

## ***Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*: A Non-Official Topographical Chronicle of post-1952 Egypt**

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### **Abstract**

In a large part of his literary production, the Egyptian novelist Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī (1945-2015) aimed at rewriting the Arabic literary heritage in order to contest the Western novel hegemony and criticising Gamal Abdel Nasser (Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir) and Anwar Sadat’s (Anwar al-Sādāt) authoritarianism. In this study we will analyse his novel *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* (1981), in which the author narrates the police state and the free market economy applying the spatial organization of the Arab-Islamic genre of topographical history (*khiṭaṭ*). The novel is built around the theme of journalism as one of the most powerful means of a totalitarian regime.

We will focus upon some relevant features of this work, such as the relation with its premodern architect, the postmodern dimension, the construction of spatial politics in the novel, the dystopian lens through which the author criticises Sadat’s policies, the revolutionary role of Sufism and art. All of these strategies are instrumental to the representation of the oppressive power and also present a challenge to it. Through this novel the author deconstructs the dominant view of history as objective and factual.

*Keywords*: *Khiṭaṭ*, Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, urban geography, authoritarianism, *turāth*, dystopia, Sufism

“Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past”  
ORWELL, 1984, 34

“History is something suspicious. Events that can neither be touched nor seen.  
Real history is the instant you are living, which rises and dies out at the very same moment”  
AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ, *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*, 296

### **Introduction**

A significant amount of Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī’s (1945-2015) literary production has as its goal the creation of an alternative to the Western novel canon and the criticism of the authoritarian politics of Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat, who headed government in Republican Egypt. The creativity of this great narrator of the Egyptian history has been affected by two historical events that have deeply traumatized him and constantly influenced his thematic and stylistic choices: the disastrous defeat of Egypt at the hands of Israel in June 1967 and the

Camp David Accords signed by the “brutal rude” (*al-jilf al-jāfī*)<sup>1</sup> in 1979. The dismantling of political opposition, the press censorship and arbitrary detention of many intellectuals did not stop al-Ghīṭānī and other members of the sixties generation, who composed symbolic and allusive narratives<sup>2</sup> to criticise the police apparatus and convey their frustration for the incessant political, economic, and social failures of the Egyptian state. These writers disclosed the weakness of the nation-state project. They expressed their alienation, discomfort, and worrying about the future by experimenting with new narrative forms and literary techniques that resulted in fracturing the time and space of the realist novel. Moreover, they drew ideologically on myth, folklore, and Arabic literary heritage (HAFEZ 1976; KENDALL 2006; GUTH 2011; STEHLI-WERBECK 2011). Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī is the quintessential master of intertextuality, a device that allowed him to take refuge in the past to denounce the present, to save the lost cultural authenticity, and to claim his own right to identity.

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Written between 1976 and 1980 and published in 1981 by a Lebanese publishing house, the novel *Khīṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* is a powerful allegoric narrative of the history of Republican Egypt which utilizes geographical discourse to recount the way power organises space to carry out its repressive policies. The novel’s title, as we will explain, is almost untranslatable considering the variety of semantic nuances it conveys. While the classic *al-Zaynī Barakāt* (1974) is a re-writing of the history of post-revolutionary Egypt set in the 16th century at the time of the Ottoman conquest of Cairo, *Khīṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* has a contemporary setting, specifically the period from the fifties to the seventies. The work is a ruthless satire of both Nasser and Sadat’s anti-pluralist politics, although the author reserves his most enraged gibes for the latter, promoter of the so-called Corrective Revolution and a free market economy (*siyāsāt al-infītāḥ*, “open door politics”) that led to a heavy pauperization of the country and to threaten its cultural specificities. *Khīṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* can be considered a transitional work within al-Ghīṭānī’s production, since it marks the passage from the novels where the author focuses on history and representation of urban space, to the novels where he seeks refuge in the allegorical and liberatory dimensions of Sufism. In fact, in 1976 the novelist published *Waqā’i’ Hārat al-Za’farānī* (Incidents in Za’farānī Alley), which tells the story of an imaginary alley that turns out to be a microcosm of the nation. In 1983-86 he published *Kitāb al-Tajalliyāt* (The Book of Theophanies), a mystical voyage through space and time deeply influenced by Ibn ‘Arabī’s (d. 1240) homonymous treatise (WIELANDT 1996). Between these two novels there is *Khīṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*, whose structure is organised along principles of urban topography,<sup>3</sup> while some themes faced in the closing section are Sufi-oriented, a kind of shifting toward a new literary awareness.

*Khīṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* is a passionate and resigned narrative that arises from public and personal traumas experienced by the author. As Yasmine Ramadan notes, the disillusionment of the writers of the sixties with the postcolonial nation-state resulted in the disappearance

1 As al-Ghīṭānī has defined Sadat in his novel *Kitāb al-Tajalliyāt* (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 1990: 235).

2 “Censorship is a blunt instrument on fiction with all the subtle and indirect ways it offers to convey criticism” (STAGH 1993: 25).

3 Al-Ghīṭānī’s interest in topography and urban space also emerges in *Malāmiḥ al-Qāhira fī alf sana* (The Features of Cairo in a Thousand Years, 1983), a passionate essay on the landmarks of historical Cairo.

from the literary sphere of the idealised space, and the exhibition of innovative spatial aesthetics different from that of the realist novel (RAMADAN 2020: 22).<sup>4</sup> Through various representations of urban space inspired by a postcolonial aesthetic, these writers have attacked the politicization of public space, which is like an open-air prison where citizen surveillance is ongoing. Al-Ghīṭānī rewrites the category of space resorting to *khīṭaṭ*, a subgenre of Islamic historiography specialized in the topographical description of provinces and urban sites.

The novel has been addressed by some critics. In *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction* (1994), Samia Mehrez analyses the strategies by which al-Ghīṭānī has overridden the borderline between the historical and the fictional text, to depict the definitive fall of Cairo. In his study *al-Kitāba wa-'l-tanāṣṣ fi 'l-riwāya al-'arabiyya* (2004), the Moroccan critic al-Ḥabīb al-Dā'im Rabbī focuses on the practice of intertextuality to develop a narratological analysis. In *Poetics of Love in the Arabic Novel* (2012), Wen-chin Ouyang presents the novel as the prosecution of three pre-texts pertaining to the *khīṭaṭ* genre, thus underlining that it is a geographical narrative which should be read as a story of place and a discourse of power.

The aim of this article is to present an overall perspective of the novel, focusing on some aspects that have not been addressed before. The study is divided into seven sections. Considering the complex architecture of the narrative, we will start by presenting its synopsis and the novel's relation with the architect. In the third part, we will move to the novel's topographical structure and its allegorical meanings. In the fourth part, drawing upon Henri Lefebvre's theoretical mode of the spatial triad, we will highlight how the novel's structure reflects and at the same time challenges the dominant discourse of power. In the fifth part, we will move to the intertextual dimension of the work, in particular the relation it entertains with its hypotext,<sup>5</sup> that is, the topographical encyclopaedia of the Mamluk historian Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442). Specific emphasis will be placed on al-Ghīṭānī's re-use of strategies of premodern historiographical writing to mock the contemporary official historiography. Moreover, we will pay attention to how the search for a literary authenticity blurs with the novel's postmodern dimension. In the sixth part, the focus will be on the dystopian lens to which the novelist resorts to describe one of the worst experiences of his own life, the ban to publish his articles under Sadat. In order to give value to the transition towards Sufism, the last section will be devoted to presenting some reflections on the final part of the novel, where mysticism and art become forces that trigger rebellion against those in power.

The choice to analyse this specific novel of al-Ghīṭānī is due to its up-to-dateness. The author has warned against the deflections of authoritarianism by imagining hyperbolic situations based on reality. As it was in the spirit of al-Maqrīzī, al-Ghīṭānī has tried to offer—through his art—*mawā'iz*<sup>6</sup> (moral lessons), unfortunately left unheard. In 2013, the Egyptian

4 For an analysis of the poetics of space in contemporary Arabic literature, see HALLAQ 2002. For a discussion on the literary construction of the Egyptian metropolis in the 20th century Egyptian literature, see GUTH 1999.

5 According to Gérard Genette, the hypotext is an earlier text which serves as the model for a successive literary text (GENETTE 1997: 5).

6 From the title of al-Maqrīzī's historical *khīṭaṭ*, *al-Mawā'iz wa-'l-i'tibār bi-dhikr al-khīṭaṭ wa-'l-āthār* (The Book of Moral Lessons and Learnings Derived from the Remembrance of Cities' Traces and Building Remains).

writer Basma ‘Abd al-‘Azīz published the novel *al-Ṭābūr* (The Queue), a dystopian narration of the police state in post-2011 Egypt. This recent work presents noteworthy similarities with *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*, both thematic and pertaining to the representation of public space. Building upon the awareness of the artistic, creative, and denouncing potential of al-Ghīṭānī’s novel, we will propose an analysis of a non-official history of the place that produces new meanings at every reading.

