

DE/CONSTRUCTION: TWO EDGES OF A MAGIAN LOVE-STORY

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“Humanity’s noblest sense, sight, coincides with our noblest faculty, reason. Each symbolically reciprocates the other. This hegemony reflects the thinking of Plato and Aristotle...and the Judaeo-Christian tradition reinforces the Greek tradition. The Biblical myth of creation states that ‘in the beginning’ all was in total darkness; ‘then God commanded, “Let there be light” – and light appeared. God was pleased with what he saw.’ (Genesis 1: 3-4)...The corollary of this vision of light, sight and God is the binary opposition of the equation of darkness, blindness, death, the Devil and evil.”ⁱ

INTRODUCTION

Similarly to the myth of creation, the protagonist in Munif’s *Magian Love Story* builds on *the look* (*al-nadbra*), as the cornerstone to his *fabula*. The entire story is imbued with a religious pulse, which results however in deconstructing religious institutions – namely, the church in this context. If the ‘I’-narrator in Munif’s second novelⁱⁱ paves the way for the deployment of his narrative by borrowing a crucial constituent from the story of creation (i.e. sight),ⁱⁱⁱ he only does so to shake the religious edifice and challenge the notion of ‘sacrality’, forcefully transmitted to human beings through “the sacred fathers” (8, 28, 30, 32, 36, 37, 43, 79).

In fact, through sight, the narrator’s own myth seems to be that of “re-creation” through fixation on a single object of desire^{iv} that he renders more and more abstract as the narrative gradually unfolds. Nonetheless, the repercussions of this double-edged re-creation/fixation process only prove detrimental to a “lost” character who subsequently endures major “internal destruction.”^v Hence, the narrator’s original quest for meaning develops into a confession scheme *à la* St. Augustine, addressed to the implied reader rather than to the religious community that he displays no respect or sympathy for (5-8). This scheme brings out the protagonist’s vulnerability, fallibility as well as his “hunt” for a hope – solely derived from his sacred^{vi} beloved’s tempting^{vii} eyes.

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine admits that temptation is brought forth by the ‘eye’. Yet, being the Platonic he is, ‘beauty’ for him culminates only in God; and, it is towards this God that sight has to inevitably be oriented, to avoid the ‘fires of hell.’ While the main character in Munif’s *Magian Love Story* engages in a narrative motif which somewhat simulates Augustine’s confessions, he nevertheless refrains from adopting any moral negativism attributed to ‘sight’ in the ascetic tradition. That is, the latter harshly condemns “unchastened gazing,”^{viii} i.e. *the look* or ‘*le regard*’,^{ix} whenever it diverts from the Creator himself. Conversely though, the ‘I’-narrator in *A Magian Love Story* discerns a new “goddess” through ‘the look’ that he eagerly starts to worship.^x

Even so, he seems to embrace the ‘Sartrean’ postulation that ‘the look’ acts as a double-edged, fatal and fatalistic instrument.; for, just as Sartre questions the meaning of ‘being seen’ and the risk embedded in it,^{xi} Munif’s protagonist explicitly laments the exchange in ‘looks’ with his beloved, which carries him through the rocky path of constant and unfulfilled yearning (14, 22-5, 29, 33-4, 39).^{xii} This might

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possibly elicit the reason why his 'love story' is depicted as *Magian*: always magically animated but never really rendered tangible.

Amidst such mixed signals and feelings and at the heart of a poignant psychological mess that the narrator experiences, can 'seeing' remain 'believing' – as popular wisdom often reiterates? Is the reader supposed to believe the protagonist's tale about the actual existence of a beloved Lillian? Could it not be the mere work of a disillusioned man's imagination, seeking to (re)construct a love-story, an institution or even an iconic figure: anything of worth and value to cling to?

Visibly, the 'I'-narrator is not relying on Cartesian premises to draw his account. So, what is the sensorial experience he describes doing in the novel, and how far-reaching is it in re-constructing – if not de-constructing – new modes of 'seeing' and 'believing'?

