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The Smokescreen of Language:The‘ Whirlwind’ Metaphor In Haydar Haydar’s Solitary Times (1973)

Dr. Malek Salman*

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□ ABSTRACT □

This study attempts a critical investigation of the narrative strategies involved in structuring the narrative of Haydar Haydar ’s **Solitary Times** (1973). It also aspires to examine how the major thematic elements—alienation, frustration, rage at repressive historical systems, and the “ laws of inertia ”—are reproduced and enhanced in the narrative strategies on which the narrative structures itself. On the other hand, it tries to establish textual and thematic connections between the `spatial form` of the novel, and what is suggested as the `whirlwind` metaphor permeating its narrative moves. One major issue tackled in this essay is the use of a highly-poetic narrative language that functions as a smokescreen blurring characters and situations, rather than as a tool of unmasking and revealing their uniqueness and dynamism.

***Lecturer in the English Department, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Tishreen University, Lattakia, Syria.**

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السنارة الدخانية للغة : مجاز "الإعصار" في رواية الزمن الموحش (1973) لحيدر حيدر

الدكتور مالك سلمان *

(قبل للنشر في 2001/6/30)

□ الملخّص □

تحاول هذه المقالة تقديم دراسة نقدية للاستراتيجيات السردية التي تبني عليها رواية الزمن الموحش (1973) لحيدر حيدر. كما أنها تطمح إلى البحث عن الطريقة التي تتم فيها إنتاج المواضيع الرئيسية – الغربة والإحباط والأنظمة التاريخية القمعية و"قوانين العطالة" –وتعزيزها من خلال هذه الاستراتيجيات السردية التي تؤسس البنية السردية نفسها عليها. ومن جهة أخرى، تحول هذه الدراسة تأسيس روابط موضوعاتية ونصية بين الشكل المكاني للرواية وما تقترح تسميته مجاز الإعصار الذي يتخلل حركاتها السردية . كما أن إحدى القضايا الرئيسة التي تعالجها هي استخدام لغة سردية شعرية تعمل بمثابة ستارة دخان تحجب الشخصيات والأوضاع السردية بدلاً من كونها أداة لإزالة الأقنعة وإلقاء الضوء على فرادة هذه الشخصيات والأوضاع وحيويتها.

*مدرس في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية، كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية، جامعة تشرين، اللاذقية، سورية.

" The Arab is a tale both old and new, and he is lost in the process of narrating it." Maybe no description can account more accurately for the narrative structure of Haydar Haydar's **Solitary Times** (1973) than this first-person narratorial comment in the fourth chapter of the novel. This is further enhanced by the 'wind' metaphor permeating the whole first-person narrative; thus, not only lending thematic force to the narrative itself, but also structuring its movements and strategies.
What characterizes **Solitary Times**—and maybe Haydar's other novels, as well—is the difficult and tragic quest for form and meaning on the part of the individual self, a quest usually carried out and expressed by the first-person narrator. In the desperate attempt to identify itself and distill some meaning out of its physical and psychic experiences, the narratorial 'I' has to battle with the oppressive weight of established systems, both old and new, where " the soul becomes a battlefield." (**ST**, 31) In the process of this narrative, this search for identification and meaning, the narrating 'I' oscillates restlessly, " flung in the midst of the currents," (**ST**, 245) in a violent, almost whirlwind movement, looking for a solid ground, while the winds of the past and the present blow " saturated with death." (**ST,** P.245) The whole narrative weaves itself endlessly around self-enhancing sub-narratives of repression and defeat, both on the personal and national levels. Consequently, language can do nothing but chew at itself, devouring its own structures with a hollow, rhetorical and tragic resonance. In this raging, restless effort to grapple with the past, the present, and the shape of things to come, it consumes itself—almost self-defeatingly—in conjuring up repressive social, religious and political systems conceived of as established over the years to prevent any blooming of life. What characterizes this relentless search and battling is the acute awareness, expressly voiced over and over again, on the part of the narratorial 'I' that "Talking about inner repression and narrow, crooked alleys requires a great amount of courage," (**ST**, 15) and that any serious attempt for positive identification, and breaking through the multi-layered walls erected over the years, necessarily engenders a bloody confrontation and a consequent shattering of the self. " The ancient … is the ideal of true definitive knowledge," writes the Syrian poet Adonis, " This implies that the future is contained within it: nobody who is the product of this culture is allowed to imagine the possibility of truths or knowledge being developed which would transcend this ancient ideal." He conceives of Arab history as a " continual actualization of the past," where any kind of innovation or personal creativity, not corresponding to this 'ideal', is mere heresy. Haydar's novel expresses its sharp awareness of this fact, both in the anger colouring the voice of the first-person narrator, as well as other individual narratives, and in the proliferation of multiple, interrelated narratives of defeat and death images. It is no coincidence that his most powerful novel **A Banquet for the Seaweeds** (1983), is subtitled **The Song Of Death**.