## 1. Synopsis

The term *Khiṭaṭ* of the novel’s title conveys different meanings that will be progressively explained. To suggest a translation, we should choose one to the detriment of the others. The term *khiṭṭa* (singular form of *khiṭaṭ*) originally meant a piece of land upon which a man made a mark to indicate that he chose it to build a house (LANE 1863: 763). In the novel, *Khiṭaṭ* is, first of all, the post-independence nation-state and its capital, exactly like the word *Miṣr*, which has referred to both Egypt and Cairo since medieval times. *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* is the story of a newspaper, *Dār al-Anbā’* (the News), related by the narrator al-Ghīṭānī, who observes the decay around him and describes it with the precision of a historian. *Dār al-Anbā’* is the most powerful institution in the republic (OUYANG 2012: 61) and exerts total control on press and media. *Dār al-Anbā’* has its own daily paper, *al-Jarīda* (the Newspaper), which manipulates reality in order to serve the power’s interests. Furthermore, it collaborates with political authority to provide information about *Khiṭaṭ*’s inhabitants and everything that happens in the country. Nothing can escape its knowledge, to the extent that its absolute power makes it more influential than political leaders. The owner and editor-in-chief is al-Uṣṭādh (the Master), an obscure figure able to manipulate everyone and everything in order to achieve his aims. The destiny of all employees is in his hands: their fortunes rely on the subservience to their boss, who does not forgive the slightest mistake. To carry out his sinister plans, al-Uṣṭādh employs a highly selected staff. It consists of shady and depraved characters, whose past is often dishonourable. The deputy editor is al-Tanūkhī, charged with falsification of documents in his youth; the financial manager is “doctor” al-Ṭanbūlī, a failed medical student; the person in charge of the telephone switchboard is al-Imbābī, who can remember all the phone line conversations, and finally there is al-Uṣṭādh’s despicable secretary and secret lover, Rawnaq. Al-Uṣṭādh has five more helpers, less prestigious but essential to carry out his destructive projects that mine private and public freedoms. The courier Ja’far, the bodyguard Burnuq, the informant al-‘Anānī, the meeting manager al-Watīdī, and al-Ju’aydī, who reports all that he hears in the streets to his boss. What all of al-Uṣṭādh’s men have in common is the total lack of a cultural background: they completely ignore history and literature’s basic notions. Al-Uṣṭādh’s main goal is to eliminate the tiniest forms of dissidence from the country, even that which might arise. His capillary network of spies monitors each nook of public space.

Al-Uṣṭādh’s sworn enemies are *al-‘ajam* (the foreigners), an obvious reference to communists. Their thought, which promotes an equal distribution of wealth, the exercise of political rights, and the enhancement of cultural heritage, represents one of the main threats to al-Uṣṭādh’s empire. It is enough to have in one’s library a book about *Khiṭaṭ*’s civilization

to be arrested as ‘*ajam*’ dissident, endure terrible tortures, and disappear forever from the public space. The other constantly monitored group is that of *al-murābiṭūn*, followers of Sufi movements who, however, are not as dangerous as *al-‘ajam*. The third threatening part is *al-a‘dā’* (the Enemies), against whom *Khiṭaṭ* has fought a war that led to the occupation of the northern territories.

From this short presentation of a part of the synopsis, it is not difficult at all to decode the numerous references to Nasser’s Egypt, his despotic power embodied in the character of al-Ustādh, the abolition of political parties, the elimination of opposition newspapers, the mass arrests of the Egyptian Left’s supporters—among them al-Ghīṭānī—and their internment and torture in prisons in the desert (GERVASIO 2007: 61), along with the ongoing opposition against the neo-imperialism of the state of Israel.

As noted by the Egyptian author Aḥmad Nājī (b. 1985), *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* tells the story of *Akḥbār al-Yawm*, the famous state-run Egyptian newspaper. Al-Ghīṭānī started to work for this daily in 1969 and became one of its pillars when in 1993 he established *Akḥbār al-Adab* (the Literary News), the newspaper’s literary magazine. *Akḥbār al-Yawm*, Nājī points out, has been an organ employed by the state to carry out its oppressive policies.<sup>7</sup> Since its appearance, the Egyptian press has been closely tied to politics, and in fact an extension of it. In 1960 Nasser reorganized the press because, in his opinion, if the owners of the main newspapers were capitalists, they could have hampered his socialist measures (RUGH 2004: 151). Al-Ghīṭānī himself, for whom Nājī has worked in the 2000s, has adapted to the rigid system of the newspaper, so much that he has become an authoritative figure and was called *al-Jinirāl* (the General) by his collaborators (NĀJĪ 2020).<sup>8</sup> At the time of *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*, however, his career was still in the making. Journalism, an essential component of democracy, can be the main weapon of a totalitarian regime, as al-Ghīṭānī’s novel clearly illustrates.

## 2. The novel’s architext: the *khiṭaṭ* genre

Al-Ghīṭānī’s interest in urban topography in general, and architecture and monuments in particular, derives from his anxiety with the passing of time, which alters urban sites and menaces the erasing of *lieux de memoire* (ELMARSAFY 2012: 84). His interests are also informed by the organization of public space and its various modalities of fruition; which constitute, in his eyes, a discourse of power. “When I am writing, it is the subject matter that dictates the narrative form” (AL-GHITANY 1984: 78). In this case, being a great supporter of Arabness and Arab-Islamic literary *turāth*, al-Ghīṭānī chooses to relate the consequences of the liberticidal drift visible in Cairo urban space by resorting to *khiṭaṭ*,

<sup>7</sup> *Akḥbār al-Yawm* was established by brothers Muṣṭafā and ‘Alī Amīn during the monarchy era (1944). The former, owner and editor-in-chief, acted like an authoritarian leader, practicing verbal abuse at work. After Nasser’s rise to power, the editors-in-chief were appointed by the government and acted like its agents. Upon Sadat’s coming to power, the newspaper continued to be the executive’s mouthpiece, and carried out a strong anti-Nasserist campaign (NĀJĪ 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Richard Jacquemond underlines that al-Ghīṭānī’s strong position in the literary field has been influenced by his relationship with the political field (JACQUEMOND 1999: 468).

subgenre of Islamic historiography specialized in presenting the transformations of a place under its different authorities, hence, in a diachronic perspective. This historical genre represents the novel's architext, that is, according to Genette's definition, "[t]he entire set of general or transcendent categories—types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres—from which emerges each singular text" (GENETTE 1997: 1).<sup>9</sup> The architext reveals the generative models for a more aware comprehension of the text and guides the expectations of the reader, who, in this very case, will expect a work where geography and power are interrelated. If we consider that not only the reported events but also the narrative form participate in the production of meaning, we can easily assume that al-Ghīṭānī's choice is not innocent at all. The *khiṭaṭ* genre, always transient by its very definition, could be rewritten every time a new authority reorganizes the public space to carry out its strategies. Moreover, the choice of rewriting this genre, which has had fortune almost exclusively in Egypt—as its large 19th century apogee, 'Alī Bāshā Mubārak's *Khiṭaṭ*—allows the writer to propose a genuine alternative to the Western narrative forms. In his well-known interview on the function of intertextuality in his literary production, al-Ghīṭānī asserts that his permanent goal has been to free himself from the authority of Western fictional forms. For this reason, he has experimented with new narrative forms to reach a wider degree of freedom of expression (AL-GHITANY 1984: 76), which he needed to criticise the political authorities of Republican Egypt. Intertextuality, Muhsin al-Musawi states, can be a post-colonial transgressive or subversive strategy which sheds light on identity, difference, or transculturality. In addition, postcolonial Arab writing tackles neo-imperialism challenges (AL-MUSAWI 2003: 57, 59), as in the case of al-Ghīṭānī.

The author's sincere interest in *turāth* does not result in a barren imitation of premodern masterpieces, but in a creative process that actualizes the cultural heritage and dialogues with the Western contemporary literary production. In fact, as al-Ghīṭānī states, "with one eye I was looking at the international novel, with the other one at *turāth*" (AL-GHITANY 1984: 75). The result is a very original product where premodern and postmodern coexist. Al-Ghīṭānī was very proud of the outcome achieved in *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*, and affirmed that starting from this novel he had been able to overcome the Western novel hegemony (AL-GHITANY 1984: 76), and, we add, cultural alienation caused by neo-imperialism and neo-capitalism.

