Research Article

Section: Literature, Linguistics & Criticism

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Traces of narrative transformation in the Syrian novel after 2011

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Abstract

The literary scene in Syria has seen a surge in novelistic achievements, especially among new Syrian novelists in the post-2011 era. This haste has attracted the attention of critics, who have analyzed these works and raised awareness about their artistic phenomenon. The study aims to highlight the difference between narrative transformations in structure and content, comparing the works of Hanna Mina from the pre-2011 era and Khalid Khalifa and Abdullah Al-Maksoor from the post-2011 era. The study will analyze post-narrative techniques, language, literary settings, and narrative openings. It will also address symbolic changes in the representation of the sea, central character, and various images, including the Jew, marginalized, Arab leader, and terrorism. There is concern about the expansion of this novelistic form that has recently escaped censorship. The study examines this new narrative manifestation of Syrian novels in terms of form and content transformation, comparing two distinct periods in the life of Syrian Arabic novels.

Keywords: Syrian Novel, Narrative Transformation, Hanna Mina, Khalid Khalifa, Abdullah Al-Maksoor

Public Interest Statement

The study aims to highlight and elucidate this difference, comparing the narrative transformations in structure and content. It will represent Hanna Mina as a representative of the pre-2011 era and the works of novelists Khalid Khalifa and Abdullah Al-Maksoor as representatives of the post-2011 era. The study will delve deeper to analyse post-narrative techniques, as well as the language, literary settings, and what is known as narrative openings.

Introduction

To clarify the matter and define the study's approach and starting point, it is necessary to first identify the sources of the artistic works that this study aims to uncover and explore. This should be framed by understanding the context of the period to which the new Syrian Arabic novel belongs. Additionally, the study should highlight the key social and political factors that have influenced and continue to influence these works.

After the events of 2011, it became apparent that Syrian society, for reasons beyond the scope of discussion here, embraced the Arab Spring, seeking to break free from constraints, eliminate surveillance, and liberate itself. Syrian novelists, in response to these circumstances, incorporated into their literary works themes that portrayed and unveiled everything that was prohibited or silenced. This was evident in numerous novels published during the early stages of the Syrian revolution.

The novel has claimed a prominent position over poetry due to its expansive space, recording capability, and imaginative power, which are more accommodating in terms of possibilities and its ability to narrate, describe, and tell stories. Today's discourse encompasses what has been silent for a long time and still requires detailed organisation and representation, along with an exploration of its reasons and implications. This is a realm permitted by the novelistic genre, whereas poetry tends to avoid detailing consecutive events and discussing them elaborately.

These novels arrived laden with content that simulates violent clashes between the Syrian government forces and armed or unarmed opposition, alongside the presence of other extremist groups that entered and settled in the country under circumstances that facilitated their spread across Syrian territories. Consequently, the narrative discourse became dense and well-documented, emerging from various perspectives and diverse orientations. Everyone came forward to describe and express what the actual witnesses were unable to articulate. Repression and violence dominated the discursive contents of this new novel, taking the events in the city of Hama and the Tadmor Prison in the 1980s as a starting point, recalling that relationship between authority and the people in Syria. Internal motivations of various kinds compelled writers and novelists who began to sense the fragrance of freedom to express themselves openly and intensively, albeit with different sensitivities that cannot be immediately guaranteed.

The novel *Sons of the Sea* (2016) by Abdullah Al-Maksoor and the novel *No Knives in This City's Kitchens* (2013) by Khalid Khalifa are works that exhibited a compelling blend of documentary and narrative capacities. They compelled reality to assert itself once again in the face of artistic expression, adorned with its marvellous, symbolic, and critical realist hues. Mustafa Khalifa's novel *The Shell*, though published in 2008, harshly revealed astonishing realities. It adopted a direction of acknowledgment and direct portrayal with high-precision artistic techniques that the author invested in constructing a classical narrative form. Among its prominent new features was its consideration for the ascending and organised progression of time without taking narrative detours or burdening itself with artistic techniques such as the absence and shading of the narrator, limiting or representing human models, or relying on symbolism and myth representation to simulate human and societal issues.

The new realities, emerging about a year after the onset of these events, necessitated a different thematic approach. It needed a voice, a narrative voice distinct from the one tinted by the authority since the 1980s, a voice that the authority used in service of its political discourse and regional stance, which the Syrian people did not benefit from. "Despite our previous readings in the literature of Hanna Mina and our appreciation for the hymns of joy, love, and human dignity, along with the existential struggles" (Qadmani, 2013, p. 168), this narrative took a different form. It emerged as a storytelling narrative that does not believe in the diversity of voices, its freedom, or the justice of human representation in its various forms, such as the voice of a woman or even the voice of the same oppressor. The singular narrator form is undemocratic and restrictive, favouring a single perspective and vision.

It happened that the events of the Arab Spring in Syria coincided with a phase of "transition to the novel from other literary genres, characterised by a phenomenon of linguistic and artistic ease. In the novel, there are elements that stimulate literary criticism with its new voices, artistic expressions, emerging perspectives, and philosophical stances" (Sulaiman, 2012, p. 113). Syrian novelists, seizing the novel as their platform, used it to express truths that had been overlooked for a long period in the history of the Syrian Arab state, which emerged under the rule of the single party.

Syrian novelists hurriedly and even competitively sought to articulate everything that occurred during the era of suppression and restriction in their country. They equated what their cameras captured with what their pens wove. The open space of freedom enticed these writers, and they were captivated by the flow laden with genuine revelations that had effectively escaped the watchful eye.

The new Syrian novel is closely tied to a series of profound transformations that took place in Syria. As mentioned earlier, these transformations posed difficulties in the writing process, manifested in the struggle to harness their creative abilities for the recently unleashed substantive content. Consequently, writing emerged from ground zero, abandoning linguistic extravagance, directly delving into reality with a renewed exploration of the function of reflective literature and the dissemination of clear ideological messages. It embraced a language that transcended the aesthetic function associated with literary language, as the content soared above considerations of narrative construction, poetic storytelling, language, and the unique experimental techniques. Absolute and unrestrained emotionality prevailed over any other criteria, surpassing the beauty of Syrian novelistic construction and connecting it to its literary world, renowned through the works of some of the most skilled Arab novelists like Hanna Mina and Abdul Salam Al-Ajili.

Since emotions and sentiments, along with everything that emanates from the soul, play a crucial and pioneering role in literary writing, narrative fiction, however, is not concerned with any form of "artistic conveyance" or with questioning whether the writer is sincere or deceitful. This is because the artistic work does not point to a specific tangible reality but rather indicates various forms of reality, where the reality does not remain constant. The artistic work is imbued with reality and simultaneously exhibits multiple interpretations (Murkowski, 1984, p. 40).

Therefore, we do not evaluate the works of Syrian novelists based on their authenticity or their conformity to actual events. Their sincerity in conveying their personal feelings or attempting to prove a certain identity is not the measure. The journey of the Arab individual and their struggle with authority is well-known and not incidental in the Syrian scene. However, each writer has their unique sensitivity to this reality, along with their distinct narrative style that imposes diverse forms and content, even though their writings fall within the realm of descriptive writing, which usually avoids categorising literature according to it. This is a belief in the dynamism of history and the temporal evolution of contexts.

Some critics criticised the level of novel writing after 2011 and classified some of the recent literary works in Syria as shallow literature that misrepresents just causes. According to them, the accompanying noise and "ideological shouting" do not bring any value, as they believe that spreading the creative touch

on works that dilute thought, literature, and revolution is futile (Hussein, 2018). Here, the judgement of literary art is not solely based on the "functional balance in the text" (Al-Madi, 2011, p. 99+), which relies on harmony in form and content. From the outset, we acknowledge that the novels of Hanna Mina have placed Syrian novels in a high artistic rank, not inferior to the works of Naguib Mahfouz in Egypt. Hanna Mina's works have a high-quality artistic structure, for instance, investing in the symbolism of the sea and its openness to various symbolic spaces. Also, the imagination and methods of presenting and depicting fictional characters, as well as revealing the human struggle and ways for a peaceful human life, have been highlighted by many critical works surrounding Hanna Mina's novels. These works have uncovered numerous beauties and secrets within the narrative game he employs.

Therefore, one of the major obstacles facing this study is the scarcity of previous research that has addressed Arab novels in general during the era known as the Arab Spring in the Arab world and specifically in Syria. The existing studies are limited to immature essays and university research, often consisting of journalistic articles with hasty impressions. Consequently, this study aims to examine a selected number of Syrian Arab novels that emerged after 2011, attempting to highlight their narrative features that have coloured Syrian fiction in the aftermath of events that cast shadows on the literary art in Syria. These novels include:

> Khalid Khalifa - *No Knives in This City's Kitchens* (2013), published by Dar Al-Adab in Beirut.
> Abdullah Al-Maksoor - *Sons of the Sea* (2016), published by Dar Al-Sweidy for Publishing.

