

Epic Fails

Sonallah Ibrahim's Modern Myths of Seeking

I was hoping I could write a modern myth, with a character that would overcome all the existing deteriorating circumstances. But when I started writing . . . the character was transformed into a completely crushed one.

—SONALLAH IBRAHIM¹

The Egyptian author Sonallah Ibrahim has been called many things, including a “rebel with a pen,”² “a novelist of lost causes,”³ “Egypt’s oracular novelist,”⁴ and “the Arab world’s preeminent bard of dashed hope and disillusionment.”⁵ Yet, as several recent interviews have made clear, Ibrahim’s work is also deeply indebted to detective fiction, and specifically to Raymond Chandler’s noir. Ibrahim has named Chandler’s protagonist Philip Marlowe as one of his all-time “favorite heroes in fiction,”⁶ and he has cited the “modern, lively, simple . . . even poetic” style of Chandler’s novels as one of the biggest influences on his own writing. For Ibrahim, Chandler and Ernest Hemingway belong together in an unconventional school of writing—a “school of simple exhibition which hides many meanings.”⁷ It’s difficult to think of a better phrase to describe Ibrahim’s own novels, narrated as they are in plain, often colloquial, language, yet always obliquely condemning the shadowy networks that sustain national, international, and capitalist power.

Like the author himself, the unnamed narrator of Ibrahim’s 1981 novella *The Committee (al-Lajnah)* is, at one point, very explicit about distinguishing the kinds of detective novels he likes from those he doesn’t. In the novel’s fourth chapter, one of the members of the titular committee, referred to only as “the short man,” notices the absence of “even one work by Agatha Christie” among the many procedurals piled in the narrator’s hallway. “I actually only like a specific kind of detective fiction,” the narrator explains,

the kind built on action and movement. My favorites are the ones where a hero chases down criminals and gangsters, undergoing every kind of hardship and misery

in the process and—as is the case in most of these novels—confronting society and its ruling classes in defense of someone from among the weak and disenfranchised . . . These novels don't require much mental effort from the reader because they are built on action, but that doesn't mean that Agatha Christie's novels are somehow more intellectual. Her fictions are constructed around simplistic, imaginary puzzles that no one should waste his mental energies deciphering, especially since reality itself is full of actual puzzles interesting enough to require all one's faculties.⁸

Indeed, much of the action of *The Committee* is dedicated to identifying, researching, and laying out the “hidden meanings” behind these “real puzzles”—for example, connecting Coca-Cola's penetration into Egyptian markets with the declining quality of tap water, the decrease in public housing projects, the disappearance of local cigarettes, the rise in cases of depression, and the higher doses of foreign-produced pharmaceuticals prescribed in the country.⁹ In fact, the novella lays out a “method” of seeking that has been called “conspiracist,”¹⁰ but that I will argue is in fact akin to “confronting the ruling classes in defense of someone from among the weak and disenfranchised,” in other words, to Marxist critique. It is a method for writing a people's history, a complex practice veiled in simple language, or, in Ibrahim's own words, a form of “simple exhibition which hides many meanings.”¹¹

In what follows, I first lay out the features of the “way of seeking” Ibrahim pioneers in *The Committee*, then turn to *Zaat* (1992) to show how the later novel solicits the reader to perform the complex labor of investigation shouldered by the earlier novel's first-person narrator. I illustrate how Egypt's “oracular novelist,” this “bard of dashed hope and disillusionment,” turns reading into a training in historical-materialist investigation, as well as an invitation to form community and solidarity through the negative image of the isolated, defeated, yet still morally crusading individual.¹² The way of seeking dramatized in *The Committee* and transformed into a way of reading in *Zaat* thus stands in sharp contrast with the ways of seeking dramatized in the previous chapter. Ghanim and Khoury destabilized the rhythms of their narratives with unexpected voices, forms, and registers of speech in the hopes of democratizing or popularizing the novel, making it a social as opposed to an individual form. Ibrahim, meanwhile, takes the opposite tack, plumbing the depths of his era's isolation, alienation, and despair—the misery of neoliberal atomization—as the negative image of possible future communalisms. His novels offer us not so much “the dream of a world in which things would be different,” as the nightmare that makes such a transformed world thinkable.¹³

TOTALITY, FUTURITY, AND THE INVESTIGATIVE POETICS OF THE COMMITTEE

Given Sonallah Ibrahim's repeated expressions of admiration for Chandler (and, it's worth noting, Maurice Leblanc's Arsène Lupin),¹⁴ we should not be surprised that the narrator's views on detective fiction in *The Committee* jibe almost

perfectly with Chandler's in his 1944 essay "The Simple Art of Murder." Mocking the improbable intricacies and contrivances of "classic" British clue puzzles and their even more far-fetched American progeny, Chandler also asks why any reader should be interested in "the same utterly incomprehensible trick of how somebody stabbed Mrs. Pottington Postlethwaite III with the solid platinum poignard just as she flatted on the top note of the 'Bell Song' from *Lakmé* in the presence of fifteen ill-assorted guests."¹⁵ Like the narrator of *The Committee*, Chandler argues that clue puzzles like Christie's "are too contrived, and too little aware of what goes on in the world."¹⁶ His concern throughout the essay is with realism, not as a rigid set of formal principles but as a question of authenticity, stretching from a novel's plot to its language.

But more than this, Chandler—like Ibrahim's narrator—is also concerned with the *moral* quality of detective fiction, its ability, when it "takes murder out of the Venetian vase and drops it into the alley,"¹⁷ to expose the hypocrisies of modern law and order, causing its readers to notice, perhaps for the first time, the oft-obscured injustices in the societies around them: "The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities . . . a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket . . . because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing . . ." ¹⁸ In Chandler's view, the world of the detective story should be one in which there is some measure of "redemption" for the poor and disenfranchised, a redemption achieved through the actions of the detective himself.¹⁹ Most importantly for the narrator of *The Committee*, the detective story, in Chandler's hands, is "this man's adventure *in search of a hidden truth*."²⁰ There is no need, Chandler and our narrator assert, to invent elaborate settings, plots, and murders when the real injustices and crimes around us are so widespread, so complex, so deliberately and carefully obscured by those in power. Even that arch conservative G. K. Chesterton reminds us that "morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies," and detection a modern form of "knight-errantry."²¹

The narrator's preference for this "specific kind of detective fiction" in *The Committee* also explains the seemingly random assortment of biographies he's collected in his home library—ranging from the Prophet Muhammad, Ibn Rushd, Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, and Abu Sa'id al-Jannabi, to Karl Marx, Marie Curie, Albert Schweitzer, Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Patrice Lumumba, Mehdi Ben Barka, Ahmed Ben Bella, Farajallah el-Helou, Shuhdi Atiya, and many others.²² Each was either a religious outcast, (proto)socialist, communist, anti-imperial nationalist, or some combination of these.²³ The narrator of *The Committee*, in other words, has assembled a library of outcasts, renegades, communists, and heretics in which Arsène Lupin and Philip Marlowe make sense, but Hercule Poirot—famed dispeller of crime from respectable British social circles—does not. Once again, Ibrahim subtly clues us into his narrator's simultaneously moral, Marxist, and anti-imperialist sensibilities. The narrator—at least, before his

encounter with the Committee—hopes to be yet another crusader for the poor and disenfranchised against the “ruling classes.” Yet because they occur in isolation from any kind of public, the narrator of *The Committee* will be sorely disappointed in his quests for justice. His Infitah-era “adventure to expose a hidden truth” will end in nothing more than disillusionment, frustration, and ultimately self-destruction.