In medieval times, the word *khiṭa* refers to the planning of urban spaces. During the time of early Islamic conquests, the term indicated the new-founded cities' quarters. Then, due to the need to know the regions of the Islamic empire for administrative purposes, *khiṭa* came to indicate a historiographical genre that provided the topographical description of cities' quarters. Taken in diachronic perspective, this genre enables us to know the evolution of an urban centre through the space re-organizations undertaken by its various rulers (GARCIN 1994: 113-4). As Mehrez observes, this genre is linked to the authority's fortunes, since it focuses on buildings, streets, and monuments patronised by those in power. The city's architecture and topography are expressions of political,

<sup>9</sup> Architextuality is one of the five types of transtextual dimension, i.e., the textual transcendence of a text. The term transtextuality corresponds to Julia Kristeva's intertextuality, that is, the intersection of a literary text with a number of anterior texts.

economic, and social relations that take place in urban sites (MEHREZ 1994: 65-66). Topographical writing is also connected to the concept of memory, because *khiṭa* is “the physical reminder of an act of building and a legal proof of a territorial claim of certain people, which is preserved in the act of naming itself” (RABBAT 2018: 9). The description of quarters thus functions to preserve the memory of the bygone ones.

Planning, authority, and memory are key concepts also in the fictional *khiṭaṭ* composed by al-Ghīṭānī. The author rewrites the topographical history of Egypt and its capital because, after the fall of monarchy in 1952, a paramount political change led to the birth of the nation-state. It is no coincidence that in the novel’s first pages—relying on the opening section of medieval topographical works—, the author presents *Khiṭaṭ*’s clear borders: three land borders and one maritime, and, in the light of new diplomatic relations, three with friends and one with the Enemies. The hegemonic structure that runs the nation-state is represented by the headquarters of Dār al-Anbā’, which carries out, with the help of secret services and public security, a totalizing planning of spaces and activities allowed within them. This planning has as its goal the destruction of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and the fictional historian works hard to preserve its memory through a very symbolic gesture, that is, the choice of a traditional and Egyptian genre. Keeping in mind Stephan Guth’s remarks about al-Ghīṭānī’s *Risālat al-Baṣā’ir fī ‘l-Maṣā’ir* (The Epistle of Insights into the Destinies, 1989), confronted by the westernization caused by Sadat’s economic liberalism, our author seeks authenticity in writing. The literary heritage is thus re-affirmed and re-shaped (GUTH 2010: 148, 154). The rewriting of a classical narrative form becomes a political act, a symbolic way to save local identity threatened by multiple forces.

### 3. The novel’s topographical structure and chronotope

According to Michel Foucault, if history was the great obsession of the 19th century, the 20th century was the epoch of space. In 1967, the philosopher affirmed that “[w]e are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein” (FOUCAULT 1967: 1). Space is thus crucial to the comprehension of power strategies. For a full understanding of our epoch dynamics, so, it is necessary to reserve major attention to space, which is essential for the exercise of power. As we have anticipated, *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* is a spatial history where the discourses of power reorganize and remap space in order to serve their own interests.

The absolute centrality conferred to space and place in the novel is reflected in its distinct structure and chronotope, both of them drawn by the historic topographical writing. As Mehrez remarks, al-Ghīṭānī has collapsed the conventional boundary between genres and has challenged the conventional dividing line between history and literature, real and imaginary, with the aim of opposing himself to the dominant historical discourse, and emphasizing the dialogical nature of narrative. The novelist is architect of the city history, chronicler, designer of memory and collective aspirations (MEHREZ 1994: 64).

The novel is divided into two macrosections that sketch a spatial-temporal itinerary that proceeds from the centre to the periphery. This spatial standard is distinctive of the *khiṭaṭ* genre, where the historian firstly discloses the central part of the city—seat of power—, and then moves toward the outskirts. The key player of the first macrosection, titled *al-Shawāriʿ*, *al-aswār*<sup>10</sup> (Streets and Walls), is al-Ustādh, and the narration rotates around the apogee of his power until his mysterious disappearing. This part is set in Fatimid Cairo, the heart of the historic capital, and is in its turn divided into six subsections titled *al-Sūr al-awwal* (the First Wall), *al-Sūr al-thānī* (the Second Wall), and so on. A labyrinth of streets and alleys originates from these walls, clearly inspired by the ancient walls of Cairo. In Republican *Khiṭaṭ*, citizens must ignore their country's past. As a consequence, streets and alleys have been named after al-Ustādh's men and collaborators, in order to rewrite history and mark ideologically the public space. The human geographer Tim Cresswell observes that space leaves its abstract dimension and becomes place through the process of naming, which puts places in a wider cultural narrative (CRESSWELL 2004: 8). In the First Wall, for instance, we find Zuqāq al-Tanūkhī (al-Tanūkhī Alley) or ʿAtfat al-Imbābī (al-Imbābī Bend). This strategy allows the narrator to talk about the character who gives the name to a certain street. In other cases, the street name allows the narrator to present a practice committed at the detriment of citizens. In the paragraph titled *Shāriʿ al-wishāya* (Slander Street) the narrator talks about how the employees of Dār al-Anbāʾ slander each other<sup>11</sup> to gain al-Ustādh's favor. In the First Wall, the negative characters who contribute to damage the country are introduced, while in the Second Wall the author gives a glimpse of the story's heroes, who have the future of *Khiṭaṭ* at heart. They are Khidr, who works at Dār al-Anbāʾ printing press and will become a leader of the resistance; Khālid, a young idealist whose dream is to free the northern territories from the occupation;<sup>12</sup> Darghām, an engineer who projects the plantation of desert areas. Of course, any project aimed at the public growth is obstructed.

In the second macrosection, titled *al-Dawāhī*, *al-nawāhī wa-l-khalāwī* (Suburbs, Peripheries, and the Desert), power is taken on by al-Tanūkhī who, however, has to share his functions with three men that in the first section were quite marginal but villainous characters: al-Hilālī, the illiterate director of al-Jarīda art section; Majdī Ramzī, an arriviste engineer; and finally, al-ʿAnānī, who now operates from a secret location. The transition from the first to the second section of the novel takes place through the crossing of *al-Maydān al-kabīr* (the Big Square), at which all the citizens arrive after going through the last street of *al-Shawāriʿ*, *al-aswār* that pours in the square. Everyone is forced to cross the square; people are terrified because no one knows what the future will have in store for them. This forced traversing may be an allusion to the undemocratic designation of al-Ustādh's successor. As suggested by its title, the second main part is set in Cairo's suburbs, where the new centres of power are

10 The names of the two main parts are taken literally from al-Maqrīzī's encyclopaedia. Rabbī points out that the novel is built following the rules of architecture (RABBĪ 2004: 237-238).

11 A very common practice at *Akhbār al-Yawm* (NĀJĪ 2020).

12 The young man nurtures a real passion for reading, has the novel of Arsène Lupin—one of the first readings of al-Ghīṭānī—in his backpack, dreams of helping financially his modest family, his father is very devoted to *awliyāʾ*. All these details suggest that the author infuses the figure of Khālid with autobiographical details.



moved after al-Ustādh's disappearance who, however, continues to operate secretly. *Al-Dawāhī*, *al-nawāhī wa-'l-khalāwī* narrates the period of Sadat's government, who promoted the Open Door policy and foreign investments at the expense of national economy. For this reason, the new headquarters are symbolically located far from the Old City and are called, just to name a couple, *al-Dāhīya al-ūlā* (the First Suburb) and *al-Ḥayy al-sābi'* (the Seventh Quarter). Moreover, after *al-Hazīma al-kubrā* (the Great Defeat, i.e., the Naksa), which takes place in another periphery of this section called *al-Mashārif*, a reference to Sinai Peninsula, Khīṭaṭ occupies a marginal position in the Arab world. The presence of different leaders could be an allusion to Sadat's controversial politics. In fact, he stated he would have pledged to guarantee a margin of democracy but his multiparty system was merely formal. The second main part of the novel focuses on the change of direction in Khīṭaṭ policy, now based on a strong relation with the Enemies and Western governments. 'Ajam persecution, nevertheless, is still the main purpose of the political agenda. *Khalāwī*, the third word of the section's title, indicates a large outskirts of the country, the desert, towards which those who refuse to be passive witnesses of the country's definitive downfall will head. Escaping urban planning, the desert eludes the control of power.