In this regard, we will attempt to trace the most significant transformations in the narrative style resulting naturally from a textual shift in both content and narrative technique. This, in turn, is manifested in the fictional setting and its oscillation between openness and closure. Additionally, changes can be observed in the techniques of portraying fictional characters, the pre-narrative and post-narrative methods, as well as the technique of the narrator and their awareness of their position from the central focal point. This will be accomplished through a comparative analysis with one of the most prominent Syrian novelists in the pre-2011 era, namely the esteemed Syrian novelist Hanna Mina.

In Terms of Structure:

This study will not extensively explore every formal disparity in Syrian novels and compare them according to the most prominent chronological division in the trajectory of Syrian novels—the events of 2011. Nevertheless, it aims to address all discernible and noteworthy differences worthy of comparison between them. Given the thematic unity prevalent in the content of Syrian novels after 2011, the introductory and concluding aspects have rendered them more cohesive, at least within the novels under consideration. This distinguishes them from the novels of Hanna Mina, which serve as comparative examples for Syrian novels before the events of 2011.

It is evident that what unfolded in Syria will not easily dissipate, and all novels aspiring to depict and shape this reality from their perspective are consequently novels with a singular viewpoint. There is no clear perspective on the side that escaped the grip of the regime, despite the magnitude of the collapse, regarding the image of the cohesive Syrian home known for its attachment to its land and strong relationship with it. Novelists have consistently transformed visual reality into the realm of fiction, not poetic imagery, aiming to achieve further exposure and documentation by capitalising on "the attempts of some naturalists who rush to compete with reality itself when they seek to present an honest portrayal of it" (Assaf, 1982, pp. 36-37).

As a result of the intense engagement novelists had with their new reality and their occupation of narrative texts, the beginnings and endings, along with their situations, took on a similar narrative

appearance, as if a comparison were made highlighting the contrast in the initial and final situations in Hanna Mina's novels. What characterised most of the new Syrian novels is their engagement with the political and current circumstances, remaining largely open-ended in terms of conclusion. They recorded a state of resemblance between literary representation and reality, remaining open-ended with an uncertain fate for this rapid and unexpected beginning.

- **Pre- and Post-Narrative Techniques:**

Modern critics have introduced what is known as the parallel text, which surrounds the narrative text, preparing the reader for its interpretation and everything related to its future implications (Genette, 2000, pp. 89-90). Studies have unveiled symbols leading to a signified that precedes the narrative content, "relying on the positive presence of the recipient who interprets and explicates these signs. The sense of sight collaborates with mental perception in reading the cover, title, export sentences, margins, dedication, cover colour, illustrations, and the narrative prologue. Indeed, no literary text is devoid of them" (Nasser Al-Ali, 2012, p. 10).

As for post-narrative techniques, they are more concerned with the recipient than the narrative player and its creator, the author. Here, the reader will play a productive role that extends beyond the boundaries of reception and acknowledgment. This signifies the initiation of the concluding phase, the beginning of the effectiveness of impact, the establishment of meaning, and the embracing of the narrative discourse. This occurs at a time when narrative metaphors, announcing the end of the novel and the cessation of reading, start to manifest. After all human images and models have been revealed, and the narrative knot begins to unravel, destinies approaching their conclusion, tensions between characters and their relationships start to ease. The reader takes on this distinct position, leaving themselves the freedom to interpret the latest textual indication or reference, guiding them to an open space for interpretation.

"At the end of the narrative, the narrative pen, according to Greimas' description, reaches its conclusion. This is because the sequences, precedents, and events accompanied by transformations, which are referred to and intertwined with each other until the end, come to an end and cease" (Ben Malek, 2006, p. 22). It is crucial to note that post-narrative techniques are organically linked to endings, whether open to interpretation or closed. The narrative pen, before announcing the conclusion, whether open to interpretation or closed, has already started entirely from the last narrative turning point before the narrative interruption. It concludes, reaching the signified indicated by the endpoint, which the reader captures, making it their own stance from the novel without hesitation. Here, narrative endings and their aftermath can pass through two stages:

The first stage is a sensory phase indicated by punctuation marks that conclude the narrative, leaving it suspended in the reader's mind, such as exclamation points, periods, or commas. Alternatively, it may be an empty space consuming half the page, leaving the reader stimulated to fill in the remaining part. These perceptions also include the cover of the last page and the truncated farewell sentence deviating from the narrative syntactic structure.

The second stage, which is the post-narrative stage after finishing reading, meticulously details the signified to which the sensory endings lead. This stage makes the reader captive to the shock that filled the reception space with surreal and highly sensory realistic scenes. Even though the narrative has ceased and the flow has stopped, the reader is still in the stages of reception, grappling with what they have received. They attempt to formulate it with a self-connected coherence, and may find themselves needing to go back and retrieve something from a narrative point deep within the novel. This point continues to ignite confusion and astonishment. The concluding position is a shared position where the novelist establishes a

connection with the reader, and the reader begins to judge and evaluate the work that gradually emerges from its dominance.

However, some critics have seen that <u>the features shaping the ending</u> are perceived through significant transformations that begin to take shape in the narrative. These can be observed through important indicators, including:

Firstly: A change in the narrative voice or a transition from narrating events to description or the narrator's concluding commentary.

Secondly: The presence of expressive indicators, such as words indicating the conclusion (finally, in conclusion, etc.), and perhaps the placement of a heading that prepares and serves as an introduction to the ending or conclusion.

Thirdly: Relying on formal elements, such as referring back to the beginning of the line or leaving a narrative blank space (Barka et al., 2002, p. 135). If these serve as indicators pointing to a definite ending, then the conclusion will take a form that does not lead towards a connection with the sequence of another narrative. It is not followed by any new narrative turn, and the reader, captivated by the ending and under its influence, sees that he must complete that narrative sequence written in his mind as a cognitive awareness. It may vary and transition from the tragic to the miraculous to the realistic... He feels that he possesses it because he derived it himself.

Therefore, the open ending is an unfinished condition imposed by the ongoing and endless implications of the current Syrian situation. This makes the reader interpret and anticipate the possible endings alone this time. The novelist left the matter of the characters and their relationships to the reader, who will have multiple views of the anticipated ending in Syria. This is exactly what Abdullah Al-Maksoor intended in his novel *Sons of the Sea* when he created an index for the novel, listing the names of cities and stations he moved to. However, he ultimately left an impression as a concluding note:

"One conviction I carried with me on all the shores I invaded, one conviction that remained suspended above the sea salt: that all countries are our land after Syria has been lost" (Al-Maksoor, 2016, p.102).

He left a blank space on the last page, concluding with the previous sentences, to make the reader feel that there is a vacant space left for them by the narrator. This allows the reader to engage in interpretation and anticipate another station that the displaced Syrian, who lost his homeland, will seek. The open ending insists on the fate of the lost Syrian, who has not yet been able to conclude his journey of refuge and seal his stories with it. Here, the reader, faced with the word "lost," can now discern the forms of this loss and the dispersion experienced by Syrians after the events of 2011. They have numerous choices and endless expectations in the outcomes of refuge. The reader does not comprehend the ending to predict it, even though they contemplate it in their narrative discourse.

Therefore, we have observed variation in the position of textual thresholds or what is known as "pre-text" and also in the position of techniques of "post-text." This variation in the structure of Syrian Arabic novels in the post-2011 era highlights a significant change in the position of the Syrian novelist today. As mentioned earlier, it reflects his evolving vision, openness to unrestricted spaces in time and place, and his ability to reveal his references and opinions without an urgent need for this highly coded pre-textual or intertextual discourse in the "post-text."