DISILLUSIONMENT INCARNATE

When Adrian Lyne adapted Vladimir Nabokov's famous novel *Lolita* into the big screen, he chose to open the narrative with an intriguing yet important detail, stated in the first person by professor Humbert – the main protagonist – who directly relates it to the audience, as if to redeem or justify himself. In fact, Humbert confesses that his mind fails to function like that of an adult. Stuck at age fourteen during which he happens to have lost his beloved, Humbert ceases to develop both at the emotional and psychological levels. Still lingering, despite the years, in 1921 Cannes – where he had met Annabelle and explored the meaning of passion with her, prior to her accidental death four months later – professor Humbert constantly exacerbates his own grief by animating within himself a fierce sense of melancholy, bordering on madness. It is not until the brisk appearance of the juvenile Lolita, that he re-embarks on an unquenchable yet hopeless search for lust and "love".^{xiii}

Similarly to Nabokov and Lyne's anti-hero, Munif's main *personage* in *A Magian Love-Story* catches the thread of narration from the beginning, to introduce his problematic situation: not only is he yearning for a love affair that cannot possibly materialize; he is also suffering from the loss of his mother's affection at a tender age – a deficit that sharply determines his rapport to women, especially prior to the unforeseen encounter with Lillian.^{xiv} Even though this deep sense of loss is sporadically highlighted throughout the text (20, 73), its impact is vividly felt in the narrator's illustration of his restless life – to the extent that he transforms into an identical twin of Nabokov's Humbert; in that, he openly admits to be inhabiting a man's body but simply reasoning with a child's mind (107). Moreover, he regards the latter as a deficiency, underlying not only his personal trauma but a whole generation's struggle^{xv} with a city that "survives on students'^{xvi} aspirations and ruthlessly annihilates their future prospects" (110).

It is noteworthy here that the novel's fifth chapter,^{xvii} which reflects on the narrator's relationship to the host city, also maps out some crucial *raisons d'être* for his defeat and justifies hence, the sort of jargon permeating the text. Indeed, from sexual frustration to much-awaited socio-political relief, the journey led by Munif's narrator and his fellow foreign students is one of 'futile mobilization' in pursuit of volatile dreams. According to the 'I'-narrator, what deeply marks this pursuit is mere 'cowardice' alone – an impeding motif that occupies considerable space within the narrative (16-26). The narrator links cowardice to defeat in a riddle-like question (25-27-108), which simulates the puzzling genesis of the chicken and egg: which one comes first and which is subsequently engendered? Such unanswerable query however, traps the narrator in a vicious circle of wondering(s) and wandering(s). His entrapment renders the thought of meeting 'redemption', an idea *per impossibile* (79) and imposes a melancholically monotonous tone on the narrated experience. In a sense, Munif's main character turns into a '*pendulum*' (14-19); for, like a '*pendulum*' – which always indicates time but never dictates it – he is synchronized to outline his

pain, deception and many defeats, but falls short from breaking the strenuous repetitive motion of his life.

Failing to maintain a firm grip over circumstances compels the narrator to both reinforce his self-portrait as a 'coward' and order the implied readers to symbolically flagellate him in rebuke (26). However, far from assuming full responsibility for his declared 'cowardice', he blames 'nature' for conspiring with 'the city' against human beings (23), by casting upon them a major unbreakable curse. In the narrator's eye, everything is cursed – even the balcony from which he manages to first oversee his beloved. He actually perceives this balcony as the vital 'testimony to his end' (36).

The notion of 'ending' hereby evoked, is expected to bear the protagonist's psychological collapse and far-fetched disillusionment alone. Nevertheless, the 'end' allegedly imposed on the narrator when he crosses Lillian from his hotel balcony, paradoxically marks the beginning of a rejuvenated search for meaning. The same encounter that drives the protagonist insane makes him wonder, in retrospect, about his five-year 'ephemeral' journey at the heart of an 'alien' host-city (103); and, it is this encounter – which blurs the lines between 'reality', 'diction' and 'narration' – that motivates him to ponder crucial if not existential questions: does the 'curse' derive from love or is it an intrinsic, inescapable part of his life? What is love anyway (34)? Is it a definable entity? How does the idea of desire emanate and how does it subsequently degrade into a painful outcry (45)?