In medieval topographical works, the description of buildings and monuments was instrumental in praising or criticising the caliphs and sultans' politics in a specific timespan chosen by the historian. A given building was presented more than once in the same work to shed light on how the change in power could have visible effects on places, which could be improved or neglected. The *khīṭaṭ* genre is thus shaped by a very particular chronotope<sup>13</sup> in which the chronological order is subordinate to organization of space (OUYANG 2007: 340). Space and time are two inseparable categories and their balance in fiction can be redefined for specific purposes. Drawing upon the prominence of space over time in the chronotope of topographical literature, in *Khīṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* a certain area of the city or the country symbolizes a phase of Republican Egypt history. So, for instance, in the first macrosection *al-Shawāri'*, *al-aswār*, the setting—medieval Cairo—represents Nasser's nationalist politics.<sup>14</sup> The spatialization of time is also revealed by the temporal function given to the street, conceptualised as a temporal line along which an event occurs.<sup>15</sup> The event starts at the beginning of a street and finishes at its end; going back in the street is impossible. This fictional rendering of the balance of the two components of chronotope and, hence, the predominance of space over time, is an important strategy that allows the author to represent the hegemonic discourse of post-1952 Egyptian politics, centred, in fact, on the monopoly of public space as a means to prevent dissidence.

13 Term coined by Michail Bachtin to indicate the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial that are artistically expressed in literature. [...] The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic *generic* significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in chronotope is time” (BACHTIN 1981: 84-85).

14 Evoked, for example, by “the first ever airplane produced in Khīṭaṭ's factories” (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 2009: 38).

15 Another eloquent example of the spatialization of time can be seen in the use of the quasi-preposition *khilāl*, employed in both spatial and temporal sense, as in the following example: “Across/during this suburb, the emptying of Khīṭaṭ's mind will take place” (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 2009: 190).

#### 4. Space and power

Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī held a great esteem for the renowned Egyptian geographer Jamāl Ḥamdān (d. 1993), who resigned from his university career in 1963 and chose a life of seclusion due to political interference in intellectual and cultural life. Ḥamdān composed a geographical encyclopaedia, *Shakhsīyyat Miṣr* (The Personality of Egypt), published one month after the Naksa. In this masterpiece of geographical literature, Ḥamdān resorts to human and environmental geography to comprehend historical dynamics. In particular, he deals with one of the most crucial themes for the writers of the sixties: despotism, identified by the geographer as a constitutive element of the Egyptian personality, not to be intended as the Egyptians' character but as the country's character. Since Pharaonic times, Egypt experimented with tyrannical forms of government, ascribed by the British colonial rhetoric to geographical facts, such as the environment dominated by the Nile. The importance of this river would have led to a total control of the irrigation system, generating centralist governments. In Ḥamdān's opinion, Egypt has been the first unified state in history and, probably, the first tyranny. Political unity has been guaranteed at the expense of social rights. Egypt in fact should not be considered the biggest prison in the world, but the oldest prison in history. However, overturning the Orientalist theory, Ḥamdān points out that tyranny is not *genius loci* but *Zeitgeist*. The authentic personality of Egypt is based as well on solidarity and reciprocity, in other words on a unique socialist spirit produced by the inhabitants' cooperation for solving inundational problems. Egyptians, the geographer goes on, have never surrendered to authoritarianism; on the contrary, they have always manifested a revolutionary spirit (ḤAMDĀN 1994: 555-581). The emphasis Ḥamdān puts on the strong bond between geography, authoritarian power and revolutionary dynamism is very useful to reconstruct a theoretical frame within which al-Ghīṭānī moves, and proves that history of Republican Egypt has generated, among intellectuals of different disciplines, the urgency to represent and explain how power performs its authority on geographical discourse.

Spatial representations in novels always have an ideological dimension, being influenced by politics, culture, and economy of a specific period. In *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*, spatial representations are shaped, as we have anticipated, by the hegemonic discourse of power. Nevertheless, they are influenced also by the author's perception, who conceptualizes space according to his personal experience and his libertarian aspirations as well. In this paragraph, we will explore the relation between space and power in the novel drawing upon the theoretical framework of the spatial triad created by Henri Lefebvre, whose study *The Production of Space* (1974) is a very influential work in the field of spatial studies. According to Lefebvre, space is not isotropic; it should instead be read as a social phenomenon. In modern capitalistic society, it is in space that different representations of relationships and social acts that generate the so called 'spatial triad' take place. Space consists of three elements: spatial practice (perceived space), which includes the daily routines of people living in a certain place; representations of space (conceived space), that is space conceptualised and planned by urbanists and technocrats; and representational space (lived spaces), the symbolic space imagined by artists, bearers of clandestine and underground potentials that could be a threat to the establishment (LEFEBVRE 1991: 39-38). Production of

space is never a neutral practice. Conversely, it is always tied to the will of implementation of power.

In al-Ghīṭānī's novel, the triad is dominated by conceived space. Urban space appears to be quite empty. There is no mention of monuments and the building that overlooks the city in the first macrosection is the impressive Dār al-Anbā'. Surveillance of central and peripheral urban areas is total; the aim is to maintain control over every single resident.

Dār al-Anbā' has an office in every section of Khiṭaṭ, an agent in every street, a reporter in every building higher than ten floors, as well as in sport clubs, trade unions, agglomerations, branch offices of security department, centres of firefighters, and also correspondents in automobiles always ready for unexpected events (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 2009: 12).<sup>16</sup>

A potent means by which power ensures surveillance of citizens is the deployment of security agents at the end of every street with the task of registering every passer-by and asking surreal questions to unearth potential dissidents.

The General Direction for Public Security has total responsibility for the surveillance of each resident of Khiṭaṭ, as well as the banishment of 'ajam's organizations, finding them out, and defaming their ideas. Its headquarters is located in an unknown place in Khiṭaṭ, but in streets, walls, alleys and lanes there are checkpoints that constantly monitor these areas. They spy on suspicious individuals and are appointed to discover the past of anyone who arrives in Khiṭaṭ (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 2009: 27).

Discipline is thus ensured by monitoring urban space. The state control is so pervasive that citizens begin to doubt of the last freedom they hope to have, the freedom of thinking silently. With regard to al-Wafīdī, who dreads of having done something that has disturbed his boss, the narrator tells:

Would al-Ustādh have found out what he thought when he took shelter in the Fifth Street (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 2009: 103)?

The State dictates even the citizens' movements in public space. As we have seen above, streets can be ridden in only one direction and everyone is forced to go through the Big Square, a sort of disciplined collective movement where no one can change his travel direction. Citizens' bodies appear to be isolated, distant from each other, giving the impression of a lack of reciprocity. As observed by Foucault in his classic *Discipline and Punish*, power makes use of space to realize its social practices and create "docile bodies". Authority operates to avoid the effects of imprecise distribution of individuals, their uncontrolled disappearance and dangerous gathering (FOUCAULT 1991: 141-143). Authority also has secret spaces where it can work out its devilish plans. In the paragraph titled *Qabw khafīy* (Hidden Tunnel), for instance, the setting is a tunnel at al-Ustādh's only disposal.

Let us move on to the representation of spatial practices. They are a direct consequence of conceived space, which they are subordinated to. In some cases, street toponymy reflects a character's mood, generated by the ongoing pressures of the authority. Al-Wafīdī delves

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<sup>16</sup> All translations are my own.

into *Zuqāq dayyiq jiddan* (Very Narrow Alley), terrified for his destiny because he has revealed to al-Tanūkhī confidential information about al-Ustādh. The subject has a legitimacy only if situated in urban space. Expulsion or intentional departure would entail the loss of this legitimacy, as in the following passage where the narrator reports a reflection ascribed to al-Watīdī:

Which fate would have awaited him if he had tried to run away? If he had headed towards one of the Walls, he would have lost his distinctive features. He was tied to alleys and lanes, people revolved around his person. Would he have gone away decisively and disappeared from Kḥiṭaṭ, from buildings, mosques, *zāwiyas*? The matter was not easy at all (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 2009: 100).

Although power presides over perceived and conceived space, the novelist, by textualizing space, tries to lay claim to his own “right to the street”<sup>17</sup> and creates a third space that opposes power. This space, invested with an extraordinary resistance force, is *khalāwī*, the desert, which corresponds to Lefebvre’s representational space, that is, “the dominated space which imagination seeks to change and appropriate” (LEFEBVRE 1991: 39). In the southern desert, very distant from the centre of power, resistance against damage and suffering carried out in the country is arranged. We are talking about a barren territory, impenetrable due to the layout of the land, the presence of wild beasts, and seven insuperable natural obstacles. Consequently, central power underestimates its revolutionary potential. For future revolutionaries, on the contrary, it is a natural fortress. Migrations towards the desert, at first individual and then collective, take place in the epoch of al-Ustādh’s successors, when ‘*ajam*’s persecution reaches an intolerable level and the peace deal with Enemies is drawing near. Honest people who do not accept the power structure decide to emigrate secretly towards *khalāwī* and launch *zaman al-khurūj* (the exit time). It is noteworthy that those who leave the stifling, disciplined urban spaces are men of letters, artisans, folklore enthusiasts, in other words those who, in Lefebvre’s model, imagine and create lived space.

