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POSTSCRIPT OF EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION: AN ANALYSIS OF PRODUCTION OF EGYPT AS A SPACE IN BASMA ABDEL AZIZI'S *THE QUEUE* (2016)

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ABSTRACT

Basma Abdel Azizi's dystopian novel *The Queue* (2016), originally *Al-Tabuur*, and translated into English by Elizabeth Jaquette in 2016 bring out the rather bitter aftermaths of the 21st century Egyptian revolution. The novel charts out the impact of the revolution on the life and conscience of a people who are ceaselessly negotiating violence, administrative anarchy and are being deprived of basic human rights. The novel is a symbolic portrayal of thwarted mass aspiration. As a portrayal of the aftermaths of a revolution, the novel is a provocative portrayal of the mired socio-political realities of the contemporary Egyptian society. The preoccupation of the paper is therefore to analyse the post 21st century revolution Egyptian society as portrayed in the novel. The paper approaches Egypt as a space which is physical but also emotional in its construct. Aziz, too in her novel approaches Egypt as a space which is produced by those who approach it. One the one hand, there are the revolutionaries and the common people, and on the other there are bureaucrats, politicians and various representatives of the failed postcolonial state. The paper is more concerned with Egypt as a space produced by the struggles and tears of the common people.

INTRODUCTION:

Egyptian Revolution of 2011 and It's impact

The Egyptian revolution of 2011 (Arabic *Thawarat Khamsa wa-isrun yanayir*) began on 25th January 2011 with a bid to topple the autocratic Hosni Mubarak regime. The last few years of Mubarak presidency was marked by a increase in Human rights violation, police brutality, secret killings, censorship on freedom of speech and expression. So as to protest against this regime, thousands of common people, mostly youth belonging to different socio-economic strata of

the society thronged the streets of Egypt so as to protest against the president Hosni Mubarak. Violent clashes broke out between the protestors and the security forces, resulting in death of more than 846 people and burning of 90 police stations across the country.

On 11th February 2011, the then vice president Omar Suleiman announced the resignation of president Hosni Mubarak. The power was now in the hands of the armed forces. The Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) under the leadership of effective head of the state Mohammad Hussein Tantawi, suspended the constitution and dissolved the parliament till time democratic elections could be held.

After the revolution against Mubarak and a period of military rule, the Muslim Brotherhood through a series of electoral victory came to power. The Islamist leader Mohammad Morsi was elected as the president. However, his victory was short lived. His attempt to introduce an Islamist Constitution sparked fierce opposition and mass protest broke out during his rule on 28th June 2013. Morsi's regime was overthrown by a coup de etat led by minister of defence General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. El-Sisi went on to become the president of Egypt in 2014.

Although the Egyptian revolution of 2011 espoused principles of liberty, equality and fraternity through a mass participation and the subsequent overthrow of an autocratic regime, yet the post revolutionary Egyptian society had to deal with the scars of the revolution. The conflict between the new leadership and the Islamists has continued till date, often resulting in anarchy in the society. Moreover a sustained period of instability has impacted the democratic transition which the country is undergoing. For instance good governance is a distant dream, equity in distribution of resources, modern legal reforms and a steady economic growth has been grossly lacking. Similarly unemployment has risen subsequently. Rise in religious radicalism has also impacted the stability of the society at large.

Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* (2016) and the Production of Post 2011 Revolution Egypt as a Space

Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* looks beyond the excitement and romanticism associated with the Egyptian Revolution. The story is set in an unnamed country with a gate as the central authority. The Gate is portrayed as coming to power after a popular uprising called the "First Storm". So strong is the authority of the gate that every citizen of the country must sign every document from the gate. The Gate never opens for the common people but however is prompt enough to issue ordinances, regulations and decrees from inside. People queue up outside the gate but they can never enter the gate. The queue outside the gate is so long that it resembles a geography of its own. The queue of the novel is symbolic of the post revolutionary anxieties of the citizens. The novelist in her symbolic portrayal of the queue is inspired by a real life episode of people queuing up outside closed government buildings in Cairo (Lynx 2017). In the novel too, the citizens wait for officials who are as faceless as the gate to dispense the evidence of their survival. The novel opens with its protagonist Yehya Gaid el-Rab Saeed, age 38, occupation sales representative, waiting outside the gate waiting to get a permission for a surgery to get a bullet from his body removed, which he had attained during his participation in the revolution. However, the gate never opens. Its function in the novel is to bring out the failed administrative order of the nation state. It is the converse of the opening that the name suggests. The gate is as monument which interpellates and excludes those who approach it. The Gate has 'insinuated itself into everything, people didn't know where its affairs ended and their own began' (Aziz 31).