The narrative structure of **Solitary Times** is marked by what I designate as three major 'movements', or 'currents'—to use Haydar's own narrative terminology. These 'movements' are linguistically marked by the opening phrase "Here they come." These three sub-narratives, so to speak, concern the spatial mobility of various intellectuals from the peripheries to the centre; the peasants and villagers who provide the temporal backcloth of the feudal system; and –finally—the advent of the Zionists who furnish the political forces of destruction and defeat. These movements are acted out in the narrative against the continuity of repressive historical systems in Arab life and culture. At the centre is the voice of the first-person narrator who is caught in the midst of these currents. There emerges, at the heart of this narrative, the relationship between men and women, woven mainly around the narrator's personal love affairs. This theme – or, fourth 'movement', if one could call it that – intensifies

the other narratives of frustration and defeat, and lends force to the narrator's sense of loss and despair at the grinding social structures ruling over personal relationships.

In **Solitary Times** – as well as in **A Banquet for the Seaweeds** and **Mirrors of Fire** (1995) – Haydar establishes his narratives mainly on the dark intellectual and political experiences which the generation of the 1967 defeat had lived, and the conflicts and mechanism of the major currents in modern Arab life, both religious and nationalist. He unveils, in this process, the totalitarian regimes that had emerged in the wake of national-liberation revolutions, and the repression Arab intellectuals suffered at the hands of different systems, inspite of their progressive and liberal masks and rhetoric. This strong sense of persecution is manifested in Hayder's novels in the idea of the intellectual as an exile, constantly running away in search of a safe haven. Narratives of defeatism, frustration and escape almost dominate the body of his entire work. In **A Banquet for the Seaweeds**, Mahdi Allam, the Communist, runs away from the great massacre against the Communists in Iraq, seeking shelter in the Algerian city of Bunna where – under social, religious and political pressures – he finds no way out except in plunging into the sea to become " a banquet for the seaweeds." In **Mirrors of Fire,** Naji escapes the Beirut massacre to a Moroccan city on the Atlantic ocean. Here, the sense of escape and exile is intensified as the whole narrative takes place in the mind of the narrator on a running train. Maybe there is no need here to expand on the autobiographical elements around which these narratives are originally structured.
The most recent Syrian history is characterized, among other things, by the movement of a large number of Syrian intellectuals from the peripheries to Damascus. This spatial mobility has had great impact on modern Syrian culture and literature. Here is the first movement with which the narrative of **Solitary Times** opens:

> Here they come, pouring from the mountains
> and plains into the cities. There is anger in their eyes,
> and on their foreheads dust and awaited glory. …
> They are marching with confident steps – just like
> furious waves traveling towards unknown shores –
> … towards the cities that had fallen under the first
> attacks. … Now the world looks clearer than ever,
> as crystal – clear and quiet as a lake in the wake of a
> storm that had blown with all its might and ferocity,
> then subsided. All what remained was the traces of a
> storm that had pierced the soul, leaving behind debris
> and quiet … .
>
> (ST, 9)

