- Lynx Qualey, M. "2013 Naguib Mahfouz Medal to Khaled Khalifa's 'No Knives in the Kitchens of This City'." *Arabic Literature,* 11 December, 2013. Accessed 8 December 2016. http://arablit.org/2013/12/11/2013-naguib-mahfouz-medal-to-khaled-khalifas-no-knives-in-the-kitchens-of-this-city/.
- ----- "Syrian Novelist Khaled Khalifa: 'What is Left of the City After All That?' *Arabic Literature*, 4 April, 2014. Accessed 7 December, 2016. http://arablit.org/2014/04/01/syrian-novelist-khaled-khalifa-what-is-left-of-the-city-after-all-that/.
- Mahmoud, Sayyed and Mohammed Saad. "INTERVIEW: Khaled Khalifa Syria's memory of pain." *Ahram Online*, 17 February, 2014. Accessed 7 December, 2016. http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/18/0/94411/Books/INTERVIEW-Khaled-Khalifa-Syrias-memory-of-pain-.aspx.
- Morayef, Soraya. "Khaled Khalifa: "Revolutions Can't Be Reversed"". *Jadaliyya*, 8 July, 2014. Accessed 7 December, 2016. http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18435/khaled-khalifa_revolutions-cant-be-reversed.
- Qualey, M. Lynx. "Queerness in Khaled Khalifa's 'No Knives in the Kitchens of This City." *Arabic Literature (in English)*, 23 September, 2016. Accessed 29 May, 2017. https://arablit.org/2016/09/23/queerness-in-khaled-khalifas-no-knives-in-the-kitchens-of-this-city/.
- The American University in Cairo Press. "Judges' Citations, The 2013 Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature presented to Khaled Khalifa for his work *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*." Accessed 7 December, 2016. http://www.aucpress.com/images/MahfouzMedalJudgesCitations2013.pdf.
- The Culture Trip. "10 Syrian Writers You Should Know." Accessed 6 May, 2017. https://theculturetrip.com/middle-east/syria/articles/10-syrian-writers-you-should-know/.

Arabic reviews:
- Farrāj al-Nābī, Mamdūḥ. "'Lā sakākīn fī maṭābikh hādhihi al-madīna' riwāya ashbaha bi-marṯiya." *Al-'Arab*, 13 May, 2014. Accessed 30 January, 2017. http://alarab.co.uk/?id=22512.
- Ḥusayn, Hayṯam. "'Lā sakākīn fī maṭābikh hādhihi al-madīna' wa-ṣunūf al-'ār." *Al-Jazīra*, 26 January, 2014. Accessed 30 January, 2017. http://www.aljazeera.net/news/cultureandart/2014/1/26/لا-سكاكين-في-مطابخ-هذه-المدينة-وصنوف-العار.
- Jāhīn, Bahā'. "Taḥrīḍ 'alā al-qirā'a Lā sakākīn fī maṭābikh hādhihi al-madīna." *Al-Ahrām*, 17 December, 2013. Accessed 30 January, 2017. http://www.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/248267.aspx.
- (No author mentioned). "'Lā sakākīn fī maṭābikh hādhihi al-madīna' li-khāled khalīfa: tafkīk al-dhākira ḍarūra li-ṭard 'unfhā. *Al-Wakīl al-Akhbārī*, 10 July, 2013. Accessed 31 January, 2017. http://www.alwakeelnews.com/article/56447.
- Mandūr, Saḥar. "Lā sakākīn fī maṭābikh hādhihi al-madīna.. haram al-khawf." *Al-Safīr*, 24 January, 2014. http://assafir.com/Article/66/335195. Accesed via *Goodreads* on 8 May, 2017. https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/729154638.
- Mas'ūd, 'Alī al. "Riwāya (Khālid Khalīfa) - Lā sakākīn fī maṭābikh hādhihi al-madīna – riwāyat al-khayba wa-l-'ār??" *Al-Ḥiwār al-Mutamaddin*, 2 April, 2014. Accessed 31 January, 2017. http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=408513.
- Ṣilāl, Aḥmad. "Qirā'a fī riwāya 'Lā sakākīn fī maṭābikh hādhihi al-madīna': Khiṭāb īdīyūlūjī lā akṯar." *Al-Quds al-'Arabī*, 5 March 2014. Accessed 30 January, 2017. http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=140270.
- Sulṭān, Jīnā. "Taht al-ḍaw' - 'Lā sakākīn fī maṭābikh hādhihi al-madīna' li-khāled khalīfa drāmā al-tafassukh al-akhlāqī." *Al-Nahār*, 13 November, 2013. Accessed 30 January, 2017. http://newspaper.annahar.com/article/83171-تحت-الضوء--لا-سكاكين-في-مطابخ-هذه-المدينة-لخالد-خليفة-دراما-التفسخ-الاخلاقي.
- Tala'at, 'Aliyā'. "Lā taqra' riwāya 'Lā tūjadu sakākīn fī maṭābikh hādhihi al-madīna'". *Arageek*, 1 September, 2014. Accessed 31 January, 2017. http://www.arageek.com/2014/09/01/dont-read-this-novel.html.

