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WRITING SHAME IN ASAD'S SYRIA

By Judith Naeff

Martha Nussbaum wrote in 1995 that “emotions are not just likely responses to the content of many literary works; they are built into their very structure, as ways in which literary forms solicit attention.”¹ This article analyzes how the Syrian author Khaled Khalifa has “built” feelings of shame into the literary structure of his novel *No Knives in the Kitchens of this City* (hereafter *No Knives*).² The article distinguishes two types of shame. The first type is caused by the transgression of often conservative social norms. While Khalifa seems to acknowledge this shame as an inevitable social consequence of transgressive behavior, he passes no moral judgement. It does, however, provoke feelings of shame and disgrace in some readers, who express revulsion and disgust in their reviews of the novel.

The humiliation of submission to the authoritarian rule of the Asads produces the second type of shame. Rather than provoked by the breach of honor, this type of shame follows from the assault on human dignity to which the subject is unable to stand up. Shame in *No Knives* travels from character to character, and from characters to readers, in uncontrolled ways.

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The pervasiveness of both types of shame in the novel—that of dishonor and that of humiliation—resonates with the literary evocation of an unstoppable spread of corruption, rot, and decline. The third section of the article addresses the literary strategies that express the affective quality of shame in Khalifa's Syria. It argues that the recurring motif of stench and the disintegration of narrative structure and language are literary strategies that inspire the reader to recoil in ways similar to the shame-ridden characters.

With these three steps, the article argues that the all-pervasive sense of shame in *No Knives* makes an ethical appeal to insist on moral judgement in the face of corruption and subjugation, even if we fail to act on it. The argument builds upon the growing body of scholarship known as affect studies, especially as articulated in the field of literary studies.³ A crucial element of these studies is that they shift away from interiorized psychological understandings of emotion, towards an approach that takes into account its bodily articulation, as well as its sociopolitical and ethical implications. Rather than residing in the heart of the individual, affect “sticks” in Sara Ahmed's words, strongly binding people to each other around things and ideas.⁴ In such a view, affect is the necessary glue of ideology, as it preserves the connection between, say, the national flag and a shared feeling of pride, or between that same object and feelings of fear or contempt. Ahmed thus situates affect at the center of political mobilization. In the same line, literary emotions are understood here as *moving*, that is, affect is understood as setting individuals and collectives in motion. This article teases out *how* Khalifa's novel produces shame as such a mobilizing affect. By weaving shame into the depiction of characters, the development of plot, the use of metaphors and even in the novel's narrative structure, the author provokes an almost physical response of aversion, which he consistently directs to the authoritarian regime under which his characters try to live their lives with dignity.

No Knives in the Kitchens of this City

Within the past two decades or so, novelist, screenwriter, and poet Khaled Khalifa has emerged as an important literary voice in and beyond Syria. Two of his novels were shortlisted for the prestigious International Prize for Arabic Fiction. One won the Naguib Mahfouz medal for literature, and

several have appeared in translation. The public interest in his works has to do both with his distinct literary style, and with the way in which his works express the sentiments of fear, outrage, disenchantment, and humiliation that led to the uprisings and subsequent war in Syria. Significantly, he was one of the first, if not the first, fiction writers to publicly address the massacres in Hama, Homs, and Aleppo in the beginning of the 1980s. Despite this wide acclaim, Khalifa has received scant scholarly attention.⁵

No Knives is Khalifa's fourth novel and revolves around a family in Aleppo struggling to live under the Asad regime. To understand their struggle against the subjugation enforced by Hafez and later his son Bashar al-Asad, at least two elements of Syrian authoritarianism should be highlighted. On the one hand, the Asad regime relied, as it still does in a state of war at the time of writing, on the terror of army and police brutality, forced disappearances, mass incarceration, and torture, sustained by a web of multiple secret services creating a general atmosphere of fear and suspicion. On the other hand, there is the omnipresence of the Ba'ath party, the army, and above all, the leader. The glorification of Asad, the father and later the son, on posters and banners, on radio and television, and the frequent public parades, chants, and ceremonies expressing exalted loyalty to the leader seem rather absurd to outsiders. In her seminal article "Acting As If," Lisa Wedeen asks why it is that the Syrian regime demands participation in such rituals and rhetoric.⁶ Most common theories of ideology assume that authorities need a measure of public consent and legitimacy. In contrast, Wedeen argues, the authoritarian regime of the Asads seeks to make its subjects complicit by continually demanding "external evidence of their allegiance to a cult whose rituals of obeisance are often transparently phony."⁷ This demand to participate in spectacles of obedience is enforced by the regime's reign of fear. Forced complicity, rather than fabricated legitimacy, is what sustains the authoritarian regime.