The narrator, Shibli Abdallah, deserts his village on the Mediterranean and heads for Damascus, driven by ambition and high hopes. Through a web of relationships with various characters, he weaves narratives of defeat, frustration, and an alienation that amounts, at times, to feelings of exile and loss.
Samer al-Badawi is a rebellious poet who can write poetry only when drunk, when the world turns into " shadows and visions." Purely sensual and solitary, his god is his bodily desires. He is one of the many intellectuals who plunged into Damascus, " the city of alcohol, politics, death and women." (ST, 53) He is portrayed as a "desert wolf" who took shelter in sex, and used the others as " a projection screen for his ego which had swollen till it almost amounted to prophecy, who made of his life an inferno and a purgatory in the experience of sexual consumption." (ST, 95) Disappointed with politics and political action, for him revolution took a personalized turn, a battle fought out in the individual self. It is " to be honest to myself

… . To be a revolutionary, I have to be myself, with all the nakedness in the world, both inside and outside." (**ST**, 267) His self-indulgence and escapism are glorified in the narrative and portrayed, at the same time, as destructive and tragic. He dies of a bullet that pierces his head. In opposition to this self-consumptive, hedonistic poet, Rani is portrayed as a dreamer, a romantic writer who roams the night streets of Damascus playing his flute and searching for the love of his life. Like the others, he is sharply aware of the repressive, life-killing power of taboos, and he provides powerful, rhetorical attacks against repressive systems and their obstruction of human freedom, in constant –almost repetitive—conversations with the narrator. In the character of Masrour, the narrator finds a symbolic figure of the Palestinian exile, chased across Arab countries, experiencing both a sense of personal defeat and the tragedy of national loss. As he is called to join the forces for the liberation of his occupied land, this sense of loss and defeat surges up in him and is transformed into a violent, bloody act against his own wife, Diana. Frustrated and drunk at a party taking place at his house, and suspicious of his wife's fidelity, he stabs her to death.

On the other hand, Wael al-Assadi provides a more complex picture. He is an intelligence officer; strong, muscular and powerful. His father was maimed in the 1948 war after emigrating from Alexandretta. He finds his haven in a pleasure hut he owns on the outskirts of the city, and in the torture cell at work. His language, like his life and character, is violent and tragic at the same time. The principle he lives by is to " rape pleasure and joy in the midst of this jungle of sadness, even if God hated it." (**ST**, 156) In the torture cell, as well as in his relationships with others, especially women, he is a master, " reconstructing the reformation of this disintegrating, unbalanced universe." (**ST**, 245) Still, there is a tragic resonance to his character, as he conceives of himself as a victim to his society and culture. As a result of excessive drinking and reckless driving, he meets a violent death in a car accident.

Experiencing the frustration and despair of his generation in Damascus, and elsewhere all around the Arab nation, the narrator develops what he calls his " Theory of Compensation." As a result of continuous defeats and inhibiting, repressive systems, the Arab took shelter in compensational perversions, so to speak: alcohol, hollow and pointless discussions, women, money, gossip, and " metaphysics of exiled sensations." Actually, most of the narrative is structured around this theory, and the rhetorical, repetitive and highly poetic first-person narrative functions – in the end—as a metaphor for the content of the book itself to the point that the form becomes the content, or an integral part of it. Haydar has always been criticized for over-poeticizing his narratives (Remember that the subtitle of his major novel is **The Song of Death**). Poetry and poetic language are the most distinctive features of Arab culture and discourse, be it literary, religious or even political. One could claim – with a degree of caution, nonetheless—that Haydar's narratives assault Arab repressive culture, both modern and traditional, using its own means of expression, without seriously attempting to break through these linguistic structures of expression. Modern literary theory has taught us that language is an ideological carrier of the dominant components of culture. Any ambitious and creative project aiming at subverting and unmasking this dominant language from within is definitely—I dare say—not on Haydar's narrative agenda. Maybe this is why the language of a character like Wael al-Assadi in **Solitary Times** seems almost identical to that of other characters in the novel who are supposed to be victims to the power he personally represents. And maybe this is why we cannot help – as readers—but feel the heavy presence of a narrative rhythm dominating both the language of the first-person narrator and that (and the singular form is suggestive and intentional here) of other characters in the novel, with hardly any recognizable differences to the point that the discourses of various characters could be easily interchangeable without having any serious impact on the narrative. Moreover, most of these characters do not transcend the almost homogeneous linguistic units they seem to be. On the other hand, one could also claim that this strategy is aimed – whether such claim is grounded in the text or not—at unmasking the workings of Arab culture itself and revealing

its hollowness, repressiveness, and monotony, in its suppression of differences and diversity. In this sense, and only in this sense, could form be looked at as a reflection of the content and an integral part of it.
The second movement in the book concerns village life, where the narrator originates, and the sufferings and defeats of peasants:

