

Fiction of Imprisonment and Individual Peace: Abd al-Rahman M. al -Rubayi's *al- Washm* as an Example

Sabbar S. Sultan

Dhofar University, Salalah, Sultanate of Oman.

Abstract: Prison literature represents a new genre in the twentieth century that can be seen through the practices of writers from different continents and cultures. It is significant to note that this type of literature is often associated with intellectuals who find themselves smarting under very painful circumstances of imprisonment and the concomitant psychological sufferings. Abd al-Rahman al- Rubayi's novel, **al- Washm* ('The Tattoo') is one of the seminal works in this tradition in the Arab world. The present paper seeks to revisit this novel and show the inextricable relation between its two levels: the subjective and objective ones. Also it aims to assess the final achievement this novel represents. The study tackles the following points. The introduction is concerned with providing the nature of the Arabic novel and its particularity. Also there is a passing reference to social life in Baghdad in the 1960s, which forms the backdrop of *al-Washm*. The question of modernism in prose fiction and its impact on the author is also present. Al-Rubayi's rendering of the imprisonment experience is the central issue here. The biographical details and his position in contemporary Arabic novel are covered as well. The main section of the paper is devoted to his *al-Washm* as exemplifying the fiction of imprisonment, its merits and demerits. The conclusion gives a final judgment of this novel and its writer in the light of the developments in fiction as a literary genre.

Key words: *al-Washm*, politics, egocentric, individual peace, defeatist

*All the translations of the excerpts from the novel and critical texts are my own. (the author)

1. Introduction:

The contemporary Arabic novel in the late sixties and early seventies witnessed radical changes in terms of form and content. Indeed it is the content that is most striking as seen in its diversity and daily changes of many dogmas in social customs and conventions. In Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon in addition to the Arab countries in north Africa there were serious attempts to raise issues not discussed before. History has been analyzed and radically sifted in search of new vistas of artistic experiences. Politics serves as a nexus for many novels by the late Saudi-Iraqi novelist, Abd al-Rahman Munif gave a harrowing picture of the world of imprisonment in *Sharq al-mutawassit* (East of the Mediterranean) (1975). In fact it runs parallel to *Darkness at Noon* (1941) by the Hungarian novelist, Arthur Koestler. Apart from politics and its intricate field, there are other topics that surface in the contemporary Arabic novel. Among these are poverty, gender, freedom, class differences, and the transition from the rural and agrarian place to the rural areas. Roger Allen, the famous translator of many Arabic novels into English, comments on the complexity of this type of fiction and diversity. He asserts that "the spirit of elan and even defiance as shown by Arab novelists thus far could continue to find a fruitful outlet in novelistic tradition." (1995, p. IX).

As regards its position toward the question of modernistic devices and the artistic innovation, one can notice that there is a sort of compromise between what is traditional and innovative. This can be easily seen in the narrative technique in *al-Washm*. The Lebanese novelist and short story writer Elias Khoury (b. 1948) expounds this issue in his illuminating comment that:

You can't make typology of Arab literature today. Modernism in the Arab world does not mean that the premodern has disappeared. It coexists with the premodern and the postmodern. The reason for this is related to the way knowledge is produced in the Arab world. It is not produced by the culture itself, but imported from without. (cit. in Meyer, p. 1)

A. Baghdad in the 1960s:

Undoubtedly any serious argument about *al-Washm* and its author entails providing a brief account of the social and economic life prevalent at that time and how it contrasts vividly what is going nowadays. Definitely the course of events in *al-Washm* is inextricably tied to the vibrant life outside the walls of prisons. It is a life marked by peaceful atmosphere and stability as far as the question of security is concerned. Indeed the dilemma of Kareem Al-Nassiri is basically self-inflicted after following the hollow and alluring slogans of the underground political activities. The novel shows that he has a good job and decent salary that enables him to enjoy life in the capital with ease and satisfaction. He works in the cultural affairs of the ministry of culture and information. This is a personal note since al-Rubayi himself held such position in his life before embarking on his adventures in Kuwait and Tunisia. Viewed from the current perspective, life in Baghdad in those years appears to be a vanishing world that is not expected to be seen again. The only thing that was required for the continuation of that quiet, albeit monotonous, life has

something to do with politics. It is the only danger lurking in the individual's way. Many people have imbibed this lesson and skillfully eschewed these traps and nets. Kareem is not of this type. Hence the devastating impacts of imprisonment on his psychological being and perception of life. A writer contemporaneous to al-Rubayi recalls those times when people never heard of a word like "terrorist" even though there were stories of mischief and suffering. As she puts it, "in the good old days , there was repression, there were seeds of violence and tensions erupted, leaving bloody traces."(Al Ali,p.56).

Evidence of the validity of such views can be easily felt through observing Kareem's thinking and daily practice. He devotes a lot of time to boozing in the endless pubs of the city and frequents the brothels in Baghdad where the stories of injustice and bias proliferate. The title of the book has something to do with the night life and what goes on behind the screens. It is this kind of care-free life that Kareem chooses to abandon and follow the sloganizations of politics that only leads to destruction and bitterness and incurable injuries.

B.The Shift in literature: Modernism

The writing and publication of *al-Washm* coincided with a strong wave of translation of famous literary works in the western canon. The novels of the modernists like William Faulkner, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka and Ernest Hemingway were translated by competent specialists and admirers of the western tradition in literature which eventually left a great impact on the practitioners of the novel and the way they handled their own literary material. In fact the sophisticated literary strategies of James Joyce in his *Ulysses*(1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) found their way to the novelists of the Arab world thanks to the dedicated translators and advocates of James Joyce. The Egyptian scholar Taha Mahmoud Taha translated *Ulysses* in 1984 and the second edition in 1994. The contemporary Iraqi writer and translator Salah Niyazi gave another translation of the same novel in 2008-2010-2014. Interestingly, these translations are prefaced by comprehensive introductions explicating the mysteries and attractions of the Joycean texts and the pleasure and pain in rendering them into Arabic. Thus it is safe to say that writers of al-Rubayi's generation enjoy the privilege of having access to the esoteric and highly sophisticated novels and their sustaining effects on the works of the Arab readers themselves.