No Knives was largely written before, but completed shortly after the Syrian uprising erupted in 2011. The slogan of those protests was "bread, dignity, freedom" or a variant of those three. Khalifa's novel, and his oeuvre more broadly, makes painfully palpable why the demand for dignity was as urgent as the demand for bread and freedom. Indeed, in her discussion of *In Praise of Hatred*, Rita Sakr maintains, "Khaled Khalifa suggests that if the story remains imprisoned in indignant chests, it could

explode destructively as soon as the layers of fear start to erode."⁸ It is for this reason that Khalifa's novels are important not only for their literary merit, but also for the ethical appeal they make in the face of the tragedy that is recent Syrian history. At the time of writing, the world complacently allows Bashar al-Asad to violently take back control over the last ruinous remains of those moments of popular revolution. This analysis of Khalifa's *No Knives* speaks to this bleak present by drawing attention to the daily struggle for dignity that has continued largely unnoticed before, after, and parallel to the open revolt of 2011.

The character-bound nameless male narrator of *No Knives* is born on the day of Hafez al-Asad's coup in 1963. His mother, who fiercely rejects the Ba'th, considers this coincidence a bad omen.⁹ Since the narrator never relinquishes his position as an observer, we know very little about him. He graduated in 1987, served in the army and works as a translator in a textile factory. He is aware, more than his brother and sister, of the fact that he is living "a parallel life." He is withdrawn from the all-consuming Party—the Ba'th is never mentioned by name—but still has to accommodate its effects on society. The narrator reflects on the history of his family while sharing the old family home with his mother, now sick and senile.

This *materfamilias* was once a proud upper-middle class lady, eager to dissociate herself from the peasants in her husband's village, as well as from the uncouth party comrades that invade the Aleppo neighborhood where the family settles after the father has run off to live in the United States with another woman. The story is fragmentary, now focusing on the narrator's sister Sawsan, then on his brother Rashid, or his uncle Nizar. In the background is the sad family home with a bitter mother, gasping for breath since the military took over the country, and clinging to her notable origins.

The narrator's sister is the irrepressible, unpredictable Sawsan who is on a lengthy and unhinged search for fulfilment. She first joins a paramilitary group, following her commander and lover to Dubai. When her lover refuses to marry her based on sectarian divisions, Sawsan seeks redemption in religiosity. She hopes to find meaning in Islam, starting with a surgery to "restore" her virginity. Her religiousness borders on the extreme, but she realizes in time that this will not bring her salvation. When she ends up alone and disillusioned, she leaves for Paris for good. Sawsan is the only character in the novel that represents both the victim and her

executioner, and as such she is the connecting link between the supporters of the regime—informants, officers, tradesmen, and the religious establishment—and the opposition—those who are on the run, who are drowning in despair and misery.

The brother, Rashid, is a sensitive young musician, suffering greatly from the violence and injustice that plague Syrian society. In a desperate attempt to find meaning and overcome his own cowardice, he joins an Islamist mission against the American invasion in Baghdad (2003), but he flees when they are under attack and returns to Aleppo. Defeated by his failed attempt at heroism, he is eventually driven to suicide, with which the novel ends. Their eldest sister, Suad, was born mentally and physically challenged, something the mother found impossible to accept. Sawsan never forgives her mother for neglecting the child and the quiet burial of her body and possessions upon Suad's early death.

Finally, uncle Nizar, the brother of the narrator's mother, is a generous, joyous and warm individual. As a gay man, he enjoyed relative freedom in the interwar "liberal era" but now has to face a city that rejects him as an outcast. He flees to Beirut, where he lives a decadent life until he loses everything: his lover, his hope, and his self-esteem. He returns to Aleppo, where he builds a successful career as a musician. In the end, Nizar is by far the most successful member of the family.