> Here they come, crossing the waterways. Their shovels on their shoulders … crossing the night bare-footed on the weeds and stones, legs and arms tatooed with mud. They escort the water to the thirsty land that will give them grass and crops. And the water is not theirs. They bought from their jailers when time was, just like water, seeping through their fingers.

(**ST**, 251- 2)

The narrator's continuous return to his village, in various forms, juxtaposes the city narratives, so to speak, with the peripheral village life and the feudal system. (Haydar's novel **The Leopard**, 1968, celebrates the rebellion and heroic death of a well-known peasant who fought the feudal lords and the French occupation authorities in the first half of this century in the mountains lining along the Syrian shore.) This return materializes in the narrator's occasional visits to his home village with the woman he loves, Mona; in his recollections of his father's life and his relation to him. This return is not nostalgic; it is, rather, an intensification of the narrator's anxiety and sense of exile, where any attempt at identification is violently aborted and shattered:

> Where does this ancient past come from, and why now? He was a Sufi, a religious man who lived by what he believed in. He worshipped God and the Earth, and was inhabited by super-natural powers. But you believe in something else called Man. Man is what he creates, while God is an ancient incapability of understanding and explaining phenomena.

(**ST**, 176)

This narrative lends force to the other narratives of defeat, and is linked to the present through successive systems of repression which extend back to ancient Arab history. In a similar manner, the third movement is a vital part of the structure of the novel, and much more intensified as it dominates the first two appendixes located at the end of the book. This relates to the advent of the Zionists and the destructive and humiliating blow they directed against the Palestinians and Arabs in general, in the wars of 1948 and 1967. The body of the major narrative abounds with references to the barbarity and violence the Zionists have brought to the modern Arab world. This historical narrative is advanced in the first appendix of the novel, an extract from the Bible recounting the annihilation of Zion and the dispersion and humiliation of the Jews for their sins. This narrative is further enforced in the second appendix, a poem entitled " Time for Sadness, Time for Thunder"; an elegy to the death of the Arabs in modern times, times plagued with past conflicts and hostilities, and further contaminated with the arrival of the Zionists in the Arab land, where the murderers become the masters of time:

Here they come,
I know them from the 'Hatikva',
Under their arms a sword and a book
And in their eyes the lightning of death
… … …
Here is the ancient myth resurrected,
A glory saturated with invasion.
… … …
Here they come
With thundering voices:
"I fight, therefore I am."
… … …
They have arrived: the strangers, the exiles, the killers.

(**ST**, 296)