Speaking of a resident of the capital who has decided to migrate, the narrator comments:

Oh Kḥiṭaṭ, your cities were not safe anymore, so he sought refuge in your deserts. How sorrowful has it been for him to leave your walls, streets, and peripheries. Yet, if circumstances come to be unbearable, you have a place distant from pain (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 2009: 263).

Desert wastelands, being not subjected to power monitoring, are the only places in the nation-state where one can feel safe. Al-Watīdī, whose son has become a ‘*ajam*’ dissident and refuses to reveal his comrades’ name to public security officials in the Seventh Quarter, is compelled to move away from peripheries. Once he reaches the desert, despite the fear of not surviving, he feels like he never felt before.

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<sup>17</sup> Expression borrowed by al-Ghīṭānī from a treatise of the 10th century geographer al-Muqaddasī (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 1997: 129).

He felt relaxed in his loneliness. For the first time, he could be alone with his soul, after having dodged it, after having turned away from it, hidden it from his life, and having ignored the groans of his conscience (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 2009: 269).

In Foucault's language, *khalāwī* is a heterotopia, a counter-site whose function is contesting real sites. Even though places of such a kind are outside of all places, it is possible to designate their location in reality (FOUCAULT 1967: 3-4). The fictional construction of this non-official space leads the narrator to see a gleam of hope that the repressive regime can be subverted:

Oh Khīṭaṭ, oh Who opens doors and breaches in you at the moment when everyone thinks all the ways out are closed (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 2009: 264).

Through his theoretical model, Lefebvre aims at emphasizing the three-dimensionality of the dialectic relationship between the perceived, the conceived and the lived. A bi-dimensional relationship would reduce to an opposition. In an agreeable situation, the philosopher states, a coherence between the three elements may be achievable. In *Khīṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*, the author constructs a dualistic relation that reflects the polarity of the tyrannical system, where everything is subordinate to the hegemonic discourse of power.

## 5. Between al-Maqrīzī's retrotopia and postmodernism

In the second section of this article, we have introduced the architext of *Khīṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*, the genre of topographical history. Now we will go into detail by exploring the novel's relation with the *khīṭaṭ* work that, in our opinion, has mainly inspired al-Ghīṭānī, hence its hypotext.<sup>18</sup> In her accurate analysis of the relationship of al-Ghīṭānī's novel and its pre-texts, Ouyang states that the topographical works on which the author has established his novels, were produced in a period of great historical changes. In particular, *Khīṭaṭ al-Maqrīzī*, composed between 1414 and 1425, in the transition period from Turkish to Circassian Mamluk Sultanate, focuses on the misgovernment of the sultan Faraj and the subsequent crisis of the state, which was reflected in the decline and ruin affecting the city of Cairo. *Khīṭaṭ al-Tawfīqiyya* by 'Alī Bāshā Mubārak (d. 1893), minister of public works under Khedive Ismā'īl (r. 1863-79), updated al-Maqrīzī's work, because major changes, provoked by French and British presence in Egypt, affected Cairo urban landscape; for example, Islamic monuments were destroyed in order to westernize the city (OUYANG 2012: 49). *Khīṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* is the literary update of Mubārak's encyclopaedia, but, in the novelist's opinion, the historian was responsible for the marginalization of the Arab-Islamic identity of Cairo, having promoted a Western-oriented process of modernization (OUYANG 2012: 49). Al-Maqrīzī, al-Ghīṭānī points out, was instead a faithful and passionate interpreter of the Arab-Islamic identity, his "Egyptianness" and "patriotism" were sincere (RABBAT 2005: 39). Not coincidentally, the pre-text with which the author speaks of more is the work of the Mamluk

<sup>18</sup> An anterior text which can be considered the main source for a subsequent text, i.e., the hypertext. The relation that unites the two texts is called hypertextuality by Genette (GENETTE 1997: 5).

historian,<sup>19</sup> in such a way that it is worthy to highlight why the novelist borrows specific stylistic devices from the hypotext, adapting them to the fictional world to challenge the traditional view of history.

We have already presented two macrotextual elements of the novel that are grounded in the *khiṭaṭ* genre: the topographical structure of the narrative and the distinct chronotope. In this paragraph, we will focus on the microtextual elements of the novel relied on al-Maqrīzī's work, as well as on the novel's postmodern dimension which originates from the dialogical nature of the narrative, where the boundary between history and literature is intentionally blurred. Arab authors of the sixties generation have collapsed the rigid dichotomy between tradition and modernity, creatively reassessing their literary heritage (PFLITSCH 2010: 32). Here, we want to investigate the goals behind al-Ghīṭānī's intertextual practises. The borrowing from medieval genres does not occur in an obsequious way, but involves an infraction that provokes a rupture with the premodern model.

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By rewriting *khiṭaṭ* genre, al-Ghīṭānī acts as a contemporary al-Maqrīzī, with the major difference that the novelist is an informal chronicler of Cairo. After all, to narrate a counter history of post-1952 Egypt, one could not be an official representative of the "Army of Letters", quoting the expression coined by Richard Jacquemond (JACQUEMOND 2008 [2003]: 15).

In her study on the topographical writing in Mamluk Egypt, Sylvie Denoix defines *khiṭaṭ* as a nostalgic literary genre, whose driving force is the affliction the historian feels in front of the ruin that ravages Cairo. Given the crisis, the historian felt compelled to record how the city was before its imminent destruction (DENOIX 1992: 13). In the specific case of al-Maqrīzī, there is a date that torments the historian: the year 806/1403-4, which was marked by famines and plagues caused by both celestial calamities and the rapacity of the ruling class (LOISEAU 2010: 158). Al-Ghīṭānī's novel is similarly marked by the date of a contemporary catastrophe, 1967.<sup>20</sup> The filial love for his land and the despair for the decadence visible in urban spaces leads al-Maqrīzī to describe Cairo's streets and buildings at his own time with a melancholy and outraged tone, while the past, notably the Fatimid era (969-1171), is presented in a romantic and elegiac way.<sup>21</sup> Hence, the past is almost idealised, while the present is a source of consternation and anxiety. Employing anachronistically a conceptual category developed by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, we can say that in al-Maqrīzī's work there may be a retrotopia, that is, a utopia that reflects the lost past because of the fear for the future.<sup>22</sup> In fact, *Khiṭaṭ al-Maqrīzī* culminates in the depiction of the devastating rage that would have affected the gloomy future of Cairo. The idealisation of the past, cause of

19 The novel's title is clearly inspired by the short title by which al-Maqrīzī's work is best known, *Khiṭaṭ al-Maqrīzī*.

20 The expression that indicates 1967 in the novel, *al-Hazīma al-kubrā*, evokes *al-shidda al-'uzmā* (the major calamity), expression by which al-Maqrīzī refers to 806. The name "al-Ustādh" could have been inspired by the *ustādār*, the superintendent of the Sultan accountable, according to the historian, for the ruin of the world in his epoch (LOISEAU 2010: 168).

21 Al-Maqrīzī considers that under the Fatimid dynasty, Cairo was a magnificent city, a model to emulate.

22 Talking about retrotopia, Bauman asserts that "the road to future turns looks uncannily as a trail of corruption and degeneration. Perhaps the road back, to the past, won't miss the chance of turning into a way of cleansing from the damages committed by futures, whenever they turned into a present?" (BAUMAN 2017: 5).

the elegiac and romantic tone of the historian, is found also in the novel. Here, the narrator expresses his dismay for the current situation by seeking refuge in a utopian past, thus escaping from the downfall he witnesses. The retrotopian approach affects the historian's methodology, who proposes a comparison between the condition of a specific site or monument in the past and its decline in the author's own time. Al-Ghīṭānī re-employs this methodology. The backward process leads the author to take a particularistic gaze at past events, by presenting them not as they really are but as he imagines them. In the novel's introductory section, we find an eloquent tribute to al-Maqrīzī's work. In fact, parodying the hypotext, the novel opens with a long invocation to God followed by a praise of Egypt at the time of Creation that is a clear example of pastiche,<sup>23</sup> that is, the imitation of the hypotext by which the author seeks refuge in remembrance to construct a politics of memory.

God created Khiṭaṭ in the middle of the world. He preserved it from excessive heat and biting cold. He made its air agreeable, mitigated summer heat and relented cold. [...] It was said that the inhabitants of all parts of the world were in need of moving to Khiṭaṭ to look for sustenance. Khiṭaṭ's inhabitants, conversely, did not need to look for sustenance in any other place in the world (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 2009: 8).