In the novel *Remnants of Images* (1984) by Hanna Mina, first published in 1984 by Dar Al-Adab in Lebanon, we notice that "pre-text techniques were concentrated and intensified to a high degree, not exceeding the first page" (Mahfali, 2018, p. 58). In this novel, Hanna Mina condensed and intensified the description and presentation of the main character of his narrative, typically introduced at the beginning of the narrative. However, at the end and in the post-text phase, he would often conclude with a situation

"seemingly drawn from a dynamic scene, aiming to transition towards a new unknown state" (p. 62). This state reintroduces a voice that was not present before or recovers a space erased from the text and the relational network between characters. The conclusion takes the form of a break in sentence links, surrounded by white space, encompassing the lines preceding the concluding sentence. This concluding sentence is often initiated by an imperative verb derived from a moral voice unheard before. This disembodied voice emerges without causing or a prior presence in the network of relationships that brought the novel's characters together. It says:

> "... The road was long, and we enjoyed the silence. I buried my head in my mother's embrace, and she covered us with a blanket, saying:
> 'Sleep, my little ones. We are heading to the city.'" (Mina, 1984, p. 358)

While Abdullah Al-Maksoor's novel *Sons of the Sea*, representing the post-2011 literary phase in Syria, presented a pre-text situation consistent with a post-text situation, the reason for this convergence in these two situations may be attributed to the overwhelming shock that overthrew all the subtleties of narrative eloquence. The self-centered perspective dominated at the expense of the objective one. There was no prelude to any ending of any kind. Within narrow limits, Al-Maksoor attempted to pave the way and conclude with insights that relate to his suffering as a Syrian intellectual who endured the oppression of the regime, as well as the extremism and horror he previously experienced in Iraq.

Practically, the thresholds of closure converged in the pre-text and included the cover image of the novel, with its blue semiotics indicating a maritime crossing for the two children, the author's real-life sons: Hamza and Damas. They embark on an Arab refugee journey that differs in its conceptualization from the refugee journey of the Palestinian people during the years of *Nakba* (The Catastrophe)and *Naksa* (literally 'setback' or Palestinian exodus). In the introduction, the two children were also present in the post-text, and the cover of the final novel was adorned with this passage:

"Milan's alleys recognize me, understanding that my steps, like those of all passersby, do not attempt to entangle themselves in the city's love. Here, we do not entwine our hearts with cities that do not share our memories. Memories burned with our cities in the East. Alone, I pass through the main airport gate in Milan after extracting a forged identity card with a foreign name. When you're an illegal immigrant, you know how to reach what you want. I triumphed over both sea and land. When you lose your home, all the world's homes become yours. When you lose your homeland, all paths are permissible to secure a new land. The law of the world and Syria on the same scale…" (*Sons of the Sea*, Al-Maksoor, 2016, cover page)

There is a clear singularity in the discourse, and a definite insistence that reflects the narrative of sorrow experienced by the Syrian people today. The Syrian is the one who was known, according to his preconceived typical image, for the firmness of his connection and stability with the land, the farm, and the coastal cities. This was previously reinforced by Hanna's Mina novels, which are rich in words that indicate the beauty of nature in Syria, and the characters in them are presented through the fertile and enchanting space of the land and sea in Syria (Ibrahim, 1991). However, this uprooting could not sever the Syrian's connection to his land and his deep memory. These places or temporary homelands, as some Syrians call them, only increased their attachment to the motherland. This is what these young novelists want to emphasise.

In Khalid Khalifa's novel *No Knives in This City's Kitchens* (2013) the conclusion came with something resembling a signature, recalling the cities of their refuge and displacement with the name of Damascus as the first place, even if they moved away from it. This is in contrast to some novelists who mention the name of the place of exile when signing their novels:

"Damascus - Iowa- Hong Kong
Autumn - 2007 Spring 2013" (Khalifa, 2013, p.255).

In Khalid Khalifa's novel, the culmination is marked by the death of Rashid (Nizar and Sawsan's maternal uncle). However, this dramatic and final event unfolded naturally after the pervasive mention of death, killing, and torture experienced by Rashid in Syria and Iraq. The last page contained two paragraphs, both beginning with the past tense and concluding with the present tense, signifying the continuity of this event that had become widespread and expected:

> The <u>first</u> paragraph: "He rose early in the morning... and it occurred to me for a moment..."
> The <u>third</u> paragraph: "I opened the door... so as not to leave... that death is simple" (Khalifa, 2013, p.255).

Meanwhile, the second paragraph was reserved for a descriptive pause, serving as a separator between the final two paragraphs in the narrative. This paragraph carried a narrative and descriptive account of the characters preparing for the death scene. It reconstructed the setting and adorned it with elements befitting the solemnity of death. The description did not hinder the narrative flow but rather intensified it, imbuing it with expressiveness without the need for rhetorical symbols or embellishments. Khalid Khalifa, in his narrative world, does not require symbols to bridge the gap between him and his external world. The formation of his fictional world is represented by those characters, identical to those in the real world, conveying and mirroring it with near-perfect resemblance.

The most significant image is that of the Syrian intellectual and his family, left under a closed and dictatorial regime. In tracing the consequences of this seclusion and rigidity in the relationship between the people and the regime, death, in all its forms – torture, suicide with three gunshots, and death in battles – becomes an inevitable reality here. It has become a natural part of the narrative, no longer an exceptional event or a major twist that could conclude the story, as seen in Hanna Mina's *Blue Dove in the Clouds* (1988). Death, exile, and displacement are no longer definitive, conclusive events but rather integral components in the natural progression of the hardship that people in Syria witness and experience daily:

> "Before rising to my bed, I heard Nizar say calmly: 'Rashid wants to die,' as if he was telling me simply to warm myself well" (Khalifa, 2013, p.255).

Since the open ending has become a new trademark for Syrian novels after 2011, it does not require the lengthy preamble that extends across numerous pages before reaching a carefully crafted conclusion in the narrative, unlike the novels of Hanna Mina. In his works, what precedes the ending appears brief, emphasising the approach of the closed conclusion. This aims to create the shock of the ending, closing the horizon of interpretation and decisively settling in favour of the novelist's desired outcome. In his novel *Blue Dove in the Clouds* (1988), Hanna Mina portrayed the death of Jihad's daughter (Rana). Jihad got out of the hospital, leaving his dying daughter, only to return later because of a hospital call urging him to hurry back, despite having witnessed every moment of her illness:

"When the awaited phone call came:
'Come quickly.'
He rose from the bed in a rush ... to arrive before his daughter died. He had accompanied her

through every stage of her illness, and now he wanted to accompany her in the stage of death. He wanted to speak to her before she died. However, he arrived late. Rana was dying and unable to speak. When she saw him, she cried, asked for a piece of paper and a pen, and with trembling hands, she wrote one fragmented phrase: '(Let me sleep).' And she slept." (Mina, 1988, p. 363)

Endings usually stick in the novelist's mind since the moment of the beginnings that accompanied them. As mentioned here, they form a cohesive structure with its narrative thresholds and openings. However, leaving them open indicates non-constructive motives intended by the writer, linked to the content rather than the form. Syrian novelists in the post-2011 era found themselves in bloody beginnings that did not yet allow them to envision a future where they could create an ending close to expectation and hope. Since the narrative of the beginning is still ongoing, they are not yet motivated to create an ending or anticipate its occurrence; instead, they are unenthusiastic about it, fearing further disappointments.

The Narrative Language:

There is what is known as "narrative syntax, whose name refers to the apparent organisation on the sentence surface, with the significance provided by this organisation playing a crucial role in completing the overall semantic structure" (Al-Ajami, 1991, pp. 36-37). The linguistic structure of the novelistic sentence varies between narration and description, through the use of attributions and similes that interrupt the narrative, hindering its progression in favour of expanding the narrative space and delving into the essence of characters and their details.

In the context of discussing Syrian novels after 2011 and their language, it is emphasised that there is a proliferation of the informative language with a reportorial character. This is evident in novels like *Sons of the Sea*, where the dominance of the documentary nature becomes intolerant of multiple meanings in a single narrative sentence. The descriptive narrative sentence typically carries rhetorical colours and semantic energy due to its poetic nature and deviation at the zero level of meaning. It does not acquire that brilliance unless it transforms into a linguistic style that governs its unconventional composition within the novel.

Novelists resort to poetic language in the novel, aiming to limit the dominance of this documentary realism and adopt sentences with a level that allows openness to poetic, imaginative, and metaphorical elements. Since the conclusions are still unrestricted in the minds of new Syrian novelists, some of them have opted for twisted, closed endings with sentences carrying poetic connotations that, in turn, alleviate the weight of documentary language and documentation to a considerable extent.

While poetic language in Hanna Mina's works stemmed from an imagination guiding reality rather than being driven by a reality constraining the novelist's imagination, the internal conflict for Mina was more apparent than external, unlike the case of Al-Maksoor and Khalifa. This internal conflict took on distinct characteristics, imposing a unique linguistic poetry that distinguished Hanna Mina. The symbolism of the sea and the connotations of women in Mina's works concealed elusive and unapparent meanings behind them. In his narrative language, Mina crafted a rich and symbol-laden discourse, with key symbols such as the sea and women pervading his overall body of work. Through these symbols, Mina orchestrated a game of concealing and revealing meanings, harnessing the poetic and rhetorical energy generated by this manipulation. In contrast, novelists like Al-Maksoor and Khalifa insisted on portraying reality without linguistic artifice or embellishment of the conveyed images in the narrative carriage of the novel.