In these two appendixes, there are two narratives; one ancient and religious, the other modern and political. They function as tightly-interrelated narratives shaping modern history and, more importantly, they provide a kind of symbolic interchangeability between the Torah's Jews and the modern Palestinians as exiled from their own land, and Arabs in general in a metaphorical sense; that is, as exiled from modern history. Furthermore, these narratives connect with Masrours's tragic and dark narrative; that of Weal al-Assadi's old, maimed father; and more generally that of modern national defeats and the cities "that had fallen under the first attacks"; the destructive wind blowing over the whole region leaving nothing in its wake but defeat, destruction, and the taste of violence, bitterness and disillusionment.
The three movements—or, winds—structuring the narrative of **Solitary Times** are further coupled with a strong sense of continuity, as the past weighs heavily on the present it almost constructs it, and their destructive consequences prevail in individual narratives of defeat and tragic, violent deaths. Recurrent images and metaphors of death and imprisonment punctuate the narrative as a whole. The novel opens with a prologue, a poem entitled "Funeral Rites", supposedly written – as the novel indicates—by "An African Poet". Damascus is recurrently referred to as "a cemetery for those who ruled, those who loved, and those who came from the far ends of the earth." (**ST**, 61) The narrator's village "slept like a dead body in the coffin of silence behind us." (**ST**, 25) Masrour, the Palestinian exile, has " a coffin face", and his wife Diana is "dead silent like a grave housing nothing but bones." (**ST**, 232) To all these images is added the narrator's image of the Arab "lying in a tightly closed coffin," (**ST**, 57) imprisoned by thousands of years of morality, religion and repressive, political systems. And in the extracts from Mona's diaries, occupying the last appendix, Mona writes of giving birth to a dead baby, sick in body and soul; thus identifying things to come and strengthening her metaphorical function in the novel.
If ideas and images of alienation and exile are overtly and repetitively expressed in the narrative of **Solitary Times**, both by the first-person narrator and in the words of other characters and their retreats into their escapist shells, the narrative strategies employed reveal, in their turn, this sense of alienation on a technical level . I have a strong conviction that the structure of any work of art should be read and analyzed as part of the thematic significance verbalized, or overtly conveyed, in this work of art. In this context, I believe that the structure of Haydar's novel engenders some of the major themes of the novel. One of these is the element of alienation, central to Haydar's work in general, and the other is the " laws of inertia" the narrator believes rule over Arab life.
It is a general characteristic of most first-person narratives that the "narrating-self" resists, at times, any total identification with the "experiencing-self", to use F.K Stanzel's terminology, or the "narrated self", as Gennette elects to call it. This is usually marked by the variation in

the use of pronoun from ‘I’ to ‘he’ with reference to the earlier self of the first-person narrator. Wolfgang Iser interprets this alternation as an effort to reveal “the relative and temporary nature of the standpoints which conditioned earlier attitudes and events,” and to express the considerable developments of the narrating-self which can now “view its own past with such detachment.” This could well be quite revealing in particular narratives or certain contexts, but the problem with such theoretical generalizations is designating particular, fixed implications to technical strategies in isolation from the particular context in which they operate, and the relationship they have with the narrative in question. Such narrative, or technical, devices and strategies do not carry within themselves particular values, functions or indications; but rather they have the capability to establish dynamic affinities with the contextual narratives and situations they are used in. **Solitary Times** is a case in point. Haydar’s first-person narrator alternates the pronouns in referring to himself, using ‘I’, ‘he’ and ‘you’. This objectification of the narrated self – in this particular context—does not aim at this kind of epistemological distanciation, as it were, but rather performs a double function in cahoots with the thematic thrust of the narrative as a whole. On one hand, it conveys the constant attempt on the part of the ‘I’ to conceive of a particular identity where the individual self of the Arab – as presented in the novel—is caught “in the midst of the currents” with deadly winds blowing from all directions. On the other hand, this individual self loses its distinctive boundaries, its transparency, and opens up to a more collective identity; thus reflecting the interchangeability of roles and identities against the backdrop of individual and collective sense of loss and defeat strongly verbalized – and on various levels—in the narrative.