This family of searching souls, driven to despair, inhabits a house that is gradually conquered by mold and the putrid smell of decay and excrement.¹⁰ The mother constantly complains of a lack of oxygen. The fall of the family and decay of the house reflect the disintegration Syrian society since the fateful day of Asad's coup and the narrator's birth. This decline of the nation is arguably the main theme of the novel, which is then reflected fractally in ever smaller units. The once elegant and cosmopolitan city of Aleppo falls to boorish party members, corrupt officials, criminals, and "bearded men" who are loud, smelly, banal, and often violent.¹¹ The neighborhood transforms from fragrant open lettuce fields to a dense and crime-ridden urban district. The family's house is overtaken by mold and rot. The family is fragmented by an overwhelming sense of sadness and apathy. The sister Sawsan constantly exceeds her own boundaries and the suffocating, stinking mother neglects her motherly duties, becomes senile and finally dies in the house.

The novel is replete with shameful behavior, especially to more conservative standards. The plot includes cases of adultery, divorce, harassment, rape, same-sex love and intimacy, sex work, and cross-dressing as well as explicit descriptions of sexual desires and acts. An uninformed reading could argue that characters losing their moral compass and transgressing normative boundaries simply reflect the larger theme of a society falling apart under the destructive forces of corruption and violence. Yet, Khalifa's sympathetic portrayal of his characters tells us that their shameful conduct should not be read as a mere metaphor for moral degeneration. Indeed, *The Guardian* quotes Khaled Khalifa as saying "it is the duty of writing to help break down taboos and clash with fixed and backward concepts."¹² The analysis in this article shows that the novel's transgressions of the often conservative norms governing the characters' social world, as well as that of many readers, do even more than break taboos. The author mobilizes the reader's affective response to foreground another kind of shame. This shame does not arise from a breach of honor, and its associated boundaries of social appearance, manners, and norms. It is provoked instead by a breach of dignity, individual autonomy, and human integrity. The shame of irrepressible appetites and the inability to comply to social norms *mirrors* the shame of complicity in a system of brutal tyranny and rampant corruption. This mirroring both distinguishes and connects the two types of shame discussed in this article. By teasing out the nature of shame's variations and affective economies in the novel in the following sections, the article argues that the all-pervasive sense of shame in *No Knives* makes an ethical appeal to insist on moral judgement in the face of corruption and subjugation, even if we fail to act on it.

Shame and Honor

One instance of shame in *No Knives* revolves around uncle Nizar's homosexuality. This homosexuality expresses itself in various ways. There are episodes during which Nizar tries to repress it, and others where he tries to escape from repression, such as when he moves to Beirut. There are episodes in which his sexual orientation exposes him to harm, such as when he is abused by a shaykh during his time in prison, and, later, when

he is involved in a self-destructive relationship with the violent Madhat. Yet, there is also a period of a truly balanced, affectionate and fulfilling relationship with Michel. His sexuality seems, moreover, to be associated with a general air of eccentricity and generosity, and it involves an instance of cross-dressing. Although there are many examples of homosexual characters to be found in Arabic literature, this diversity of desires, conduct, and relationships is rare.¹³ Khalifa depicts Nizar as partly conditioned by his sexual orientation, because he cannot repress it and it exposes him to violent abuse. At the same time, he is not completely defined by it, because he fashions his life and his relationships in various ways in order to accommodate these conditions.

Despite the depth of this characterization, Nizar's sexuality is repeatedly, explicitly, and directly related to shame. His brother in law, Haytham Sabbagh, for example, sympathizes with him but also "felt ashamed that [Nizar] was uncle to his only son Najib."¹⁴ Haytham's wife, aunt Ibtihal, goes as far as to prevent Nizar from attending his nephew's funeral and even takes the opportunity of the funeral to heap abuse on him.¹⁵ Nizar himself "was thinking of killing himself and burying his sexuality, to save us all and to shield us from the shame which we had endured as a family for years."¹⁶

In a helpful glossary of various shades of shame in the Arabic lexicon, Nader Al Jallad identifies words that signify shame as a good function of moral behavior, nearly untranslatable to English. Examples are *hishma* and *haya*, both denoting an appropriate tendency, especially for women and children, to become shy and embarrassed in the presence of others.¹⁷ *Fadiha* is rather a form of shame that comes from the exposure of a secret and embarrassing action, for which the committing subject might not feel shame at all if it were not for the exposure.¹⁸ In contrast, the word *'ar* is used in the case of Nizar's shame in *No Knives*, signifying an intense, profound and everlasting sense of disgrace "triggered by committing deeds that are in extreme opposition to moral values and social norms."¹⁹ Shame in all of these instances, far from an interiorized feeling, is a social phenomenon related to proper conduct. Homosexuality, in transgressing contemporary social norms in Syria, inevitably affects the family as whole. Regardless of the feelings that uncle Nizar or his sexuality inspire in his family members, this externally imposed shame is profoundly oppressive.