It should also be noted that Hanna Mina often engages with the aspects of natural beauty, investing his language with its richness. Syria, a country with diverse landscapes, includes the coast, countryside, and the sea, which has frequently served as a world to escape to for characters confined in closed and dark spaces, under the watchful eye. However, this aspect has been absent from Syrian novelistic language after 2011, which drew inspiration from the vocabulary of refuge, escaping from death, violence, displacement,

and threat. It elevated the voices of the deadly waves of the Mediterranean Sea, the sounds of the night, and the police pursuit, overshadowing their linguistic portrayal with a sombre tone as a result of this prevailing melancholic pattern.

The form of class and societal conflict in Hanna Mina's novels imposed the presence of a character facing challenges alongside class tyranny and injustice. These challenges are eternal, intellectual, and existential, justifying the character's escape to the world of nature and expansive peaceful places. The aim is to draw inspiration for solitude and distance from the authoritative and curious other. Consequently, the vocabulary and voice of that character rise from the embrace of the melodious nature and its simplicity.

Hanna Mina's language takes into consideration the inner world of the main character who carries the responsibility of narration and the nature of the external conflict with the wealthy, occupation, and feudalists. In the novel *The Sun on a Cloudy Day* (1997), the character is revealed and etched in the reader's mind through a rich environment of music, mythological stories, sunlight, clouds, and dancing with the rhythms of nature and its formations, leading to states of union and mysticism despite being immersed in a turbulent and melancholic environment:

> "To play or dance for nothing, that is a falsehood; there must be something, someone, an idea. Only then does playing, dancing, or singing have meaning. To live for something, for the sake of passing the days…" (Mina, 1997, p. 32).

Hanna Mina loaded the title of the novel *The Sun on a Cloudy Day* with mixed meanings between nature and music. The title concealed within its folds the values of rejection, liberation, and the possibility of escape. Conversely, a novel like *No Knives in This City's Kitchens* from the cipher of its title and its significance, draws inspiration from death, its instruments, and the enclosed, imprisoned place. There are no sounds except those of death and its accompaniments. The political burden weighed heavily on the novel, causing it to succumb to the ideological context accompanying it and to the binary conflict between supporters of the Syrian regime and its opponents.

Meanwhile, the novel *The Sun on a Cloudy Day* attempted "to find a connection between art and religion and their fulfilment of human spiritual needs in general" (Al-Ouf, 2007, p.34). Since the form of conflict plays a role in shaping language, oscillating between direct natural expression and poetic artificiality, Khalid Khalifa's linguistic structure took on a natural character that does not linger to create semantic expansion in sentences to carry broader semantic energy, but rather utilised narrative sentences to hasten the storytelling for the sake of precision and recounting what happened to Sawsan:

"She didn't wait long after detecting the scent of the end of the influence of the paratrooper leader. She asked him for a scholarship to study music in Paris. Soha sat in front of Sawsan, knowing from the dark circles under her eyes that things were not going well for her. She invited her to a café near the music institute, offered her a heavy espresso coffee, helped her rent a small room not exceeding two metres by two metres in a neighbourhood near the 'Gare de Nord' train station that she saw from time to time, inviting her for a short walk or to a restaurant where they exchanged a hurried glass of wine. She would not return to Aleppo defeated. She thought on the cold night that she was a forsaken lover <u>resembling a train station hatching its eggs with reassurance on its platform for its passengers</u>, cooking green beans, and drinking cheap wine, trying to overcome the difficulties of staying in Paris and preserving the few coins in her account that were running out. Aleppo seemed distant to her and Paris was exhausting. She thought she would spend her entire life serving in a restaurant owned by an Algerian woman who scolded her" (Khalifa, 2013, p.64).

In the previous paragraph, the narrator provided a condensed summary of Sawsan's life, who traversed global capitals after she left her hometown Aleppo. This was done through the narrative summarization

technique, where we observed how it affected poetic language, often eclipsing it. This language requires patience and deep reflection in its weaving and reception. Rarely does this new Syrian novelistic language awaken to a displaced phrase here or there amidst a vast array of informative and reportorial sentences. Among them, this sentence stood out in the previous paragraph, amidst a crowd of active sentences that heightened the dramatic level of events and their tension within the narrative:

<u>"She thought on the cold night that she was a forsaken lover resembling a train station hatching its eggs with reassurance on its platform for its passengers,"</u>

However, we realise here that the language of narrative fiction in general is a moderate language formed due to its transition from "ornate prose language to a level that made it simple in structure and reception. Perhaps the reason for this can be attributed to the various old verbal genres that the novel benefited from, such as myths, folk heritage, and theatre, as well as modern writings like articles, journalistic investigations, and interrogations. It also intersected often with visual and auditory journalism, presenting through scene fragmentation, various forms of dialogue and investigation, and employing temporal paradoxes, documentary dimension, and recording" (Yaqteen, 2012). The hope is pinned on reducing the impact of documentary language in favour of a narrative language rich in the history of fiction achievements in Syria, to liberate it from the dominance of verbal genres and preserve its narrative genre from being assimilated by others that threaten its presence.

The Narrative Space:

Writers typically differentiate between two manifestations of narrative space: the open and the closed, depending on the space generated as a result of the intensification of narrative action and its characters, along with the details and particles of this space. This grants significance that is projected onto the narrative discourse. The intertwining of sensory and non-sensory details serves to enhance the presence of the fictional character and expand its space. Through this, the focal point of the narrative is measured, and the character's unique perspective is revealed. The place is not merely a backdrop for events and a shelter for characters, but it is an important dimension through which characters acquire their identity, and through which the narrative event is also formed.

However, we will not confine ourselves to a reading of the place based on that restrictive binary, because the structure of place in the new Syrian novel is entirely different from the manifestation it had in Syrian novels previously. The Syrian place in Hanna Mina's novels, for instance, was a nurturing one, sending its children towards the future rather than the unknown. In "*The Sail and the Storm* (2006) by Hanna Mina, the descriptive space imposed itself on the narrative, with the description of the city of Latakia taking up a large space at the expense of narration. This description expressed the narrator's relationship with his place as if it were his beloved child, appearing as an integral part of all dimensions and aspects of this place. He depicted its beaches, streets, markets, and alleys in a manner that contributed to the shape of the upcoming events and their development, thus serving an aesthetic function in constructing the narrative itself" (Ibrahim, 1991).

While the image of the new place, whether welcoming or repelling, reveals a different reciprocal relationship from its predecessor, which was understood through the binary of the open and closed place, this reciprocal relationship is likely to imbue the narrative with new oscillations and dramatic movements. Thus, the place, whether in its positive or negative form, will depict characters including their consciousness, cultural references, speech forms, and content. Syrian narrative after 2011 has dispensed with the binary of the city and the countryside, or the café and the prison; for the narrative space in these novels has travelled

beyond the sea, the countryside, Alexandria, and closed cafes, to places like London, Paris, Afghanistan, Istanbul, and Dubai... offering a completely different vision of the sea, which Hanna Mina had loaded with various moral values, and considered it as a geographical distance akin to the cities of the Syrian coast. Mina remembered it as a detailed place with "all its undulations and existential twists, with ideas, reflections, and opinions on politics, society, and human nature in all its positions and elevations; with its ups and downs, for the epic events revolve within the scope of the sea" (Al-Awdah, 2014, p. 89). However, this same sea in Abdullah Al-Maksoor's novel *Sons of the Sea* left a mark of estrangement and exile from the land towards another unknown homeland, becoming a prominent witness to an unprecedented Arab refugee situation; it was a refuge across the killer sea, not a nurturing one for the livelihood and future of the children. It was indeed an ugly refuge, contrasting with the aesthetics of the sea that appeared in Hanna Mina's novels.

> "I was overwhelmed by a great fear of the sea, the sea that once betrayed us and snatched others from among us" (Al-Maksoor, 2016, p.91).

The symbolism of the sea has not been taken in its multiplicity as with Hanna Mina, thus the sea achieves an unprecedented semantic paradox when it carries the meaning of both mystery and fear of what is to come and what has passed. Consequently, Syrian literature after the events of 2011 has overturned that humanistic view that the sea used to declare when presenting itself as a refuge for all those fleeing the narrowness of the land and the tyranny of its masters. For the sea is no longer associated with homeland, today there is a new identity for the Syrian novelist, and there is a different approach to the blue of the sea.

The place is the most significant literary addition to Syrian Arabic literature after 2011; its connotation has been transformed, and belonging to the national place in Syrian cities has become different. It is no longer associated solely with its land or its sea; there is a 'utopia' of non-locality caused initially by constraint and then expanded spatially by narrative imagination, which subsequently unfolded and illuminated details and various places far from the familiar Syrian environment.