The “laws of inertia”, on the other hand, are not only verbalized in the narrative so repetitively and oppressively in the concept of a persistent past invading the present and freezing history, but are engendered again in the technical working-out of the first-person narrator. According to Stanzel, the motivation of the act of narration, for the first-person “embodied” narrator (who usually figures as a major character in the narrative), tends generally to be existential and directly connected with his/ her practical experiences; as the motivation to narrate can originate in “the need for an organizing overview, in a search for meaning on the part of the matured self-possessed ‘I’ who has outgrown the mistakes and confusions of his former life .” Out of this emerges a “narrative distance” that exists between the two selves. This distance is not only marked in temporal terms, but is also distinctively signified by narratorial comments amounting to an evaluation of the narrated experiences. In **Solitary Times**, however, while the temporal distance exists by virtue of the retrospective nature of the first-person narrative situation (where witnessing and experiencing precede the act of telling), the narrative distance, on the epistemological level, narrows down between the two selves—the narrating and the experiencing—almost to the point of identification and congruence . Here, both selves are marked with an emotional intensity dormant in the rage at the persistent conditions motivating the narrative act in the first place. On the other hand, the objective of Haydar’s narrative is not the development of the individual self of the narrator as much as the registering of a historical, collective experience defined by the “laws of inertia”, and mercilessly destined to a temporal continuity reproducing itself **ad infinitum**. It is the absence of change and development in experience and knowledge that, actually, charges the narrative with this urgency, characterizes its repetitive moves, and lends it the tragic resonance it possesses. Both selves are almost interchangeable, except for a purely formal quality; that is, the very act of narration. So, one could easily claim—on this line of analysis—that what ruptures and disturbs this historical inertia is the act of narration itself, and not any attempt at re-evaluation on the part of the ‘matured’, narrating self, as Stanzel would have it. In this effect, what is conceived as ‘movements’ in this narrative (marked, as mentioned before, by the phrase “Here they come”) gains an ironic significance in relation to the static experiences conditioning both the experiencing –and narrating-self.

I mentioned before that a lot of criticism had been labeled against Haydar's heavy reliance on his poetic, charged language. Moreover, there has been a lot of talk in the Syrian intellectual circles, in the last few years, about the brilliance of the language such and such writer uses, and the play on language prominent in this text or that. It is as if language, **per se**, had become synonymous with the work of art as a whole, or as if language itself were capable –by virtue of particular, intrinsic merits—of replacing the hard work involved in producing a literary work, in spite of its great importance as a means of expression. In Haydar's novels and short stories—maybe with the exception of **Banquet**; and this could be one of the reasons why it is considered by many to be his best work—poetic language in prose is so overpowering to the point it sometimes threatens to become the content of the work. I, personally, do not find poetic language in prose works a deficiency. It all depends on how either of these devices functions in the body of the work, be it a novel or a movie, and to what extent it contributes to the artistic creation, in the first place. In Haydar's work, in general, the major interest and effort seem to lie not in dramatizing and investigating situations, characters and feelings, as much as in talking about them, weaving an endless linguistic web that, in the end, blurs these situations and characters instead of clarifying them and bringing them to life in all their dynamism and vitality. Language here, whether poetic or otherwise, becomes a kind of smokescreen, instead of performing its function as a piercing ray of light. This same phenomenon is prominent in the writings of 'The Angry Young Men" in the late 50s and early 60s Britain, to the point that some critics claimed that it was easy to see that Jimmy Potter (the protagonist of John Osborne's play **Look Back in Anger**, 1956) was angry, but very difficult to know what he was angry about. I can easily conceive of a major similarity between Haydar's –and many Syrian and Arab writers'—works and those of the Angry Decade in Britain, which pushes language—and more generally, telling—to the fore. The modern Arab novelists –just like their counterparts in Britain in the 50s and 60s; novelists like John Braine, Alan Sillitoe, etc.—are filled with anger and rage at the various repressive systems paralyzing Arab life, and rightly so. This anger is, in most cases, motivating them to say a lot of things and at one go; and the easiest way to pour all this anger out is direct, almost compositional, narration, especially in first-person narratives. This phenomenon deserves separate critical investigation, but I will let it rest for now to go back to Haydar's novel.

Central to Haydar's work, in general, is the impossibility of establishing healthy relationships, sexual or otherwise, between men and women in a culture ridden with taboos and inhibitions. D. H. Lawrence dedicated almost all his work to the highly moral investigation of the problematics involved in the intimate relationships between men and women –even between men and men, as overtly tackled in **Women in Love**, for instance—against the backdrop of modern concepts, or distortions, of Christianity (brought to a focal, theoretical point in this last book **Apocalypse**, 1931). Haydar's fictional project, in somewhat similar fashion, engages in measuring the various forces in modern Arab life which do not only contaminate the possibility of healthy relationships, but also lead up to tragic and shattering consequences befalling the individuals involved. The thrust of Haydar's novels, and short stories, is to reveal the cracks within the individual self, "the cracking cathedral of the soul," (**ST**, 10) as he puts it in this novel, caused by the heavy burdens of morality, religion, and repressive political structures. As a result, no common language survives between his men and women except stolen moments of pure bodily pleasures acted out in dark rooms, in a culture where "love…is a thief ever on the watch, expectant to be caught." (**ST**, 18) Haydar's men and women are destroyed from within. Even when they venture into freeing themselves from their fetters, in an attempt to emerge clean of their restrictive heritage, they fall tragically. For, when they think they have purified themselves of concepts of sin and guilt, these ghosts show up in various forms, because they are nestling "in the pores of the skin, and in the blood … ." (**ST**, 42) This theme is structured in **Solitary Times** around the narrator's affairs with two