By perceiving the past as a comfort zone, the novelist wants to emphasize the current decay as opposed to the strategic centrality of the country in ancient epochs. In fact, the root cause of al-Ghīṭānī's novel is expressed by two terms that al-Maqrīzī constantly used with reference to his own time: *fanā'* (annihilation) and *kharāb* (destruction).<sup>24</sup> In the novelist's view, art is the best way to save the world from the perils of devastation caused by politics.

There are many other examples of pastiche in the novel. By adopting stylistic devices of al-Maqrīzī's writing and, more in general, of medieval historiography, the novelist means to reproduce the canonical historiographical style, conveying the impression of narrating a real history of Egypt. Among these affinities we find, for instance, the imperative *i'lam anna* (know that), used by the fictional historian to address the reader directly; the locution *fh* (there is), put at the beginning of a paragraph to indicate something happening in a specific place; the word *fā'ida* (benefit), found in the title of paragraphs where the narrator provides relevant details about something. However, the presence of these devices elicits an ironic reaction in the reader, since the gravity of historiographical style is re-employed to narrate events and characters that verge on the ridiculous and the absurd.<sup>25</sup>

The function of numerous cases of pastiche and parody is also to reproduce, in the fictional writing, the repressive power strategies, whose main goal is to hide the truth from citizens. One of the most consistent examples of parody, i.e., transformation of the hypotext, is the use of passive voice. While in historiographical writing this device was a means of objectivity, in the fictional world of al-Ghīṭānī it allows to present a fact without specifying its author. In this way no one is accountable, and those responsible for an action remain unknown. The narrator is almost never able to determine the truth, since he usually gives contrasting versions of the same event. Drawing upon al-Maqrīzī's methodology, the

<sup>23</sup> According to Genette, pastiche is a strategy an author employs to produce hypertextuality.

<sup>24</sup> In particular, the word *fanā'* is found since the novel's opening (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 2009: 8).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. the tragic irony in *Risālat al-baṣā'ir fī 'l-maṣā'ir* (GUTH 2010: 156).

narrator's sources of information are what he hears from people or what he painfully witnesses himself.<sup>26</sup> The following extract, intended to trace the unrivalled power of al-Ustādh, exemplifies this method.

[Al-Jarīda] was established in the Forties by a man who was said to be Kurdish, then alleged to be Armenian, while some reliable persons assure he was Turkmenian. Anyway, no one remembers him today. He suddenly disappeared and no one knew anything about him. Today, Dār al-Anbā' is related only to al-Ustādh and his loyalists (AL-GHĪTĀNĪ 2009: 10-11).

Sometimes, we have the impression that the narrator is presenting what is actually the case by using another distinctive formula of medieval historiography, *min al-thābit* (it is proven that). But we soon realize that he is not able to give a logical explanation, so he concludes his reasoning by confusing the reader further.

It is proven that migration toward the *khalāwī* territories did not take place after a deal between two people. But then, how did the exit from the built-up areas of Khīṭaṭ occur at once, how did this idea arise? No one knows, and anyone who maintains an opposing view is a liar. It is one of the astonishing secrets of Khīṭaṭ that has confused almost everyone (AL-GHĪTĀNĪ 2009: 277).

These strategies clearly illustrate the bond of the novel with *turāth* and the search of the author for an authentic literature. Nonetheless, they also confer a postmodern dimension to the work, in such a way that it can be considered an experimental novel.<sup>27</sup> In fact, pastiche is a typical feature of postmodern writing, as well as the urban setting, the relativity of truth, and the consequent ambiguity that never abandons the reader. Formulas such as *yushā'anna* (it is rumored that), that in medieval historiography served to cast doubt over the authenticity of an account, may feature in a postmodern novel, where truth is decomposed into a thousand splinters (KAPPERT 2010: 14). The reader feels thus disoriented and will never know where truth lies.

Another key feature of a postmodern novel is the fragmentation of the narrative plot. In our view, in *Khīṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* fragmentation is anticipated from the title, in particular by an ancient semantic nuance of the plural form *khīṭaṭ*. In earliest Islam, a series of lands allotted to tribal groups (*khīṭaṭ*) formed a garrison city (*miṣr*) (CRONE 1986: 23); in the same way, the novel is made of blocks apparently scattered. Characters are presented gradually, as if their stories are made of blocks which must be pieced together.<sup>28</sup> For instance, a character is introduced in the first macrosection, then he is not mentioned for a long time until he appears again in another place, i.e., in another historical phase of Republican Khīṭaṭ. The reader is

26 The Mamluk historian also relied on a third source, the works of anterior historians (BOUDERBALA 2011: 182).

27 The main difference between the Western postmodern novel and the Arab one is the political commitment of the latter. The postmodern Arab skepticism, that works against any monodimensional explanation of social reality, is deeply political. After all, in contexts where basic civil rights are not ensured and social injustice prevails, art cannot take distance from society (PFLITSCH 2010: 28-29).

28 This fragmented structure, also found in *Risālat al-baṣā'ir fī 'l-maṣā'ir*, has been likened to mosaic technique. Al-Ghīṭānī started out as a designer of tapestry, a career that influenced his writing techniques.



asked a great effort in order to reconstruct the characters' personal stories, considering that the novel is highly populated. The narrative fragmentation, however, denotes also topographical history. As we have seen, al-Maqrīzī presents a certain place more than once in order to highlight the changes it has gone through over a span of time. Moreover, this narrative discontinuity suggests the idea that the characters' subjectivities have been destroyed by the totalitarian regime, and appear consequently fragmented and scattered, like shards that the reader has to put back together.

The extradiegetic narrative voice is that of the non-official historian al-Ghīṭānī, who contemplates the ruin and the decline of his country in distress and resignation. He intrudes into characters' minds and expresses their depraved and unspeakable thoughts via free indirect speech. Direct speech, on the other hand, is rarely used in a novel that talks about the suppression of freedom of speech in Republican Egypt. The narrator, however, is not omniscient. The awful secrets of the Khiṭaṭ administration cannot be known. In three episodes that take place in the "secret tunnel", we find three cases of metalepsis, with al-Ustādh taking the word via interior monologue,<sup>29</sup> depriving the narrator of his narrative hegemony. In this way, the reader can know some of al-Ustādh's hidden plans but simultaneously feels to be monitored by a sort of Big Brother.

If many macrotextual and microtextual strategies are aimed at conveying the darkness of the authoritarian atmosphere, the narrator resorts to irony to subvert the hegemony carried out by power in every realm of life. Céza Kassem Draz states that irony is the main principle that commands the works of the writers of the sixties, being a strategy of critical and satirical discourse and a means of deceiving censorship (DRAZ 1981: 139). Mehrez has defined al-Ghīṭānī as "the silent ironist par excellence" (MEHREZ 1986: 132). Irony permeates the whole novel and allows the author to break the seriousness and the objectivity of historiographical writing. The challenge to the traditional genres is another postmodern feature which confers the novel an internal tension that reflects the author's disgust for the descending parabola of his country. In the following passage, after reporting a statement made by the public security forces, the narrator fools the authority:

Oh, Khiṭaṭ's residents, public security forces are always vigilant to thwart any *'ajam* attempt, always watchful to protect you from their thoughts and calamities... (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 2009: 87).

In this case, irony originates from the contrast between the situation imposed by power and its perception by people. We find irony also in some praises for al-Ustādh and his successors, a parody of al-Maqrīzī's praises for Fatimid caliphs. As a result, those in power are ridiculed. Irony reaches its peak in the second macrosection of the novel, where it becomes a medium of the dystopian narrative lens.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> According to Genette, metalepsis is a transgression of the narrative level, "an intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe, or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe" (GENETTE 1980: 234-235). Al-Ghīṭānī states that, concerning interior monologue, he has been influenced by his reading of Leon Edel's work (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 1984: 75).

<sup>30</sup> This finds a parallel in *Risālat al-baṣā'ir fī 'l-maṣā'ir*, where irony reaches an existential dimension, characterizing the tragedy of one's own existence: sticking to the heritage while knowing that it will be lost.

## 6. The “licence to practice a talent”: the writer’s personal experience through a dystopian lens

Despite the restrictions imposed on the press during the Nasser era, editors were able to have a margin of freedom by criticising indirectly the status quo by publishing, for example, short stories that concealed symbolic messages (RUGH 2004: 152). With Sadat’s rise to power, journalists and intellectuals’ conditions worsened. His management of the relationship with the cultural sphere was characterized by paradoxes and ambiguities. On the one hand, he was more tolerant than his predecessor and lifted partially the censorship of the press in 1974 and on books in 1977. On the other hand, he showed a certain intolerance toward the intellectual field, since those considered to be hostile to the state were removed from their positions or forbidden to publish, unless they expressed praise for the government in their writing (JACQUEMOND 2008: 22-23). While only one journalist, Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal, dominated the scene during the Nasser era, under Sadat no one assumed a dominant position; the most important chief editors, however, supported the regime. In the fictional universe of *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*, this monitored multiplicity may be represented by the rise to power of four men following al-Ustādh’s disappearing.