Yet, the novel presents Nizar as one of the few characters, if not the only character, who succeeds in retaining a sense of dignity and autonomy in a deteriorating country. His relationship with the violent and abusive Madhat is particularly telling in this respect. Rashid describes Madhat as “shameful and unworthy of his beloved uncle.”²⁰ The Arabic word used here is *fadiha*, that is the shame of being exposed. While the shame of Nizar’s homosexuality deeply affects the social position of all involved, his family does not seem to make any moral judgement and continues to value him as an individual. In contrast, they strongly reject Madhat’s abuse as shameful, not because it is dishonorable in the social sense, but because it is immoral and humiliating. Eventually, to everyone’s surprise, Nizar is able to radically turn the table. He forces Madhat into a life of misery and humiliation. Nizar emerges dignified, planning to carve out a place for himself and his loved ones, away from the decaying city of Aleppo.

A second example of transgressive behavior that causes shame is represented by the narrator’s sister, Sawsan, who is consistently described as “irrepressible.” Open, frivolous and excited, her body’s voluptuousness and wafting odors are uncontainable and excite men and women alike. Sawsan struggles to channel her own desires, too. Like in Nizar’s case, the social shame produced by her premarital relationship and her provocative style of dress inspires sympathy rather than rejection. Moreover, as in Nizar’s case, the narrative craftily redirects the target of rejection from Sawsan to those who feel entitled to humiliate her. When, at the age of forty, she decides to dress up again, with a short skirt and a top that leaves her pink bra visible, she returns home only a few minutes later, having been attacked and harassed by a group of men in the street. Sawsan takes a kitchen knife and leaves the house to avenge herself but she only finds “various mothers opening their doors, cursing her and calling her a whore.”²¹ The reference to the novel’s title here is significant. Although Sawsan *does* have a kitchen knife, she and her family remain powerless in the face of those with more conservative norms, who clearly control the social sphere in which the characters live. When she returns home, “she saw our weakness and fear, and felt that she was alone. There was nothing she could do but go to Comrade Jaber and write the reports he wanted and reclaim her gun, but this she wouldn’t do.”²² The social shame that Sawsan’s transgression might have provoked, is thus redirected to the family’s incapacity to protect her integrity from the looks,

harassment, or rejection of others. Moreover, from Sawsan's refusal to return to the Party emerges a sense of dignity that at least partly counterbalances the humiliation on the streets.

While the author and characters seem to withhold judgement, many readers respond emotionally to the characters' shameful transgressions of conservative moral codes, and especially the author's graphic depictions of them. The findings of Nienke Weiland's comparative analysis of reviews of, and reader responses to, the novel show that while professional reviewers tend to withhold moral judgment, the novel's erotic passages are a main reason for negative reception among a wider audience.²³ Online reader responses include comments such as "Too bad that sex was present in a number of descriptions," "Is this the level of literature that wins prizes nowadays? Shame remains on who reads even one letter of it," and "# no morals in this city."²⁴ While there were also many positive reviews, readers regularly use words like *muz'ij* (disturbing, unsettling), *ghathayan* (nausea, sickness), and *ishmi'zaz* (disgust, aversion) in their responses to Khalifa's novel.²⁵

The examples of Nizar's homosexuality and Sawsan's provocative appearance and behavior serve to show how the novel's confrontation of taboos inspire some readers' moral outrage, ridden with shame and disgust. But the novel does more than provocation. Apart from presenting its transgressive characters with great sensitivity and sympathy to counter such social taboos, *No Knives* also seeks to mobilize these emotions of moral rejection, and to redirect them away from these characters and towards those that feel entitled to humiliate them. At the end of the day, it is the failure to protect the characters that causes the shame that permeates the novel. This second type of shame, caused by powerlessness and humiliation, is directly related to the experience of complicity with an oppressive regime.