> "In this strange city, its heart was larger than a writer's imagination, yet smaller than an Arabic poetic image. There are ample spaces here for the settlement of some of the dead and the living, even the dead. Upon my arrival, I briefly thought I would eventually be one of them. I rejoiced in memorising the names of its streets, the letters of its alphabet, the smiles of its beauties, the frowns of its men, their intricate details, and those of its women" (Al-Maksoor, 2016, p.33).

In terms of description and aesthetics, non-Syrian places did not receive that warmth in terms of artistic utilisation, expanding space, and extending it. Rather, those places were not adorned with any aesthetic characteristic that showcases the brilliance of their details and the beauty of their formations. Instead, they were left to be coloured and influenced by the narrowness of the migrating Syrian personality and its melancholy, which, along with these strange places, brought back nostalgia for the sea, the city, the café, and the countryside in Syria. Thus, they became with them large and spacious cities like Dubai from Suzanne's perspective in the novel *No Knives in This City's Kitchens*, and Istanbul in the novel *Sons of the Sea*, cities that despite their civilizational openness and expansion, are perceived by the narrator as open spaces leading to restriction and confinement:

> "Prison is not only in a completely closed place with an iron door tightly sealed in its entirety. Prison can be a vast land, where many take on the role of guards, closed off as one passes by

the entrance to GalataSaray at the end of Independence Street…" (Al-Maksoor, 2016, p.37).

In Abdullah Al-Maksoor's novel, which is almost classified in favour of the autobiographical novel genre, Baghdad appeared as an epic place with its historical dimension. However, it did not present and depict its details because the novelist himself sees that the ruin and destruction that befell him and his Arab homeland were primarily caused by the American occupation of Iraq, which made him mourn the city's historical status:

> "The blood that covered Baghdad throughout its life now tastes different, Baghdad abandoned and alone like an orphan among Arab capitals" (Al-Maksoor, 2016, p.53).

Despite the writer's acknowledgment of their splendour and their rich extension in the history of civilization, other cities remained temporary cities; they cannot be accepted as part of his soul. He resists with words, emphasising the value of rejecting that forced dimension from Syria:

> "Istanbul, the curse of forbidden love, and the pleasure of the first touch, the first kiss, the first ecstasy, and the first silence. You search for your identity in its streets, but you cannot find it. Your soul is attached to another city, hidden from you in the depths of distant mountains. So, you look at the sky and ask, 'Oh Lord of the strange cities.'" (Al-Maksoor, 2016, p.53).

So, what establishes the structure of place in the new Syrian novel after 2011 is the constant and the shifting, not the closed and the open; the circumstances shaping it within the novel today have made Syria the fixed place in the soul, while all other cities and magnificent capitals are merely temporary and changing stations where their roots have not taken hold and their hearts have not yet settled. The same applies to Khalid Khalifa's novel, which, for the first time, witnessed a portrayal of characters travelling through countries mentioned by name within the novel; here is Suzanne travelling to Dubai and Paris and returning to her family carrying a vast mix of emotions towards her first country. This changing structure of place did not contribute anything new to the identity of this character presented through her initial place. Meanwhile, Hanna Mina has kept his main characters revolving within the orbit of Syrian cities and countryside, rarely focusing on İskenderun, which was often portrayed as a stolen part of the Syrian homeland. Also, he seldom mentioned Syria explicitly in his novels (See Hanna Mina's *Blue Dove in the Clouds* (1988)).

Narrative Voice and Literary Characters:
The narrative voice in the novel takes on a documentary, sequential aspect of events and occurrences. Conversely, in the imaginative aspect, it may allow hypothetical others to share in weaving a world closely resembling those events and occurrences. In the new Syrian novel after 2011, there is a predominance in favour of the individual narrative voice that conveys and records what has been unearthed from the bitter reservoirs of memory through its own mental vision. It describes, intensifies, and skips over events, characters, and places, bringing them closer or pushing them away according to its cultural and ideological references that have governed its perspective and focal point in the novel. It selects and chooses what fits its ongoing discourse. Syrian novelists have rushed here to restore the classical narrative to its place and literature to its reflective function, thus the difference between Khalid Khalifa's novel and Abdullah Al-Maksoorr's novel lies in the fact that the narrative voice in Al-Maksoor's novel resides in the presence of a self-referential character, namely the author's character, while Khalifa's characters are fictional paper characters that may entirely coincide with reality. This is because both authors draw from the same specific source in time and place, which is Syria during the events of 2011.

So, the narrative space, whether imagined or real, is subject to the diagnosis of the narrator and his subjectivity, as well as to those whom he employs in his narrative. This leads us to say that the worldview in Syrian literature after 2011 is a completely subjective one, showing bias and the exclusion of certain parties. Literature among new Syrian writers is not based on serving a holistic worldview concept but rather on the desire of some to shape the overall world according to their own perception and sensibilities. Literature no longer assists writers in seeing the world; instead, it enables them to sense the world in a way that is personally expressive. Everything the novelist creates is a detail related and linked to his or her uniqueness rather than to the world around them.

Syrian novels published after 2011 have maintained a physical vision of reality and details, without leaning towards the bizarre or the impossible. Perhaps the reason for this lies in the position of the narrative voice and its embodiment as a reality in both the structure of the story and the structure of the novel alike. This applies more to Al-Maksoor's novel, as it has a biographical dimension, whereas Khalifa's novel, which relied on the participatory narrator, touched upon the misery of the Syrian family in the late nineteenth century, making these fictional characters almost present in reality, following the social trend in their portrayal, which can be pointed out and clarified easily within the context of reality.

> "Nizar informed her of an urgent telegram that arrived two days after the burial. She travelled with her four children on a freight train, crying on the way and remembering her life like a movie reel. She couldn't arrange her long-standing waking dream, the bliss of the fool in her embrace. Suzanne, Rashid, and I were drowning in a large wooden chair arranged for us by my father's colleagues... Adding a black strip to a new picture makes his death a reality" (Khalifa, 2013, p.33).

We perceive that the social life pattern (realism) portrayed in the previous passage did not undergo any replacements or unnatural changes in the narrative structure of the novel. The narrator did not initiate any flashbacks or anticipations, thus maintaining the traditional and classical form of narrative time and its progression. This means that the factual narrative foundation dominates over the artistic imagination, subject to the novelist's game and the scope of his intervention, altering the balances and facts he hopes to change, even if only within the realm of his imagination and his ability to weave and reshape what has occurred.

The voice of the narrating character in the new novel played a major role that overshadowed the roles of other characters; it worked to reveal the model of the oppressed and downtrodden Syrian personality, arousing pity and horror in the recipients themselves. Therefore, it did not invent anything, but perhaps it discovered itself and got to know itself for the first time outside the original place. These voices were limited to carrying the meaning of freedom, struggle, and sacrifice, which they left their homeland for, and they contented themselves with carrying symbolic meanings and fundamental values despite the varying narrative trajectories and multiple levels. The relationship of the narrating voice with its secondary characters is a necessary relationship, but with the 'other' represented by Syrian security forces, for example, it is an antagonistic relationship that has been dropped and narratively marginalised. "To understand the content of the opposite, it is necessary to automatically drop the opposite" (Benkrad, 2016, p.84). However, this oversight made freedom the only carrier of the narrating voice as in Khalifa's and Al-Maksoor's novels. The absence of opposing voices and not giving them their due in highlighting their voice in the narrative, even in the form of a plurality of voices, deprived the new Syrian novel of that balance in the text that relies on "the coordination and comparison between two narrative contents with the aim of proving their similarity or difference" (Todorov, 1982, p.229), as well as confusing the structure of the novel, which is

supposed to be based on a juxtaposition of artistic character models.

The narrating character in the works of Hanna Mina takes on the role of depicting characters and revealing their intricacies, departing from the traditional autobiographical narrative. The narrator has complete authority to withhold information as desired, without the need to authenticate events. Similarly, there is no expectation for the narrator to elicit empathy for any character, as evident in the novels of Abdullah Al-Maksoor and Khalid Khalifa. The narrator is an active voice in shaping events, sometimes introducing unexpected twists, going beyond the role of a linguistic actor to become a participant in imagination and the creation of the fictional society as desired.

Here, it is necessary to point out that the narrating voice in both pre- and post-2011 eras emerged explicitly and did not hide, blur, or temporarily disappear. This may be related to the objectivity of Syrian Arabic fiction with its storytelling nature, confirming the extent to which the narrator is involved in the fictional universe and its function, which must not be limited to mere reporting or narration. The narrative organisation undertaken by the narrator, considering it as the artistic shadow of the author, as mentioned by Yumna Al-Eid (1986), presents a rhetorical image of the author or novelist and acts on behalf of them in the narrative discourse. This narrative discourse is nothing but the rhetorical image that this novelist presents to the audience in interviews, press conferences, and similar occasions.