The gate in the novel is also an intricate portrayal of how socio-political spaces are produced by those who approach it. In the context of the novel, the production of post revolutionary Egyptian socio-political space takes place at three levels. *First* there is the state administrative machinery symbolized by the “Gate”. The panoptic nature of the state is inextricably tied to the politics of the space which it seeks to govern. *Secondly* there are the disillusioned masses, who are frustrated with the overall state of order. Grievances of the people in the novels are not addressed by the state. As a result of which they start negotiating the societal instability in their own manner. Egypt for them as a socio-political space after the revolution is a dystopia. The romanticism and the seeds of hope have failed to germinate. *Thirdly* there is the writer who is producing Egypt as a space in the novel. For the novelist the post revolutionary Egypt as a space is rather dynamic in nature. It is physical and at the same time an emotional space. The emotional longings of Egypt in the mind of the novelist run as an undercurrent in the physical spaces which she portrays in the novel. One approach which is central to the understanding of the novel is the notion that space is relative, mobile and socially produced (Lefebvre 1991; Soja 1989; Harvey 1990). Space, therefore, is at once material, imaginary, symbolic, emotional and linguistic in nature. Lefebvre in his *The Production of Space* (1974) posits three different forms of space namely “firstly the physical-nature, the cosmos; secondly the mental including logical and formal abstractions; and thirdly the social” (Lefebvre 11). His Marxist understanding of space sieves space into three theoretical categories:

Spatial Practice, which embraces production and reproduction, and the particular location and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation...*Representations of space*, which are tied to the relation of production and to the “order” which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to “frontal relations...*Representational spaces*, embodying complex symbolism, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art (which may come eventually to be defined less like a code of space than as a code of representational spaces) (Lefebvre 31).

Literature and language (if, one assumes it to be art) therefore form a part of Lefebvre’s representational space. Similarly language is also central in Lefebvre’s idea of space: “Perhaps what have to be uncovered are as-yet concealed relations between space and language: perhaps the logicalness intrinsic to articulated language operated from the start as a spatiality capable of bringing order to the qualitative chaos (the practico-sensory realm) presented by perception of things” (Lefebvre 17). Language, therefore, becomes a key concept in his proposition of space as “the perceived, the conceived and the lived” (Lefebvre 38).

Drawing from Lefebvre’s conception of space as mobile, relative and socially produced, theorists have argued the necessity of viewing the individual body as spaces in their own right. The ‘space’ of our body is encoded with maps of desire, disgust, pleasure, pain, loathing, love (Pile 209). The body is a site for consumption and expression of values. It is only through the body that we perceive the qualities of space that we inhabit; through our cultural baggage, we access, adopt and design space.

In the novel too, we see the different approaches to Egypt as a socio-political space. The state for instance, with its panoptic sight intrudes into the hearts and souls of the characters. In the novel the “Gate” which is symbolic of the state machinery is building an invisible wall around its citizens. Every citizen strives

to get sanctions from the gate as a proof of his existence. The case of Amani for instance brings out the stark realities of the functioning of the state. Amani's case is the sole case which is heard by the state. After a series of events Amani is detained and dumped by the state in dark hollows. Similarly Yehya who had participated in the revolution fails to attain the signature which would enable him to go for the surgery. In the context of the novel the post revolutionary state is creating a repressive space. This repressive space resembles that unfulfilled promises and the unrealized hopes of the past. The uncanny nature of the past administrative order lurks into the present. The post revolution nation state in the novel has inherited the past order of things and as such resembles the past in diverse ways. Eminent space theorist Lefebvre argues that the state transforms inherited socio-political spaces and in turn contributes to the organization of a national as well as a global geopolitical spatial re-organisation. In the novel too, inherited political landscapes after the revolution has led to a production of a repressive space where the grievances of its citizens are not addressed properly. Lefebvre argues in his work *De l'E'tat* (1976) :