Shame and Dignity

The shame caused by a failure to protect the human dignity of self and others punctuates the novel and is always directly caused by the regime and its allies. The novel relates it to the humiliating demand upon civilians to publicly show loyalty to the regime, as well as by more concrete forms of complicity, such as Sawsan's membership of the paratroopers. The cases of Nizar and Sawsan of the previous section demonstrate that shame is

not so much an interiorized feeling, but rather a social configuration. The shameful sense of humiliation in the face of tyranny moves in multiple directions and produces a peculiar sociality that is at once deeply intimate and profoundly alienating.

While it is clear that the narrator feels deeply humiliated and ashamed, he doesn't address his shame directly. He reflects on his own shame only by describing that of others. In a passage near the end of the novel, the narrator explains his survival strategy of shutting out dreams and hopes and existing only in the present. This, according to the narrator, is the only possible road to happiness under tyranny. Yet, he continues by expressing the fear of total collapse. This fear for the future immediately demonstrates the narrator's failure to live happily in the present in the way he proposes. He is afraid of becoming like "the pleasant man in the accounts office."²⁶

He was like me in his inability to shout, and turned a deaf ear to the banalities of his colleagues, who competed to demonstrate the greatest loyalty and veneration for the President before the informers. . . . When I missed him one day, his colleagues told me he had killed his wife, his two children, and then himself, and explained, "He found out his wife was a whore and his children weren't his." But I believed it was something else—he couldn't bear his life any more. The silence and the shame that were integral to his image were also Jean's. He had produced a small book entitled "On Shame and its By-Products in Syrian Life."²⁷

Here, the narrator takes the liberty to refuse to believe that his colleague's shame is produced by the transgression of social norms, an explanation that presupposes that the murders are an attempt to save his honor. The wife's alleged adultery is equivalent to Nizar and Sawsan's conduct. In line with the larger theme of the novel, this type of honor-related shame is reinterpreted as the shame of unbearable subjugation. This passage is one of many instances in which shame jumps from character to character. The narrator is in the midst of explaining his recipe for happiness, which is based upon strategic numbness, when his fear for becoming like his colleague pops up, interrupting the narrative just as fear imposes itself unexpectedly and abruptly. Rather than bringing the anecdote back to the narrator's isolation and shame, the passage ends with yet another character,

Jean. He in turn exteriorizes his shame, situating it in Syrian society at large with his small book.

Jean is a key figure in representing shame as a contagion across characters as well as the transformation of the question of honor into one of dignity. Significantly, he is not a part of the family, as if the deeply felt shame of complicity can only be discussed through an external other. Jean is the former French teacher of Sawsan, a man of so-called “good taste,” of the Christian upper middle class in Aleppo. His ailing mother, Mary, revels in nostalgia, recalling the splendor of French-ruled Aleppo and celebrating the city’s long history. But Jean only feels defeated in the face of the city’s present. The forced participation in spectacles of obedience to the regime is particularly and profoundly humiliating for him. Khalifa describes Jean’s experience as follows:

He hadn’t wanted to see Aleppo again; he felt completely cut off from it. He couldn’t bear the filthy streets and the Party parades he had to join so regularly, walking with a bowed head as if in submission. He moved his lips slowly when the crowds around him called out in loud voices; he felt that he would have a heart attack before reaching the end of the parade. Returning home covered in dust, he replayed the sight of his respectable colleagues holding the shoulders of the person in front of them and stamping rhythmically in time with the songs blaring from the speakers, and he felt ashamed. Exhausted, he would wash and make some strong coffee.”²⁸

A number of features characterize this description of Jean’s shame. First, his condition is described as radical isolation. This is reinforced by the contrast between his own performance “with a bowed head,” moving “his lips slowly,” on the one hand, and the “blaring speakers,” “stamping” and “loud voices” of the parade, on the other. Second, the surroundings are described as “filthy,” and when he returns home “covered in dust” he washes himself. Finally, Jean’s shame is provoked not so much, or not only, by the humiliation of his own participation, but by the sight of “his respectable colleagues.”