Communicating through telegram, the Committee asks the narrator to prepare a study of the “greatest contemporary Arab luminary.” To respond to their call, the narrator goes through a lengthy process of selection, research, and preparation which he later refers to as his “method” or “methodology” (*minhāj*) (L 96). Although he never uses any explicitly Marxist terms, there are two aspects to his method, I argue, that make it a form of Marxist critique. First, it is concerned with “totality”—that is, with considering the connections between the subjective experiences of alienated individuals and the objective social realities that condition these experiences.²⁴ For Western Marxists like Georg Lukács, it was necessary to “abandon the view that objects are rigidly opposed to each other” and “elevate their interrelatedness and the interaction between those ‘relations’ and the ‘objects’ to the same plane of reality” in order to dispel alienation and apprehend historical change.²⁵ Like Lukács, the narrator of *The Committee* is concerned with “interrelatedness” (*irtibāṭāt mutasha‘ibah*) (L 47), and he seeks to explain the “mysterious puzzles and strange phenomena” that structure his life by stitching them into a larger fabric of material and social circumstances. He quickly realizes that he must find the methodology appropriate to explaining “every phenomenon in itself, and all of the phenomena in their relationships with one another” (L 96).

The narrator spends long hours in the archives of state newspapers, ladies’ journals, and the American embassy, tracing the involvement of his chosen subject—a man referred to only as “the Doctor”—in numerous realms of Egyptian life. These include the entertainment industry, the nationalization of foreign companies following the Tripartite Aggression of 1956 (referred to as “Egyptification,” or *tamṣīr*), the propaganda efforts surrounding Nasserist pan-Arabism, and subsequently, after Sadat’s rise to power, securing government subcontracts for the private firms in which he holds large stakes, marrying the daughter of a Gulf-based “oil king,” and serving as a middleman between foreign financiers and local consumers. By refusing to consider any of the Doctor’s endeavors in isolation from the others, the narrator of *The Committee* sees how this mysterious figure has continually milked the political system for his own profit, turning on a dime from pan-Arab socialist to neoliberal Egyptian capitalist. Given his disempowered position with respect to the Committee, the narrator is—according to Lukács—uniquely positioned to see these “connections” because, unlike the capitalist, he already understands himself as an object, rather than a subject, of history.²⁶

The narrator’s method can be characterized as Marxist for another reason: it is focused on the future, and on the inevitable, inexorable movement of history in favor of the disempowered. At the end of the novel, after a second official interview

with the Committee during which he once again fails to confront them as he might have liked, the narrator makes one last attempt at vindication. He puts a blank cassette into his tape recorder, places it atop a pile of books, and begins addressing it “as though it were a committee.” After affirming to this imaginary committee that “every noble intention in this world must be directed at getting rid of you,” he affirms that he is “not so innocent as to believe that if this goal were achieved, it would be the end of the journey, for it is only natural that a new committee would replace you, and no matter how good its intentions or how high-minded its goals, sooner or later corruption would infiltrate it too,” and it, in turn, would be fated for dissolution. Yet the narrator, by studying history, has learned that “through this very process—the process of change and repeated dissolution—your group will lose its influence, while the power of *those like me* to confront and resist it will rise.” Though he regrets having failed to truly confront the Committee (owing, in part, to his “infatuated pursuit of knowledge”), still the narrator is comforted by his “conviction about what *will* come to pass, however long it takes, for *this is the logic of history* and the way of life” (L 120, emphases added).

In the narrator’s invocation of “the logic of history,” it is hard not to hear an echo of the idea that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”²⁷ The Committee’s power, it seems, will inevitably be superseded by the “lower classes” or, in the narrator’s phrase, “those like him” (L 87, 120) through the sheer force of history and struggle. This emphasis on posterity explains the otherwise puzzling citation of Russian Marxist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky in the novella’s last chapter. As he prepares to carry out the Committee’s bizarre sentence of “self-consumption” (literally, eating himself), the narrator comes across

these lines from Mayakovsky, which he said shortly before his tragic end:

I swear, from this moment forward, to never speak with the shameful tongue of reason and common sense . . .

Now a person can stand up and speak, and his words will resonate across the ages, all history, all creation.

The fate of the man who had spoken them reminded me of my own tragedy. (L 118–19; C 154)²⁸

In his commitment to the political and social ideals of communism, on the one hand, and his continued clashes with Soviet state authorities, on the other, Mayakovsky’s “fate” does indeed seem to resemble that of the narrator in *The Committee*, as well as that of Ibrahim himself. A committed Leninist and supporter of the October Revolution from very early on, Mayakovsky denounced the bureaucratic entrenchment and state-enforced cultural standards of the Stalin regime in the 1920s and through the end of his life.²⁹ The lines Ibrahim cites come from a series of late fragments found among Mayakovsky’s papers after his suicide in 1930, apparently written as a second prologue to a never-written poem about Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan (with the more famous poem “At the Top of My

Voice” serving as the first.)³⁰ Central to both fragments—and to Ibrahim’s invocation of them—is the renunciation of “common sense,” “being reasonable,” and “convention.” Like Ibrahim’s narrator, the poetic speaker in Mayakovsky’s fragments seems aware that his life is essentially over, that there is nothing left for him to do but address his plea to posterity, letting his voice resonate through various levels of time, from the cosmic (“the ages”), to the secular (“history”), to the divine (“all creation”). Following the “wild torment of his life,” Mayakovsky implicitly addresses the readers of an ideal future—the “planet’s proletariat,” living in the “far communist future”—who may discover these fragments in the wake of his self-inflicted death.³¹ Given that Mayakovsky composed the lines less than a year before his suicide, it makes sense that the narrator of Ibrahim’s *The Committee*, who is just sitting down to destroy himself, would equate Mayakovsky’s “fate” with his own “tragedy” (L 118–19).