women; Amina and Mona, and is further intensified in the depictions of other relations in the novel.
Amina is an older woman, old enough that the narrator –Shibli Abdalla—sees in her a kind of a mother figure. She was married, by force, to a much older man, Ayyoub, only to discover later that he had a strong pederastic tendency. Her husband, who had lost his land and money, indulged in alcoholism while locked in his room day and night. She is, at the same time, a source of frustration and an object of sexual release for the narrator. She is inhibited by the concept of sin, the eyes of her father and the Prophet keeping constant vigil on her. The narrator constantly strives to impose his concept of "healthy human relationships and the freedom that springs from within and gives existence its meaning," only to realize that "the vocabulary between us was no more than mere timed, physical movements." (**ST**, 33) Later on, Amina runs away with a wealthy student, taking her little daughter with her and leaving behind a broken husband and a frustrated lover chewing on their own defeat. Diana, Masrour's wife, is another victim to social customs who married by chance just because she had to marry some one eventually. She is a sexual object for her husband, and ends up a frigid, young woman who loses touch with her own body. A sexual awakening is stimulated by the narrator only to lead to her violent death at the hands of her drunk, suspicious husband; as if this is the inevitable price a woman has to pay for such sexual liberty. The motif of a woman married to an impotent or negligent man is central to Haydar's narratives. In **Mirrors of Fire**, Demiana's husband is paralyzed after a car accident. In **Solitary Times**, this motif is reinforced in the cases of Amina and Diana, bearing in mind that Mona's husband is dead. This is again a Lawrencian theme motivating the relationship between Connie Chatterley and the gamekeeper Mellors in **Lady Chatterley's Lover** (1928), after the aristocratic husband is rendered impotent and paralyzed in the war. Verile men like Haydar's Shibli Abdalla and Lawrence's Mellors carry out messianic missions to free women; they assume the role of saviours. But the woman has to be weakened and broken first before she could be conquered. Even Mona's husband has to be killed, so she could be exposed to the conquering heroes and made available for invasion. Wael al-Assadi's physical strength and political power –which lend force to each other—render women weak, ready to be taken, to be raped; including his wife's sister. He violates the bodies of women the same way he breaks the bodies of the political prisoners he interrogates in the cell. It is one aspect of the compensational strategy the narrator advances in the novel. In her attempt to link sexuality and male domination in modern Arab culture, Evelyne Accad is not very far from the truth when she writes that in the Middle East, "the meaning and importance given to a military weapon and to the sexual weapon are one. Man uses penis the way he uses his gun: to conquer, control, and possess." In a short story entitled "Dance of the Wild Prairies", Haydar goes as far as to metaphorize a tortured man's rape of an officer's sister to humiliate him. Not only the raped girl lets " a suppressed cry mixed with pain and desire," but immediately after the violent rape scene, al-Azraq is announced "triumphant now." Not only does this perpetuate the outrageous, purely masculine, idea that women enjoy rape, but it reinforces the very traditional, repressive culture Haydar's narrators and characters rage against and hold responsible for their lack of freedom and humanity. It quite simply enhances the conventional idea of the woman as a possession, as the male's 'honour' that should be protected and defended by all means possible, even by killing in many Arab societies and is condoned by religion, society and the law.
The narrator's obsessive relationship with Mona provides the tone of the narrative and hightens the elements of alienation and defeat, as much in her absence –after she leaves for Cairo—as in her presence. The bitterness her flight generates in the narrator is added to his frustration at the difficulty of possessing her, body and soul, in her illusive presence. Maybe, Mona's relationship with the narrator –in addition to her previous affairs with various men—produces a piercing criticism of patriarchal society established on male domination. She looks