Khalifa describes Jean’s shame in corporeal terms, a bowed head covered in dust. Shame is, indeed, a particularly bodily affect. Elsbeth Probyn describes shame as “the body calling out its hopes and discomfort because it feels out-of-place.”²⁹ Gilles Deleuze reads this peculiar and disturbing

disjuncture between mind, body and feeling in T. E. Lawrence's memoirs: "It is as if [the mind] were saying to the body: You make me ashamed. You ought to be ashamed. . . . 'A bodily weakness which made my animal self crawl away and hide until the shame was passed.'"³⁰ While shame only arises in relation to others, the affect dynamically and vehemently turns simultaneously inwards and outwards. Ill at ease with itself and others, the body cringes with shame and self-loathing.

Khalifa uses the same word *'ar* in his description of Jean's shame, as in the passages describing the dishonor of Nizar and Sawsan, suggesting the affect is equally intense, profound and durable.³¹ However, the relational dimension of shame has a different dynamic. Disgrace and dishonor radiate from transgressive subjects such as Nizar and Sawsan, affecting relatives and social relations in concentric circles. Under certain circumstances the transgressive act can be a form of self-assertion and liberation that is powerful precisely because of this effect on surrounding others. The shame of humiliation lacks this liberatory potential. It works pluri-directionally, affecting participants, observers, and readers with shame, whose cringing bodies in turn embarrass self and others. The shame of Jean produces a peculiar sociality, where the acts of others deeply affect him, but at the same time radically cut him off. That is, the humiliating complicity of others has a distancing effect, causing a profound sense of isolation, while it also intimately touches Jean at the core of his being.

Writing on Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, Walter Benjamin points out that "shame is an intimate human reaction, but at the same time it has social pretensions. Shame is not only shame in the presence of others, but can also be shame one feels for them."³² In other words, shame is not only produced by one's own inadequacy as judged by others, but also by bearing witness to the moral inadequacy of others. The final passage of *The Trial*, describing the protagonist K.'s execution, is marked by his profound discomfort regarding the humiliating banality of his executioners' gestures. Rather than a dramatic grand finale as readers might expect, the execution is marked by reciprocal embarrassment. While K. feels ashamed by the clumsiness of his own execution, quietly carried out far from the eyes of the public, the Party parades in *No Knives* are loud and ostentatious spectacles which Jean perceives as vulgar, not clumsy. Yet, there are also important similarities.

Significantly, the acts of both K.'s executioners and Jean's respectable colleagues are complicit in a state system the banality of which erases the human dignity of its subjects. Moreover, it is precisely these acts of complicity, no matter their differences, that humiliate, and it is precisely the banality of this process, as well as the incapacity to resist, that evoke shame in the literary narrator, who is simultaneously the complicit participant in, and embarrassed witness to, the event. Like Sawsan's incapacity to protect her bodily integrity from harassment except by dispensing her political integrity to collaboration with the Party, Jean is humiliated by his incapacity to avoid participation in the rituals demanded by a regime he loathes.

This leads to a potential ethical claim of literary shame. Shame has been understood as a fundamental part of our capacity for moral judgement, with the sin of tasting the fruit from the tree of knowledge in genesis as its archetypal origin.³³ Significantly, Probyn's and Deleuze's discussions of shame cited above are predicated upon the white experience in Australia and Britain's betrayal of the Arabs respectively. More complex than guilt, to be complicit in such a shameful history exceeds the moral individual capacity to act. To feel shame in these cases is to insist on the ability to distinguish right from wrong, even though we fail to act upon it. To be affected by the shame of Jean, which is also the narrator's and the Syrian people's, is to share a sense of moral indignation in the face of prolonged subjugation. The shame and self-loathing of Khalifa's characters is intimately bound up with their refusal to be swallowed up by the Party, even if only in their minds.

Pervasive Shame

We have seen how shame travels from Nizar and Sawsan to their family members to Khalifa's more conservative readers, and from the narrator's colleague, to Jean, to the Syrian people. The verb "traveling," however, does not capture the quality of this instability. In line with our findings so far, affect theory addresses both the corporeality and the relationality of affect, distinguishing the concept from "emotion," understood as interiorized, psychological and subjective. Moira Gatens has argued that such an understanding of "the contagiousness of 'collective' affects" leads us to "question common sense notions of the privacy or 'integrity' of bodies."³⁴ The fact that such an intimate feeling as shame and our uncontrolled corporeal response

to it—our cringing toes and bowed heads—is at the same time profoundly social, is disturbing, because we rather consider ourselves, our bodies and minds, to be autonomous.