Apart from the availability and accessibility of these important creative works, some critical works were also published which eventually affected the writings of this generation. During the time of composing and publishing *al-Washm* an influential book was translated into Arabic or at least some parts in literary journals. It was Robert Humphrey's *Stream of Consciousness in the Novel: A Study of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson and William Faulkner* (University of California, 1954). Now it is out of print. However, in its time it was a breakthrough in the way novels are to be constructed. The devices raised by this book include flashback, fade, spatial and temporal montage, interior monologue and free association. Some judgments from Arab scholars refer to the view that this book is more influential on "critics than the writers themselves"(Caini & Cobham,p.47). In fact it has affected both teams equally. The novel to be discussed shows that al-Rubayi is very much influenced not only by the technical devices made available by these translations, but more importantly, he is influenced by the epistemological and intellectual assumptions informing these works. In sum, al-Rubayi is a writer who has imbibed the lessons of modernism and put their findings at the service of his own creative works.

The twentieth century is the age of the novel par excellence when it reached its climax in form and content. Indeed it rounds up the ceaseless transmutations going on for a long time. If Dickens was a towering figure in the nineteenth century, in the following century his name has been relegated to that of an entertainer, or to quote Harold Bloom's statement, "the greatest of superficial novelists." He is now judged negatively to the extent that it appears an offence "against humanity to place Dickens among the great novelist" (Bloom, p.4). Undoubtedly a judgment of this sort raises different questions about the new criteria and yardsticks critics and scholars hold in their perception and judgment of the novelistic work. Bloom sees the novel as a literary genre that is more or less a hybrid field in its assembling all sorts of tools such drama, documentary points, poetry, narration, critical elements and so on. This is what we see in the practices of the modernists already mentioned.

The relative view of time, the concentration on the intensity of the experience, the failure of the individual to control his ideas or even language are some of the marks characterizing modern life and intellectual products. Jean-Paul Sartre identifies the failure of the traditional novel in its incapacity to represent fully what goes on in life. As he puts it, "the traditional novel narrates what is expected as the present in the past tense; it intimates a future which is always closed off from foreknowledge and genuine causality, forcing us to experience time as a locked-in-continuum" (cit. in Armstrong, p.15)

The Arab novelists received the cutting-edge developments in the field of prose fiction. Indeed many of them, al-Rubayi included, kept track of these developments and changes in the field of prose fiction and pursued the strategies put in vogue by the modernists. Thus *al-Washm* concentrates more on the inner and intuitive drives rather the external and physical. The plot is minimized and what lies underneath in the inarticulate and conflicts is maximized.

C. Al-Rubayi and the World of Imprisonment: Background

World literature has recently devoted much space to those writers and intellectuals who are often enmeshed by the awkward situation between following their self-righteous ideals and views and the extremely hard circumstances awaiting them in prison. It is that hazardous world of politics that leads such people to the miserable situation of "the decrepit walls, hunger, physical maltreatment", to borrow Michel Foucault's terms (Foucault, 2012, p.30). There are reasons behind writing about an experience that is associated with the most painful and humiliating situations. Among these, and perhaps the most significant one, is the overwhelming desire to release oneself of its overwhelming pressure, its trauma, and to "say goodbye to all that" as Robert Graves titles his famous autobiography (1929). This dismissal of or rather emancipation from such nightmares might have sustaining and invigorating effects on the individual who survives this harrowing experience. By verbalizing what he/she has seen or witnessed, the ex-prisoner may feel free from, or at least sustain, its trammels, repercussions and perhaps his self-delusion. Of course such a view remains only theoretical, or at most, wishful. This is because the prison experience has a lasting effect on the person in question to the extent that it becomes a decisive force in "the way identity is shaped, compromised, altered or shaped by incarceration" (Miller, 2003, p.3). As will be shown in the rest of this paper, the main character in al-Rubayi's novel is doomed to undergo this painful process so that it becomes a demarcation line in his life: what is before and what is after will be radically different. No doubt his anti-

heroic situation does not always win the approval or consent of readers that remain, after all, only outsiders and cannot even imagine what goes on behind the bleak walls of prisons. Significantly, the novel to be discussed here runs within the mainstream of prison literature in the sense that the writer himself is both witness and victim of the demoralizing and dehumanizing effects of imprisonment.

As already suggested, life went on smoothly in Iraq of the 1960s and the majority of Iraqi people in the new millennium recall those times with nostalgia and sense of loss. If Kareem has great psychological scars it is his own doing and the punishment is not a surprise for him and his comrades. It is worth noting that the creator of Kareem has engaged some diplomatic posts. This shows the blatant contrast between fiction (the events of the novel) and reality as felt through the tolerant attitudes of the authorities toward his type. At any rate, the reader can only admire the author's skill in making him live "the stories, memories and poems that originate behind bars" (Miller, p.1). What is captivating about this issue is this one of prison stories is endowed with the power to make the reader perceive and visualize this memorable experience. Roger Allen once again locates al-Rubayi's novel within the tradition of Arabic fiction that is mainly concerned with exposing "a horrific vision of a crisis of societies suppressing intellectual dissent and subjecting their populace to all manners of barbarous torture" (1992, p.212). As such, this type of fiction is on the borders of "testimonio" which "coalesces as a new narrative" (Wu & Livescu, 2011, p.13). Also the act of writing itself and the graphic images invoked can be viewed as an attempt on the part of the author to release himself from such burdens. Writing as viewed from this perspective, "can be therapeutic, rehabilitative or redemptive" (p.7).

D. Al-Rubayi's biography and Experiences:

Abd al-Rahman M. al-Rubayi (b.1939) is a pioneering Arab major novelist, short story writer and a journalist from Iraq whose literature is often associated with political persecution, persistent search for freedom and unflinching representation of the modern Arab's abortive dreams and self-defeat. The other novel that tackles the same topic is *al-Wakr* ('The Den') (1980). The leftist activities in the 1960s represent the intellectual and political backdrop of such literary works. Indeed at that juncture it was very difficult to isolate literature from the prevailing circumstances. As has been recently suggested, "the left is also increasingly finding a voice causing the dividing line between literature and political writing to be more and more blurred" (Bushrui & Malarkey, 2012, p. xxiii).

