

## PART TWO

# Seeing, Telling, Power

*The thing we can be sure of here, is that you didn't know a thing about that which was circling around you.*

—NARRATOR, *ERASER CHILD*

*You travel, from one end of the Arab world to the other, in Europe, Africa, the Americas, Australia, and there you find Palestinians like yourself, who, like you, are subject to special laws, special status, the marking of a force and violence not yours.*

—EDWARD SAID

*Ibrahim has given us a feat of luminous writing; it is not a calming model, but takes a marginalized point of view and makes it visible.*

—FAISAL DARRAJ



HITHERTO, ANALYSIS HAS FOCUSED ON THE WORKS OF THE PALESTINE COMEDIES. As an expansive project that conjures Palestine only within the limits of imagination, it in many ways has free rein to narrate the Palestine that has been edged out, cut off, and silenced by other dominant narratives. While this approach has widened the scope and representability of Palestine, it leaves out what has—excruciatingly—also been a part of the Palestinian story: the violent structures that have and continue to repress and exclude it as a living organization of people and places. Though the Palestine Comedies does not shy away from the representation of violence perpetrated against Palestinians, the focus tends to be on how this violence affects individuals and at times small communities, never really the national collective or the shape of the nation itself.

Violence has, however, affected Palestine at the structural level. Palestinian life, its times, and its experiences have been indelibly shaped by colonial, neocolonial, and settler colonial forces but also systems of patriarchy, religion, and social norms. What the Balconies series achieves is the representation of these structures as part of the story of the nation rather than as the nation's limiting factors. These structures are "seen" by the Balconies so that they too can be accumulated, read into the network of texts that the Comedies created (while not limiting the possibilities of the Comedies). This view was forged perhaps accidentally, in the first of the Balconies, *Balcony of Delirium* (*Shurfat al-hadhayān*), which was written during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. The work grappled with what it meant for Palestine and the Middle East more broadly to experience its first Western-led invasion in over a decade. It was, for many, a reliving (or reassessment) of the meaning of foreign occupation and direct imposition of a new and present control.

The invasion reminded Nasrallah, and us all, that the age of imposed structures was still upon us. As the world watched Iraq change irrevocably—its possibility horizons changed, faced with new limitations and new logics of limitation—Nasrallah began work on a novel that would grapple with the inescapable arrival of this type of control. He looks at this logic as what Foucault described as a “system of conceptual possibilities that determines the boundaries of thought in a given domain.”<sup>1</sup> The work sets out to explore how the logic of a US invasion and its mechanisms of control can lead us to think about the much less visible limits that it creates. What does absorbing this logic do to the individual, to society; how does it limit the person; how does it limit Palestine? Though perhaps most importantly, the novel would ask: What is this framework? Are there others?

*Balcony of Delirium* was not a one-off text. Nasrallah would later return to the idea of structural limits, first in 2009, 2010, 2013, 2014, and 2016 and just about every other year since. Eventually, for every story in the Palestine Comedies that came out, another would be published in what became a second series: the Balconies. Once one is attuned to limiting structures, myriad structures become visible, and each—it seemed—had to be accounted for. Written almost in parallel, the story of imposed structures (principal among them the nation-state) became wrapped up in the story of Palestine that emerged in the Comedies. To read Palestine as *just* the Palestine Comedies today would be to miss a great deal. Indeed, it was only the initiation of the Balconies series that spurred Nasrallah to write past what had seemed to critics at the time as the culmination of the Palestinian story in his 2007 *Time of White Horses*. In fully grappling with the state and other imposed structures (which mostly, in the end, function the same way, as we shall see), the possibilities for the imagination of Palestine seemed to pass a hurdle; structures that once limited the national story were now part of its network of texts. And there were many structures to excise from the level of the imagination and bring into Palestine’s novel form. So more and more “balconies” were written.

This second series, read alongside the Palestine Comedies, tells the story of Palestine as it exists in a world of states and forces of limiting control. It also tackles the issue of how imagining Palestine as intertextual, as dual, and as accumulating is meant to happen when so much exists to reinforce the idea of a nation as exclusively a bounded and linear state. Over two chapters, my analysis shows how the balcony (that place of liminality, of inside/outside) becomes a position of narrative and a way of reading—of knowing and producing knowledge about—the nation. This liminal vantage upends the power of the single all-powerful point of view, which scholars from Michel Foucault to Timothy Mitchell and Vanessa Ogle have described as a way of seeing that produced the nation-state from the colonial era on. This narrative vantage presumed an omniscience, a sense of the possibility of knowing and telling everything on earth.<sup>2</sup> Mitchell called this omniscient creation of knowledge “enframing” and described it as a way of seeing—seeing that happened from above, as a “bird’s-eye” view.<sup>3</sup> This is the same vantage—from which

the world was ordered in order to know and therefore control it—that Foucault called the “panopticon.”<sup>4</sup>

Telling the nation from the balcony, instead of Foucault’s watchtower or Balibar’s point of retrospective, upends what scholars have called the tyranny of a single-view knowledge production. The political scientist Cedric Robinson described this tyranny as one of both oppression and exclusion. Anything that did or does not “fit” within a manufactured sense of normal, he wrote, is erased or deemed “irrational.”<sup>5</sup> This would include anything seen from the watchtower that did not fit into linear and developmental narratives, for example. Hawari, Plonski, and Weizman have shown how this type of exclusion operates in Palestine, outlining “both productive and repressive practices that work together to render their [Israeli/colonial] history and present ‘normal’” at the expense of Palestine and Palestinians.<sup>6</sup> Within the episteme of the state and its linear retrospectivity, Palestine and Palestinians become the abnormal, the outcasts, obliterated, ignored, or, at best, seen as material for assimilation into this dominant worldview.<sup>7</sup> Critics have said it is next to impossible to undo or undermine this position, which, as Fredric Jameson writes, is because “we cannot not” see the world but from the elevated perspective.<sup>8</sup> This omniscient, elevated retrospectivity that orders the world into linear narratives and discrete locations is so embedded in thought, he writes, that it functions as a “pane of glass at which you try to gaze even as you are looking through it.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, seeing the world through the logics of space and time that produced the nation-state is basically equivalent to “seeing”: there is no way of looking, of seeing beyond this “glass” because it is the very thing through which we look. How to see otherwise, from the position of the liminal balcony, is the subject of chapter 4.