Reviews in Dutch and English:

- Cock, Jorn de. "De Gestrafte Stad." *De Standaard der Letteren*, 27 March, 2015. Via PEN Vlaanderen. Accessed 8 May, 2017. http://penvlaanderen.be/khaled-khalifa-er-zijn-geen-messen-in-de-keukens-van-deze-stad/.
- Dijkgraaf, Margot. "Een kapotte stad vol zwarte kraaien." *NRC,* 24 April, 2015. Accessed 8 May, 2017. http://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/2015/04/24/een-kapotte-stad-vol-zwarte-kraaien-1487159.
- Lynx Qualey, M. "Book review: Khaled Khalifa's No Knives in the Kitchens of this City tells tale of a proud Aleppo family consumed by shame." *The National*, 21 September, 2016. Accessed 8 May, 2017. http://www.thenational.ae/arts-life/the-review/book-review-khaled-khalifas-no-knives-in-the-kitchens-of-this-city-tells-tale-of-a-proud-aleppo-family-consumed-by-shame.
- Mahmoud, Sayed. "Book review: The price Syrians paid under the Baath." *Ahramonline*, 28 July, 2013. Accessed 8 May, 2017. http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsAFCON/2017/77614.aspx.
- Senior, Jennifer. "Review: 'No Knives in the Kitchens of This City' Describes a Syrian Hell." *New York Times*, 14 December, 2016. Accessed 8 May, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/14/books/review-no-knives-in-the-kitchens-of-this-city-describes-a-syrian-hell.html?_r=0.
- Ulin, David L. "No Knives in the Kitchens of This City." *Barnes & Noble*, 9 January, 2017. Accessed 8 May, 2017. https://www.barnesandnoble.com/review/no-knives-in-the-kitchens-of-this-city.
- Vrancken, Inge. "Er zijn geen messen in de keukens van deze stad." *Cobra*, 2 April, 2015. Accessed 8 May, 2017. http://cobra.canvas.be/cm/cobra/boek/1.2291199.
- Yassin-Kassab, Robin. "No Knives in the Kitchens of This City by Khaled Khalifa review – rage and shame in Syria." *The Guardian*, 24 September, 2016. Accessed 8 May, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/24/no-knives-in-the-kitchens-of-this-city-khaled-khalifa-review.

Goodreads:

- Goodreads. لا سكاكين في مطابخ هذه المدينة by Khaled Khalifa. First ten pages (sort: default) as accessed 9 December, 2016, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18480662?from_search=true.

Rectification

Page 33 - Unfortunately, a misunderstanding took place when quoting from the book review of reader Suzie Toumeh. In Arabic, she wrote:

اعطيته نجمتان فقط لأن هذا أول كتاب عربي أقرأه يكون أحد الشخصيات الرئيسية ترانسجندرد أو متحول جنسي! .

While translating this sentence into: "I gave it only two stars because it was the first Arabic book I have read in which one of the main characters was a transgender", I did not notice the sense of irony and sarcasm embedded in this sentence.

After e-mail correspondence with Ms Toumeh, I got to know that, in fact, she does not oppose the presence of transgender characters in works of Arabic literature at all. She actually meant to say that "the book was such a displeasure that even the appearance of a transgendered character does not improve it beyond two stars".

It was never my intention to misrepresent Ms Toumeh's ideas, and this page serves to set this misinterpretation right.