The narrator in *The Committee*, then, is not “uninteresting, and therefore disinterested.”³² His “way of seeking” is more Marxist than it is “suspicious,” in Rita Felski’s pejorative sense of this term, “paranoid,” in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s,³³ or even “conspiracist,” as Benjamin Koerber has argued.³⁴ Rather, he seems driven by a Marxist concern with totality, on the one hand, and futurity, on the other. Moreover, it is difficult to think of the narrator as a delusional conspiracy theorist when the “connections” he uncovers are, for the most part, real. At one point, for example, he notes that “since tap water now represents Coca-Cola’s only competitor, we can see why it would invest in a project to desalinate seawater carried out by the Aqua-Chem company, which Coca-Cola acquired several years ago, in 1970, to be exact” (L 97). This is no conspiracy theory: in his 1986 address to Coca-Cola Company shareholders in Atlanta, then-president Roberto C. Goizueta noted that “at this point in the U.S., people consume more soft drinks than any other liquid, *including ordinary tap water*. If we take full advantage of our opportunities, we will see the same wave catching on in market after market, until eventually the number one beverage on earth will not be tea or coffee or wine or beer; it will be soft drinks, our soft drinks.”³⁵ Coca-Cola executives like Goizueta *did* view tap water as their number one competitor in the world, and they *did* in fact acquire the Milwaukee-based Aqua-Chem water filtration company in a “blundering attempt at diversification,” with the reasoning that “this would be a tool for getting into the Arab countries, which refused to deal with Coca-Cola because the company did business with Israel.”³⁶ The move was ultimately a failure, but the importance of this business history is very clear: in order to become “the number one beverage on earth,” Coke had to not only redefine the specific food and drink cultures of the countries where it wished to penetrate, but indeed, reconfigure human thirst itself.

The narrator’s problem, in a nutshell, is that he’s a Marxist thinker in an era of neoliberalization—an Egyptian subject atomized, against his will, in a political climate that has scrapped collective action and sold it for parts. When we

follow the paper trail of the other “phenomena” he so intricately weaves together, we learn that he was correct about other elements of his research as well. John Trotter, the Texas-based CEO of a Coca-Cola bottling plant in Guatemala, *did* collaborate with local conservative politicians, military officers, and police to threaten, intimidate, and ultimately kill workers associated with unionization efforts at the Embotelladora Guatemalteca S. A. in starting in 1975.³⁷ The Coca-Cola Company also *did* “present a huge grant to the Brooklyn Museum in 1977 to rescue Egyptian pharaonic antiquities from collapse” (L 96–97; C 124–25), providing more than four hundred thousand dollars for a Museum-led project to conserve and record the monuments of ancient Thebes.³⁸ And while the company hasn’t exactly financed “an entire university budget,” as the narrator also claims (L 97; C 125), still Coca-Cola’s founder, Asa Chandler—a devoted Methodist—*was* instrumental in the founding of Emory University near Coca-Cola’s headquarters in Atlanta. Coca-Cola’s second president, Robert W. Woodruff, “bequeathed gifts to Emory that surpassed \$150 million, much of it in Coke stock.”³⁹

Furthermore, the Coca-Cola Company *was* responsible for the mistreatment of migrant farmworkers in the Florida orange groves of its subsidiary, Minute Maid, throughout the 1960s. It took the intervention of César Chavez’s United Farmworkers union in 1970 to bring these workers marginal improvements to their wages and working conditions,⁴⁰ as well as the summoning of then-CEO of Coca-Cola, J. Paul Austin, before a Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor headed by Walter Mondale, the Minnesota senator who would go on to be vice president under Jimmy Carter.⁴¹ Austin admitted before Mondale and the rest of the Senate “committee” that labor and living conditions in the Minute Maid orange groves were indeed “deplorable,” but “his solution was to start more worker motivation programs, accompanied by lots of publicity, books, and films on Coca-Cola’s rehabilitation efforts . . . a media solution to a real problem.”⁴² Only two years after the hearings, Mondale himself, when asked what gains his campaign had won the migrant workers, would answer “not much.”⁴³ Meanwhile, as the narrator of *The Committee* also reminds us, Mondale *was* indeed invited to become a member of the Trilateral Commission, a nongovernmental policy-shaping group founded by billionaire David Rockefeller, shortly after its establishment in 1973. Like the Committee, whose quasi-military, quasi-civilian status Ibrahim captures with the neologism *madan ‘askariyyah*, or “civilitary” (L 87), the Trilateral Commission unites private interests and public figures from the United States, Western Europe, and Japan to “foster cooperation” between these three regions. Mondale accepted the offer, and thereby stood, as a private citizen, alongside the same Coca-Cola president he had battled as a public servant, speaking on behalf of impoverished migrant laborers, only three years earlier (L 96–97; C 124–25).⁴⁴

We might thus be inclined to forgive Ibrahim’s narrator for arguing that “this slender bottle . . . played a decisive role in the choice of our mode of life, the inclinations of our tastes, the presidents and kings of our countries, the wars we

participated in, and the treaties we entered into” (L 23; C 23). Coca-Cola may well have served as “a method devised by Arab Spring revolutionaries to mitigate the effects of tear-gas,” yet this isolated fact alone should not excuse the company’s decades of monopoly law avoidance, labor abuses at home and abroad, and political and cultural manipulation on a global scale, nor does it make the beverage a “method . . . for overthrowing dictators.”⁴⁵ Rather, as the narrator of *The Committee* also points out, Coca-Cola has often indirectly helped to enforce dictatorial rule: this “slender bottle” purposefully modeled after a “girl with an hourglass figure” has, for the past several decades, also been used by militias and secret police across the Middle East as an instrument of rape and torture (C 20).⁴⁶ Given the “homosexuality test” to which the narrator is subjected in the very first chapter of *The Committee*, such methods of torture are never far from the reader’s mind.

By undertaking his economic, historical-materialist research, then, the narrator aims to be like Chandler’s Marlowe, Leblanc’s Lupin, even an Arab popular hero like ‘Antarah or l’Adham al-Sharqawi, locating and calling out the corruptions of the “ruling classes” on behalf of the country’s masses (“me and others like me”). However, when he returns to the real world, after spending months holed up with his “study” of the Doctor, the narrator’s actual quest for justice inevitably fails, in large part because he cannot find a public of grateful admirers to cheer him on. Indeed, it is the deterioration of the “public”—understood as both audience and shared social infrastructure—that ultimately undoes the narrator over the course of three encounters.

The first occurs on the street, amid crowds of sweaty, thirsty civilians clamoring for ice-cold Coca-Cola from a vendor who has doubled the price of his stock “on the premise of . . . illusory ice,” while the curvy glass bottles swim in open-faced coolers filled with murky, lukewarm water. The vendor “seemed to be in a state of ecstasy as he . . . ministered to [his customers] with the warm bottles,”⁴⁷ and as they “sip the magic liquid,” they “gulp down the contents in a state of surrender” (L 106–7). By the decree of private enterprise and dismantled public infrastructure, which together have allowed tap water to deteriorate to a brown sludge, Egyptian thirst will now be quenched exclusively by Coca-Cola, and the vendor in this scene has taken advantage of this new economic situation. Inducing the “surrender” (*istislām*) of its consumers and the “ecstasy” (*nashwah*) of its purveyor, Coca-Cola has become a kind of religion for these crowds, who pay the unjust price “in a frozen daze,” hypnotized by the power of the bottle, the “magic liquid” (L 107). Before the narrator realizes what’s happening, the vendor has placed an open bottle in his hand, too, forcing him, like the others, to pay the unjust price and sip the lukewarm Coke “unconsciously, automatically” (L 107).