This inside/outside vantage, and the way it narrates power, offers, to use Robinson’s words, not so much an “an alternative but a negation” of the dominant modes of order.<sup>10</sup> Robinson wrote about the perceptions of time among the Tonga people and saw their own negations of power impositions as resistance to and an exposure of “the possibility and actuality that orthodox Western thought was neither universal nor coherent”<sup>11</sup>—that it was not the only way of seeing. Palestine, too, can see differently. This shifts what Edward Said has called the “partial tragedy of resistance,” where texts “must to a certain degree work to recover forms already established or at least influenced or infiltrated by the culture of empire.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, Palestine must speak back to power on and in its own terms. While the balcony carries out this act of recovering, it also goes beyond recovery in the development not only of its own language but also of a unique structure of telling. Palestine is not told here within the logic of the dominant power. The balcony does not respond to but takes control of colonial logics and locates these logics in a broader story.

The balcony as a vantage point and position of telling “negates” colonial-era knowledge and knowledge-making because the vision offered does not respond, revise, or reorder its rules. Rather, power is subsumed, recognized, and integrated

within its larger encompassing structure. It does this not only by making the glass—that logic of looking—visible, but by incorporating it as part of the story of Palestine. This happens through the mobilization of the same set of intertextual devices that we saw in part 1. In Nasrallah's imagining of Palestine, structures of power and ordering are recorded and accounted for as texts. While powerful and all-encompassing, these texts are reduced to the status, say, of genre, so the limitations of seeing the world become no more frightening than the limitations of expression imposed by a newspaper article (the pyramid of urgent facts) or the conventions of letter writing (date, salutation, information, closing). In this accounting, genres, structures of power, are removed as epistemes, as discursive umbrellas, so that they no longer constitute the invisible operating and ordering logic of Palestine.

In literary terms, these structures become visible as what Genette calls "architexts." In Genette's schema of intertextuality the architext describes the rules and conventions by which genre operates—in other words, the at times unquantifiable differences between a memoir and a letter, an op-ed, or a novel. Architexts, as Genette puts it, are those "transcendent categories (literary genres, modes of enunciation, and types of discourse, among others) to which each individual text belongs."<sup>13</sup> Like a realist novel, a haiku, a *qasida*, or a tweet, each genre—like the nation-state, capitalism, religious authority—has its own easily identifiable logic, its architecture of telling. The novels of both the Palestine Comedies and the Balconies series mobilize the tools of architextuality to teach readers to "see" structures of power. Just as readers can identify when a character reads out a letter in a novel or inserts the lines of a poem into a newspaper column, so too are they taught to separate the structures of the nation-state, of colonialism, of imposed religious authority, from the realities of Palestinian life and nation. This is the subject of chapter 5.

Functionally, structures of power operate in Nasrallah's Palestine as texts (architexts) and enter intertextual relationships with other elements of Palestine. Understanding the nature of these relationships is to parse out the effect and operation of power within the nation. As texts, structures of power can—indeed must—be critiqued, their logics understood. This helps explain how texts interact and describes the nature of the unevenness in the relationship (between the nation-state and the camp in Wihdat, say, or a colonial legacy and a soldier in the Arab Liberation Army). Of course, texts are not just their logics of telling; they are also that which is told. In reading power as an architext, the "stuff" or information contained in a story can also be read differently. There is a separation between the "stuff" being ordered and the logic that this "stuff" is ordered by (like the way Salwa's story is "ordered" by the journalist, compared to who or what Salwa is beyond that telling). Principally, this is a sense that the logic of telling or of an imposed power does not define or delimit its subject. So, even if Palestine, for example, is told within the parameters of the bounded space and linear time of

the nation-state, this does not mean that this logic defines or delimits the nature of the material. Palestine, as we saw in part 1, is far more than this nation-in-waiting. The vantage of the balcony teaches that structures of power (texts) are understood to give only a particular set of information and that there is always more to the story, as we shall now see.





## Balcony as Vantage

The balcony has associations in the context of the Middle East that are critical for the analysis of its narrative function in Nasrallah's work. The anthropologist Farha Ghannam gives an apt overview of the balcony's meaning in her description of the architectural feature in an urban Cairo neighborhood. Her depiction neatly parallels the operation of the balcony as a position of seeing, telling, and knowing in Palestine as it comes across in Nasrallah's *Balconies* series. Socially and imaginatively, Ghannam writes, the balcony is "used to interact with others and to present the self in public."<sup>1</sup> It is a crossing point, she describes, between inside and out, a position of surveillance and site of social control—but also a location where these structures are subverted.<sup>2</sup> As a position of viewing and being viewed, of contact and separation, the balcony is multiple and simultaneous—a far cry from the bird's-eye view (where the watcher is unseen and all-seeing) or the panopticon of colonial knowledge-making.

Just how this vantage is achieved, and how it changes ways of telling and of seeing, is the subject of the following three sections, which look in turn at the first three novels of the *Balconies* series: *Balcony of the Snow Man* (*Shurfat rajul al-thalj*, 2009), *Balcony of Delirium* (*Shurfat al-hadhayān*, 2004) and *Balcony of Disgrace* (*Shurfat al-‘ār*, 2010). Though extraordinarily different—in style, subject, character, and plot—the three novels convey a single powerful idea: that telling and representation are both powerful tools and tools of power. Each of the *Balconies* tackles a different manifestation of episteme, and in fact breaks down Foucault's notion of the term into many different parts. These parts represent so many different logic structures that govern or dictate how one sees and understands the world around them. From first to last published, the works tackle subjects that include news media, government institutions, literary writing, and religious/cultural norms. And these are just the topics of the works of the *Balconies* considered here. Others look at surveillance technology, education, and the law (etc.). Each

of these themes or topics is explored as a way into understanding the structures of power that limit what can be said, or even thought.

Building on the work of the Comedies, these novels also mobilize intertextuality, this time to help readers find and identify the edges of systems and structures. When the edges are found, it becomes easier to understand the functioning of each system and then see past them. The “balconic vantage” to coin a term, which is used to find these edges, has at least three functions. It is these functions of the balconic vantage that this chapter tackles. The first is to decenter the position of telling a national narrative, moving telling and knowing away from an omniscient and retrospective position where all things are seen from a central vantage. The second function of the balcony is to disrupt linearity and attempts at “enframing.” There is within the series a sense that the impositions of these frames of knowing are relentless and must be constantly unsettled. The third function is slightly more permanent, so that from the balcony one can engage the work of dominant structures of knowing, to make room for the operation of an intertextual Palestine. Each of these functions are explored in turn below.