As the product, the child, of a space, the so-called national territory, the State turns back toward its own historical conditions and antecedents, and transforms them. Subsequently, the State engenders social relations in space; it reaches still further as it unfurls; it produces a support, its own space, which is itself complex. This space regulates and organizes a disintegrating national space at the heart of a consolidating worldwide space (l'espace mondial) (Lefebvre 261–262).

Similarly for the disillusioned characters of the novel, the nation state as a space is a dystopia. The aims of the revolution have not been realised. And the current state of affairs has impugned the very nature of the nation state which they inhabit. Their very definition of nation as a home for them is in a flux. For characters like Yehya and Ammi, the post revolutionary nation is a site of contested desires and violence. The image of Yehya bleeding to death and Ammi succumbing into the emptiness of the hollows bring out stark realities of the very definition of the nation as a home. For these protagonists repressive regulations and sanctions, abject poverty and death surround the space which they inhabit. In the novel the characters aptly relate to the stark socio-political realities of the space which they inhabit. For instance after her indoctrination Ammi;

Amani relaxed. She found what she'd long hoped for in the Gate's message – stability and tranquility – while Yehya kept slowly bleeding. It was all a simple fiction, she decided; that was the rational and convincing explanation, but it had fooled her and everyone else. If only she'd accepted it from the start [...]. (Aziz 210).

The "Gate" therefore as a physical space, internalizes repressive memories of the state. For Ammi and Yehya the gate contains and accumulates several layers of memories for the subjects who inhabit it. The death of Yehya and the indoctrination of Ammi for instance transform the nation state for them into a violent and anarchic space where hospitals are crammed with injured and diseased patients and where human lives fail to achieve the penultimate realizations of their spirits.

For Basma Abdel Aziz, the novelist the unnamed nation state that she has articulated in the novel is carved out of the memories of her homeland Egypt. The queue of the title of the novel is at once physical and at the same time emotional. The queue of the novel is in part inspired by the queuing of the ordinary masses outside government offices in Cairo. This image of the queue had perhaps stayed in the consciousness of the novelist and the novel is a

manifestation of the tumultuous emotional space which has remained embedded in the consciousness of the novelist for a long time. It is the memories of the post revolutionary nation state which the novelist has been negotiating in the novel. The tumultuous experiences of the post revolutionary nation in the novel are therefore translated by Aziz in spatial terms. Space theorists Yi-Fu Tuan argue Space is a realm “enriched with human experience and understanding: an organized world of meaning” (Tuan 1976). For Altman and Low it is a “setting to which individuals are emotionally and culturally attached.” (Altman and Low 1992). For Basma Abdel Aziz too, Egypt as a space is carved out of the memories of the events occurring in the physical space which bears in her conscience.

Conclusion

Therefore, the novel aptly portrays how Egypt has been approached by various individuals and organizations who inhabit it. All these approaches produce Egypt as a space which is a complex conglomerate of memory, violence, instability and the desire for stability amidst the fetters of uncertainty. The queuing up of the citizens outside the all pervading “Gate” is symbolic of the inescapable nature of one’s nation state. The nation state as a individual and social space is deeply embedded in the heart and souls of its inhabitants. On the one hand is the gate- a physical embodiment of powerful state machinery that is at times repressive to its inhabitants and on the other hand is predicament of characters like Yehya and Ammi whose destinies are tied to the functionings of the “Gate”. The gate for them as a nation state is psychological in nature. It what Michel Foucault calls the “heterotopias” – a space which is at once physical but also psychological. The negotiations carried out with the stark socio-political realities unfolding in the space also at the same time gives the protagonist of the novel an identity as citizens of a post revolutionary nation state.

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