Even though he reluctantly utters the word 'love', the narrator depicts the latter's conquest of his heart in almost the same fashion that Idwar al-Kharrat's Mikha'il does, throughout the opening pages of *Rama wa 'l-Tinnin* (Rama and the Dragon),^{xviii} i.e., both protagonists discern in 'love' a drift towards solitude and at the same time, a bitter-sweet 'adolescent' strife to overcome this solitude. Yet, while the two protagonists tend to examine the probable intertwinement of 'love' and un-consummated adolescence,^{xix} Munif's shaken narrator oscillates between perceiving love as a 'stupid mistake' (15) or a definite need, transcending the immediacy of carnal desire. Then again, he does not provide ready-made answers and, for that matter, does not possess any.

Swimming in a sea of pressing questions, the 'I'-narrator revisits his own life in a deconstructed narrative, which completely resembles him. The dramatic incisions that his questions cause within his own memory make it possible to piece up not only the history of his disillusionment but also the story of his attachment to Lillian – be it Lillian the woman or the thought thereof. After all, as Kundera indicates, "a question is like a knife that slices through the stage backdrop and gives us a look at what lies hidden behind it."^{xx}

FRAGMENTED *FABULA*: THE STORY OF A BROKEN NARRATOR

Throughout the narrative, Munif's protagonist remains anonymous. His harsh, expressive and scolding "I" sharply addresses the reader and other implied listeners^{xxi} – creating thus, manifold layers of narration, reading and interpretation – without providing any elicited indication of his identity, nationality or "home."^{xxii} The only details this character willingly reveals – albeit in bits – consist of his occupation as a foreign student in an unspecified European country and a shaky approximation of his age at the time when the main story unfolds.^{xxiii}

In fact, there is a temporal disparity between the process of narration and the actual development of reported events within the narrated story; for, the solo *raconteur* pours his heart out only years later.^{xxiv} Even so, the storyline itself is divided into manifold but succinct timeframes.

The overall framework, within which the main story develops however, is that of a ten-day holiday at a seemingly bourgeois hotel in the mountains, towards the end of summer (9, 27). While the narrator relates his escape to the necessity of finding some rest (18), his discourse unveils a high level of anxiety and distress that

even nature – with its lakes, pine-trees and bathing spots (9, 10, 40) – fails to alleviate. The anonymous protagonist seems to face heightened uncertainty vis-à-vis strangers who share his vacation, vis-à-vis relationships with women and vis-à-vis “books.”

Based on the stream of consciousness, his discourse reveals all at once, a sense of self-imposed exile, psychological unsettlement and sharp self-awareness, which persist even after he moves back to the city – rendering him thus, more vulnerable and bare before the readers’ gazing eye.

While “stripping naked”^{xxv} (the deliberate act of completely exposing one’s inner self) is a perilous endeavor, the narrator ventures into soliciting the readers’ immediate attention – as indicated above – by spilling his words and weaknesses out boldly; that is, he does not camouflage his excessive sadness (16) or low self-esteem (8). Instead, he stages these two main components of his personality as intrinsic parts of the ‘truth-formula’; i.e., parts of a narrative that he strives to present as viable and non-illusory. It is worth mentioning here, that the narrator is fully aware of the fact that his words are not necessarily cathartic. Hence, he constantly guards against the readers’ potential backlashes; yet, he still seeks to establish a new channel of interaction through their imagined presence – since all avenues for communicative exchange have been severed, with a surrounding that merely allows for ephemeral relations.^{xxvi}

If his life has so far resembled the tedious longing for a ‘Godot’ that fails to come along, why does the narrator take on another addressee who cannot possibly reciprocate his exchange or offer him constructive feedback? By doing so, Munif’s protagonist probably tries to lead a ‘normal’ life ‘with rhythm’, in which he no longer orbits solo; for, throughout the largest proportion of his narrative he only roams intimate/inner spaces, from which he attempts to extract – in flashback form – scattered excerpts of an eclipsed life.

In fact, the narrator’s all-encompassing deception begins with the church as an institution led by ‘potential murderers’; namely, ‘the sacred fathers’, whose ultimate pleasure is often derived from torturing innocent creatures (37, 141). Similarly to Zaki al-Naddawi,^{xxvii} who renders Wardan the ‘scapegoat-dog’ the sole recipient of his fury, this anonymous protagonist chases the ‘alleged’ guardians of the church and makes them – rather understandably – bear the cross of his anger.

While his story is written in a confession-like style, the narrator’s main purpose is to profoundly challenge the church’s dogma and its inculcation of distorted beliefs into the pious’ minds.^{xxviii} This does not however imply that the protagonist discards ‘spirituality’ per se. On the contrary, it is the intricate yearning for a ‘spiritual haven’, which fuels his attachment to Lillian’s eyes and contributes to dissolving manifold ties with his surrounding – material and otherwise.

For instance, failure to derive ‘serenity’ from ‘books’ makes him cast the latter off, as yet another source of disillusionment (14, 16, 24). While the direct reason underlying such intellectual crisis is not explicitly evoked, the narrator – initially a poetry-avid (88), a painter (77) and art appreciator (101) – reveals great cynicism towards and low affinity with the printed word.

On a more intimate plane, his disenchantment is intensely expressed vis-à-vis sexuality. Driven by a palpable sexual frustration, the one-man-show narrator tries to lead an allegedly ‘promiscuous’ life. His random process of experimentation is nevertheless accompanied by a bitterly-felt distinction between sex and ‘love’^{xxix} (20), which coins the former to a pejorative and degrading connotation.^{xxx} Paradoxically though, Munif’s unsettled protagonist excessively probes ‘carnal desire’ – albeit in vain – for meaning and affection. That is, he engages in a trail of sexual rapports to different women;^{xxxi} then, repeatedly – but not coincidentally – lands on ‘ephemeral’ bonds, regardless of their longevity.^{xxxii} Such for example is the case with Mira (18-19), whom he ‘unorthodoxly dates’ for about three years. Actually, his so-called relationship to Mira is depicted as bearing the most substance;^{xxxiii} for, it involves not only sex, but also a blend of emotional, familial,

and mental exchanges.^{xxxiv} Even so, the narrator cannot remain faithful to her or, deliberately abstains from remaining thus. Upon his return from the ten-day holiday, Mira loses much of her appeal in his eyes (65) and both individuals drift further apart – despite his subsequent and trivial attempts at winning the ‘fleeing’^{xxxv} Mira over in bed again.

Indeed, rather than providing the narrator with inner tranquility and reconciliation, the hotel visit seems to enhance his sense of alienation from people in general, especially those ‘strangers’ who temporarily share the ten-day journey. Sinking in a world of his own, the anonymous protagonist eyes the surrounding crowd with a lot of disdain^{xxxvi} (22-23). Hence, he downgrades other visitors’ presence at the hotel to an insignificant proliferation of unfamiliar faces, yielding two parallel yet completely paradoxical outcomes: the restraint on his privacy and the enhancement within his inner self, of even more solitude (10-11). As a result, the ‘I’-narrator tends to merely orbit around his worries, individual speculations and thoughts. That is, he takes refuge in inner closed spaces, which do not necessarily procure him a concrete sense of security; for, security (at least in Foucauldian terms) implies not a complete prevention of disorder, but a certain management of the latter; and, the anonymous protagonist seems to possess no control over his chaotic state of being – even after he meets Lillian.

FIXATION/RE-CREATION

Until his encounter with Lillian at the beach, the narrator seems to lead a tumultuous inner life, running in undetermined directions and primarily dictated by the afore-outlined disillusionment. The unexpected emergence of ‘her eyes’ however, engenders what could possibly be deemed a ‘resurrection’. As the sole ‘familiar’ creature around (33), Lillian manages – particularly through her eyes – to become the narrator’s subject of focus, then gradually, the center of his fixation(s). It is neither a pure coincidence nor an element of surprise that her name is unraveled almost forty pages into the novel – since the anonymous protagonist is thoroughly consumed by the aura around her *look* alone. Actually, the entire ‘love affair’ is built on the decisive effect of a ‘glance’; from then onwards, the narrator leaps slightly but not consistently, outside his inner confines – only to soon re-embrace, an unfocused circular motion in search of Lillian.

Before exploring the nature of this search however, I would like to pause at the ambivalent effect of ‘sight’ on the narrator – as a major ‘*élément déclencheur*’ beneath his desperate pursuit.

While casting a major emphasis on the sacredness of Lillian’s eyes, Munif’s ‘I’-narrator depicts the double-edged corollary that stems from their sudden appearance; indeed, not only do these eyes fill his heart with ‘love’ (14, 22, 25, 29, 33-4, 39), they also constitute a perilous tunnel at the end of which awaits him both ‘madness’ (19) and ‘defeat’ (22) – two symbolic incarnations of psychological death.

The interplay between love, madness and defeat ties – once again – into al-Kharrat’s vision in *Rama wal-Tinnin*, where the main character Mikha’l, ponders crucial speculations about the expandable and solitary essence of love: expandable because it bears neither a beginning nor a discernable end; and solitary, because it kills the ‘beholder’ then ‘resurrects him dead’ on a daily basis (6) – as though love were a relentless but doomed ‘hunt’ for something, someone, anything.

If I elect to employ the word ‘hunt’, it is specifically because Munif’s ‘I’-narrator, who is completely haunted by Lillian’s ‘gaze’, strives – albeit in vain^{xxxvii} – to possess the object of his fixation and in turn, earn salvation. This being said, he tries to establish a communication channel with the desired object through ‘sight’ – turning himself thus into a sort of ‘voyeur’, seeking to relinquish his loneliness. Nevertheless, voyeurism only buries him deeper in the grave of solitude and, just like the mythical Sisyphus, his quest for redemption remains bitterly wishful. Throughout the novel, Munif’s narrator swims in the deep sea of yearning, but

wakes up – over and again – to a sour realization: that shallow foams are but his sole share of the overwhelming emotional tide he experiences with every ‘look’. Having somewhat assimilated his ‘sort’, the narrator cynically warns readers against any ‘grandiose’ final expectations; for, they will inevitably fall on ‘nothing tangible towards the end of narration’ (59).

Is the entire story based on an illusion then? Is it a dream? Is it the creative work of the ‘I’-narrator’s imagination, in a desperate attempt to escape emotional drought?

While plausible answers to such questions may never be reached, it is worth turning to the protagonist’s idiosyncratic re-creation of meaning, for speculative reflections. In the process of fixation he undertakes, the protagonist gradually rids his love for Lillian from all possible ‘impurities’. Therefore, he discards the ideas of sex and carnal desire (34) from their alleged bond. By doing so, he transposes Lillian to a different plane than that of everyday life – rendering her half woman, half Goddess in some instances; and completely divine in others (25).^{xxxviii} The more divine, angelic or transcendental her depiction, the more she escapes his grip. Yet, in an almost masochistic fashion, the narrator savors her abstraction and becomes more adamant vis-à-vis her pursuit; hence, his engagement in a ceaseless search for the ‘beloved’, even after they head back to their original urban setting.

In fact, the narrative is symmetrically divided between the protagonist’s quest at the mountain resort and that which he envisages in the city. Both seem to mirror and prolong each other; since, the narrator fails to derive a sense of closure from his earlier ‘hunt’. Indeed, on the tenth and final holiday evening, Lillian and the anonymous *magus*^{xxxix} experience a first ‘up-close’ meeting (58). Behind their dancing-ball disguises, their respective eyes manage to meet and mutually draw them closer. The whole scene is painted with an intense blend of melancholy and lust, which transcends however, the immediate physicality of the moment. Lillian ceases being ‘flesh and bones’; rather, she transforms into a lashing ball of light that ignites his innermost parts – without really salvaging his aspiration for ‘meaning’; that is, the ephemeral nature of their encounters,^{xl} renders the thought of possessing the iconic Lillian, an idea *per impossibile* (60).