Born in the city of Nasiryya to the south of Iraq, al-Rubayi prepared himself to be a teacher of painting as he graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad (1962). Indeed he worked for some time as a teacher of painting after his graduation. Being involved at an early age in leftist activities that were then banned and treated ruthlessly in Iraq of the 1960s, al-Rubayi was imprisoned for three months. In many cases, this may ring a passing experience in the individual's daily experiences and the countless inflictions to which man is often subject. However, in al-Rubayi's case, this acquires broad and traumatic dimensions when the author has distilled the implications, significations and lessons to be inferred from that uncommon experience. This is not surprising, given the disposition and propensity of a man of his type when exposed to such painful situations. In his case, it turns into a living experience that will imbue his perception and vision of life, its scars will be ever-present in his future works. Indeed he has written many short stories and novels that revolve around the topics of politics, imprisonment, persecution and the individual's aspirations behind the walls of jails and detention centers. Such

topics are recurrent in his novels *al- Saif wa al- Safina* ('*The Sword and the Ship*',1966), *al- Anhar* ('*Rivers*',1974), *al- Qamar wa al-Aswar*('*The Moon and Walls*',1976),*al-Wakr*('*The Den*',1980),*Shahrayar yabher* ('*Shahrayar Sails*',1985),and many other works of fiction and criticism. Between 1983 and 1985, he worked as a press attaché in the Iraqi embassy in Beirut. At the moment he is a member of the editorial board of *al-Majalla al- Thaqafiyya* (Cultural Journal) in Tunis. Indeed he settled for good in Tunis in the mid 1980s after getting married to a Tunisian writer, Rashida Al Sharni.

It is obvious that al- Rubayi's life is eventful, vibrant and active. He is invariably dissatisfied with the monotonous life and inertia prevalent in his society. Hence his ceaseless travels and shifting in place (Iraq, Lebanon, Kuwait and Tunis).In all these places he practiced writing as a journalist and creative writing concurrently while he kept his original field of specialization (painting) at bay. To be more exact, one can say that there is a continuous process of intermingling or cross-fertilization between these two fields in his creative works. He acknowledges in a famous collection of testimonies and reviews on his own art and writing that "in my novels I could not keep myself away from two basic facts that constitute the backbone of its technique: painting and poetry"(al- Rubayi, 1999,p.34).

2 . Al-Washm : A Prominent landmark in Modern Arabic Fiction:

In *al- Washm* ('*The Tattoo*',1972) al- Rubayi explores the life of Kareem al- Nassiri (the surrogate of the author himself),his painful experiences, involvement in the intricate and precarious world of politics, imprisonment and final release and disillusionment. The protagonist is a kind of anti-hero and a typical image of the self-defeated educated young man. As a poor young man from the south of Iraq, he has been haunted by a dream of finding social justice in his hierarchical society. Thus the themes informing *al- Washm* are seen through "the dualities of imprisonment/freedom and submission/rebellion"(al-Adwani,2011,p.281). In fact, this highly idiosyncratic and individual voice in the novel becomes the mouthpiece of a whole generation of young men in Iraq in the 1950s and 1960s who have cherished great hopes about developing their country and finally got disillusioned. The late Iraqi critic, Aziz Sayyed Jassim, expounds the great impact of *al- Washm* on his generation," it is the story of all of us. al-Rubayi embodied the decay of that spirit"(al--Rubayi,1984,p.15).This is not just a personal judgment of a fellow-prisoner who had a first-hand experience of the gloomy world of imprisonment and its far-reaching effects on the individual's future attitudes and reactions. Another assessment runs in the same vein in that it sees the novel as :

the prophecy and dream of escape from the inferno of Iraq and its sufferings, and writing about the new life in Tunis after 1989.But all this is tinged with anguish, sorrow and sense of loss for leaving his homeland of his own free will. Thus he writes his own dirge '*naheeb al rafidain*'('The Weeping of the Two Rivers') and '*hunak fi faj al reeh*'(There in the Direction of the Wind).(Obeidi,2011,p.113)

In a book exclusively devoted to exploring the different manifestations of the political persecution as reflected in contemporary Arabic fiction, critic Fadhel Thamer pays tribute to al-Rubayi's novel as a milestone in modern Arabic fiction in its minute probing of the psychological aftermath of the experience of imprisonment:

Al- Washm really represents the model of the repressive era. The author did not seek to present the objective trajectory of this reality. Instead he reshaped it in a subjective and individual form through the consciousness of the repressed protagonist which eventually led him to a sort of political emasculation.(Thamer, 2004,pp.21-22)

Such judgments and perceptions give the impression that al- Rubayi's novel has left a certain impact on the trajectory of Arabic fiction, particularly what can be termed the imprisonment fiction. Needless to say, world literature has its own great contributions in this regard. For instance there are the works of such writers as Arthur Koestler, Edgar Allan Poe, Richard Lovelace, Andre Malraux and George Orwell, to mention only few in this regard.

Al- Washm begins with a key situation that epitomizes the real problem of the protagonist, Kareem al-Nasiri--his actual alienation from his environment and pathetic failure to bring himself to terms with his own people. All this is due to the initial and traumatic experience of imprisonment which will be a constituent element in his consciousness:

Kareem al-Nasiri inhaled the air of the street after deep suffocation: seven unjust months encircled him with their minutes and terror, and crushed his nerves, bones and blood.

Kareem al-Nasiri came out safe, tall and smiling, asking about friends and answering the salutations of others, receiving their congratulations on the occasion of his release from prison. But at least there was something that was crushed within. This normal, sober state is merely a mask concealing the remnants and the irreplaceable destruction.