#### DECENTER

The second of the Balconies, *Balcony of the Snow Man*, fractures the panoptic point of seeing as a position of authority. Readers are presented with repeated authoritative “texts” (a biography, an autobiography, and a mystery to which we shall return) each of which offers a version of truth undermined by the other texts. While each claims to be more authoritative than the last, none tell the same truth. Readers undergo a process of encounter where they work to make sense of what is happening in the terms that the text sets out (i.e., this is a story about an ambitious man who is led astray by his ambition) and then alienation when they discover that the supposed truth being presented there is false (the man says he is not ambitious). During this repeated process, readers learn to identify structures of narrative control, to glean information from what is presented within the different structures of telling (the biography, the autobiography, etc.). At the same time, they learn to understand the limits that ways of telling put on what it is possible to say or know. By the end of the novel readers find that ultimately the “truth” of the people and events described lay somewhere outside of the many texts within the covers of the work.

The encounter/alienation process is, formally and structurally, repeated three times in *Balcony of the Snow Man*, which is divided into three main parts corresponding to the different genres of telling described above. Each part presumes the total immersion of readers, and each presents a “realist” and compelling story. At the start of each new section readers are abruptly ejected from the logic of the preceding part and asked to enter a new system of telling. The novel thus cannot quite be described as any one genre; it is inside and outside each.

The first genre encountered is a linearly plotted psychological biography. Here a story is told about an individual, where the plot is driven by the inner needs and desires of the protagonist. The story is told within 152 pages and gives no hint that its style and form do not make up the entirety of *Balcony of the Snow Man*. The biography is fun, suspenseful, and engrossing. It begins by telling the story of an ambitious but downtrodden journalist, Bahjat Habib, who works for the state newspaper (of an unknown and unnamed Arab state). This story of Bahjat leads up to and revolves around the character's journalistic career and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: the chance to get his name on the front page. As the psychological novel tells it, it is because of Bahjat's underprivileged upbringing and sense that he has something to prove that he accepts what is ultimately a dubious opportunity. Bahjat is meant to write another sort of authoritative text: a headline newspaper article. He is handed the story of an execution and must go to interview the "condemned man" in prison the day before he is scheduled to die. Because the execution is meant to happen in the early hours of the morning, Bahjat is supposed to submit the story of the man's death before it occurs. He ends up, in a frantic effort to make sure his story is true, being responsible for the man's execution (as we will see). In this biography, the newspaper article parallels the story being told of Bahjat. The execution is the defining feature of both and is where both stories end (or is the point of retrospective from which they are told backward). Bahjat has done a terrible thing (had a man killed) because he had something to prove. This is not, however, how Bahjat sees it, which we learn in the second part of the novel.

When it abruptly ends, readers of Bahjat's biography are plunged headfirst into a semiautobiography of 128 pages apparently written by Bahjat himself. At first, it seems that this is offered as a corrective to the biography. Bahjat says he hopes to "write" the wrongs of the first text, which we learn was penned by one "Mr. Ali." His reason for writing, Bahjat states, is to fix "all those bad habits of books that try to novelize the story of your life" (163). Mr. Ali, in fitting Bahjat into a teleology from the point of the execution, wrote a man that Bahjat did not recognize. As Bahjat put it, "If I had read what he wrote about me in the first version without my name being there, I wouldn't have recognized myself in the words" (178). The novel, because it took on the "bad habits of books," told the "wrong" truth. It is at the intersection of the two texts that their ideas, their structures, of truth and knowing are revealed.

What Mr. Ali had done was write using dozens of tropes of the realist-style novel: time-stamped chapters that count down in reverse the minutes of a clock that ticks in homogeneous empty time down to a zero hour that brings all narrative strands together. The story is told from a point of retrospective. These homogeneous empty seconds end in the headline news of an execution that the entire country will read about in the papers the following morning. The psychological novel opens with a time stamp at "2:35 a.m.," when word had come in that the prison

sheikh was sick. Without someone to perform last rites, the execution would be postponed. With the announcement of the man's death already at press, the newspaper officials are in a panic. They call in Bahjat, demanding he fix the problem. The news cannot be wrong; the man must die on schedule. For the reporter, the problem of the ill sheikh becomes a personal catastrophe. His own insecurities drive Bahjat to "fix" the problem. He makes sure the "condemned man" is killed so the news of his death, already at the printers, can be correct and his story—finally on the front page—won't end up an embarrassing disaster. Ultimately, Bahjat has determined the end point of the man's story before it has ended, and he must force the trajectory of his life toward that point.

Ensuring the predicted death of the condemned man is ensuring Bahjat the resolution of his own desire for success at work. This success is, notably, within an institution cited as one of the manufacturers of the notion of national time (filling up, in a linear fashion, the nation's bounded space): the newspaper.<sup>3</sup> As the narrator tells it, Bahjat had always wanted recognition as a journalist but was never quite up to the task. "Bahjat did not enter the world of journalism reassured of his writing talents," (15) the biography tells its readers, adding that the character had felt inadequate and invisible his entire life because of it. Writing the story of the condemned man was meant to be the middle-aged father's breakthrough article: "Bahjat dreamed of news, real news, and many times he thought about making it himself" (36). No matter how hard he worked, however, Bahjat's articles ended up on "some other page" (36)—never as the headline. This, the biography explains, is why Bahjat takes the matter in hand. He races around the city amid an epic snowstorm to find a sheikh who can ensure that the execution takes place. Despite some tense moments of assured failure, Bahjat manages, and he delivers the sheikh to the prison.

As the condemned man is executed, Bahjat realizes he has killed a man with a life beyond (and in addition to) his status as the character of "condemned man." Bahjat realizes, "It was my job, all those years, to convince the old and the young that they wanted news of them in the paper, as if those who did not have news about them had no existence" (100). It is with a deep sense of failure that Bahjat returns home, at 5:16 a.m., and hands the newspaper to his wife, saying, "Read it."

Her heart stopped.

She saw his name in small font under the headline "The government executes a man condemned for murder . . ." (146)

To imagine the page, it might look something like this:

*The government executes a man condemned for murder, by Bahjat Habib*

The wording implicates Bahjat in the death. Bahjat's drive for fame killed a man who may not have been guilty—at least according to Mr. Ali. Both Bahjat (of the first text) and Mr. Ali (the writer of the first text) have imposed an architext on

their subjects and done violence (real and metaphorical) in the process. This is the violence of the singular vantage.