Khalifa employs various literary strategies to make the unbearable shame of his characters palpable to the readers. Resonating with Gatens's notion of "contagiousness," Khalifa describes shame as an all-pervasive sense of rot and decay. Rashid and Sawsan, for example, when describing the songs of praise coming from the neighbors, the solemnity of the news-readers, and the cheering crowds during party parades, agree that "it was like a vault where the mold first marked a beautiful painting, and then spread until rot even saturated the air, sullyng the vocal chords and constricting the throat."³⁵ In this passage, suffocation implies silencing: "it would be a long time until the hoarse throats would regain their ability to scream."³⁶ The sense of suffocation is thus linked to the loss of one's voice in Hafez al-Asad's Syria.

Stench, moreover, is all-pervasive. It not only spreads, but also permeates the air, the furniture, the clothes, the skin. Khalifa reinforces this pervasive nature of bad smell through repetition, both as a figure of speech, as in the example of the spreading mold cited above, and in descriptions, particularly of the changing neighborhood in Aleppo. The arrival of the loyal party comrade Fawaz, who comes to live on the ground floor, for example, leads the family's house to decay. When Fawaz boards up their windows, the lack of daylight turns the apartment into a tomb overtaken by rot. Through the small opening that is left, the stench of excrement from Fawaz's livestock creeps in.³⁷ With the mother of the family continually complaining about a lack of oxygen, waving her hands and opening windows to no avail, the suffocating stench of decay thus permeates the novel's narrative through repetition. This strategy reinforces the reader's sense of the pervasive rot permeating the air, the city, the house, and the bodies of the characters.

Decay, death, and excrement belong to the realm of the abject. Their smell provokes an immediate and instinctual corporeal repulsion. This bodily response resembles the experience of shame: the contracting stomach, the cringing, the helpless discomfort with one's own body. It is not only a similarity on the level of bodily response though. As Julia Kristeva argues, the encounter with the abject is always already ridden with guilt and shame, even if we successfully turn away from it. It is the shame of being drawn

towards what we reject, fascinated with the parts of ourselves and our society that we radically expulse: excrement, menstrual blood, rotten food, garbage. “The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them.”³⁸ Associating complicity with the regime with rot thus effectively evokes an instinctual rejection that resembles the shame of Jean and the narrator discussed in the previous section.

The resonance between the shame of subjugation and the abject stench of decay is reinforced by the urge for purification. When Jean arrives home, in the passage cited above, he washes himself, rinsing the dust and sweat of the Party parades off his body. It seems he wishes to wash the whole afternoon away with it. Sawsan too, “was trying to rid herself of the smells that still clung to her soul and her body: the odor of the Party, the paratroopers, and the past.”³⁹ This is particularly significant, because the young and arguably uncorrupted, albeit irrepressible, Sawsan is described repeatedly in terms of her intoxicating fragrance. The narrator and his other siblings used to bury their heads in their sister’s lap, seeking comfort in an increasingly insecure environment.⁴⁰ Sawsan’s lovers are driven to despair by the unfulfilled desires evoked by her bodily scents.⁴¹ Significantly, in Sawsan’s final years of bitter regret, she has lost her characteristic odor.⁴² There is one other instance of olfactory pleasure, which is the smell of the narrator’s childhood village. When the narrator and Sawsan make a return trip, it is the smell of the countryside that instantly provokes nostalgic yearning. The corruption of Syrian society is thus contrasted to the purity of youth and of simple peasant life.

The notion of the corrupted society is not only reflected in the description of the events, but also in the structure of the narrative and the language. Without adhering to any logical coherence, Khalifa delves into the daily lives of his characters, in a whirl of cherished dreams and frustrated aspirations, a vortex of daily events, of strife, anxiety, mutual incomprehension, and above all a strong feeling of shame that dominates all of them. The nonlinear sequence of events is not merely a literary style, but aims at disorienting the reader. “Characters are presented at a breakneck pace, disappear and return. Previously described events are repeated, as in a spiral. The reader loses grip on the story and feels at a loss,” just like Khalifa’s unhinged characters.⁴³ Although the author jumps from one event to another, without

chronological order, the reader constantly has the feeling that every event, every action, and every decision has a political connotation. The only certainties are the references to political reality, which are scattered randomly throughout the book.