The second confrontation occurs as the narrator is riding the “Carter” bus. Bearing images of two hands clasped in friendship superimposed over an American flag, these public buses were meant to be “heralds of the prosperity promised” by Egypt’s new US-friendly economic policy under Sadat and, after him, Hosni

Mubarak. Nevertheless, the buses are falling apart, and whereas “early in the buses’ service, the dancing motion they caused had called forth a shy smile from all the riders” (thus fostering a sense of social collectivity), today, even though the buses’ “dancing” has increased dramatically, the riders’ enjoyment has disappeared completely. “It seemed to me,” the narrator notes, “like they were busy with other things, staring gravely at the billboards adorning the streets, the advertisements for the latest inventions from around the world, in every arena, and at the latest makes and models of private cars, furnished with numerous mechanisms for protecting their riders from noise, pollution, heat, cold, and the eyes of others, like tiny tanks” (*L* 110).⁴⁸ Moreover, when he tries to confront a man who has been silently fondling a woman beside him, the narrator draws courage from the idea that the other passengers “would take my side, drawing on religious or moral principles to condemn the giant’s sexual behavior, to disapprove of his striking a defenseless woman, or simply choosing to stand by the truth.” He is sorely disappointed, however: every one of the passengers simply “looks the other way, some at things along the route, others simply turning their backs” (*L* 113; *C* 146). The man, meanwhile, lunges at the narrator, knocking him to the ground and fracturing his arm. The ‘Antarah-like confrontation the narrator had imagined—in which the grateful passengers would cheer the righteous hero on—in reality leaves him feeling even more alienated than before. The broken arm is not the only wound he sustains; the utter fragmentation, atomization, and monadization of Egyptian social life shatters him as well.

A third and final failed confrontation with Egypt’s new neoliberal economic system happens at the private medical clinic where the narrator goes to seek treatment for his wounded arm. After paying five pounds for a service his government technically guarantees its citizens for free, his first appointment with the medical doctor goes off without a hitch; but, after a few hours at home, he realizes the prescribed painkillers aren’t working. He returns to the clinic for a follow-up appointment, where he is asked to pay a “consultation fee” yet again. “This is profiteering, pure and simple!” he exclaims. Yet, where he expects the other patients in the waiting room to cheer him on, they merely follow the discussion in silence, “their poker faces betraying no shadow of their thoughts” (*C* 150). The narrator then makes one last attempt at confronting the system. When the doctor stakes the necessity of his clinic on the claim that “there’s no [public] hospital whose services you can trust,” the narrator exasperatedly points out that it’s the doctor and others like him who have ruined the public health system by opening their own private clinics. “I’m entitled to free treatment from you,” the narrator concludes, gesturing to include the doctor and his furniture, air conditioner, sound system, and medical equipment:

None of this has resulted from your unique genius. You and others like you benefit from a system of inherited privileges that have been stolen from me and others like

me, from my parents and my grandparents, and the parents and grandparents of others like me over time. Above and beyond this, you are from the generation that had a free education, a free ride on me and others like me. (L 116)

For yet a third time, the narrator has confronted the superstructure where, even though his investigations have struck at the base, simply being right about the structures of wage theft and crumbling public infrastructure that have enabled the doctor's private gain does nothing to actually change those structures. With every confrontation, the narrator is met not with the support of the cheering masses—"me and others like me"—but only with embarrassment, alienation, and isolation. Like Mayakovsky, he is caught between his utopian visions of communist collectivity and the realities of self-interested social atomization. He has nothing left to do but dream of a "far communist future"⁴⁹ or, in the narrator's case, an inexorable "logic of history" that will eventually erode the power of the Committee, of all committees.

However, in this very concern for the future, there is also a deep—and, for Ibrahim, a centrally important—ambivalence. Mayakovsky's political disillusionment, psychological dissolution, and suicide give his impassioned addresses to future generations of proletarians a note of futility. The arrival of the future he describes is uncertain, to say the least, and thus "At the Top of My Voice" seems to be screaming into the void more than it is addressing a community to come. So, too, the narrator of *The Committee* is at his most confrontational and optimistic only when he is narrating to the void, his only audience the hissing of an audiocassette tape set to record. The audiocassette itself, in the final scene of *The Committee*, becomes a figure of the uncertain future: the reader is given no guarantee that any listener will ever hear and act on the narrator's words. Just as there is nothing to guarantee the coming of the "far communist future" prophesied by Mayakovsky's poetic speaker, so the narrator's conviction about the "logic of history" working against the Committee (and all committees) is rendered uncertain by the very medium that records it. This uncertainty becomes a principle of composition in *Zaat*.

EPIC FAILURE AND THE SUMMONING OF A PUBLIC IN ZAAAT

If there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not any of us can bear for long.

—THOMAS PYNCHON, *GRAVITY'S RAINBOW*

Published eleven years after *The Committee*, and nearly three times as long, Ibrahim's 1992 novel *Zaat* strikes a very different note from the earlier novella. Where *The Committee* is structured, in large part, around the investigation carried out by

its first-person narrator, *Zaat* features an omniscient narrator and chapters that alternate between the wry and sardonic telling of its titular protagonist's story and the compilation of headlines and news items that tumble over each other, bold and sometimes offset into boxes, in the novel's even-numbered chapters. As in *The Committee*, each headline in *Zaat* is caught in a tangled web of relationships: to other headlines within the same chapter, to headlines in the other docufictional chapters, and to the events that take place in the life of Zaat, her family, her neighbors, and her coworkers.⁵⁰ Through these connections, the macrocosms of Egypt's Americanization, Islamicization, and neoliberalization are shown to have their effects in the microcosms of everyday life. The two works might seem to have very little to do with each other on the level of form or content; my aim, however, will be to connect *Zaat's* focus on everyday alienation, loneliness, and corruption in the era of Hosni Mubarak with the more explicit investigative poetics of *The Committee*.

Specifically, I argue that by alternating the narration of Zaat's life with the compilation of headlines and news items (many of them "directly cited from government and opposition newspapers," as a note from the publisher affirms in the novel's frontmatter),⁵¹ *Zaat* the novel places its reader directly into the position once occupied by the narrator of *The Committee*. Whereas *The Committee* chronicles its narrator's process of search and discovery in the newspaper archives, *Zaat* brings the archive to the reader, forcing them to connect the docufictional chapters' reports of political corruption, public mismanagement, economic liberalization, and cultural Islamicization with the narrative chapters' tales of polluted food, sexual frustrations, social climbing, and alienation. In *The Committee*, the unnamed narrator does all the work required to understand the totality of the Egyptian present; in *Zaat*, the burden of this work, this "research" (baḥṭh), falls to the reader.

Moreover, if the narrator of *The Committee* was concerned with totality and futurity—that is, with a Marxist way of seeking—so the reader of *Zaat*, by being indirectly placed into that narrator's position, is summoned into a similar way of reading. To read *Zaat* is to read "as a Marxist," then, in the sense that the structure of the novel forces one to connect the individual feelings of alienation, loneliness, and defeat described in its narrative chapters with the collective historical, economic, and political occurrences reported in its docufictional chapters. Ibrahim exploits the linear nature of narrative to reveal (without explicitly asserting) connections between the powers of Egypt's Mubarak-era military government and the immiseration of everyday Egyptian citizens.⁵² If, in *The Committee*, the labor of critique fell to the narrator alone, in *Zaat* the absence of these connections is transformed into a negative principle of composition whose positive image is a practice of reading, seeking, and seeing that it summons into being.⁵³

To achieve this authorial conjuring trick, Ibrahim continues *The Committee's* interest in totality by sowing connections between the novel's docufictional chapters and its narrative ones, leaving it to the reader-detective to connect these clues

into branching tales of injustice. Healthcare, housing, the construction industry, waste management, transportation, police violence, labor organizing, food production—the privatization of these and other formerly public sectors is reported in the novel’s headlines, and the effects of this privatization trickle down into Zaat’s personal life. One of the central failed adventures in *Zaat* is built around the disintegration of water treatment systems and public electrical lines in the rural village of Zifta, combined with the local authorities’ corrupt collusion to cover up their mismanagement. The novel’s docufictional chapters report on “little Farag,” for example, who drowned in “an open sewage manhole near the Republic Palace in Kobba” (which one general writes off as “an act of fate and completely unavoidable”),⁵⁴ and on “two hundred cases of hepatitis in the village of al-Nagila . . . after sewage contaminated the drinking water” (Z 178). Then, in one of the novel’s narrative chapters, we are told about Jihan, the eleven-year-old niece of Zaat’s neighbor—ironically named after first lady Jihan al-Sadat—who was electrocuted on her way to school after slipping in the mud and grabbing onto a faulty lamppost, during a rainstorm that left the village’s streets flooded with sewage. Power lines, these very literal images of connectivity and technological progress, here lead not to the modernization of the countryside but to the death of innocent and unsuspecting children.

As if this story weren’t bad enough, however, the police who respond to Jihan’s electrocution want to avoid the blame they know should fall on them for the accident. They manipulate Jihan’s parents, asserting that the postmortem examination required to substantiate the family’s claims of public negligence would constitute a “gruesome fate” for their daughter’s body. Yet, even after the parents sign a death certificate falsely attesting to their daughter’s death from “chronic heart problems,” the police still accuse the father of forgery and compel him, with the threat of his daughter’s autopsy, to produce two witnesses who can testify to Jihan’s history of heart disease. “It’s important to prove that there was no negligence involved,” they inform Jihan’s father. “What are the governor and the electricity officials supposed to do about a lamppost and an uncovered wire when it rains? It was her destiny . . .” (Z 130). Reports of failing public sewage systems in the novel’s docufictional chapters, in other words, have simply flitted past Zaat’s uncomprehending eyes with the daily headlines: she cannot connect Jihan’s gruesome fate with that of “little Farag” or “al-Nagila.” Whereas, in al-Hakim’s 1937 *Diary of a Country Prosecutor*, autopsy was a “gruesome” imposition by the state on traditional practices of mourning and burial, as well as a crude, disillusioning, and ultimately failed penetration into the mysterious “interior” of a human being, here the authorities have coopted the rhetoric of tradition to counsel Jihan’s father away from the autopsy that would reveal their culpability. And, rather than undertake a quest for justice in the countryside similar to those narrated in al-Hakim’s novel, as well as in those of Yusuf al-Qa’id and Yusuf Idris, Zaat travels to Zifta merely to collect more material for “transmission” among the “machines”—that is, her female

colleagues—at the newspaper archive where she works. The task of “questing for justice,” it is implied, now falls to the reader.

The connective tissue linking Zaat’s many misadventures with the novel’s newspaper headlines is only one aspect of a bigger historical reality narrated in *Zaat*—namely, the mixing, jumbling, and reshuffling of public and private that has resulted from Egypt’s neoliberalization in the 1980s and 1990s. In the same way that “the words all climb on top of one another’s backs and the phrases and meanings get mixed up” whenever Zaat tries to read or write (Z 7–8), so too *Zaat*’s Egypt is a topsy-turvy world in which the privatization of public services has sown comic confusion among the novel’s characters. The private language of love, tenderness, and romance, for example, has been replaced by the rhetoric of advertising and commercialism. During her first date with her future husband Abdel Meguid, Zaat offers the following flirtation: “Washing clothes is no longer a problem thanks to Omo. Just pour a splash into a plastic water bucket, mix until it foams, throw in your shirts or blouses, then make a tea or do the cooking. After that, just a scrub or two—no need to destroy your fingers or the washerwoman!” (*Dh* 13; *Z* 4)

Likewise, a number of the Nasser-era Arabic phrases coined to describe the promising new world of local, publicly owned Egyptian industrial production have been dislodged from their original meanings in *Zaat* and now refer to aspects of the private sphere. Egypt is no longer a country following the “march of progress” toward development, instituting sweeping social and economic reforms to fly in the face of Western democracies touting free market capitalism as the only path to modernity. Now, in the era of Sadat and the Infitah, the “march of social progress” has been replaced with the “march of demolition and construction”—that is, the improvement of private bathrooms and interior spaces rather than public works (*Dh* 54). There is also the “activation of Zaat’s tear glands” (*Dh* 97) and the transformation of the bedroom into an industrial “hatchery” that can also be “operationalized” (*tashghil al-mafrakhah*) (*Dh* 153). The economic “self-reliance” (*al-i’timād ‘alā al-nafs*), pronounced as an empowering strategy of anti-imperial industrial and agricultural production in the years of Nasser, is transformed into a euphemism for masturbation; so too mouths become “machines” (*mākīnāt*, the transliterated English word rather than the Arabic *ālāt*); conversation becomes “transmission” (*bathth*); and “boycott” (*muqāṭa’ah*) is no longer an economic strategy to resist Soviet-era US imperial interests but a social tactic of “cutting off” anyone who does not conform to the country’s new social-climbing standards of conversation. The Nasser era’s language of Third World, anti-colonial nationalism has been almost entirely repurposed, in *Zaat*, for the new world of individualism, consumerism, and social competition.

In line with the economic and political transformations of the Infitah, Egyptians like Zaat are no longer encouraged to improve the common, shared spaces of public life, nor is there any hope or purpose in seeking justice for those who have been wronged by those in power. Despite her sense of “professional duty,”

Zaat's attempt to convince her colleague to report on the scandal of Jihan's electrocution ends not only with defeat but also with mortal fear, when the reporter suggests she "should go to the opposition papers" with her story (*Dh* 166–67; *Z* 131). Meanwhile, Zaat's project to curb the number of cats, cat feces, and spilled garbage littering her apartment building's stairways—a quasi-public space—by encouraging her neighbors to adopt a new garbage collection system is also met with spectacular failure. Now the *inside* of one's home is all that matters.⁵⁵ Thus, when a private car in front of her taxi comes to a sudden stop on the October 6 bridge into Heliopolis, discharging a veiled woman who frantically runs out into the traffic, Zaat can only think of one explanation for why "a respectable-seeming woman with a family, children, and a private car" would do such a thing in the middle of the night: "She must want moquette" (*Dh* 159). As with Coca-Cola in *The Committee*, the Infitah has reconfigured not only the Egyptian economy but Egyptian desire itself, such that the craving for high-pile carpet, for many housewives, surpasses the will to live. Free market capitalism, ever questing after new markets, has completely reconfigured the Egyptian self—the nation's *dhāt*.