at men as “rapists”, and keeps addressing her lover in the collective pronoun ‘you’. For her, no matter how the man struggles against his inner deformation, he wants the woman for himself; “He wants her past to be pure, and he wants her to obey him just like a slave. This is the complex of fathers and forefathers who passed down to their sons and grandsons the idea of tyranny.” (**ST**, 42) Mona is symbolized in the narrative, pushed to the limits of idealization and abstraction –maybe due to her relentless resistance to conquering and possession—and erected in the narrator’s mind as the shelter, the escape, “the city of peace” in the face of strong winds after the other cities had fallen down. He frantically clings to the idea that they could “rebuild our universe in a new, creative way.” (**ST**, 42) Mona is symbolically identified with the city of Damascus –just as women have to be symbolized to denote things other than themselves in male narratives. She was betrayed by the men who knew her, just as Damascus had been betrayed by the men who ruled it. The subconscious concept of conquering and possessing comes up to the surface once again. After her leaving to join her daughter in Cairo, Mona’s absence permeates the narrative to assert a domineering, yet illusive, presence. The novel, even, closes with fragments from her personal diaries. Mona could actually figure as a feminist in the making. In fact, the only two positive and affirmative initiatives in the narrative, involving decision and action, are related to Amina and Mona; thus, highlighting the subversive role of women in traditional, repressive cultures.

In spite of what I have termed as ‘movements’ in **Solitary Times**, and despite Mona’s and Amina’s decisive actions, or flights, and the many violent deaths –reminiscent of Shakespearean tragedies! —the narrative as a whole is less characterized by any prominent, temporal process, than by a kind of juxtaposition of various events, characters, and sub-narratives. Actually, the novel yields more to the spatial-form novel than to any other type of narrative. Although the narrative seems temporarily processed, it is more spatially oriented. It is mainly structured around an extended web of human relationships and portraits of individuals. Added to this is the cluster of interrelated images governed by a circular movement. The narrative seems rather fragmented, at times, and it is the internal perspective of the ‘I’ of the first-person narrator –which is the centre of spatial orientation in the first-person narrative situations—that seems to provide the element of cohesion the narrative possesses. Because of the static situations in which various characters act out their lives, emotional impulses, and tragic destines, the narrative strategies employed in the book are mostly characterized by repetition and emphasis which impose some form of coherence on the narrated events. This, in turn, lends force to the notion of “inertia” and the present that is frozen in the past. In addition to this, Haydar’s novel bears characteristics inherent in the spatial- form novels, in the sense that its problematics are not resolved. The logic and laws governing the events and lives depicted in the novel make the narrative resistant to any kind of conclusions. In this kind of narrative, “the reader is confronted with an open-ended array of thematically interrelated factors he must weld into a picture –into a ‘spatial form’.” The novel, once again, acts out its ‘spatial form’, or in what I elected to designate the ‘whirlwind’ metaphor.

NOTES:

1. Haydar Haydar, **Solitary Times** (Beirut: Amwaj, 1993; 1973), p.245. All other references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

2. Adonis, **An Introduction to Arab Poetics**, trans., Catherine Cobham (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990; 1985), pp. 77-8.

3. Ibid., p.79.

4. Wolfgang Iser, **The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication** In Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1974), pp. 206-7.

5. F. K. Stanzel, **A Theory of Narrative**, trans., Charlotte Goedsche (Cambridge: University Press, 1984), p.93.

6. Evelyne Accad, **Sexuality and War; Literary Masks of the Middle East** (New York: University Press, 1990), pp. 31-2.

7. Haydar Haydar, "Dance of the Wild Prairies", in: **The Mountain Goats** (Damascus: al-Hassad, 1989), p. 77.

8. David Mickelsen, "Types of Spatial Structure in Narrative", in: Jeffrey R. Smitten and Ann Daghistany (eds.), **Spatial Form in Narrative** (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 78.

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