The same strategy of disorientation applies to Khalifa's language: at times it is uncouth, explicit, and extremely rude, and at times it is poetic, expressive, and evocative. Critics have lamented Khalifa's ungrammatical expressions and manner of speech, arguably itself a source of shame, or at least embarrassment, in literary circles. One is tempted to think that such language is also deliberately employed to unsettle the reader. Figurative language, narrative structure, and linguistic choices thus all work together to perturb the reader in ways resembling the characters' sense of bewilderment. Khalifa's shame pervades characters, setting, plot, narrative, and reader in prose that spreads and spills like stinking mold.

Unlike scholars such as Martha Nussbaum, for whom disgust is by definition morally suspect, I argue that Khalifa strategically employs feelings of disgust to make an ethical appeal.⁴⁴ The variations of aversion expressed in online readers' responses therefore have a political significance beyond the conservative sexual morality from which they most likely originate. Sianne Ngai challenges Nussbaum's claim by pointing towards the politics of a poetry that desires to become intolerable.⁴⁵ The aesthetics of disgust in her discussion are directed against a postmodern culture of indiscriminatory tolerance, and seek to resist a market that swallows up all radical aesthetics as pleasurable consumption. In contrast, Khalifa's intervention responds to a context of crippling fear, not numbed consumerism. *No Knives* employs and provokes shame and aversion in order to carve out an ethical position for those forced into submission. Most ethical philosophies are predicated upon the acting subject. But what if ethical action exposes self and others to imprisonment, torture, and death? Khalifa's literary shame forcefully insists on the intolerability of political, social, and cultural subjugation despite the failure to act against it.

Conclusion

By weaving together the life stories of a family of unhinged characters roaming in despair, Khalifa, in drifting prose, simultaneously portrays

and provokes feelings of shame. As one critic puts it: “Shame floods these characters’ veins. Shame about their lust. Shame about their children. And shame, above all, about their failures to fight tyranny.”⁴⁶ Rather than Sara Ahmed’s “sticky” affect, Khalifa’s shame is smelly. Like glue, odors cling to objects and people. They do not remain on the surface, though, but pervade the most intimate spaces: home, clothes, and skin. This qualitative assessment of shame’s relationality is important because it is in the capacity of affect to exceed the individual that affect’s political potential resides.

However, the figure of decay, and the physical repulsion that resonates with shame’s corporeality, shows that no matter its pervasiveness, affect not only works as glue but can just as well fragment and decompose “ideas, values, and objects.”⁴⁷ Indeed, shame’s dynamic nature in the novel can be characterized in terms of a pervasive spread which unravels previously established relations, much like rot, one of the main metaphors throughout the novel. This is the duality of shame: an affect that is at once relational and profoundly alienating, an emotion that is contagious but makes us turn away from each other. And yet, despite, or perhaps because of, this duality, shame is an affect that can, if not mobilize, at least make an ethical appeal. Through recurrent metaphors of the putrefying stench of spreading decay, the social and emotional disintegration in the characters, the decline of the setting and the fragmentation of narrative and language, Khalifa’s novel evokes a sense of repulsion in his readers. This repulsion, resonating with the deep feelings of shame that permeate the novel, might draw the contours of a shared sense of moral rejection, connecting characters and readers across the profound sense of isolation caused by the unravelling of Syria’s social landscapes under the repressive reign of the Asads.

ENDNOTES

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- 4 Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, 29.
- 5 Exceptions are Rita Sakr, *'Anticipating' the 2011 Arab Uprisings: Revolutionary Literatures and Political Geographies*. (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013); miriam cooke, *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience, and the Syrian Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2016); and Anne-Marie McManus, "Sentimental Terror Narratives: Gendering Violence, Dividing Sympathy," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 9, no. 2 (2013): 80-107.
- 6 Lisa Wedeen, "Acting As If: Symbolic Politics and Social Control in Syria," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40, no. 3 (1998), 503.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 504.
- 8 Rita Sakr, *'Anticipating' the Uprisings*, 81.
- 9 The novel does not give any specific information about the religious denominations of the characters, but from the fact that her brother named his two sons Hasan and Hussein and buries his third son according to Shi'ite tradition, my guess is that the mother must be Shi'ite.
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- 11 *Ibid.*, 38, 47, 57, 122.
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- 20 Khalifa, *No Knives*, 92.
- 21 Ibid., 131.
- 22 Ibid.
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- 39 Khalifa, *No Knives*, 65.
- 40 Ibid., 14.
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