When he explores the objects of the city, its people, buildings, lanes, cafes, he does not sense the former warmth and geniality that used to tie him to these. Thus he used to feel alien. A voice from within called upon him to leave his comrades in order that his restless soul would find its peace and calm.(al-Rubayi,2002,p.31)

Technically speaking, the novel from the very start reminds the reader of the fact that the entire action of the novel is already complete. The main character is now free after spending the period of incarceration and what remains is a retrospect of the events as recapitulated and envisioned by the protagonist and the other inmates. Indeed, in this initial situation, the author succeeds in reflecting the dualities in the protagonist's mind: the past and the present, the concord and discord, conformity and non-conformity and above all the inside and outside of the experience of imprisonment. In fact the protagonist's post-war psychological and emotional status will be a decisive factor in his subsequent encounters with people and events in the rest of

<http://jrdsjournal.wixsite.com/humanities-cultural>

the novel. Kareem al-Nasiri will invariably be driven to that painful past and its far-reaching repercussions. Now we learn that he is physically all right and can do what he likes. Nevertheless, after the nightmarish experience of imprisonment, he is no longer the same person because of the formidable impacts of this terrifying experience. In other words, this relatively brief time in jail can be considered as a watershed experience in Kareem's career. From this time on, his vision of life and its potentialities will be radically altered. Admittedly, this is a roundabout way of saying that this past will be a weighing force in his life and a perspective through which all things will be glossed. As regards this influential point in the course of events, it is necessary and useful to refer to the author's own testimony in this regard. Al-Rubayi is quoted to be saying that his novel has a great psychologically sustaining and refreshing impact on his life when he finds vent from the scars and nightmares of a worry-inspiring situation:

Al- Washm was a kind of sublimation. For me its writing was a sort of special prayer by means of which I purged my soul off all that which has inflicted it , a supplication by which I was born afresh, by which my protagonists are born again as they make faces to their persecutors.(al- Rubayi,1999,p.127)

One of the inmates in prison, Muhsin Khalil, recites a sorrowful dirge about their lost youth and continuous suffering. Here Kareem becomes the author's voice in highlighting the purgatorial effects of art, "O Muhsin, demolish all the dams and drown us in your deluge, purify us of our filth and disgrace"(p.53). Indeed, this is one of the conspicuous shortcomings of the novel, i.e., the tendency to make correspondences between the fictional persona and the writing subject, al-Rubayi himself. Sometimes one feels that the subjective plane outweighs the objective. Critic Abdul Jabbar Abbass deftly identifies this technical drawback in his insightful comment when he argues that " the language of *al- Washm* in some paragraphs is not very far from the tone of confession or direct divulging when the author initiates his paragraphs in the lyrical mode instead of the narrative situations" (Abbass,1980,p.137).

After being set free from his imprisonment, he finds himself unable to adjust to his former mode of life. Indeed he dabbles in different jobs and places in his strenuous search for a sense of security and peace of mind. Thus he begins a nomadic, if not hectic life ,in quitting his native town (Nasiryya) and settling in Baghdad for a while. In this painful process, he has been subject to blame and criticism, just like the author himself. Kareem's friend Hassoun al- Salman blames him bitterly and hopes that soon Kareem will be back to his city and its people:

"I wish you would recover and come back as soon as possible."

"Why should I come back? How can we show our shameless faces to people?"

"You speak as if you were the only guilty one."

"At any rate travelling provides me with the opportunity to start."(p.31)

Throughout the rest of the novel, it transpires that Karim will not get that dream of individual peace and appropriate niche in society. Instead his life will turn into a series of escapes, evasions and abortive dreams. This keen sense of futility and meaninglessness is not Kareem's lot only: it is that of an entire generation in the post-1958 revolution in Iraq. The description of the interests, activities and preoccupations automatically bring to mind the lost generation that Gertrude Stein

has keenly identified in the novels of Ernest Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald. When Kareem lives in Baghdad as a journalist, he lives with other colleagues who are single like him. He spends his time in boozing and debauchery. In his working hours, he comes to know a woman who is a victim of cruel social connections. She was forced by her father to marry a man who is twenty years her senior. Unhappily wed, Mariam compensates her failure through having passing sexual affairs with different men:

O Karim, they made me get married while I was too young. He was twenty years my senior. I did not know him till the night of our wedding. It was a deal conducted by my father to cope with his loss. At the beginning I started crying but then I came to terms with the situation. I found my consolation in my daughters Wisal and Hind.(p.34)

She hopes to add Kareem to her list of men with whom she has had fleeting intimate affairs, but the latter proves to be adamant to such allurements because of his own inhibitions and self-centred interests. The author attributes that to Kareem's own failure to transcend his inflated ego. The fact of the matter is that in his intricate relation with the married Miriam, he is seen to be oscillating between his dream of love and the harsh and dismissive reality he has to put up with. His ruminations shed an illuminating light on such contradictory sentiments in a person who has turned into one of the "hollow men" Eliot talks about in his poem carrying the same title:

Can I start with Mariam? I ask myself this question. But I change my mind and dismiss it altogether as a relation that is doomed from the very start. O Hassoun, I am in a state of delirium. Where can I get this purity? [...]
Do you think a man might love you someday?
What is the point?
That is another question, but I want you to answer my question first.
No.(p.35)

This relation with Mariam is certainly important for the refining and consolation of Kareem's perturbed soul. Her tragedy reminds Kareem of the fact that many people, men and women, are in the same pathetic lot for different and inexplicable reasons. As a partner in this unenviable situation, Kareem's attitude does not move beyond the verbal level. Even if he is a frequent visitor of brothels, Kareem maintains a certain moral restraint and resolve not to encroach upon her and exploit her weakness as many of her lovers do:

Do you really want me? Or am I for you merely an adventure whereby you compensate your failure?
I dislike to experiment my talents on you and construct my collapsing remnants on your debris, believe me.