Hanna Mina remained silent, or perhaps suppressed, about expressing his political views on the issues he had previously addressed in a symbolic and unofficial narrative manner, as opposed to Khalifa and Al-Maksoor. Mina focused in his narrative discourse on issues - as we mentioned - related to freedom, dignity, and some existential questions. He remained silent about them in his oral interviews and in presenting his creative testimonies as well (al-Atassi, 1971, pp.172-176). However, interviews conducted with Al-Maksoor and Khalifa (aljazeera, 2015) showed a juxtaposition between what was presented in the form of a written narrative discourse and what was presented orally to the public and readers in general. Nevertheless, "the narrating voice takes alternating and sometimes inclusive measures" (Al-Khabu, 2011), causing the shadow of the writer to disappear with it, sometimes appearing clearly while referring to the writer himself. However, whenever the novelist's shadow appears in the form of a participating character with a present voice that cannot be pluralized, the writer may have abandoned any connection linking him to the imagination, except for that narrative language that barely collaborates with the narrative phrase 'they claimed' and informed me of the frequent dimension in narrating events.

One of the main tasks undertaken by the narrating voice is the presentation and depiction of fictional characters. It has become evident to us that Syrian novelists generally deploy their narrative characters and construct them benefiting from their semiotic and symbolic dimension. These characters almost come alive in the Syrian reality, achieving a symbolic equivalence between the textual world and the external reality. In Abdullah Al-Maksoor's novel, the characters were not merely products of his imaginative prowess, as mentioned earlier, but rather a genuine summons from flesh and blood towards a textual world that granted them permanence and immortality by making them exemplars of the displaced Arab, forced out of his country because of his country. On the other hand, characters like Rashid, Sawsan, Suad, and Nizar in Khaled Khalifa's novel *No Knives in This City's Kitchens* were emblematic characters that aligned with their real existence portrayed in the novel, embodying the plight of a Syrian family oppressed by totalitarian rule, poverty, and despotism.

While the characters in the works of Hanna Mina were subject to creating a parallel universe, it did not reach the level achieved by Syrian novels post-2011. Hanna Mina has the ability to condense characters and utilise the semiotics of names and drawing techniques to make the characters of his novels representative models of Syrian society, its rural areas, shores, and cities. The main characters in Hanna

Mina's novels, especially what we can call the central character, are depicted and presented in a way that makes them the focal point of the narrative even before it begins. This character is the one the reader will follow with great interest. As the narrative unfolds, the central character emerges, revealing the narrative time and place in which the character navigates, surrounded naturally by other secondary characters. The character would typically receive a predictively psychological sketch (Samaha, 1999), and their name would be explicitly mentioned after two or three pages at the most.

While in narrative 'biography', we witnessed characters being presented without preamble or depiction that ignites the reader's imagination, their names are thrust forward without introduction or linkage by the narrating character. The reportorial style prevailed among the new Syrian novelists, who preferred to present characters through their names and identities. This is because they were summoned freshly from a memory filled with tragedy and defeat, as observed in the beginning of the novel *Sons of the Sea*. "Artistic characters, connected to reality, are usually evaluated based on their relationship with two different levels of reality:

> The first: The transient universe.
> The second: The eternal universal" (Benkrad, 1991, pp.210-211).

As the text with its biographical narrative nature models its characters based on the transient universe, the human models not included in reality or imagination retain their presence with a humanistic and enduring value due to the human dimension they carry. They might serve as a model for a struggler or a politician, which can be considered in the novels of Hanna Mina. The characters in the novel *Sons of the Sea* still await the unknown future and do not know its end.

In the novels of Hanna Mina, the omniscient narrator directly outlines and introduces the protagonist and most of the characters close to the centre of the narrative. This protagonist becomes the main focal point around which the novel's community is formed, with its various human models. In contrast, in Khalid Khalifa's novel, there is an inclusion of characters who are forcibly brought into the centre of events; numerous characters perhaps imposed by spatial mobility and painful memory flow, as some come from New York, Paris, and the Arabian Gulf. Khalifa's characters are also presented in a non-contemplative manner, relying on the condensation of the human space for those characters. The reason may also lie in the fact that the events in Khalifa's novel were not related solely to the main plot involving Suzanne and her siblings' fate. Aleppo was the primary narrative space from which they were able to move to various places, attracting numerous fictional characters along with them, as well as rolling events summoned by this accompanying unconscious flow:

> "He grabbed his small bag and returned to Aleppo, arriving exhausted, to find Abu Zuhair Al-Anabi and his family waiting anxiously…hoping that the groom's family would not discover the truth about the son who was struck by Abdul Moneim…and Michel intervened with a message he sent to his friends, promising…I thinks about my uncle Nizar…who returns from work…waiting for passing lovers, the latest of whom is Medhat…Michel remembers him, sending him colourful postcards from various cities in Europe…" (Khalifa, 2013, pp.102-103).

On the other hand, in his novel *The Blue Lanterns* (2002), Hanna Mina relinquishes the role of textual thresholds and narrative introductions, focusing instead on depicting his central character and presenting them through the narrative voice in a manner dictated by the evolving and cohesive events within the text.

This character, with whom Hanna Mina typically begins his works, becomes the focal point around which the network of statements, events, and narrative descriptions revolves. Without this character, it would be difficult to sustain the events that must unfold within the orbit of this collective persona. The character, whether the central figure or the pivotal one, establishes a direct relationship with the reader, guiding them from the very first moment of reading until the conclusion of the narrative. Hanna Mina imbues this character with its identity from the outset, bypassing the conventions of textual thresholds, narrative introductions, and all the preambles that typically delay the actual reading moment:

> "Fares wasn't anything remarkable at the outset of World War II. He was a young boy of sixteen, deeply engrossed in the affairs of adolescents with novels and horrific events! Perhaps he was seeking ...." (Mina, 2002, p.18).

The novels of Hanna Mina maintain the growth of their main narrative character and nurture it, much like the character Fayyad in *Snow Comes from the Window* (1999) or Fares in the novel *The Blue Lanterns* (2002). However, the flashback technique in contemporary Syrian literature after 2011 often does not support sequential narration, as seen in Khalifa's novel, leading to confusion in the narrative retrieval and foreshadowing.

Here we note the emergence of a narrative element that the new Syrian novel has paid attention to, contrasting with its limited presence in Hanna Mina's works, namely the narrative prologue. In Khalifa's novel, the narrative prologue occupies a significant space at the beginning of the narrative structure, delaying the appearance of the characters who converge at one moment. The narrator oscillates before seizing upon the starting point of the narrative, which is announced after the father emigrates to America, leaving his wife to care for a disabled girl (Suad), another girl (Sawsan), and a brother named Rashid, "who lives a dreamlike life that is difficult to describe" (Mina, 2002, p.36). After 2011, Syrian novels have focused on the narrative prologue and various introductory techniques, as also observed in Al-Maksoor's novel. This new type of novel does not predict or anticipate events, making it difficult to ascertain the fate of the characters, preparing for an open-ended conclusion.

The image of the hero in Syrian novels after 2011 does not represent the image of "the dominant giant hero in slave societies, or the image of the ethical hero prevailing in feudal societies, as clearly depicted in the novels of Hanna Mina used in this study, or the image of the free hero prevailing in the advanced stage of capitalist systems" (Talima, 2013, pp.72-73). The Syrian character today is employed not to reveal a new given as much as it seeks to reveal a rupture and fragmentation in the old multi-significant and multi-functional typical image of the character, as well as in the society within and outside the narrative, in order to evoke further sympathy and compassion towards its current reality embodied in the text, as "the text itself is an unconscious event that gives different meanings to all characters interacting with it" (Lotman, 1999, pp. 33+). The Syrian event transcended its text when the text wanted to mimic that event and preserve it in its narrative.

Features of Syrian Arabic Fiction in Terms of Content:

It is worth noting initially that the new Syrian novelists emerged from varied ideological backgrounds. The political poles in Syria and the Arab world, in general, have narrowed down to streams with Islamic, nationalist, or Marxist dimensions. However, most of these ideological formations practically amounted to a real application of what one definition of ideology describes as "a system of ideas more associated with perception than with reality" (Fade, 2006, p.20). Amidst these trends, the Arab reality struggled and responded to new data and dialogues introduced by the electronic and global impact on humanity. The

openness to the West came with the digital discovery age, the decline of the concept of armed resistance, and the aftermath of post-resistance repercussions. Despite the movement in the wheel of ideology and allegiance, Arab political thought remained steadfast in its three aforementioned convictions, serving its nurturing political systems and supporting their continuity.

In this regard, it can be said that Arabic novels attempted to break free from the ideological monism and to rid themselves of submission to authority, benefiting from what is known as "the ideology of the novel, which can be disconnected and distant from the author's ideology. The novel is not disconnected from ideology, but rather, it is one of its components, and may even be among the motives for its emergence and formation. When analysing the novel, the critic should view it as a network of relationships; that is, a general ideological structure of specific ideas containing intertwined smaller structures. When the general structures are established, it is necessary to differentiate between the awareness of the fictional characters and the different awareness of their author. This confirms the ideology of the novel as a whole, not the ideology of the author" (Lahmidani, 1990, p.156). Readers are not concerned with the absolute motives, biography, doctrine, or ideological thought of the author, but rather with the multidimensional ideological aspect itself in the vision presented. Thus, the conceptual-humanistic perception in novels is subject to study that has embraced transformation by abandoning the authority thought. "The active self that accomplishes the transformation is the same state upon which the transformation occurs"(Ben Ghannissa, 2011, p.53), which made us see in Arab narrative fiction an opportunity to get rid of both power and authorial ideologies simultaneously.

One noteworthy aspect is that Syrian novels had already begun to undergo a content transformation before the events of 2011, to the extent that some of these novels anticipated an imminent explosion in Syria. For example, Ibrahim al-Jabeen in his novel *Eye of the East*, referred to before 2011, portrays a different image of Jews based on contrasting human models that had not been previously presented in Arab narrative in general. It did not limit itself to the portrayal of the aggressive and fierce Jew but surpassed it to depict the expatriate and downtrodden Jew. The image of the Jew in Arab novels before the events of what was called the Arab Spring was one that "depicts the aggressive Jew and portrays him in an inhumane manner" (Al-Furayjat, 2013, p.33). Perhaps this new and strange image in Syrian Arab novels represents the most prominent features of the renewal and content transformation that labelled the new Syrian novel, the one that has committed itself to recording and reporting, documenting everything previously considered taboo.

Due to the high reportage and documentary nature, the narrative events came dense and flowing, at the expense of descriptive pauses, scenes, and the nuances of the narrative plot... On the other hand, in the era of Hanna Mina, we found a frugality in fabricating events and portraying their drama. Their desire for documentation and recording surpassed their ability to blend reality with imagination, to mix it with the truth they had long awaited. These storytellers practically preferred to sacrifice artistry for the sake of manifesting reality and not leaving it to the arts of power and its artists.

Here, Khalid Khalifa, even in his novel *Praise of Hatred* published before 2011, mentions what was previously prohibited and names things by their true names; from the defensive battalions and sectarian foundations that the regime dealt with on the coast and in command centres... In fact, these novelists ventured and accomplished their narrative works with that documentary character they rushed into as if they "entrusted themselves with the task of rebuilding the ruins, raising spirits to preserve memory and history, and documenting scenes of the present with its tragedies, documenting what was to come, and playing a role in exposing war criminals"(aljazeera, 2017). And perhaps this applies to all of these novels that responded to the events of 2011; most notably what Mahaa Hassan wrote in her novels *Metro Aleppo* and *Days in Baba Amr*, and *Return to Aleppo* by Abdullah Maksoor, and *Death is Hard Work* by Khalid

Khalifa. The contents of these novels were not limited to criticising the model of despotic Ottoman rule, as well as the French and Israeli occupations as with Hanna Mina, but went beyond to depict the Syrian leader and the Assad ruling family, which is nothing but a continuation of that " Stereotypical image of the Arab ruler since ancient Arab times" (Yaqteen, 2012).

Hanna Mina's works embodied a socialist vision, which justifies his constant resort to a social, cultural, and labour union cradle (Al-Madi, 1989, p.142) through which he confirmed that vision. However, this vision was not manifested to the extent that allowed it to address the Ba'ath Party and its military arms and the ruling family. Even after the defeat of June (Six-Day War) and the sense of betrayal that affected Arab society and its intellectuals, this silence pushed the new Syrian novelists to open the boxes of the ruling family's history in Syria, after it was once impossible to approach them. Most of the novels published after 2011 dug deep and unveiled the policing role of the Syrian regime towards its opponents. Before this revelation, the Syrian regime had delved deeply and made considerable progress in cinematic art, highlighting "the Sham during the Ottoman and French mandates, as if people now only live in the era of Assad family rule for a short time" (Al-Astah, 2011). This was facilitated by the Syrian Ministry of Culture, which defined the scope of vision for Syrian writers and turned a blind eye to many issues. The content formulated by prominent Syrian novelists of the past, such as Hanna Mina and Abdul Salam Al-Ajili, focused on the rights of workers, the poor, the wealthy class, and the oppressive Ottoman authority, but never turned to the image of the Arab leader or revealed his inner world.

In Hanna Mina's novel *Snow Comes from the Window* (1999), the struggle of the impoverished Syrian intellectual is depicted in the face of an external threat, namely the policy of partitioning that has taken away a precious part of Syria. Hanna Mina established a narrative style in which he relied on a model of a Syrian youth devoted to his homeland, participating in strikes and defending rights and dignity. However, the new novelists came to dismantle this model of the nationalist youth in favour of a voice swimming in the realms of freedom and liberation from constraints. They abandoned it and adopted different narrative and aesthetic choices. Here, we draw from the novel *Snow Comes from the Window*, where Fayyad represented a human model of the impoverished and educated Syrian youth, one who adopts nationalist and rights-based ideas that touch the people of his country. Fayyad sensed the danger of partitioning at that time and confronted it:

> "He started to enter prison at any time, and participating in protests and strikes became part
> of his life. He was injured in a demonstration against the Turkification of the brigade, and in
> the end, he entered Turkey through Iskenderun…" (Mina, 1999, p.49).

Beside Hanna Mina, the novelist Abdul Salam al-Ajili directed his narrative camera towards the Syrian society and its social transformations, and towards the struggle of the intellectual class and its leadership in the Syrian struggle at the beginning of the twentieth century before the collapse of the Ottoman-Turkish state. This intellectual class was leading the peasant and labour struggles against military rule. He also depicted "a picture of the Syrian countryside and the bourgeois class in the capital Damascus, contrasting with what the writer Ghada al-Samman wrote" (Al-Arnaout, 2008, p. 86). The era of national rule after French colonisation and before the Ottoman era was a period of Arab struggle and expansion, where Syria was about to unite with Egypt. However, the leadership that had a security inclination took control of the party and managed to cover its actions with the national dream and its extensions, which they continued to pursue under the pretext of resistance and support for Palestine and Lebanon, which prevented the continuation of the ambition they claimed. The internal situation remained closed, preventing freedom of expression, and intellectuals and artists were prohibited from writing or portraying anything other than

what relates to the principles of nationalist thought in Syria and the threat of Israel. Therefore, stories came framed to describe a world struggling against colonisation and external threats from France, Turkey, and Zionism by whispering, not by action. Thus, Hanna Mina wrote a novel entitled *The Observatory*, through which he wove a narrative imagination of a battle fought by the Syrian Arab Army to liberate Arab lands in the Golan Heights from the grip of Israeli occupiers. In this context, Syrian literature remained, from a thematic perspective, captive to national inspiration and culture, forbidden from intervening in Syrian internal affairs, which narrowed freedoms and prevented democracy and pluralism, until new literary works emerged that abandoned the image of the Arab youth and the cultured nationalist in favour of a voice suffocated in his homeland before it could be heard by his enemy.

One of the new manifestations in Syrian novels after 2011 is the portrayal of the Arab leader and commander. Syrian novelists have observed that there is a stable and stereotypical image of the Syrian leader (Assad and his family and regime), as well as a fixed stereotypical image of the Syrian countryside. There is also the image of the Arab activist in the Syrian countryside and coastal areas. However, many human models were absent and not declared, such as the image of the Syrian girl who travels, struggles, and bears family responsibilities. For example, Sawsan in Khaled Khalifa's novel was represented as a model of the liberated and unbound woman. Her voice dominated a considerable space in the narrative and played an important and intricate role in its construction and transmission. Along with her, the narrator's camera, naturally her brother, moved to various places like Dubai, Paris, and Aleppo. Despite this human diversity in Syrian novels after 2011, they maintained the Syrian, spatial, and tragic aspects as contents from which characters emerge into the narrative line, and places from which the novelist draws what he desires.