The plot-level failure of these and other attempts at public improvement and social justice in *Zaat* is also mirrored on the level of form in the novel—specifically, in the narrative structure of "transmission." Where the narrator's "method" of investigation and research (*baḥṭh*) in *The Committee* was governed by the logic of interconnection, development, and narrativization, the form of "transmission" (*bathṭh*) introduced in *Zaat* is governed by a logic of lists and enumeration. Here is a typical "transmission" from the machines at Zaat's workplace:

Rabbit Face talked about the Betanoun fire: the fire brigade had taken an hour and a half to get there and then they discovered that their hoses were leaking; Broad Shoulders told them about the letter she had seen on the letters page in the newspaper about a young second wife who lost her sight after her husband's children prayed for her to go blind; and Black Mole reported how her husband had been asking her to wear the hīgāb. Then the conversation moved on to how long was left before it was time to go home for the day, the days off they should be having, the raise and the next bonus, where they were going for their holidays next summer, the share of each individual in the compulsory scheme to pay off Egypt's debt, the plastic coating that you could stick on clear glass to make it look *fumée*, and the wife who cut up her husband with a knife. (*Dh* 164–65; *Z* 130)

According to the logic of transmission, the dysfunctional local fire department is of a piece with tabloid tales of witchcraft and magic, just as everyday watercooler complaints sit alongside violent murder and cheap, housewifely tricks for saving money while appearing wealthy. "Instead of analogy, we have enumeration."⁵⁶ The language of transmission assumes the grammatical illusion of progress in the same way that the country itself has taken on the outward signs of progress: new power lines, advanced medicine, elevated highways, sewage systems, and so on. Yet the

infrastructure does not hold, and the miserable lives of the populace continue unchanged, and indeed, sometimes even worse than before.

In *Zaat*, changes in Egyptian economics have altered the very nature of social interaction itself, such that any “quest” or “search” (*baḥth*) for justice is inevitably transformed into nothing more than the “transmission” (*bathth*) of scandal. *Zaat*’s narrative, however, struggles to continue following the narrative models that characterized the Nasser era—that is, those anticolonial forms of narrative that, as David Scott reminds us (writing in the Caribbean context), largely follow the topoi of romance: “narratives of overcoming . . . of vindication . . . telling stories of salvation and redemption,” and “depending upon a certain (utopian) horizon toward which the emancipationist history is imagined to be moving.”⁵⁷ Every misadventure *Zaat* undertakes (especially the journey to Zifta) could be told as one of “overcoming,” “vindication,” or “redemption.” Yet everything around her comes into conflict with this romantic questing. The never-ending march of demolition and construction, the enumerative logic of “transmission,” the repetitive circularity of her boss Aminophis’s rotating daily reports—none of these forms is in sync with *Zaat*’s sought-after narrative structure.

This clash of narrative forms peaks in the lengthy, nightmarish adventure of the olive tin. In addition to encapsulating the conflict between *Zaat*’s romantic-epic narrative existence and the bureaucratic obstacles that frustrate it, the adventure of the olive tin also epitomizes the similarities between Ibrahim’s novel and the oral Arab epic it obliquely references, the *Epic of the Commander Dhat al-Himmah* (*Sīrat al-Amīrah Dhāt al-Himmah*).⁵⁸ Like the *sīrah*, *Zaat* is the story of a life, but rather than focusing on an “exemplary life” like that of the legendary female Arab warrior, it focuses on the remarkable *unexemplarity* of *Zaat* and her tale. Both *Zaat* and the *sīrah* “include features of spoken Arabic” that often veer into “very base humor”; both “combine historic persons and events with imaginary characters and situations.” *Zaat* also includes exclamations and asides on the part of its narrator that directly summon the participation of the reading public (usually in the form: “Did *Zaat* despair? Never!” [Z 163]), in the same way notations on the manuscript copies of the *Epic* and other *sīrahs* reminded storytellers of key moments in which to solicit audience participation. And like the *sīrah*, the numerous, piled-up episodes of *Zaat* “read like a storyteller’s train of thought, frequently moving from one setting to another” without much connective narrative tissue.⁵⁹ (Indeed, one scholar has noted that the epic of *Dhat al-Himmah* in particular “exemplifies the narrators’ technique of accumulating disasters,” making it a particularly apt intertext for Ibrahim.)⁶⁰

Yet it is the motivations that inspire *Zaat* to pursue the “case of the olive tin” that make this character most like her namesake *Dhat al-Himmah*—or at least, a clownish latter-day version of that namesake. One day, while washing a tin of imported Greek olives she has purchased from a local grocer, *Zaat* watches as the sticker specifying a future expiration date peels off to reveal another, older

expiration stamp whose date has long passed. While her husband Abdel Meguid advises her to simply return to the shop and exchange the olives for something else, Zaat's daughter Doaa cites a saying of the Prophet Muhammad "calling the believer, if he witnesses an abomination, to right it with his sword, and, if he is unable to do that, then with his tongue, which is the least that should be expected of a good Muslim" (Z 190). Add to this pious motivation the more worldly concern with the "duties of a good citizen" instilled in Zaat thanks to the "glorious declaration of principles" made by Himmat, her colleague at the newspaper archives,⁶¹ and Zaat is sufficiently motivated to "set off" on her next adventure—much like Arsène Lupin, Philip Marlowe, and the narrator of *The Committee* before her. Like Dhat al-Himmah, Zaat now hopes to become an "accomplished warrior [and] defender of her people," and thus she "ventures away from the familiarity and the structure of kin and society in order to . . . work for the benefit of her community."⁶² However, unlike the princess from the *sīrah*, Zaat will eventually be crushed and demoralized in her battle with Egyptian bureaucracy.

The narration of the "adventure of the olive tin" so painstakingly recreates the frustration of bureaucratic headache that readers are likely to feel as demoralized as the protagonists by the end of its seventeen pages. Among the many stereotypically Egyptian obstacles Zaat and Himmat confront in their quest, perhaps the most excruciating is having to pinball between offices and buildings, as each government official passes the buck in turn. Carrying a folder of paperwork that grows fatter with each correction certificate, police stamp, carbon copy, and petition they accumulate along the way, the two women shuttle from the Office of Public Health to the police headquarters, the Public Prosecutor's Office, and the Health Ministry, and from officer, to sergeant, to secretary, to clerk. At one point, one of the sergeants even seems to enjoy the baroque procedures to which he's subjecting Himmat: "It's no use" (*Mayanfa 'sh*), he says to her.

Himmat was livid: "What do you mean, 'it's no use'?" . . .

"I can't issue you a copy."

"Why not?"

"All I have is the correction certificate."

"Great. That's what I want."

"And the original report?"

"I have a copy of it."

"You don't understand. I can't give you a copy of the correction certificate on its own. You have to take both of them together."

"Fair enough. Give me both of them. It's only a small fee, isn't it?"

"The original report isn't here."

"Where's it gone?"

"The Public Prosecutor's office."

"When will it come back?"

"That's in God's hands, and even if it does come back . . ."

“What do you mean?”

“Didn’t I just say that you have to take both of them together? When the first report comes back the correction certificate will have gone to the Prosecutor.”

“And when the correction certificate comes back from the Prosecutor the original will have . . .”

The sergeant was beginning to enjoy himself and his face softened for the first time: “Gone to the Records Department.”

Himmat joined in the game: “And when it comes back from the Records Department the other one will have gone to the Archives.” (*Dh* 243–44; *Z* 194–95)

Numerous other moments in this misadventure chronicle the delaying tactics, extortion, and sexual harassment to which Himmat is subjected at the hands of apathetic clerks, distracted secretaries, and other Egyptian public servants. At one point, she is shocked to see one of the “general supervisors” whose signatures she must obtain wearing, in addition to a woolen sweater over his colorful polyester shirt, “flip-flops—yes, I swear, *flip-flops*” (shibshib, ayy wallahi shibshib) (*Z* 200; *Dh* 251).

The adventure culminates at the Egyptian ministry of health, where Himmat has spent the better part of a day tracking down a series of Ustazes, Bashas, and Madames in quest of signatures, certificates, and stamps. At the very end of her quest, a clerk—noticing the absence of a signature from the general supervisor on her form—admonishes both her and his coworker, Mahmoud, who has accompanied Himmat on the better part of her journey: “We can’t stamp a paper like this. It would mean that Muhiyy Bey wasn’t here. You don’t want one of our colleagues to get into trouble do you?” The only thing worse than each official’s shirking his extremely easy duty in turn is their willingness to cover for their colleagues at the expense of the time and sanity of the citizens they nominally serve. At the prompting of Himmat’s exasperated tears, however, the clerk comes up with a solution: he paints several layers of Wite-Out over the space where the supervisor’s signature should be, then stamps the paper. “Now everything is 100 percent in order, *miyya miyya*” he tells her with a smile (*Dh* 253; *Z* 202).

The clerk’s parting words are a statement of arch irony: absolutely nothing is “in order” (*salimah*) at all. For Zaat and Himmat to be *salimah* would imply being simultaneously “safe” from harmful expired foods; “undamaged” and “unhurt” by the experience of trying to get them off the market; and, most importantly, “healthy” in both body and mind.⁶³ Of course, Himmat and Zaat are anything but “safe,” “undamaged,” or “healthy,” even if their file of olive tin-related papers now passes muster. (Meanwhile, the spoiled tin of imported Greek olives itself—along with the countless other shipments of spoiled meat, hormonally treated chicken, rancid processed cheese, and expired pharmaceuticals consumed by Egyptians throughout *Zaat*—is now nowhere in sight.) Yet another quest away from the private, domestic space and into the world of public life has yielded nothing for Zaat but further defeat and alienation. The linking of episodes in the “epic of the olive

tin” mirrors the enumerative logic of transmission itself, and the epic, the *sīrah*, of the olive tin is shown to be an epic fail.

The final pages of the novel, in fact, are saturated with figures for this clash between aspiration and reality—moments that project Zaat’s nightmarish and tragic reality against the scrim of her romantic dreams. At one point, Abdel Maguid is heading home from one of his long walks through the streets of Heliopolis, where he has been eagerly “watching women buy ice cream and observing the different ways they licked it.” While riding on the tram, he begins “to make up one of his Antarian super-hero escapades for Zaat [*iḥdā ‘Antariyyātīh*],” narrating how he gave three would-be muggers a run for their money (Z 166–67; *Dh* 208). But, like the narrator of *The Committee*, Abdel Maguid is no ‘Antara—he is a sad, sexually frustrated, middle-aged man, deriving his self-consciously perverted pleasure from observing the suggestive female arts of ice cream licking.

Perhaps the most remarkable of these figures, however, involves the chocolate cake Zaat’s brother-in-law Dr. Fresh supplies for her son’s birthday party, after Zaat’s own “*chocolat ice*” (*shūkūlā ays*, a transliteration of this mixed French-English hybrid) based on a recipe excavated from the archives of *Ḥawā’* magazine, emerges from the freezer as a “brownish, sticky mass that . . . did not obtain the desired shape or taste” (*Dh* 346). Dr. Fresh’s eighteen-inch-long, four-inch-high “*gateau*” (*tūrṭah*) seems—at first—to save the day. But at one point during the party, the doctor’s Griffon dog Bousy absconds to the kitchen, and when Zaat follows him, she discovers that “Bousy had ‘done it,’ with extreme liberality, under the table bearing the doctor’s cake” (*Dh* 348). Staring at the scene, Zaat is overcome by her worst vision yet:

As she eyed in disgust Bousy’s deed, which had taken the shape of a small coiled snake, or a pile of cream squeezed from an icing cone, it vanished in the blink of an eye and reemerged on top of the sumptuous *gateau*. Invisible hands spread it around until it had covered the entire surface, replacing the cake’s pale color with its own brown hue, the color of the “*dressing*” that Zaat would have preferred in the first place . . . When they turned off the lights and lit the candles on the cake, she expected at any moment to see it with the brown coating, and she watched apprehensively as she sang Happy Birthday in English with the others: ‘*haaby bersday toooo yoo. Haaaby bersday tooo Amgad*’ . . . When she saw them all greedily devouring their portions of cake, she rushed to the toilet and vomited. (Z 280–81; *Dh* 348)

Like many middle-class Egyptians in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Zaat dreams of nothing more than American-style suburban respectability, inspired by the pages of *Ḥawā’* magazine, the Nasser-era “Arab dream,” and the “transmissions” of neighbors, work colleagues, and family members, who brag about their ability to acquire brand-name watches, washing machines, bathroom fixtures, and foods. Yet once again, as throughout the entirety of Ibrahim’s novel, Zaat’s Egyptian-style American Dream has—quite literally—gone to shit.

HOW ZAAAT'S SUBJECTIVITY BECOMES OBJECTIVITY

Unlike the narrator from *The Committee*, Zaat does not record herself giving a defiant final speech in the hopes that listeners in the “far communist future” might hear her cries. Her alienation culminates when she absconds to the bathroom, which Ibrahim calls the “cry-a-torium” (*mabkā*, a place-noun or *ism makān* derived from the verb “to cry,” *bakā*), that most private of spaces. It is the readers of *Zaat* who must now form Zaat’s “public,” that collective tape recorder transmitting her cries to posterity. Through the medium of the novel, Ibrahim transforms Zaat’s subjective alienation and disillusionment into a form of communal, objective experience, inviting readers into the investigative position once occupied by the narrator of *The Committee*. *Zaat* is certainly not a lyric poem, yet the extent of its protagonist’s alienation, the exaggeratedly nightmarish quality of her existence, and her utter inability to connect her own miseries with those reported in the newspapers call to mind Theodor Adorno’s remarks on lyric poetry. Adorno calls the lyric work “a subjectivity that turns into objectivity,” because he understands the lyric subject’s withdrawal from the objective, material world as something “not absolutely individual,” but rather “socially motivated behind the author’s back.” “The work’s distance from mere existence becomes the measure of what is false and bad in the latter. In its protest the poem expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different.”⁶⁴

Adorno’s social poetics of the lyric seem a near-perfect negative image of the investigative poetics at work in *Zaat*. By taking away the audience (the public) in whose name “kindhearted Zaat’s” crusades and adventures might have been carried out (Z 15), *Zaat* creates a vacuum that, it is hoped, might be filled by the novel’s readers. “The less the work thematizes the relationship of ‘I’ and society, the more spontaneously [this relationship] crystallizes of its own accord.”⁶⁵ Interspersing headlines with misadventures, soliciting our participation in the quasi-oral epic of Zaat, Ibrahim forces us to consider the extent to which the social and communal ideals of an admittedly utopian Arab dream have been banished from the life of the subject. At the same time, this nightmare is also, negatively, the dream of a world in which things would be different.

A glimpse of that world is visible in the character of Umm Wahid, one of a triumvirate of “Umms” whom Zaat employs as domestic workers. Unlike other lower-class characters in *Zaat* (for example, the doorman of Zaat’s building, who will not sit down inside the home of any of its residents unless invited to do so) (Z 38), Umm Wahid

left no doubt, from the beginning, as to her position vis-à-vis the social topography: she sat down immediately on the chair opposite Zaat without anyone asking her, took out a packet of Cleopatras, and lit one up. Before she had finished it she lit another one from the end of the first. She was a stout woman in her forties, good

looking, extremely intelligent, hardworking, and widely cultured despite her illiteracy (thanks to numerous transmission channels). She wanted nothing to do with changes on the international scene, nor with the world order, new or old, nor with the fight between the doves and the hawks in Israel, nor who really held the most cards (El Sadat had always insisted that America held 99 percent of them). But she knew about the dangers of taking too many antibiotics and how AIDS was transmitted, how depression affects people, the benefits of arugula and lettuce, the price of the dollar and sterling in the currency exchange shops, and how important it was to skin chickens in order to reduce the effects of the hormones that are added to their feed, that the capital placement companies were a scam, the secret behind the construction work that had been underway at Cairo Airport since its inception, why Hussein Fahmy had divorced Mervat Amin, what exactly happened to 'Adawiyya at the hands of the Kuwaiti prince, and the source of the money that Shaykh Sha'rawi spent so lavishly (Z 269).

Umm Wahid embodies a kind of wiliness and street intelligence despite, or perhaps because of, her lower-class status—she is a typical Egyptian folk hero, plucked from the *mawwāl* and transplanted into the Mubarak era. In an Egypt where class stratifications seem to saturate every aspect of daily life, Umm Wahid's brazen disregard of the "social topography," combined with her preference for local Egyptian Cleopatra cigarettes over the imported American Marlboros favored by police officers (Z 191), make her simultaneously one of the book's most nonchalant characters and, consequently, its most important figure of resistance. To act in the name of the "responsibilities and duties of the good citizen," as Zaat and Himmat do in the adventure of the olive tin, is to be doomed to failure in a postcolonial era that values "transmission" over anticolonial romance. Yet to simply disregard the social topography is to be "cultured" (*muthaqqaf*) in a manner different from and more promising than the intellectualism typically associated with this word, in Arabic and in English.

Beyond her indifference to the global politics that obsess the nation's intellectuals and her knowledge of the secret truths behind the nation's latest tabloid scandals,⁶⁶ Umm Wahid knows through street smarts what it took the narrator of *The Committee* years of painstaking research to discover—namely, that, in an adage he attributes to Balzac, "behind every great fortune is a great crime" (C 94). She knows that the capital placement companies are a scam designed to take advantage of lower-class Egyptians in need of housing that was once publicly subsidized, and that there are corrupt "secrets" behind the country's construction boom, most likely linked to the real-life founder of the Arab Contractors Company, Osman Ahmed Osman, whose name litters the novel's headlines on political corruption. Like the narrator of *The Committee*, Umm Wahid also knows that the rise in depression among Egyptians is not a strange or isolated medical phenomenon but a product of the country's economic and agricultural transformations, which have brought a rise in the consumption of harmful, often spoiled,

imported foods, a decline in the production of local, healthful goods, the overprescription of imported pharmaceuticals, and a widespread belief that wealth and material goods—unattainable to the vast majority of Egyptians—are the markers of true happiness.

With this intuitive grasp of Egyptian totality, Umm Wahid makes no bones about quietly stealing from her employers—including Zaat herself. When Zaat confronts Umm Wahid about these repeated thefts, the uneducated woman replies with the novel's most informed critique of the new economic order. Why shouldn't she enjoy life as others do? Why shouldn't she have new appliances and furnishings like those owned by the simple agricultural worker who lives next door to Zaat? "And don't tell me," Umm Wahid continues, "that it all comes from the sweat of his brow. The truth will out, and he's corrupt as they come." Umm Wahid then produces yet another convincing proof from her quiver: "If she had gone to school and been educated, she'd now be a doctor like the other women who were no better than her, and who had only been given such opportunities through chance" (*Dh* 343–44). Since providence and the government have not seen fit to distribute educational opportunities equally, Umm Wahid has taken the redistributive task of a "corrective revolution" (*thawrah taṣḥīḥiyyah*) into her own hands (*Dh* 344)—a phrase she repurposes, ironically, from Sadat, who gave this name to his 1971 campaign to eliminate high-ranking Nasserist officials from his newly minted government.⁶⁷

Umm Wahid's "dialectics were not learned from Hegel," and she "did not have to read to make up [her] mind which side to join, which side to fight on."⁶⁸ Ibrahim presents readers with her irreverence, her frank and simple takedown of Egypt's newly imported bootstraps narrative, with a tone less of mockery than of deep respect. Where Mayakovsky spoke "at the top of his voice," and the narrator of *The Committee* firmly stated his faith in the "logic of history" to no one in particular, Umm Wahid simply plunks herself down on her boss's couch, chain-smokes Cleopatras, and holds forth with her socialist critique. She does not expend herself in investigations or quests; she knows intuitively that the premise of justice under capitalism is an illusion, and that simply exposing this truth will do nothing to change it. We might learn from Umm Wahid that there is little promise in the practice of baḥṭh alone. The conditions that immiserate us are on the surface of our experience, stitched into the stories that link headlines with transmissions, material circumstances with individual lives. *Zaat* trains us in a practice of investigation pioneered by the narrator of *The Committee*, but Umm Wahid teaches us the ultimate end of such investigations: that they yield not collective knowledge but collective action, that the Marlowe-esque "knight-errant" with a moral purpose is merely a premise for the unification of the crowds cheering him on.