But who rectifies the big fault? Everything has been misarranged—my marriage, your detention, our love. Where can we start to rectify? I meant to salvage my crushed, mourning self that has never known peace. I am not a prophet, but only an ordinary man that political factions have besmirched by their slogans and propaganda and led him to their whoredom. Thus I wasted my health and youth, and now I am trying to find security. That is all, but how?(p.47)

Although the Kareem-Mariam relationship is a minor plot, it is of prime importance in showing certain aspects of Kareem's character, particularly his egotism and stifled spirit in not sharing others' ordeals. Despite his great sentiments toward this woman, Kareem is unable to decide what to do about her. He is a cool, passive figure who could not shoulder responsibility about anything. It is characteristic to note that the woman in this relation is the one who takes the initiative and is more outspoken about her feelings in such moments of longing. In contrast, Kareem is content with watching the scene silently as in a still-life portrait:

Kareem Al Nasiri felt bored of pursuing work. So he left his place and stood up then he knelt above her. He made his face close to her hair and inhaled her perfume and was about to kiss it but refrained from doing that. He went back to his place.(p.55)

In contrast, Mariam has the guts to ask him frankly whether he thinks of marrying her if he is serious in his relation with her. She even offers him her body (p.106). However, his ruminations show that he wants her body and soul exclusively for himself, not to be shared even by a husband "The bitch wants to defile my feelings, debasing them and ending in a cheap intercourse which we steal from her husband, time and people"(p.107). If this option offered by Mariam faces a deadlock, she can ask for official marriage. Nothing of this materializes since the reader has already seen Kareem in different situations and can predict his next step. His answer is blunt "This is an old joke, Mariam, it should not make us laugh anymore"(p.120).

One of the inescapable inferences the reader gathers about this relation is that it is not simply there to mitigate the mounting tone of cynicism and melancholy incurred by Kareem's presence and his thoughts. Mariam has been meant by the author to be the foil to him, to embody the extent of hesitation and shilly-shallying on the part of the willless and self-centred protagonist. She has done her utmost best to rehabilitate and accommodate him but all her efforts prove to be of no avail. This is because he suffers from innate and ineradicable failure to transcend his own egotistic concerns. He is bent to escaping, evading any responsibility whatsoever. The echoes of the existential literature, especially of Camus, Sartre and Kafka are forcibly present in portraying the contours of Kareem's character and his striking reactions.

The other female characters with whom Kareem has some affairs are Aseel Omran and Yusra Tawfiq. The role assigned to Mariam holds true to these in the sense that it helps in shedding further illuminating light on Kareem's blight, the pathetic crack in his psychological

and emotional life due to the injustice he has received at the hands of his persecutors. These girls stand for the Platonic and inaccessible. They are there to show his effete masculinity and pathetic failure to be up to what is expected of him. Having known him as a man of Hamletian words only, the two choose their own destiny, away from his harmful effects. Aseel gets married after she comes to the conviction that Kareem is not the right man. This also applies to Yusra who keeps on pursuing her own independent interests and affairs. However, Yusra's attitude is memorable when she puts Kareem to test. She reminds him of the great emotional and psychological harm he inflicts on others whether willingly or not:

The story has become too long. We are not adolescent. What prevents you from marrying me?

It is a special case rarely found. You are a wonderful girl. Inasmuch as I love you, I fear for you because of this love. I do not want you to tie yourself to a tramp like myself, marooned on the beaches like a log driven by the waves on an empty shore.

Then why did you make me love you?

I do not know, Yusra, I do not know. The question is beyond my comprehension.(p.108)

If the main character fails to rationalize his ego-centricity, the reader has his/her own understanding of a self-contradictory character like Kareem. The answer is in the main rubric of the novel: it is a novel of imprisonment and the main character is in fact metaphorically and symbolically imprisoned. It is a state of fixation that will prove to be detrimental to his consciousness and future dealings with others. Needless to add, *al- Washm* is not simply about love or lovelessness. Love or its absence serves a technical aspect here in that it comments on and explicates certain aspects of Karim's perturbed spirit as a result of his imprisonment experience. In fact, *al- Washm* belongs to other Arab writings that centre on similar issues such as Sanallah Ibrahim's *tilka al-raiyha* ('*The Smell of it*', 1965), Abd al-Rahman Munif's *sharq al-Mutawassit* ('*East of the Mediterranean*', 1975), Ghalib Halasa'a *thalathat wijooh li Baghdad* ('*Three Portraits of Baghdad*', 1984).

One of the merits of this novel is its impressive power in evoking the feelings and conflicts of those who have been imprisoned not for criminal reasons. The novel is concerned with illuminating the actual experience of imprisonment and its far-reaching repercussions. The prisoners portrayed in this novel are immersed in leftist parties and used to entertain rosy hopes of a better life. The inevitable outcome is a great extent of disillusionment and cynicism while some find refuge in religion, a point that is not in line with what they used to believe. Also there is another common denominator: all of them belong to the same rural and agrarian areas which they reluctantly left to settle in the city and its crowded place, "Nasiryya is our calm, small city which our grandfathers left after they abandoned their sickles and axes in search of new jobs whereby they can feed their starving children after their land failed to provide that"(p.37). The new place, then, has opened the minds of these local migrants from the countryside to new vistas of experience at a very critical time in world politics. They found themselves enmeshed in the

alluring slogans of justice, equality and welfare state raised by the leftist or communist parties in vogue in the 1960s of the last century. Expectedly, such people took all these for granted and the inescapable outcome is imprisonment, exile and even summary executions. The inmates of the present novel belong to the same class already mentioned and share the same sense of frustration and bitterness. However, some of them find that the only solace is the recourse to religion as a remedy for their intolerable situation. In fact the arguments and suggestions raised by these inmates help in reinforcing the ever-increasing gap between Kareem and those living with him. An example of this will do. In a letter Kareem receives from his friend Hassoun al- Salman, the latter tells him about his (Hassoun's)intention of making a pilgrimage to the holy places in Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. It is a letter that turns into a means of indicting Kareem's own self-indulgence and lack of faith:

You Hassoun are kindhearted and I am only a faithless man. You've managed to be affiliated to religion and found complacency in it as Hamid al-Shaalan did before. Now you can start, annihilating the germ of anxiety inside you which gnawed your head before. Who can imagine Hassoun al-Salman as a devout dervish?(p.50)