Syrian Arabic novels after 2011 did not find the temporal leeway to indulge in fantasy and draw from it, as they remained captive to the tragedy of reality and its shocks. However, within simple bounds, they seized it because it provided them with a seat on the throne of freedom. This is what the novelist aimed to achieve through the interrogation of fictional characters, who for the first time expressed their political opinions opposing authority and its ruling party. "These are some features of narrative prose often glorified by Mikhail Bakhtin in his profound theories of the novel; although the novelist strives to create the impression of distance from his characters, it can only be achieved in the end by adhering to the vision he believes governs his artistic achievement" (Al-Khadrawi, 2015, 216). This was exploited by the new Syrian novelists, but with an excessive affectation that was reflected in the structure of the novel. It was observed that characters are often forced and introduced without justified urgency, and without the nuanced portrayal characterised by reflective techniques. Instead, they adopt a path of conjecture and elaborate imagery to depict these characters in the novel, burdening the narrative framework and exceeding the narrative forms prepared by the novelists, overflowing from the narrative box they were supposed to fit into.

The Syrian novelists did not miss addressing the issue of terrorism and extremism. Armed Islamist organisations emerged, claiming to fight the Syrian regime, and began to establish their own boundaries and laws among the people. They posed a threat not only to the regime but also to the rebels themselves. Thus, the issue of the revolution against the Syrian regime was no longer the dominant and sole theme. The Syrian Arab novel highlighted and portrayed the image of extremism and terrorism. For example, 'Rashid,' persecuted socially and politically as a homosexual and a political dissident at the same time, faced persecution by the Syrian intelligence services, which pressured him and his brothers. Eventually, he joined those who called themselves mujahideen after fleeing to Iraq:

> "He felt a great admiration for his transformation from just a thug and a confirmed criminal
> to a fighter heading towards the path of paradise, which he will undoubtedly reach. Everyone
> pledged allegiance to him as their leader, leaving him the task of negotiating with the guides

who would lead them to hastily erected training camps..." (Khalifa, 2013, p.208).

This emancipation and systematic dismantling of traditional Syrian novels, which were established by Hanna Mina, led to the emergence of urban novels and novels focusing on "minorities" and "individuals," as well as the appearance of others specifically addressing the topic of terrorism. Most of them made death and killing not just shocking endpoints as in detective novels, but foundational elements upon which the events unfolded before and after death. These new narrative patterns and their diversification represent nothing but a natural rupture and disintegration in the rigid and oppressive wall of dictatorship and ossification.

Among the novels of cities, minorities, and sects is the novel *Kobani*, titled after the city of Ain al-Arab (Kobani), which recently witnessed a major battle between the Kurdish People's Forces and fighters from what became known as "ISIS," the extremist organisation. Some of these novelists attempted to break away from the nationalist demagogic framework imposed on Syrian novels, thus reproducing new identities with diverse origins and religions that emerged as a result of the fragmentation and disintegration of the previous nationalist system. This was done through novels that were published in minor and subsidiary formats. This novel *Kobani* talks about the suffering of the Kurdish people from the consequences of what happened in Syria after many extremist groups took control of their cities. Novels of cities, minorities, and sects came as a natural response and an inevitable result of that nationalist and struggle-oriented horizon that has always been the predominant and controlling content for many decades in the history of Syrian Arabic novels.

With these novels, more accurate fictional images of the social composition in Syria have emerged. Along with them, the patriarchal image of the leader and his absolute rule has been challenged, and the narrative reins have been handed over to voices that were marginalised and absent in both voice and image. Their voices have become audible, opposing violence from all sides and attempting to understand the new reality through an audacious narrative adventure that Syrian Arabic literature has not witnessed before.

Conclusion

It has become evident to us that the narrative foundation of Syrian Arabic literature after 2011 was both limited and clear at the same time. It was embraced by the author's mind and witnessed by the reader who experienced the time of reading these novels, as the manifestation and interpretation boundaries were apparent and exposed to the reader. The Syrian narrative was not susceptible to multiple contextual interpretations; it was complete and coherent in the reader's mind and did not require the effort of interpretation, analysis, and deconstruction. This stands in contrast to the novels of Hanna Mina, where we saw how his stories were open to multiple symbolic interpretations with endless meanings. This was because he provided an aesthetic formulation of the narrative without relying on documentary evidence. He focused on the beauty of his artistic world and was not burdened by historical conditions in his writing. The new Syrian novels spared the reader the need "to spread the entire text and examine the absent sections and stray words" (Kilito, 1999, pp. 59-60). The interpretive keys of these novels' content and structure were responsive to and quickly adapted to the new developments and circumstances in the Syrian arena. They adopted a sequential, localised, and tragic character. The narrative structure was tailored to be compatible with the narrative discourse, taking the shortest route to explain, depict, and interpret the text, leaving the reader with only the simplest level of reception.
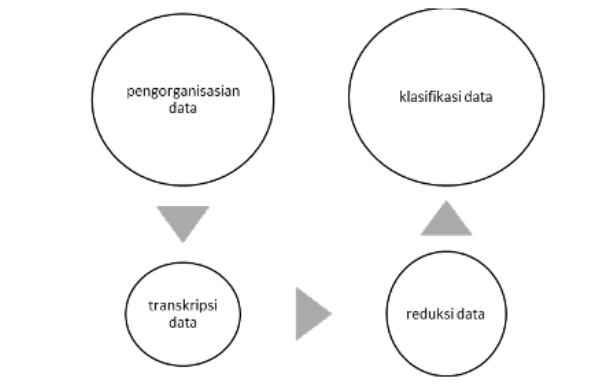
The Syrian novel after 2011 was woven with emotion, adopting the character of self-narration in both self and place. It was dominated by a reportorial language and witnessed a decline and scarcity in narrative rhetoric and narrative grammar. Syrian novelists expressed their concerns, and some metaphysics appeared in their writings as a result of fear of the future, not just the past. Meanwhile, the dramatic events and character movements in Hanna Mina's novels were linked to the mindset of the narrator as well as the main character or protagonist in the novel. There, the plots were constructed to reveal the socialist and existential struggle of the Syrian people, enjoying richness and diversity in voice and ideology. However, this diminished significantly in the new Syrian novel, which maintained the knot and form of the conflict between the citizen and the restrictive regime, reflected in the beginning and ending positions that preserved unity of content without causing any rupture or deviation from the form of the beginning, which varied with Hanna Mina. The narrative opener in his works differed from the closed state at the end. Mina's novels, which were scrutinised in this modest study, revealed a bias towards artistry at the expense of entrenched viewpoints and ideologies in his works. For example, Mina allowed opposing voices, allies of evil in his novel, to appear and not disappear as in the Syrian novel after 2011, which did not invest its characters in favour of diverse connotations but for the sake of one stereotypical character. Therefore, the novel did not play a role in dealing with the fictional characters, which did not allow them to assume both a functional and thematic role in the narrative formations of the novel. The reason, as mentioned, is that most of the narrative voices and fictional characters came from real life; they were ready-made models, while Hanna Mina's imaginative characters acquired an ideological colour and a new creation that gave them an active role in the novel's narrative world, not derived from reality and its logic.

In narrative fiction, endings are in the hands of their creators, not in the hands of the documentary narrator, as we saw in the novels of Khalid Khalifa and Abdullah al-Maksoor, who did not present the form of the ending as much as they each focused on preserving the memory of rapid destruction and documenting tragedies and disasters. They aimed to evoke compassion and horror in the reader, which highlighted their documentary approach derived from the nature of the work of these young novelists in the journalism and media sector. They succeeded in representing reality and asserting their testimonies about it, but they failed to imagine it and create a parallel state to that reality.

Here we emphasise a consistent common aspect that characterises Syrian fiction in both periods, which is the predominance of the narrative voice in Syrian fiction in general, which remained predominantly storyteller-oriented, without exploiting the dialogic voice plurality. Today, literary imagination has dwindled in the face of the desire for storytelling and its adventure, which has become accessible and unrestricted. Moreover, the change in the structure of space and the transformation of its environment, from being an intimate space to a space of loss and displacement, resulted in a substantial shift in content and textual

transformation, shattering the structure of the character of the poor educated youth struggling to survive under the grip of poverty and feudalism, into a rebellious runaway youth who opposes his ruling regime and rejects its political authority. Additionally, he refuses to adhere to its dictates, as his perception of reality has changed, and storytelling and expression have become unrestricted.

Conflicts of Interest:
The authors certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or nonfinancial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Disclaimer Statement:
Traces of Narrative Transformation in the Syrian Novel After 2011" is a research paper and not part of a thesis or a book. It serves as an independent exploration of the topic and does not represent a comprehensive study or publication.

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Authorship and Level of Contribution
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