Even so, the narrator lays his love before her ‘gazing eyes’ (59) and ventures into an everlasting cyclical journey. In the city, the ‘I’-narrator almost relinquishes his average student life and roams the streets for a glimpse of his elusive Lillian. From this ‘clinging’ attitude, springs a host of pressing questions about the essence of his search: What does the tale of his ‘love’ for this woman-turned-icon ensure? Does it render his eclipsed life less absurd or more strenuous? Is clinging to the improbable idea of finding her, more soothing than holding on to all other fallen institutions? If the quest for Lillian is a *Magian* one, then it embodies quintessential devotion, which fails to result in emotional fulfillment. So, by embarking on such a tumultuous expedition, is the narrator observing a ritual of self-torture and annihilation or a process of self-healing? Alternatively, could it be that the protagonist is simply ‘cursed’ – as he often reiterates in the narrative?

Whether his wrist is tied to a deeply-rooted curse or not, the anonymous narrator finds himself trapped in a circle of ‘wandering’ and ‘wondering’. As the city turns into yet another dark labyrinth, his search for Lillian becomes more absurd; and, from the intricacy of his situation, Munif’s ‘I’-narrator develops a sense of animosity towards this host city (91). He even accuses it of murdering its ‘progeny’, i.e. of choking its inhabitants both physically and mentally through the myth of civilization.^{xli} Actually, a stormy moment of yearning for Lillian unravels the ‘I’-narrator’s utter disillusionment with a luring and ruthless system of belief, designed by the city to cynically disappoint its occupants: luring for its vivid promises to sow the seeds of ‘civilization’ and ruthless in its failure to indicate that the latter concept is merely bogus.

At this stage, the story confers the pre-mature feeling that it would circularly end where it initially started: with a protagonist who has relinquished

everything. Yet, while the solo narrator promises to trade his entire life repertoire for a single and final ‘glance’ from the elusive Lillian (105), his mind-boggling ‘fixation’ on her makes him delve into a re-evaluation process – which paves the way for a slight glimpse of hope. Glossing over the general relationship between cities and their dwellers, over his particular five-year stay in the unnamed host town, over the broader concepts of God, religion, sex and friendship, the protagonist attains a certain level of ‘reconciliation’ that allows him to move on; i.e. transcend his most mundane concerns.^{xlii}

Whether he gives in to ‘reality’, surrenders or adjusts – and the narrative allows for no definitive assumptions – a single fact prevails: that the centrality of ‘iconic Lillian’ has prompted a rejuvenated journey beyond the tight confines of his wretched inner self.

CONCLUSION

“Narration, as a form common to both the novel and history does remain in general, the choice or the expression of an historical moment.”^{xliii}

With an array of distinct characters and a fertile literary repertoire, Munif has *par excellence*, ‘historicized’ the Arab individual’s undying struggle with a region that ‘bathes in oil’ and harbors – among other destructive landmarks – oppression and political corruption. Subserviently ‘leached’ to ignorant foreign powers, with their Machiavellian ruses and abusive instructions on the successful conversion of the oil industry to an eternal curse, this region marginalizes its own people and often condemns them to permanent exile – even where they do not physically depart. Almost all of Munif’s novels sharply and ‘polyphonically’^{xliv} echo these concerns; even more, they carve them in the reader’s mind, so that History never leaves the ‘bridge’ of memory and errs in wilderness like the solitary Zaki al-Naddawi.^{xlv}

Similarly to al-Naddawi, the solo protagonist in *A Magian Love-Story* is a lonesome anti-hero, who holds the thread of narration and lashes the reader with a convoluted narrative about everything: life, religion, exile, sexuality and crumbling institutions – but most of all, love. Orchestrating multiple layers of narration, the anonymous and identity-ridden ‘I’-narrator converts his experience with marginalization, oppression and suffering into language, i.e. into communication – that begins with the ‘look’ and ends in the ‘word’.

Actually, through the ‘look’ (*al-nadhra*), Lillian ensnares Munif’s protagonist – only to then become, the torch that lights his rocky path and against which he measures the darkness of his surrounding. This process of abstraction, which endows Lillian with an almost transcendental connotation, is best achieved through narration. It is noteworthy that the narrator realizes early on, that words are not necessarily cathartic and that they would fail in accounting for Lillian’s essence. Nevertheless, it is only through the ‘multi-layered’ narration he ventures into and the perennial unraveling of stories within the basic love-story – in an Arabesque-like fashion – that Lillian actually stands out. As language fails to contain her, as she escapes the immediacy and ‘mediocrity’ of the word (130), Lillian transforms into the ultimate abstraction of an icon-model. In her ability to haunt his memory, she subsequently manages to restore his distilled hope in a future yet to come (130).

Faced with a host of convolutions that render him an *exilé*, by widening the chasm with his surrounding, the ‘I’-narrator seems to bear the same scars as many other pioneering characters of the Arabic novel; namely, those intellectuals who woefully endure existential crises vis-à-vis the West –specifically regarding sexuality.^{xlvi} What distinguishes this particular protagonist though, is the fact that his ever-unconsummated passion constitutes an intrinsic but incomplete part of a larger whole; i.e. part of a more developed set of worries and concerns. If the ‘I’-narrator leads an alleged promiscuous life in the host city, it is because he simply lacks affection and not because he wishes to conquer the West through sex. Underneath his abundant exploration(s) of women’s arms, lies a vehement attempt at both

retrieving ‘meaning’ and burying his disillusionment – an endeavor which falls short however, from materializing in any of his experiences. When Lillian comes into the picture though, the solo narrator perceives in her the belief, the strength and the unique catalyst of meaning, he had long been seeking. And, despite his realization that ‘meaning’ was a prospective ‘vision’ rather than a palpable entity, Munif’s character insists on following the beloved’s trail – rendering hence his pursuit, a *Magian* one in the true sense: somewhat shamanistic, helplessly devoted and everlasting.

In sum, the fragmented protagonist does not totally surrender and also refrains from playing the lethal game of silence. In spite of what he recurrently labels the ‘futility of words’, he keeps narration flowing without turning into a pretentious preacher or an *ideologue*. In his resistance, this character constitutes a sort of prelude to subsequent Munif-styled creations. Tortured, exiled, sensitive, always aware but still eager to fight back, this anonymous *magus* mirrors the outstanding author who aptly crafts his experimental persona; and, it is based on his model that more mature characters will develop in Munif’s chef d’oeuvres.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Anthony Synnott, *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.209.

ⁱⁱ This novel (1974) is his second after *Al-Ashjar wa ightiyal Marzuk* (*The Trees and Marzuk’s Assassination*, 1973).

ⁱⁱⁱ On page 9, the last sentence indicates that the entire story begins when “our eyes suddenly met.” Translation mine.

^{iv} The object of fixation is a woman that the narrator meets during his vacation. Her name is Lillian.

^v Subhi al-Ta’an, ‘Alam ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif al-riwa’i: Tandhir wa injaz (*Damascus: Dar Kan ‘an*, 1995), p.142.

^{vi} Abdel-Rahman Munif, *Qissat Hubb Majusiyya (A Magian Love-Story)* (Beirut: Al-Mu’assassa al ‘arabiyya lil-dirasat wal-nashr, 1990; 5th ed.): “Anti muqaddasa” (*You are sacred*), p.13.

^{vii} Temptation here is not synonymous to seduction. Rather, it implies the act of stealing the narrator from his surrounding and moving him to a different plane of being.

^{viii} A. Synnott, p.212.

^{ix} Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, translated by Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 1989).

^x He labels her “my worshiped one” (*Ma’budati*), p.24-5.

^{xi} J-P Sartre, *Being and Nothingness. (L’enfer c’est les autres)*.

^{xii} “I don’t care any longer...I have undertaken the path of (Juljula) rattle;” “I am a Magian Christ burning a thousand times each second,” p.59. Translation mine.

^{xiii} Adrian Lybe (Director), *Lolita* (1997): Humbert Humbert, a British professor coming to the US to teach, rents a room in Charlotte Haze’s house after seeing her 14-year-old daughter, Dolores (Lolita) who deeply reminds him of his deceased beloved Annabelle and to whom he is instantly attracted. Although he hates the mother, Humbert marries her to be close to the girl. Both embark on a journey together, in which they attempt to conceal the fact that they share more than a step-father/daughter relation. Profound jealousy and animated guilt caused by “forbidden” love seem to drive the man emotionally labile.

^{xiv} Munif’s character admits to be constantly “living the past,” with the main reason behind his feeling of deprivation being the loss of his mother at age six, p.20.

^{xv} “And the days were fed up with our random cyclical movements...our manly bodies supporting childish minds,” p.107. Translation mine.

^{xvi} Especially foreign students in this context.

^{xvii} Mainly, p.107.

^{xviii} Idwar al-Kharrat, *Rama wal-Tinnin* (Beirut: Dar al-adab, 1990), p.6-8.

^{xix} Idwar al-Kharrat, *Rama*, p.8. ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif, *Qissat Hubb*, p.20.

^{xx} Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p.247.

^{xxi} The narrator indicates to readers that he has already laid his case before an unsympathetic “friend,” p.6.

^{xxii} The protagonist alludes to a “home country” that he ends up returning to towards the end of his “tale” (p.127, 128 and 129).

^{xxiii} “In my thirties...a bit more...a bit less...it does not really matter,” p.37. Translation mine.

^{xxiv} The narrator often reminds the reader that a long time has already passed. For instance, he says: “Now...after long years,” 15; “Now...Yes now. And after the years have gone by,” p.23.

^{xxv} Georges Bataille, *Erotism, Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956), p.17.

^{xxvi} S. Ta’an, ‘Alam ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif al-riwa’i, p.144.

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- xxvii Muniŕ's solitary 'I'-narrator in *Hina tarakna al-jisr*. 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, *Hina Tarakna al-jisr* (Beirut: Dar al-'Awda, 1976).
- xxviii Between pages 80 and 85, the narrator undertakes a 'real' confession in church that he embarks upon to ridicule the system even further and cunningly explain why the scared fathers are of no viability.
- xxix The narrator never clearly defines 'love'; rather, he ponders a host of questions about its nature.
- xxx According to him, sex tarnishes relationships; this is why he never thinks of Lillian as a sexual object.
- xxxi Paola, Radmilla and Mira are the three cases he elaborates on. What these three women share in common is the fact that they are all his university colleagues; yet, each possesses distinct personality traits that the narrator grasps, depicts and even plays on during his respective encounters with them.
- xxxii In most instances, his sexual encounters with women are either coupled with or followed by a feeling of exhaustion, bordering on defeat. During the act and immediately after its completion, the narrator delves into an introvert, almost esoteric, reflection on the amount of 'sadness' and despair ruling the world, p.32 –which leads his 'partners' to often walk out on him (e.g. Radmilla, Paola).
- xxxiii Among all other relationships, pre-dating Lillian's sudden appearance in his life.
- xxxiv Together, Mira and the narrator read poetry and appreciate artistic productions. Similarly, her mother displays sincere affection towards him and treats him like a cherished member of the family.
- xxxv Just like him, Mira finds herself a different life in the arms of another man (a colleague at work).
- xxxvi The narrator repeatedly sheds negative judgments on those strangers' sexual mores and behaviors.
- xxxvii Lillian is already married; so, from the very start, she belongs to another man.
- xxxviii "She is the mother of fertility," p.25. Translation mine.
- xxxix The narrator describes himself as the 'most Magian' living creature, p.33. I also borrow the word Magus from John Fowles' novel, bearing the latter title (1965).
- xl Lillian and the narrator meet twice only. On two other occasions, they briefly come across each other without being able to exchange words or even prolonged glances. In fact, it is not until their unplanned and last encounter at the train station that they entertain a sort of conversation – albeit a succinct and time-restrained one.
- xli 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, *Qissat Hubb*, p.92. Interpretation mine.
- xlii For instance, attempting to snatch Radmilla from Ivan to satisfy his ego or fighting with Mira for no viable reason.
- xliii Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1967), p.35.
- xliv Save maybe for: *Qissat hubb majusiyya* and *Hina tarakna al-jisr*.
- xlv 'Abd al-Rahman Muni, *Hin trakna al-jisr*.
- xlvi Take for example, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Suheil Idris or Taysib Salih.