It is by means of juxtaposition and doubling that Karim's difference from his environment is vividly foregrounded. His attitude is marked by stagnancy and inability to adapt to the prerequisites of his environment. The only option open for a man of his type is the continuous move from one place to another, from one relation to another. Hence the number of sweethearts and acquaintances (Maria,Aseel and Yusra)while the cities include Nasiryya, Baghdad, and Kuwait. Kareem's own creator, al -Rubayi , is not content with living in the Middle East. He chooses a remote part of it (Tunis) as his permanent residence. This stands in sharp contrast to the attitudes of many of his former and current comrades. For instance, Jaber al- Mousali has a sturdy faith in his political ideology and never knows these fluctuations felt in Kareem's reactions, "I will stay here. Our party is reorganizing itself again and I will not abandon it"(p.115).In other words, the reader is in the presence of a writer who has fictionalized his own experiences in such a way that he deliberately blurs the boundaries between fiction from reality.

Technically speaking, the author shows that he is conscious of the narrative experiments of those modernists in the east and west, especially the stream-of-consciousness technique and the free association. Almost on every page, one comes across two types of narration and in different forms: the ordinary and bold fonts. The purpose behind this striking way of writing is to mark the differences between the real and conceptualized, the linear and retrospect. Such devices are not new as they have already been in use in the novels of William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, with which al-Rubayi is certainly familiar. The signification of this mode of writing is felt through showing the terrible impact of the humiliation of imprisonment on the inmates. Indeed the book is full of situations and dialogues where this particular point is unfurled. The following is just an excerpt from the world of terror present everyday in the lives of its poor victims. Its horror is self-evident and spares the researcher any further comment:

My body was thrown in this lonely prison that was one day a stable of the

cavalry police. Nasiryya then was in its genesis and rebellion was rife among tribes in the suburbs of the city which were inaccessible by ordinary means of transport. Lethargy got hold of my body and persisted on it with quick successive pricks like tens of needles. There is no longer space for dreaming. The body is condemned and here it is chewing the inertial days, thinking of the things it has missed---books, streets, my father,Aseel, Omran, and summer strolls on the banks of the Euphrates. But the faces of the men intent upon having a mysterious banquet blocked my way and I swallowed my saliva. Inside me there was the sound of breakage.(p.33)

To rid himself of this terrible encroachment on his privacy, Kareem is asked by the authorities to sign on a sheet of paper whereby he confesses publicly (to be published in the local newspapers) that from that moment on he will have nothing to do with any political party. By this "recanting" his past 'heresies', he is restored to society"(Allen ,p.212). Of course one would easily find allowance for such a disclaimer if one recalls the harsh circumstances under which it was conducted. However, there is something else worth-mentioning here about his readiness to give names of people the authorities have had no idea about. He is in fact a snitch that tells on others out of ill will. The interior monologue betrays this and certainly the reader perceives a measure of meanness in his own character," I took the pen and paper and moved to a corner.[...] I scribbled something and wrote again. I mentioned new names and went too far as to deliberately break the necks of many people"(p.118).

This attitude is not only found in al-Rubayi's current novel. Indeed scholars have identified similar situations when the political prisoner volunteers of his own accord to provide the prison authorities with what they never dreamt of, as "they get intimidated and "tamed", censor their own and others' thoughts, speeches, and behavior, or even collaborate with the secret police for the sake of self-protection or benefit"(Wu and Livescu,p.3).Thus the victim could take the position of the persecutor in prison and outside it when one remembers his dealings with Mariam and Aseel. It is for these sides in his character that Kareem has been rightly viewed as the passive image of the educated man at a certain stage in the struggle against political authority. Kareem appears cold and calculating. The criticism or even condemnation directed against him springs from the fact that "he never seeks to show any reluctance or resistance when asked to betray those with whom he has worked. His answer is prompt!"(al- Ra'i,1991,p.118). Moreover, the novel goes too far in showing life through the perspective adopted by the protagonist who actually " turns into a utopian man who fails to fulfill his dreams"(al- Faisal,1994,p.92).

Obviously *al- Washm* is a novel of physical and psychological violence, cruelty, drinking and sexuality. Although Kareem does not respond to Mariam's persistent calls to have sex with her, he systematically gratifies his sexual needs in different brothels in Baghdad. The discrepancy between Kareem's romantic notions of love in dealing with Mariam, Aseel and Yusra and his blatant sexuality with prostitutes remains one of the salient characteristics marking his conduct. However, a reading of the novel's title has much to do with the theme of prostitution which may not be confined to the hideous act of selling and trafficking with the human body. It is derived

from the description of a whore, Scheherazade by name. Again the name is ironic since it juxtaposes between the witty and conscientious Scheherazade of the *Arabian Nights* and the current thick-headed counterpart who has nothing to attract people except her disgusting body. The present Scheherazade has tattooed many parts of her body in addition to her obesity and cheap perfume. All this fills Kareem with revulsion and a desire to vomit. The account the author gives of her and her continuous chewing underline the suggestion that she is a cow-like figure. Ironically enough, there are those scholars who find some correspondences between Kareem and Scheherazade in that both are stripped of their fundamental values and appear to be living in a kind of death-in-life "the word al-washm (tattoo) is often associated with 'wasm'(stigma) or disgrace, and the two have the same disgraceful sense"(Hussein,1997,p.20).The author himself has his own say here as *al- Washm* is one of the rare novels that has, apart from the critical essays already mentioned, a detailed bibliography of the articles, essays, reviews and academic theses written on it. Al-Rubayi's understanding of the implications of the title is related to one common point between the protagonist and the prostitute: If the latter's tattoos are ineradicable, the same holds true to Kareem's scars which are there as long as he lives:

The title of the novel (*al-Washm*) stems from the lingering ineradicable effect from the encounter with that stout prostitute that has her body embroidered with tattoos. Thus the title is to be deduced rather than being stated directly.(al-Rubayi,1999,p.27)

The original title of the novel is *zaman al samt* ("Time of Silence") as the author acknowledges (p.124). In fact al- Rubayi did well to discard this initial title and replace it by the present suggestive one. Indeed the book is articulate enough and nothing has remained in the dark, including the inhibitions, taboos and self-indictment. The real significance of this novel or all al- Rubayi's writings for that matter is derived from the author's own resourceful life and wide range of readings. As a member of the editorial boards of many journals in Iraq, Kuwait and Tunis, al- Rubayi has the vantage-point of perceiving the cultural scene in the modern Arab world with a great extent of reliability and objectivity. As a person, al-Rubayi is daring enough in stating many vulnerable points in one's consciousness, irrespective of their drastic consequences. Hence the wholehearted applause with which *al- Washm* has been received. He has been credited with this iconoclastic spirit," al- Rubayi does not refrain from making the agonies and inflictions throughout all his life, the subject matter of his fiction. His spirit knows no dams, boundaries, walls or gates"(al- Rubayi,1999,p.5).