Al-Ghīṭānī has personally experienced the sudden changes of course in Sadat’s policies regarding the press. In 1969, the writer began to work as a war correspondent for *Akhbār al-Yawm*. In 1973, he signed the manifesto spearheaded by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm demanding Sadat to order a military confrontation with Israel. He was punished for his choice: he was suspended for eight months and then brought back, but with the prohibition of writing and publishing until the eighties. Under the new administration of *Akhbār al-Yawm* he was given the responsibility of the newspaper’s literary pages (MEHREZ 2008: 62). The ban on publishing profoundly left a mark on the author and his artistic sensitivity. The other event that has extremely influenced al-Ghīṭānī’s anxiety for the future of his country was Sadat’s economic liberalism. The President encouraged foreign investments; in particular, Western investors were attracted after Egypt’s alignment with the United States and, in 1978, with Israel. The Egyptian market abounded with foreign products at the expense of local production, which became both impoverished and marginalized. Moreover, these economic politics threatened local culture and identity, which were swallowed up by a life-style more and more far from traditional values. The annihilation of Arab-Islamic cultural specificities taking place in the seventies is a heartfelt theme for al-Ghīṭānī that results in his choice to modernise *turāth*. *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* is the work in which the novelist gives a first evaluation of this situation (GUTH 2010: 148), by resorting to a dystopian narrative lens.

Al-Ghīṭānī has stated that George Orwell’s *1984*—a masterpiece of dystopian literature—has deeply influenced him (AL-GHITANY 1984: 74). Going to the roots of the word “dystopia”, Gregory Claeys affirms that in 1748 dystopia was defined as an unhappy country (CLAEYS 2017: 273). Al-Ghīṭānī’s novel belongs to two of the three variations of literary dystopias identified by Claeys, one related to totalitarianism and destruction of individuality, and the other to the fear of punishment (CLAEYS 2013: 161).<sup>31</sup> Although Claeys’ categorization is based upon the Western literary production, it can be applied to

31 The third variation is related to the fear of future (CLAEYS 2013: 162).

the Arabic novel of the second half of the 20th century; produced, as a matter of fact, in a totalitarian context.<sup>32</sup> Dystopian fiction usually presents the worst possible scenario, giving a hyperbolic representation of the social or political context in which the author lives with the aim of warning about the degenerations of the present. The dystopian lens is an additional instrument of social criticism to which al-Ghīṭānī resorts, more probably inspired by Orwell's fictional rendition of Fascist and Communist totalitarian systems. Al-Ghīṭānī is not the only writer of the sixties generation to have turned to dystopian narrative. As Muḥammad al-Shaḥḥāt points out, in some novels by the writers of this generation we find features that anticipate the dystopian trend of the 21st century, as in *al-Lajna* (The Committee, 1981) by Ṣun 'allāh Ibrāhīm, where themes of authoritarianism and surveillance of people's privacy dominate the narrative (AL-SHAḤḤĀT 2020: 31). In our view, *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*, a novel eclipsed by others of the same author that have received greater attention, may have influenced some of the most famous Egyptian dystopian novels of the last decade. Not coincidentally, Muḥammad Rabī<sup>33</sup>, author of the dystopian novel *Uṭārid* (Otared, 2014), states that *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* is one of his favourite novels,<sup>33</sup> and we have already mentioned that there are remarkable affinities with the novel *al-Ṭābūr* (see above, p. 3). Moreover, al-Ghīṭānī's novel anticipates the dystopian narrative of the 21st century because of the centrality it assigns to city and urban spaces. The great protagonist of dystopian narrative is indeed the city, as highlighted by one of the Arabic expressions for dystopian fiction, *adab al-madīna al-fāsida* (literature of the corrupted city, a negative term coined in analogy to *al-madīna al-fāḍila*, the virtuous city described by the philosopher al-Fārābī). In the footsteps of al-Ghīṭānī and other authors of the sixties' representation of the city, in post-2011 dystopian fiction the city becomes a hostile place that cannot protect its people, the source of the worst nightmares, nor the very place that catalyses fear itself (RUOCCO 2018: 163).

Rasheed El-Enany remarks that "*Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* is a dystopia of the first order, al-Ghīṭānī's *Brave New World*, with a nightmarish vision and not a glimpse of hope" (EL-ENANY 2014: 46). The dystopian perspective is very tangible in the second macrosection of the novel, where Sadat's economic liberalism and control of the press are criticised through the peculiar dystopian device of exaggeration, by which the author takes his imaginative ability to the extreme in order to represent sarcastically the total collapse of human rights in Republican Egypt. Irony, as Draz points out, is a strategy of frustration but also a weapon to destroy (DRAZ 1981: 138).

After al-Ustādh's disappearance, the state of affairs in *Khiṭaṭ* exacerbates. When the capital's residents traverse the Big Square, a surreal unknown voice announces that in the

32 Speaking of dystopian novel written in Egypt in the 21st century, Barbara Bakker states that the analysis of the Egyptian dystopian fiction based on a Western literary approach could be an acceptable starting point, because dystopia was born in the Western literary tradition and Arab literary criticism lacks a theoretical framework to dystopia (BAKKER 2021: 82). Muḥammad Farghālī remarks that dystopian Arabic fiction shares some features with Western dystopian narrative, but at the same time has peculiarities we do not find in the Western tradition, as the fact that it is always composed for political commitment (FARGHĀLĪ 2020: 38).

33 Manshūr Editorial Staff, "Hadāyā al-wīk ind: yuqaddimuhā al-riwā'ī al-miṣrī Muḥammad Rabī", *Manshūr*, 2019, <https://manshooor.com/arts-and-culture/weekend-gifts-mohammad-rabie/> (last accessed April 18, 2022).

Suburbs all dreams will come true. In this allegorical peripheral phase of Egyptian history, the former administration is openly criticised. The first man to take command is al-Hilālī, followed by al-Tanūkhī and Majdī Ramzī. Al-Hilālī is appointed superintendent of *al-Dāhiya al-ūlā* (the First Suburb), after an interview aimed at confirming his lack of preparation and hate for culture. By virtue of his ignorance, he is assigned the most important area in the Suburbs where, supported by a team of experts, he will operate to erase the country's past, no longer necessary in an era of diplomatic and political rapprochement to the Western orbit. History "distracts from the magnificence of the present" (AL-GHĪTĀNĪ 2009: 200). To attain this end, al-Hilālī promulgates a series of measures, condensed in the expression *thawra thaqāfiyya* (cultural revolution), aimed at destroying the country's cultural identity: banned book lists are drafted, people must declare their own books at checkpoints, owners of banned books must deliver them to the authorities, public security officers are requested to do inventory of readers, history is removed from school curricula, teams of therapists are appointed to heal the "sect of the historians", and even libraries and theatres are transformed into car showrooms. A new law obliges anyone who wants to practice a talent, that is, an artistic hobby, to get a governmental authorization. Paper and pens can be purchased only at appointed retailers, and the production of paper is decreased. Al-Hilālī decides to expunge literary genres; however, he is hindered by some influential foreigners who oppose his project, so he resolves to designate those who can compose literary works. The sinister dystopian parable reaches its climax when al-Hilālī, with the blessing of the other men in power, imposes the "campaign against folklore", directed at removing proverbs from spoken language, forbidding traditional dress, and imposing a standard clothing in *Khiṭaṭ*. On top of that, a unanimous referendum orders all archaeological remains of any historic period to be placed on sale, preferably to European and American countries. Citizenship is revoked to *Khiṭaṭ*'s inhabitants, who must get a residence permit every two weeks; it is instead granted to foreigners. In the meantime, anti-environmental policies cause a climate change never seen before, with floods and earthquakes that destroy the country. Madness reaches yet another peak with the opening of an office, which has agencies all over the world, deputed to sell historic periods to the best bidder.

In those days when afflictions were increasing, a wealthy New Zealander arrived in *al-Dāhiya al-ūlā*. He was willing to buy the complete works of Maḥmūd Sāmī al-Bārūdī. Majdī Ramzī apologized, saying it was necessary to buy the whole historic period. The rich man raised objection saying that the poet lived in a quite recent period that could thus not be purchased. Majdī denied. Everything was on sale, even the morning of that day, even the last instance of the sun which had not gone down yet (AL-GHĪTĀNĪ 2009: 297-298).