The psychological novel and Bahjat's response (in addition, really, to the newspaper article) demonstrate the violence in an imposition of the narrative arc that begins and ends at a singular point and is told by a single authority. Guiding readers to this conclusion is a series of insertions in part 1, author unknown, that provides what seems like extratextual information, first about the "condemned man." The information from this text does not seem to inform Bahjat or his article and is only for the reader. From this material we learn that the condemned man had killed a would-be rapist as he threw the man off a prostitute who refused to offer her services (145). When he saw that the state would not understand the mitigating circumstances, the "not yet condemned man" left the country and "stayed away a long time." When he returned

the police were waiting for him and had gathered nine unsolved crimes to charge him with. . . . [T]he woman [who he thought he had seen being raped] believed what the judges said [about him being violent] and considered herself lucky to have escaped a link between herself and a man who had committed nine crimes behind her back. (145)

So the "condemned man" is given a convenient (linear) narrative by police, which is taken up by the court and repeated in the newspaper: he is a bad man who did a bad thing and should be punished. Conveniently, the punishment is death, so the man cannot contest the story for long. The writer is complicit in state violence. The same violent single-vantage logic is exercised by the state, by the newspaper, Bahjat, and Mr. Ali. They each narrate their subjects through convenient narratives to fit a predetermined end point.

This, at least, is what Bahjat accuses Mr. Ali of in his 128-page corrective semi-autobiography, also written in "realist" style. It proclaims a different truth and is written as a sort of response to the first work. It is in this corrective that Bahjat explains he had far more interest in the office secretaries than in the news he printed. Bahjat, according to the man himself, is neither a hardworking journalist nor a loving husband as Mr. Ali had made him out to be. He accuses Mr. Ali of selective narration and suggests that these other facts would have complicated the narrative. For Bahjat, failed dalliances and the pursuit of various "off-limits" women are what drive the story of his life. He writes at length about the mistress of a government minister and how he was "enjoying a look at her full and fresh face, and her legendary ass" (239)—a move that he credits for his failure to advance at work. Both Mr. Ali and Bahjat create their own teleology based on the facts they deem most important. The stories—while competing—are both written from a single narrative vantage. Each genre—the biography and the autobiography—has its own narrative arc that necessarily skips over some information. So, both writer and form are implicated, both identified as problematic. They are also separate. The

news is shown as a problematic format, as is the biographical novel. Their authors, while no less problematic, are differently so. To adequately interpret a text, *Balcony of the Snow Man* intimates, the reader must critically read its form, as well as the position of its author. In other words, the reader must be able to look both inside and outside the text at the same time in order to make sense of what it says.

While assessing the limits of form and the content of a story gives a critical sense of what is being told, truth, the many texts of *Balcony of the Snow Man* intimate, cannot be found in any one text. Rather, it is found in the imaginative space somewhere between text and author. This finding is reinforced in the novel's final intertext. A third part titled "What Remains Hidden" (281) once again appears unannounced. The title page for this final section has all the paratextual elements of the title pages of the first two texts. The "cover art" of this part includes an Arabic translation of a stanza from the work of the first-century Chinese poet Xuedou Chongxian. The stanza prepares the reader for what comes on the following pages and creates a frame for the relationship between all of the different texts presented in the novel. The stanza reads:

The shape of my book [*kitāb*] has seven forms [*ashkāl*]  
 Three or five forms  
 So I looked in all of them  
 For the truth, and found none  
 Now, night is falling (155)

The relationship between truth and representation that Xuedou describes parallels that set out in *Balcony of the Snow Man*. Not only do the genres each claim truth, but they also claim the exclusive ability to represent it. Within the same *kitāb*, the same book of *Balcony of the Snow Man*, the different texts (the psychological novel, the autobiography, and the third part) appear as only *ashkāl*—as forms—of the same story. Working around the central character of Bahjat, each is tied as much to the type of text being produced as to the story it tries to tell. If a reader, like Xuedou, looks to the book (even in each of its forms) "for the truth," none will be found.

In presenting and undermining its texts, *Balcony of the Snow Man* demonstrates that any one system or genre is only one "form" of the thing being represented. This is much like the larger structure of the Palestine Comedies, where truth resides in the larger collection. What this final text adds is the idea of the impossibility of a truth being represented by a text at all, and the necessity of an imagined infinity of texts. For while this final section has only one chapter, consisting of three pages, in the playful spirit of Shidyaq, these pages are filled with twelve variously sized paragraphs all composed of a seemingly endless series of ellipses (Figure 2).<sup>4</sup> The running dots conclude with a final line, centered on the page. It reads: "What looks like the end" (285).

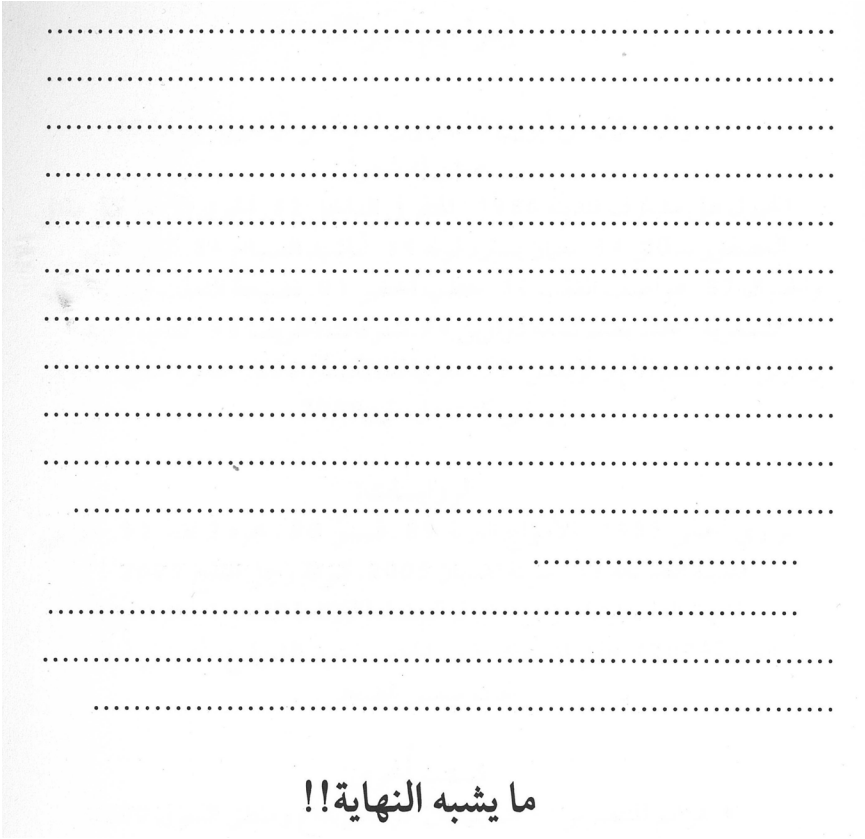


FIGURE 2. Ellipses as they are used in *Balcony of the Snow Man*, with the final phrase, “what looks like the end!”