Al- Washm is one of the early works al- Rubayi wrote even before the official date of the first publication (1972). As he argues in the testimonies written on the author and his fiction already mentioned, the tone of pain and frustration prevalent throughout the whole book is partly attributed to the Arab defeat of June 5, 1967 in addition to the turbulent political life in his own homeland. This intermingling between the personal and impersonal sides is seen as the distinguishing feature of this work, "the intermingling between illusion and reality, the factual and fictive, the objective analysis of society as a dynamic force and the psychological analysis of the human subject"(al-Nassaj,n.d.,p.266).The only reservation one might raise against such an assessment is that the psychological analysis has been solely confined to the protagonist while other characters, both men and women, are seen from the perspective of this egotistic ,if not ,neurotic Kareem.The novel gives the impression that it is a single-character novel in the sense

that all the other characters are peripheral and viewed from his own perspective and judgment. The author is content with making all the minor characters serve one primary role, i.e., that of shedding light on the main character and his idiosyncrasy when contrasted with them. They are more or less functional.

As this study approaches its conclusion, it has become evident so far that *al -Washm* suffers from a serious drawback in dealing with its fictional world. Obviously the author's primary interest lies in showing the sufferings, frustrations and disappointments of his detained characters. However, there is no corresponding emphasis on the prison authorities and how they treat the inmates except few pages(5-6 pages). The following is a rare excerpt devoted to **showing**, rather than **telling**, the reader about how the authorities view their prisoners and the actual relationship between the two sides. Even this situation sacrifices plausibility when the reader is told that one prisoner can kick back his detainer and is capable of toppling him down:

We could hear the sound of the car motor as it stopped at the prison gate. The detainees assembled around the window to have a look at it. Panic has seized the hearts ever since the interrogation started. We were not able to know who is going to be next. Some policemen got off the car and opened the door. One of them entered. He was short and his face and belly were bloated. He called in a hideous voice:

Riyadh Qassim

He answered carelessly

The voice went on to say:

What do you want to do to me?

We'll take to hell.

May Hell burn you!

O dog!

One of them moved forward to Riyadh and dealt a blow to him by the rifle

butt. Riyadh held him forcibly and threw him on the floor.(p.99)

The reaction of the detainees is what the novel prioritizes. Obviously this is a moment of elation to the detainees as they watch their fellow inmate behave in a manly and defiant way before his persecutors. However, the next step would only dispel all these sentiments and bring them back to their harsh reality:

I smiled approvingly but my smile soon vanished as another policeman

advanced and struck him by the rifle butt. Then he fell down unconscious

on the floor. They striped him off his clothes and took him outside the ward, leaving his possessions and clothes on the floor.

Hassoun said:

He's finished.

The hall was enveloped by sheer silence.

In my head there was a terrible clamour, shouting, sharp cracking sounds, cymbal sounds, bleating, whining of the moribund , neighing. I could not find one to support me. I could not help weeping.(p.100)

This moving situation has been preceded by the chilling account the detainees keep on exchanging whisperingly that some prisoners were taken outside the prison to be buried alive in the desert.(p.96) Thus one can say that the novelist throughout the entire novel has capitalized on accentuating the outside world---Baghdad and Nasiryya and the differences between the countryside (his native place, Nasiryya) and the morally loose Baghdad. Most of the action takes place outside the prison walls. Even in prison, Karim is always surrounded by his fellow prisoners who sing, recite poetry and recollect their good times in their home city. Accordingly, the nature of narration indirectly comments on and expounds the different aspects of the selfish protagonist. It always revolves around the character of Kareem.By the way, the connotations of the Arabic word (Kareem) have something to do with generosity, tolerance and altruism. All this is deplorably missing in his character. The narrative technique reinforces the character of Kareem as it centers on what goes in his mind and what he perceives. All this is implemented at the expense of screening other important constituents of the narrative to which the author has not paid equal attention.

3. The Conclusion:

In sum, this is a novel which ostensibly talks about an 'autobiographical' experience, but it is contextualized in such a way as to give room to many social and political dimensions. In fact the judgment that sees the novel as the voice of an entirely embittered generation is sound and justifiable enough as it chronicles the sufferings of thousands of men imprisoned for similar charges or even allegations. Irrespective of the narcissistic tone of the book which is felt through the point of view and narration adopted, it has achieved one of the primary tasks of narrative fiction in Marquez's viewpoint. The Columbian novelist argues in his fascinating memoir that life is not what one lived but what he remembers and how he remembers it and tells it (2003,p.1).The impersonal side which is less dominant than the biographical one centers on the existential predicament that has enmeshed Kareem and his baffled dreams. This more or less broadens the perspective of the novel and lessens the mounting impression that all other characters are "simply negative mirrors to the protagonist"(al-A'a ni,1989,p165).

Seen from another angle, *al-Washm* gives an authentic picture of the social life in the sixties, away from the suffocating world of politics. It embodies life in Baghdad in the 1960s with all its ignoble realities such as poverty, injustice, prostitution, and abortive dreams. It chronicles a very crucial and hectic stage in modern Iraq where the social injustice, class conflict and grim realities of political dynamics are pinpointed, but with no final and conclusive answer. Certainly the option offered by the protagonist of having individual peace in the same way Hemingway made his anti-hero of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) live is not a valid one. If escape has proved to be feasible for the author, the thousands or even millions of people involved in this endless struggle find the book's primary postulate frustrating and defeatist.