As demonstrated by this overview, the dystopian narrative lens is aimed at attacking fiercely the adverse conditions of the Egyptian artistic field and also the author's personal experience. In addition, through dystopia the novelist underlines the great threats to Arab identity and the risk of cultural alienation. In conclusion, dystopia is a powerful instrument that enriches narration with a strong potential of denouncement.

## 7. The revolutionary potential of art and Sufism

In his geographical encyclopaedia, Ḥamdān has pointed out that, despite authoritarian drifts, every epoch in Egyptian history has witnessed a revolutionary dynamism and popular resistance movements (ḤAMDĀN 1994: 580). The geographer's theory finds a realisation in al-Ghīṭānī's novel. As we have seen above, when the men in power's foolishness during the periphery epoch hits a point of no return, the novelist imagines the birth of a movement aimed at overthrowing the corrupted Khiṭaṭ administration. The revolution envisioned by the author is built on two forces, art and Sufism, both bearers of an immense subversive and patriotic potential. Sufism, in particular, is a major source of inspiration for the author. In *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*, it does not play a major role, but we find an anticipation of the dominant role it will play in *Kitāb al-Tajalliyāt*. In the novel, we have found traces of Sufism in the concept of *fanā'*, a Sufi term that indicates the mystic's main goal, that is, the death to the world, while, in the case of the novel, the annihilation caused by the passing of time and human treachery. Anxiety caused by the threat of *fanā'* leads the author to enhance art, architecture, and *turāth*, thus everything that may preserve memory of the past, places, and people. Sufi spirit reigns in the final part of the novel set in the southern desert, where the resistance movement tries to withstand the unbearable injustice. As Ziad Elmarsafy highlights, the remarkable presence of Sufi themes in literature produced in the eighties is the result of a sense of abandonment that permeates the writer and his surrounding world, due to the collapse of all ideology in favour of political and religious reactionism. Through Sufism, the writer may reflect on the present without losing the tie with the past (ELMARSAFY 2012: 5-7; PETRISSON 2020).

In spite of paradoxical actions imposed by the new leadership, "purifying Khiṭaṭ from *ʿajam* was a very hard task" (AL-GHĪṬĀNĪ 2009: 187). The first form of resistance takes shape in a folk song in the dialect of southern Khiṭaṭ, which starts to be echoed in every corner of the capital, initially in some moments of the day, then more frequently. Despite the arrest of a number of suspects, the song continues to trouble al-Hilālī, who gains awareness of his inability to control space and people extensively. The second form of resistance originates in workers from southern Khiṭaṭ who refuse to continue the construction of *al-Khazzān al-kabīr* (the Big Dam), a clear reference to the Aswan Dam. They suddenly disappear. An ever-growing number of honest citizens start to emigrate secretly toward the southern desert, and find refuge in the so-called caves of *taqīyya*, a word that indicates the Shi'i practice of dissimulation and denial of one's religious belief when threatened of persecution. Despite the extreme environment, these fugitives learn how to travel in an impassable nature thanks to the aid of three guides; three characters which appeared in the period of *al-Shawāri'*, *al-aswār*—when they survived accidents, torture and imprisonment—then disappeared from the narrative to be seen, again, in the last part of the novel. The first is Sulaymān, who, shortly after his birth, was brought by his parents to the southern region of Khiṭaṭ to be saved. In that epoch al-Ustādh had ordered a campaign of poisoning vaccination to exterminate all children, after having been informed about a prophecy that predicted the birth of a child who would have saved Khiṭaṭ from oppression. Sulaymān is endowed with extraordinary physical strength and is able to communicate with wild animals. The second guide is Khiḍr, who was also endowed with superhuman capabilities. He started talking when he was just seven days old, can touch wild animals, push away dangerous snakes, and is immune to scorpion venom.

The third guide is Ilyās, a man who can speak twelve languages despite his illiteracy and whose acute hearing allows him to hear voices from an immeasurable distance. The literary rendition of these characters is clearly inspired by *awliyā'* (Friends of God) and their *karāmāt* (miracles), as they are presented in premodern hagiographies, a genre of devotional literature very well known to al-Ghīṭānī. The link between the rise of mysticism and an increase in misery is a constant in history. Elmarsafy points out the connection between social misery and the life of a saint, whose mission is to provide answers or alternatives to collective suffering (ELMARSAFY 2012: 6). Popular religion and Sufism, of which our author was a profound devotee, is a field marked by authenticity, attachment to traditional values, and patriotism, since in premodern sources *awliyā'* were described as esoteric guardians of their land (TONDI 2022: 69-70). For this reason, the three saviours are featured as Sufi saints, and, as suggested by their names, they are also assigned with prophets'—Ibrāhīm, Moses, and Jesus, just to name a few—prototypical traits. Their followers are artisans, storytellers, and writers; they all work hard to rescue archaeological artefacts and ancient manuscripts, which are the country's artistic heritage. The revolutionary impulse is generated therefore from the genuineness of Sufism and from depositories of old trades that represent Khīṭaṭ's history and culture.

Anger erupts when the new inhabitants of the desert come to find that authorities are about to sign a peace treaty with the Enemies. *Khalāwī* wars start. The main symbol of oppression, the Dār al-Anbā' building, is razed to the ground. Sufism provides a salvific force, the only one able to oppose evil. However, the gains which were initially made, ultimately turn into the most devastating defeat, and the realization of the perfect dystopia. Many migrants of the desert are killed and the Enemies are invited by men in power to enter Khīṭaṭ during surreal celebrations. Among the Enemies' first announcements is that of an agreement with nuclear-weapon states to import toxic waste in the country. Other actions included the decision to export Egyptian fertile soil to make their deserts arable. Defeat is ignominious and disastrous. The last place emblematically represented by the narrator is *Sāḥat al-fanā'* (Annihilation Square), where we find some characters living in a dreamlike state, because they have realized that their devilish or innocent dreams and aspirations have been deceived. The novel ends with a triple desperate cry by the narrator, *al-ghuwāth, al-ghuwāth, al-ghuwāth* (succour, succour, succour!), a word that evokes the *ghawth*, i.e., the highest rank in the Sufi saints hierarchy, the one who gives support. This last mystical cry drives the reader to *Kitāb al-Tajalliyāt*, where the allegorical dimension of Sufism becomes the greatest means to narrate authoritarianism freely and to survive to the defeats of post-1967 epoch.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusions

*Khīṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* is in all effects a non-official history of Republican Egypt. Due to restrictions imposed on intellectuals in the post-revolution era, fiction becomes the place where history can be alternatively narrated to future generations. Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī has made

<sup>34</sup> A nightmarish portrayal of Nasser's authoritarianism was already present in the novel *al-Zaynī Barakāt* (1974).

use of his creativity to oppose symbolically Nasser and Sadat's authoritarianism and cultural alienation caused by *infitāh* policies. The search for authenticity is thus the main aim of al-Ghīṭānī's fiction; the means by which he reaches his goal is the re-writing of *turāth*. The result is an experimental novel where classicism and postmodernism are nicely combined, since the author has not renounced to employ strategies and modes of expressions of postmodern writing. Through this chosen genre, i.e., *khiṭaṭ*, al-Ghīṭānī offers an Egyptian alternative to the Western novel. Drawing on the spatial organization of the topographic historical writing, he narrates the repressive climate focusing on the relation between geography and power. In fact, as emerged from our analysis, the novel's structure and chronotope are instrumental to represent the way power controls public space to carry out its undemocratic strategies. Applying Lefebvre's theoretical framework of spatial triad, we have highlighted that spatial practices are managed and influenced by power but, despite that, the novelist imagines a third space that escapes from state surveillance, thus becoming a revolutionary space. By resorting to both intertextual strategies, applied at macrotextual and microtextual level, and to dystopian narrative lens, the author represents how totalitarian policies are carried out. At the same time, by re-using devices and strategies of medieval historiographical writing, al-Ghīṭānī means to ridicule political authoritarianism, but without ever lampooning the novel's hypotext, one of the higher models of authenticity in the writer's view. By blurring the boundary between history and fiction, the author demonstrates that history can never be objective; quite the opposite, it is subjective, manipulable, and subdued to power. Moreover, to preserve Arab cultural identity from the threats of neo-imperialist and neo-capitalist hegemony, the author resorts to Sufi sensibility in order to construct the personality of the three saviours of *Khiṭaṭ*, the leaders of the opposition against power. The novel ends with the narrator's utter resignation, who cannot but be confident in the transcendent, which may be read as another form of bitter irony. This study has pointed out that the literary strategies employed by al-Ghīṭānī are effective in fictionalising repressive politics and challenging them openly. Writing a counter history is the utmost form of agency and resistance that empowers the author, who challenges the impotence power wants to impose on citizens.

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