By suggesting that “what remains hidden” is infinite, the section reveals the “truth” as a Borgesian “Library of Babel” “composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number” of books.<sup>5</sup> No one position of telling can access everything that needs to be said for the truth to be available. *Balcony of the Snow Man* confirms what Borges’s librarians had already concluded—that “trying to find sense in books” is futile, “equating such a quest with attempting to find meaning in dreams or in the chaotic lines of the palm of a hand.”<sup>6</sup> From the texts of *Balcony of the Snow Man* readers know a great deal, though mostly about the limitations of knowledge. Knowing, in the novel, is less about the “stuff” that happens than how it is represented. This attention to the position of narrative puts the reader in that place of the balcony: paying attention to what is seen and also how it is being seen. The panoptic view is made insufficient.

## DISRUPT

The inside/outside of the balconic vantage is not just a position for narrative. In *Balcony of Delirium* (the first of the series) it also emerges as a technology of interpretation. This tool has the power to disrupt the relentless imposition of the panoptic gaze. The in/out of the balcony is presented as a way to disrupt the forceful imposition of powerful narrative frames, and to find a way out. In the language of the novel, the balconic vantage turns “order” into a delirium that makes space for the practice of an intertextual Palestine. Delirium becomes a sort of interpretive framework where it is possible to be at once within an imposed structure and outside it. This technology of interpretation is presented through the novel’s protagonist and “everyman,” Rashid al-Nimr, who goes from his home to his office job five days a week. He has just returned from work in the Gulf states, where he had sent remittances to his wife and children. Now home with a government job at the Information Office, Rashid must adjust to a very different life in a home and an office that operate through logics unfamiliar to him. The subject matter is almost banal, but it is not the humdrum of life that the text follows. Rather, *Balcony of Delirium* follows structures and their logics—the same structures and logics that Rashid is trying to adapt to and understand.

What makes the novel true to its title is that it looks at all structures simultaneously. It follows Rashid as he tries to wrap his head around the new rules of the office, the habits/expectations of his wife and children, and, at the same time, the larger political context in which he exists: the gently repressive policies of the state he works for, the US war in Iraq, what emerged as a “War on Terror,” and how these logics influence and shift realities at home and office. Written in one sitting,<sup>7</sup> *Balcony of Delirium* is a radical intervention into narrative and reads as an outpouring of thoughts and ruminations on the violence narrative systems. The delirium induced by the reading, which is often quite disorienting, not only disrupts but also destroys the panoptic as a possibility of making any singular “order.” Rather, the work identifies many competing orders that Rashid tries to figure out. In the end, however, it is only in letting go of all of them that he can find his way in the new surroundings.

This experience is reproduced for the reader through the novel’s narrative style. The novel moves rapidly from one scene to another; it uses images, movie stills, newspaper cutouts, and drawings seemingly haphazardly. Where *Balcony of the Snowman* used multiple genres, these at least were separated clearly by section. In *Balcony of Delirium*, structures are introduced rapidly and without preamble. At first this is confusing, as all obvious avenues to find logical connection between elements of the text are stymied. As both Rashid and the reader work to “make sense” of the world/texts, they are forced to abandon preconceived frames of interpretation. This makes it an exceedingly difficult novel to read. As one Goodreads reviewer put it, “The man said delirium on the front page and he wasn’t lying,” going on to wonder if the author had heat stroke when he wrote it and assessing it



as “very bad, vague, cloudy, almost incomprehensible.”<sup>8</sup> This is, I think, the point.<sup>9</sup> By forestalling interpretation, the reader must engage differently with the text to look for clues. This section looks at the most alienating technique employed in the novel to demonstrate how it prevents readers from imposing frames of knowledge, then coaches them (though perhaps only very determined ones) to generate knowledge. This knowledge—from within yet outside the ordered systems of telling created by the panopticon—is balconic: it is multiple, it is simultaneous, and it accounts for structures and that which is within them. This expands the notion of a structure from a genre to the rules of a job, the system of a household, or the rhetoric of an imperial war.

One of the most compelling and challenging features of *Balcony of Delirium* is its use of images as representations of structures-of-thought. There are twenty-nine images spread across the novel’s 202 pages. These include thirteen photographs, five paintings/sketches, three film/TV stills, four newspaper articles, and four instances of font play. Each image is embedded in paragraphs of text, and while some seem to directly illustrate something mentioned on the same page, others appear without comment or apparent connection. The first image proves educational. It is a map, which to use Genette’s terms is a “text” in and of itself, with widely known and particular conventions for reading. A simple sketch of buildings and streets covering just over one city block, the map appears early in the first chapter as Rashid begins his first day of work as a government information officer. The map ostensibly gives the layout of the block around his office, but it ends up as a tool for trying to understand a mysterious instruction that Rashid’s predecessor hands down to him.

When journalists come in for information, he is told, do not let them look west. The instructions amount to a logic of the workplace. This is a logic that Rashid is simply supposed to accept. As his predecessor explains, “Journalists will visit you to take pictures of the place, and I’m warning you, don’t allow any of them to go on to the roof to take pictures.” He goes on, saying that when journalists come, they “can take pictures from the left, . . . to the south, to the east, to the sky, but not to the west. It is on you, it is on you to tell them, because it is forbidden, expressly forbidden, expressly expressly” (20). What neither the reader nor Rashid understands, is *why* the rules are thus and why the journalists “must not look west.” This is where the map comes in. After receiving his training instructions, Rashid takes a walk around the office to try to sort out what is to the west. The map appears without explanation, as a sort of visual rendering of Rashid’s observations. The only thing that the walk adds besides the information on the map is that the alleyway behind the office has the “smell of urine” (11).

Encountering the map, readers look to see if it offers new information. The drawing contains no navigational markings or legend, and there is no title to confirm that this is in fact a representation of Rashid’s office. These elements, however, are implied; they are precisely the set of conventions that are (at first) unquestioningly applied in order to garner meaning. So north is assumed to be

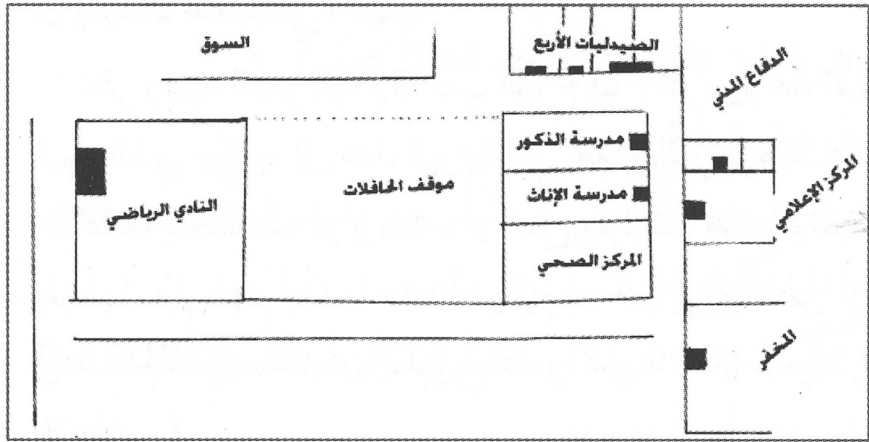


FIGURE 3. The map displayed in *Balcony of Delirium*, which appears after Rashid explores the area around his new place of work. The novel never explicitly says that this is Rashid's drawing.

the top of the map, and from there, west of the Information Office (the labeled building in the middle at the far-right quadrant of the map) can be identified as a block of three buildings: a boys' school, a girls' school, and a health center. Beyond the school complex (reading right to left, again a convention) are a bus stop and then a sports center. In plotting the buildings on a street map, the sketch allows readers to see directly what Rashid and his predecessor narrate. The map puts in visual form what had been described in prose and, significantly, gives readers a different way of accessing the scene. However, neither map nor narrative gives an easy answer as to what is to the west. This is where readers struggle: What does it all mean?

When images and other intertexts are encountered, precisely because they make no initial "sense," readers are forced to question how the image "should" be read. At times, the context in which the intertext is situated provides enough information to "read" its meaning. At other times, readers must reach into their experienced past, into cultural knowledge, or into the realm of international politics to locate a context in which the image was initially situated (like the photograph of Ashley Judd, or the Iraqi dead after a market bombing, or the second plane flying into New York City's Twin Towers). This extra-context accessed by readers is brought into the novel and put to service in telling the story of Rashid and the broader story of the structures that he is surrounded by. The map serves as a useful example of how this works.

Since regular conventions don't reveal what is west, readers might try to interpret the map differently. Perhaps the map is a mirror image and could be read backward; perhaps it has purposefully been placed on a different axis. Maybe it is

of a different area. The question becomes for readers how to go about “reading” the map so that it adds information. Otherwise, why include the image? In using the map and Rashid’s narrative to help interpret the “rules” that Rashid has been given, we are reading the architexts: one text (the office rules) and its conventions is being read against another (the map), trying to either make sense of or even undermine the first. In trying to discern meaning from these abutting, complementary, but somehow contradictory texts, readers must consciously deploy conventional knowledge from outside the novel and then question that knowledge as a useful interpretive lens. To no avail, at least initially.

The solution to the mystery of just what is west doesn’t come until much later in the novel (and here not until chapter 6), but the exercise of reading, of interpreting the map, Rashid’s reaction, and the instructions, prepares readers for an even more opaque scene that follows. A turn of the page brings one of the novel’s richest examples of disruption and production of the inside/outside balconic vantage. The new chapter begins; its title, again vague, “Fluttering Wings,” greets readers. From first glance, readers see a different mode of text on the page: metered verse and then an image embedded in the text. This foretells the highly intertextual and metapoetic nature of the chapter. The action begins as Rashid takes a nap. As he drifts off to sleep, an unknown but authoritative narrator steps in. This narrator addresses readers in prose, then in metered verse, and using images. Reading the highly figurative chapter in depth gives a full sense of how intertextuality is mobilized to create the balconic vantage and how the novel requires readers to gain this perspective along with Rashid.

The chapter can be broken into three parts: a sort of dream narrative written in metered verse, a semimetered section of prose poetry, and then more verse, all told by an unknown narrator and punctuated with an image. The first verse is a dream narrative, the fact of which is actually more important to interpretation than the words. In classical Arabic biography, Dwight F. Reynolds explains, both poetry and dream narrative function “as messages from outside . . . that act as portents of the future or as authoritative testimony.”<sup>10</sup> Read as such, the poem offers insight “from outside” into the nature or meaning of Rashid and his experiences. As a dream narrative, it is a truth that neither dreamer nor reader might comprehend. So the dream-poem comes to the reader as if a truth—like the truth of the office predecessor who simply dictates the rules without explaining them. Thus far, still truths without sense.

When the poem ends, the same dream narrator notes that Rashid “woke up before all of these flowers could bloom,” acknowledging the undeveloped ideas that the poem brought into the text and hinting that these poetic suggestions will “bloom” later on. They do, in a later dream, which is touched on in chapter 6. Once the dream is over, Rashid wakes from his nap and finds himself thinking about George W. Bush. The narrator switches briefly from poetry to prose.



FIGURE 4. The image of former US president George W. Bush as it appears in *Balcony of Delirium* at the end of the dream sequence.

In prose (which is nonetheless quite poetic), the narrator describes that Rashid is thinking of George W. Bush's infamous "mission accomplished" speech, delivered to US troops aboard an aircraft carrier returning from service in the Persian Gulf during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq (Figure 4). Running through Rashid's head, according to the narrator, is a radio broadcast, the lines of which are recorded: "And the broadcaster that he loved announced, in terrifying words: 'The start of a new era'" (15). The words refer to Bush's speech again, where he declared a turning point in the US combat mission in Iraq. He told assembled troops, "In the images of fallen statues we have witnessed the arrival of a new era,"<sup>11</sup> a new era signified by the fall of Saddam Hussein, the occupation of Iraq, and US military intervention in the region. The lines are punctuated with an image: the US president as he disembarked from a fighter jet, helmet under his arm, walking to a podium to deliver his speech, the words of which have haunted Rashid.

The remembered (quoted) speech and the image are two more examples in *Balcony of Delirium* where the reader is meant to read the structures of the texts into the narrative. Each text is unpacked in turn below.

First, the photograph. This text acts as "a temporal hallucination,"<sup>12</sup> which at once documents an event with a fixed moment and place and is a reproduction that can be viewed anywhere at any moment by anyone. Roland Barthes, in his *Camera Lucida*, theorizes that through an encounter with the still image, the viewer is given direct access to a scene. The encounter includes the knowledge that the image is created via a lens controlled by one individual. In this way access is at once direct and mediated.<sup>13</sup> Photographs, as Dava Simpson has discussed, "produce both knowledge and experience. They are not only records of a frozen past; they are also placed in contemporary contexts."<sup>14</sup> Through the image the past becomes present, read within and alongside a different age, to say nothing of a

different geography. In the poem, the systems and structures that shaped the past of the photograph and invisibly crafted the image are being read—along with the image—into the “present” scene of Rashid’s life and all its invisible structures.

The reader must draw on these ideas to understand what the photograph “means.” Not only this, but one might also go on to wonder whether the photograph is art or witness. As Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri have observed, “Because of the photograph’s persistent use as documentary evidence, the presence of photography in literature almost automatically challenges accepted distinctions between fiction and nonfiction.”<sup>15</sup> The reader must ask the following questions: Within the text, is the image fact or fiction? Does it operate with the authority of a footnote or give the guidance of a preface? Perhaps it functions as a sort of quotation? This series of almost inevitable questions creates a critical position for the reader, who is forced to interrogate the parameters of fiction and eventually the conventions that are embedded in it;<sup>16</sup> in other words, the reader must forge the inside/outside position of knowing from the balcony. The reader must be in the text and outside it at the same moment.

Ultimately what the reader takes away from the dream-intervention is first the inability to make established “sense” of the presented material. The second is the development of a critical sense of texts, a honed ability to recognize what is being told and how, and to recognize that all “truths” are not in fact true. This disrupts the power of the totalizing narrative. Like *Balcony of the Snow Man*, the structures become part of the story, but unlike the story of Bahjat, here the reader must struggle along with Rashid to find “sense” in the jumble of structures. Structures of power are thus subsumed within narrative, become part of the story, and the very nature of the invisible rules are put up for interrogation. As readers go through the process of interrogating each of the types of text they are presented with, they are forced to find a balconic position—as the only stable location for sustained interpretation. The book, like this section, very often leaves the reader suspended, without plot resolution until other structures and their relationships are also disrupted and made available for analysis.

#### DECODIFY

The focus of *Balcony of Disgrace*, the third book in the series, shifts from the macro level of genre and architext to the micro: the impact of these structures on language. The novel, which unlike all the other Balconies has a woman as its protagonist. It follows Manar, the once-celebrated only daughter of a working-class family with aspirations to social elevation, as she becomes pregnant as the result of a rape by an assailant seeking revenge on her father, imprisoned “for her own protection” in a state facility, sexually assaulted by other inmates, and shot in the street by her brother. All this is done in the name of family, state, and religious notions of “honor.” Through her story, “honor,” “disgrace,” and “family” are

examined as concepts co-opted and calcified by the state, the middle class, and the larger family network. The work of the balcony here is to show how language itself becomes part of powerful narrative frameworks, so that words can be used to force people within a particular narrative trajectory. Of course, in showing that this is simultaneously true for multiple systems, the purchase of power on language can be subverted and words given new meaning. Rather than units of language to express the realities of everyday life, words in *Balcony of Disgrace* become tools of oppression and control that serve no one and nothing but existing regimes of power. This imposition is made palpable, as it is quite literally enacted on the body of Manar. The work of the novel is to show how language can reproduce regimes of control and at the same time use tools of the in/out balconic vantage to disrupt and decenter the definitions imposed. The balconic vantage can thus decodify language, extract its meaning from the operation of power, and open words once again for use within a changing and open experience of life.

"Disgrace" is first spat out by a jealous uncle whose son has been refused marriage to Manar. The uncle, long months after his son was turned down, learns of Manar's rape and hangs a "banner of disgrace" above her family home. He claims that her rape dishonors the family (the loss of virginity, the unsanctioned transgression, the inability of her father or brothers to protect her), and declares to her father and brothers: "I hope to god there is a man in this house to rise up and protect their honor" (105). The idea is, if the immediate male relatives could not protect Manar, at least they should protect the larger family. The uncle taps into a notion of family honor that would seek the "evidence" of violence done to the family eliminated. That evidence is Manar.

The young woman has nothing to do with either dispute—between her father and her attacker or her uncle and her parents who refused the proposal—but it is her body that disputes are waged through and over. These definitions of honor, disgrace, and protection are not only used by Manar's uncle but also by the state when police and a judicial system barge onto the scene and claim that they "are here for her protection" (179). Once in protective custody, Manar is just as badly abused. Disgusted at the conditions, she insists, "I will not agree to go in there" (184), but even as she is stripped and hosed down, the guard scoffs, "Why? Are you more honorable than them?" (184). The guard uses the idea of honor to violate Manar again. An inmate later promises to protect Manar if she complies with yet another assault. The pregnant Manar gives birth alone in the prison. The only people who protect and honor her are a group of similarly disgraced women with no power or honor at all (at least in the systems that claim the monopoly on the terms).

Here each "authority" creates its own version of the same language, logic, and the maintenance of a (neo)patriarchal structure.<sup>17</sup> The self-styled authority of the state, when it comes onto the scene ostensibly to protect Manar from her family, stems from the image of a father-type protector of the motherland.<sup>18</sup> If the state were to challenge the uncle, for example, and declare that family honor

was not connected to the protection of the purity of the woman and mother figure, the entire logic of state authority would collapse. So protection is done on the same terms, but the state claims the ultimate authority to carry it out. This is not an uncommon elision of notions of authority. Palestine's declaration of independence, for example, which sought to establish the nation as a state in 1988, establishes a definition of Palestine and Palestinian based on the masculine protection of woman/mother Palestine. As Joseph Massad has argued, in the declaration "men actively create glory, respect, and dignity, women are merely the soil on which these attributes, along with manhood, are grown."<sup>19</sup> To protect the nation is to protect women, Massad has shown, and to maintain the identity of the nation is to keep its honor.<sup>20</sup> So the ideas are at once distinct but codependent: to be a nation is to be a family in the patriarchal sense, to belong to this nation is to have honor, which is preserved by keeping the nation honorable. Those who penned the declaration were meant to be the ultimate representatives of that masculine honor. What *Balcony of Disgrace* does is challenge this linked set of meanings so that protection, honor, and disgrace take on new—and still national—meanings that cannot be easily dismissed.

*Balcony of Disgrace* undermines these associated words by connecting Manar's story to the events of the 2008–9 Israeli war on Gaza, which takes place in the background of the novel. The war is perceptible only at brief moments, on a television station, so that after "songs from Nancy Ajram" characters see "the Al Jazeera news is broadcast, the war on Gaza continues, and there are protests around the whole world" (151). But the news is just as quickly clicked past. Also haunting the backdrop of the novel is a habit of hanging a "black banner over the door" (195) of homes as a show of protest against the little done by leaders of the Arab world as Gaza was bombarded. These black banners play on the associations of nation as motherland, with Israel metaphorically "disgracing" the Arab world by violating Palestine. What undermines this is that the banner hung over Manar's home (hung by her uncle as a sign of her rape and the necessity of her family to remove her—and her stain on honor—from the family) is several times mistaken for a flag mourning those killed by the Israeli bombardment. At one point Manar's mother even displaces the disgrace assigned to Manar and her family onto the Arab world, telling one visitor who does not know about the rape that the banner is like "the many banners you see like it, that people raise mourning the souls martyred in Gaza" (219). Manar is transformed into one of the Gaza dead, a Palestinian killed because of the failure of Arab states to protect her. The shame, then, the disgrace, is on those who failed to protect.

The parallel thus inverts the way "disgrace" is used and applied. The same structures that read Manar as disgraced to maintain their position in power are shown as disgraced for failing to protect the Arab and Palestinian nation—not as a state, but as a people. This puts disgrace-Manar-Gaza into a relationship that ultimately inverts the usage pattern and cracks the imposed narrative logic. It is allowing the



violence to take place that is the disgrace. The title word no longer only defines Manar and what will happen to her as the logic of power's definition is carried through, but also defines the systems themselves. *Balcony of Disgrace* is an indictment of systems governed (and which govern) by calcified language and concepts.

Beyond the link between its heroine and the people of the Gaza Strip, *Balcony of Disgrace* weaves in a complex set of questions about the process of giving words meaning and how this too is tempered by words' construction within structures of power and ordering. The novel does this through an intertextual link to Ibn Manzur's thirteenth-century compendium the *Lisān al-'arab* (Tongue of the Arabs), which has become a repository, an almost definitive history of the possibilities of language from Arabic's early period.<sup>21</sup> Words in the *Lisān* have come to represent the traditional and "original" meanings of Arabic words and roots. It is no coincidence, then, that on her first day at university, after her father drops her off at the campus gates, Manar goes directly to the library reference section to look up a word in the *Lisān*. She is seeking meaning but also seeking to challenge and create meaning (and indeed logical ordering) anew.

The word Manar looks up is *sh-q-q*, a root word with several definitions that hauntingly parallel the protagonist's life. The first meaning she reads into the novel is "cleave" (*shaqaq*), the breaking of a whole into parts; next and related is "brother" (*shaqīq*), or sibling parts of the same larger family structure; then "lightning" (*shaqīqat al-barq*), that which cleaves the sky; and finally "martyrdom," through the story of the *shaqā'iq nu'mān*, anemone, said to grow where martyrs fall, after the classical Arabic tale of the martyred Nu'man b. al-Mundhir who was slain in righteous battle.<sup>22</sup> Manar reads these definitions from the lexicon entry directly into the pages of the novel, but it is not a direct transcription of the definitions offered.<sup>23</sup> Rather, Manar makes some critical selections, reducing the six-page entry from a twenty-volume lexicon into a single page on which she rearranges the roots, their references, omits most, and ultimately transforms the definition of the word into a story that mirrors her own. The meaning of "sibling" and "cleave" symbolizes the relationship between Manar and her brothers who would turn against her; the lightning symbolizes the traumatic splitting experience of the rape and finally her death as a "martyr."

Manar's act of consultation and questioning of meaning is an act that builds on a tradition of language exploration in Palestinian letters (indeed in Arabic literature more broadly). Jeff Sacks has written about the lexical explorations of Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, who saw in the late 1880s that "any act of gathering together is order and organization, which is to say, putting each thing in its place."<sup>24</sup> This was in a context of standardization and codification that sought to modernize (and organize) language.<sup>25</sup> So whether Ibn Manzur set about to put language in "its place" or not, the creation of the *Lisān* as a document of tradition certainly had that effect. To consult the *Lisān* is to consult tradition, but for Manar the rewriting reorganizes its meaning—disorganizes it, so that she can gain a power over language and its links



to tradition and past. *Balcony of Disgrace* demands a “return” to tradition where language and its meanings are an infinite gathering rather than a precise narrowing.<sup>26</sup>

It is worth very briefly noting that this same technique of decodifying tradition through the rearrangement of Ibn Manzur’s lexicographical compendium is deployed across the works of the Palestine Comedies series. In the linked novels, a rearranged *Lisān* entry appears, not embedded in and as part of the text, but excerpted as back matter that paratextually links the different works of the Comedies together.<sup>27</sup> The *Lisān* excerpt appears as a ten-line entry from the root *l-h-w*, the same letters that produce the word *malhāt* (comedy). The different definitions are presented under the title, “Of *al-Malhāt* [Comedy] and Its Roots.”<sup>28</sup> The excerpt lists the meanings of different *l-h-w* words, it seems, in order to derive a meaning for *l-h-w*, or comedy. In this case, *l-h-w* is also the word that describes and defines Palestine in the series title, so the list and its entries are also describing Palestine.<sup>29</sup> Where in the Comedies this redefinition is of the nation, in *Balcony of Disgrace* it is a reclaiming of language as something powerful for people rather than something that people (and Manar in particular) are subject to. This book is not the only text in the Palestinian literary corpus to demand that language be wrested from structures of power. Mahmoud Darwish’s *Memory for Forgetfulness* (*Dhākira li l-nisyān*), for example, mulls the meaning of Beirut, changing it to B-E-I-R-U-T so that the place shifts from one that history has endowed with meaning to a disarticulated set of letters that reflects Darwish’s personal experience of the 1982 Israeli invasion. The word is taken out of the telos of history and politics and into the realm of the personal.<sup>30</sup>

While Manar is killed by her brother, her life and story offer a decodified language with which to speak about the nation as an honorable entity separate from the state—even an entity oppressed by the state. Manar demonstrates what the Comedies only hinted at: the power of a reinscription of meaning into language co-opted by authority. Her story offers a decodification, indeed decalcification, of language that is now free of the structures that controlled it. This allows language to express and rescript or describe anew the experience of Palestine as an intertextual nation and provides an open set of tools—alongside work to decenter and disrupt the imposition of powerful narratives—to give narrative and practical space for Palestinian lives.

From so many “vantages,” then, the balcony provides a space of narrative for this novel Palestine. Not only does this inside/outside disrupt the central and retrospective point of narrative required for the imposed power of state, but it can disrupt that power when it is put into operation. This disruption gives Palestine and Palestinian lives that essential space for representation, and the balcony’s decodifying power—to see how language is used by power to maintain power—means language can be redefined to speak other possibilities. What this means specifically for the nation that becomes possible in Nasrallah’s Palestine Project, is the subject of the next chapter.