It has become evident by now that *al-Washm* is a major work not only in the Iraqi novel but also in the Arab novel in general. He has successfully tackled different issues in modern Arab sensibility and awareness. The novel shows unmistakably the discontent of certain segments of society: the marginalized and their abortive dreams. Kareem al-Nasiri, no matter how one views him, remains a controversial figure in the entire novel and his recollections, ruminations and self-introspection are memorable. Indeed, *al-Washm* is an in-depth analysis of the inflated ego in its daily encounter with unexpected and sinister forces. The three months imprisonment Kareem has to put up with gains considerable momentum when it is filtered through his perturbed and anguished soul. The sense of place is dominant in the novel in that the writer gives a graphic picture of the institutions, places, and the suffocating cells that become the protagonist's never-ending nightmare. If there is heavy emphasis on the psychological life of the protagonist, such places serve as the background that triggers such incompatible reactions and sentiments. The novel embodies some love relationships. The objective behind all these is to show the fact that Kareem is spiritually stifled and is lacking the power to respond to normal love relations. The interior monologues, authorial descriptions and recurrent dialogues exchanged between Karin and his fellow inmates are put at the service of the primary task of illuminating his uncommon attitudes when it comes to the questions of love, sex and friendship. What strikes more about the protagonist's attitudes is the mounting sense of alienation and inability to interact with the recurrent calls of love and marriage. In short, *al-Washm* is a novel that pays great attention to showing Kareem and the surrounding environment and its irresistible effects on the individual in his daily practice. It is this curious combination between the individual and the public life that imbues the novel with its distinct touch. Perhaps the main merit of this novel is that the author made no attempt whatsoever to endow his main character with anything extraordinary or even admirable. His representation is a reminder that al-Rubayi has in mind similar experiments in the works of Dostoyevsky, Kafka or Hemingway whom he admired considerably and had in mind the moment he wrote his impressive novel.

References

1. Abbass, A.J.(1980) *fi al naqd al qassasi('In Narrative Criticism')*.Baghdad: al- Rasheed Publishing House.

2. al-A'ani, Sh.(1989).*fi adabna aL qassasi al mu'aser ('On Our Contemporary Narrative Literature')*.Baghdad: House of Cultural Affairs.
3. al- Adwani, A.(2011).*bidayat al nas al riway'i: muqarabat li aaliyat tashkel aldalala ('The Genesis of the Narrative Test: Approaches to the Mechanism of Forming the Signification')*.Casablanca: Arab Cultural Centre.
4. Al-Ali, N.S.(2007).*Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present*. London&New York: Zed Books.
5. al-Faisal, S. R.(1994).*al sijn al siyasi fi al- riwayah al- arabiyyah ('Political Imprisonment in Arabic Fiction')*.Tripoli: Gross Press.
6. Allen,R.(1995).*The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*. Syrause,New York: Syracuse UP.
7. Allen, R.(1992). ' The Mature Arabic Novel Outside Egypt'. Ed.M.M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature*.Cambridge: CUP: 193-222.
8. al-Nassaj,S.H.(n.d.) *panorama al- riwayah al- arabiyyah al haditha('Panorama of the Modern Arabic Novel')*.Cairo: Gharib Library.
9. al- Rubayi, A. M.(1999).*al khuroj min bait al ta'a: shahadat fi aL adab wa al hayat ('Disobeying the Patriarchal Authority: Testimonies on Literature and Life')*.Ed.and introd. Khalid M. Ghazi. Cairo: Arab Press Agency.
10. al- Ra'i, A.(1991). *al- riwayah al- arabiyyah('The Arabic Novel')*.Limassol:al- Saqr al- Arabi li al- Ibda'.
11. al- Rubayi, A. M.(2002).*al- Washm ('The Tattoo')*. Rabat: Zaman Publishing House.
12. al- Rubayi, A. M.(1984).*aswat wa khatawat('Voices and Steps')*. Beirut: Arab Foundation for Publication.
13. Armstrong, T.(2005). *Modernism: A Cultural History*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
14. Bloom, H.(2004).*The Victorian Novel*.NY: Chelsea House Publishers.
15. Bushrui,S & Malarkey,J.M.(eds.)(2012).*The literary history of the Arabs: An anthology*. London: Saqi.
16. Caini,F.& Cobham,C.(2013).*The Iraqi Novel: Key Writers , Key Texts*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
17. Foucault, M.(2012).*Discipline & punish: The birth of the prison*.Trans. Alan Sheridan. NY: Vintage
18. .Hussein, K. (1997). ' False Heroes: A Study of Abd al-Rahman M. al-Rubayi's *al-Washm(The Tattoo)*.*Arab Studies Quarterly*,19(4).Reprinted as a preface to the 2002 edition of the novel:1-31.
19. Marquez,G. G.(2003).*Living to tell the tale*. NY: Knopf Doubleday.
20. Meyer, S.G.(2001).*Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism and the Levant*. NY :State University of New York Press.
21. Miller, Q.D.(ed.)(2003).*Pros and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States*. Jefferson & London: McFarland Inc. Publishers.
22. Obeidi, M. S. (2011). binyat al- shakl al- riwai' wa aaliyateh :muqarana sardiya thaqafiya inda Abd al-Rahman M. al- Rubayi ('The Structure of the Novelistic Form and its Mechanism: A Cultural Narrative Approach to Abd al-Rahman M. al- Rubayi').*Nizwa*,Oman,68:112-128.
23. Thamer ,F.(2004).*al maqmo' wa al masqout a'nh fi al- sard al arabi('The Suppressed and Ignoble in Arabic Narrative')*. Damascus: al- Mada Publishing House.

24. Wu, Y. & Livescye, S. (eds.) (2011). *Human Rights, Suffering, and Aesthetics in Political Prison Literature*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington.