

The World Humanities Report

So Vast the Prison: Contextualizing Prison Writings after 2011

Faten I. Morsy



The World Humanities Report is a project of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), in collaboration with the International Council for Philosophy and the Human Science (CIPSH). The views expressed in the contributions to the World Humanities Report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the editors, scientific committee, or staff of CHCI.

The World Humanities Report gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

© 2023 The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System

This work carries a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivs 3.0 License. This license permits you to copy, distribute, and display this work as long as you mention and link back to the World Humanities Report, attribute the work appropriately (including both author and title), and do not adapt the content or use it commercially. For details, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>.

This publication is available online at <https://worldhumanitiesreport.org>.

Suggested citation:

Morsy, Faten I. *So Vast the Prison: Contextualizing Prison Writings after 2011*. World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023.

More information about the author can be found at the [end of this document](#).

So Vast the Prison: Contextualizing Prison Writings after 2011

Faten I. Morsy [Ain Shams University](#)

This essay explores prison literature as a distinct genre in modern Arabic literary history and how it has changed in the context of the political shift brought about by the revolutionary movements that began in 2011. I use “prison literature” as an umbrella term comprising works written by political prisoners who were incarcerated for their political involvement; by prisoners of conscience detained for having political, intellectual, or religious views that the political order considers to be seditious and subversive; and by writers who have not necessarily had a firsthand experience of incarceration but write about prison. As such, I view prison literature through the lens of human rights. Even today, many of the young people in jail throughout the Arab world have never been involved in any violent acts but were incarcerated simply for daring to challenge their governments and for hoping to institute democracy and implement political reforms. In a very broad sense, the question of social and political justice is an integral feature of prison literature.

One main goal of this essay is to explore the continued interest in the representation of political imprisonment in Arabic literature. I am sensitive specifically to the shift in the medium of expression from earlier traditional narrative forms like the novel and memoirs to the more recent mediatized forms of expression that are influenced by social movement activism. Moreover, in relying on new technology that has fostered the growth of more dynamic and sometimes amateurish attempts, after 2011 young artists have opened the way for potentially more radical and grassroots alternatives. Thus, this essay will show that new forms of writing by young political activists merit as much critical attention as traditional prison literature by canonical writers who used formal or mainstream genres.

The canonical works of modern Arab writers who wrote about political imprisonment in the twentieth century have been the subject of a number of studies, conferences, and workshops. Surveying the genre in modern Arabic letters seems to be an impossible task, but scanning the scores of studies, in Arabic and in other languages, attests to the compelling variety of perspectives

from which one can approach the texts, which largely belong to the same genre. Thus, any essay on such a broad topic cannot do full justice to the diversity and depth of the whole corpus of prison literature produced throughout the Arab world. Entire regions will not be covered in this essay: the Gulf region, Yemen, and the Sudan are areas that merit special attention as they are still fighting battles of social and political transformation.

Canonical Prison Literature

Political imprisonment in most (if not all) Arab countries has led to the production of a considerable body of prison literature. From “classical” prisons such as the Egyptian desert gulag, al-Wahat, Morocco’s notorious Tazmamart, and Israel’s infamous detention center in south Lebanon, al-Kheyam to the more “modern” prisons like Abu Ghraib in Iraq and even Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp in Cuba, prisons are the setting of hundreds of narratives, memoirs, autobiographical works, plays, poetry collections, and even films, both narrative and documentary. Prison writing thus presents itself as a rich subgenre of modern Arabic literature. Such works are produced by men and women; by nationalists, both leftists and Islamists; by professional writers or one-book authors who needed to record their traumatic experiences of incarceration.¹ For my purpose, I have selected a number of cases that I consider representative of the genre before 2011 and thus precursors to prison literature written after 2011.

Some specific incidents have generated notable prison writings. One is al-Thulatha’ al-Hamraa’ (Red Tuesday) in British Mandate Palestine on June 17, 1930. On that date, British authorities executed three Palestinian freedom fighters. It is believed that one of the fighters, named ‘Awad, wrote one of the earliest Palestinian vernacular poems on the walls of his cell, discovered after his execution. Palestinian poet Ibrahim Touqan memorialized the brutality of this act in his poem titled “Red Tuesday.”² Another significant incident was the 1952 trial and hanging of communist workers Khamis and al-Bakry, which took place, ironically, immediately after the Egyptian Revolution. Their brutal punishment in the prisons of the Gamal Abdel Nasser regime (1956–70) was meant to be a warning to other working-class protesters and dissident voices

¹ Radwa Ashour, *Likol al-Maqhoureen Ajneha: Al Ustadha Tatakalm* [All the oppressed have wings: Thus speaks the professor] (Cairo: Dar Al-Shorouk, 2019), 79.

² See Issa Boulatta, “Ibrahim Tuqan’s Poem ‘Red Thursday,’” in *Tradition and Modernity in Arabic Literature*, ed. Issa Boulatta and Terri de Young (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), 89–92.

in the nascent republic led by the Free Officers (Nasser and his fellow officers who ruled Egypt after ousting King Farouk in 1952). Similarly, the brutal death of Egyptian communist thinker and activist Shuhdi Atiya el-Shafie in Nasser's prison in 1960 prompted the anger of leftist Egyptian writers, who documented the event in their narratives.³

These examples suggest the broad reach of prison literature. Asking whether all writing on prison should be considered prison literature or whether the writers need to have experienced prison seems beside the point. Confining the term to real or lived experience risks a myopic reading of the tradition. In the case of prison literature, the experience is worth documenting whether it is firsthand or not. When it is not, the writer is a witness to the traumatic experience.⁴ Indeed, the conditions in political imprisonment have been the subject of hundreds of texts written by canonical writers who did not necessarily experience incarceration directly.⁵ Because this tradition in Arabic literature seeks to redraw the layered maps of contemporary meanings of “justice” and “injustice,” any attempt to unpack the specifics of prison writing in Arabic has to start by broadening the use of “prison literature.” These writers gaze on the strategies of power that subject their (or others’) bodies and souls to torture, surveillance, and other forms of illegitimate punishment, and when they reveal these conditions of incarceration, they speak back to the political regime.⁶ Thus, from a critical perspective, exploring prison writing guides literary scholarship toward the possibility of breaking the barriers between the political and the aesthetic.⁷ Written from inside the flexed muscle of power, prison writings attest to the tight synergy between the personal and the collective.

³ See Fathi Ghanem, *Hekayet Tou* [The story of Tou] (Cairo: Dar Al-Hilal, 1987); Sonallah Ibrahim, *Najmat Aghustus* [The star of August] (Cairo: Dar Al-Huda, 1974); Mahmoud El-Werdani, *Awan al-Qetaf* [Harvest time] (Cairo: Dar Al-Hilal, 2002).

⁴ Noha Hanafy explores the tradition of poets as witnesses to a traumatic experience. Their narration of war becomes a means of resistance and eventual transformation rather than an account of personal trauma. See Noha Hanafy, “The Poetics of Witness in Selected Poetry of World War II and the Iraqi War” (PhD diss., Ain Shams University, 2018).

⁵ Abdulrahman Munif, *Sharq al-Mutawasset* [East of the Mediterranean] (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 2001), gives gruesome accounts of the torture and abuse of prisoners in an unnamed country. Sonallah Ibrahim, *Yawmeyat al-Wahat* [Al-Wahat diaries] (Cairo: Dar Al-Mustaqbal Al-Araby, 2004), was claimed to have been tediously written on cigarette rolling papers and smuggled out of a prison in Egypt. Other examples include Radwa Ashour, *Farag* [Blue Lorries] (Cairo: Dar Al-Shorouk, 2008), and Bensalem Himmich, *Mu’adhibaty* [My Torturers] (Cairo: Dar Al-Shorouk, 2011).

⁶ Doran Larson, “Toward a Prison Poetics,” *College Literature* 37, no. 3 (2010): 145.

⁷ Of particular interest here is Barbara Harlow’s contribution to a whole range of cultural and interdisciplinary scholarship that links literature and art to human rights issues. See mainly Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (London: Methuen, 1987).

The vast literary corpus written within the walls of prisons is mainly directed against coercive forces exercised by political regimes in the Arab world. However, the oozing wounds in Iraq and Palestine bring in other world play-

Written from inside the flexed muscle of power, prison writings attest to the tight synergy between the personal and the collective.

ers and circumstances that show that Arab citizens are sometimes victims of internal and external structures of oppression and humiliation. Despite the mal-carceral practices of the two major proclaimed

“liberal” counterinsurgencies of the twenty-first century—the United States with its so-called war on terror and the ongoing Israeli war in Palestine—the writings that document the degrees of abuse inside Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and Israeli jails still need serious scholarly and research attention. Nothing is more expressive of Iraq’s everlasting scar in Abu Ghraib than the words of Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef in “The Wretched of the Heavens”: “The closed cell suddenly swung open / For the female soldier to come. . . . She did not say a thing / She was dragging my brother’s bloody body / Behind her like a worn-out mat.”⁸ Such descriptions lay bare the contradictions inherent in the avowedly liberal principles supposedly upheld by the most influential of Western “democracies” in the region, the United States. When we consider such neocolonial practices alongside and in collaboration with local regimes and the national liberation causes they espouse, the irony intensifies. Lelah Khalili’s laconic description of US policy in the region as “torture by proxy” is fitting. Referring to the state of the detainees in the global war on terror, Robert Baer reminds us of the gruesome reality: “If you want a serious interrogation, you send a prisoner to Jordan. If you want them to be tortured, you send them to Syria. If you want someone to disappear—never to see them again—you send them to Egypt.”⁹

⁸ Saadi Youssef, “The Wretched of the Heavens,” in *Nostalgia, My Enemy: Poems*, trans. Sinan Antoon and Peter Money (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2012), 72–74. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise indicated. See also Sinan Antoon, “‘What Did the Corpse Want?’ Torture in Poetry,” in *Speaking about Torture*, ed. Julie A. Carson and Elisabeth Weber (New York: Fordham University, 2012), 99–107. In addition, I thank Hoda el-Hadary for bringing to my attention a small but moving volume comprising the poems of twenty-two prisoners in Guantanamo that document the atrocities they suffered at the hands of the US authorities. See Ariel Dorfman, Flagg Miller, and Marc Falkoff, eds., *Poems from Guantanamo: The Detainees Speak* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007).

⁹ Quoted in Lelah Khalili, *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 158.

Women's Prison Memoirs

In women's prison memoirs, the personal traumatic experience is intertwined with the collective plight of the nation. Although women's and men's political memoirs share a commitment to the struggle for individual and collective human rights, women confront distinct forms of oppression in political incarceration that derive from their position in society at large.¹⁰ Women's prisons in 2011 and after were the sites of widespread physical abuse of young revolutionary women, including the notorious virginity tests conducted in Egyptian prisons. The 1981 detentions of Egyptian intellectuals across the political spectrum occasioned a number of prison memoirs by Egyptian women documenting the days in Barrages Women's Prison in Cairo. Nawal al-Saadawi's *My Memories in the Women's Prison* (1984), and Farida al-Naqqash's *Al-sijn: Dam'taani wa Wardah (Prison: Two Tears and a Flower, 1985)* depict prison experience from a collective perspective. These leftist middle-class intellectuals were not exposed to physical abuse during their imprisonment; yet their experiences are similar to that of Islamist writer Safinaz Kazem.¹¹ Despite ideological differences, these three writers reflect on the experience of incarceration and consider any violation of a citizen's rights in society a form of abuse akin to the experience of imprisonment. Other books depict actual experiences of violence. Moroccan Malika Oufkir's prison memoir, *La Prisonniere* (1999; *Stolen Lives: Twenty Years in a Desert Jail, 2001*), together with her mother Fatima Oufkir's *Les Jardins du Roi: Oufkir, Hassan II et moi (The King's Gardens: Oufkir, Hassan II and I, 2001)* are examples. They document the atrocities committed in the notorious Tazmamart prison in Morocco during what came to be known as the Years of Lead (the 1970s and 1980s under the rule of King Hassan II, marked by extreme violence against political activists). In the Mashreq, Syrian women writers generated a wave of prison writings documenting atrocities committed in the 1990s under the regime of President Hafez al-Assad. Rosa Yassin Hassan describes her book *Nīghātīf: Min dhākirat al-mu'taqalāt al-siyāsiyyāt (Negative: On the Memories of Female Political Prisoners)*¹² as a documentary novel (*riwāya tawthīqiyya*), featuring numerous descriptions of torture that mainly women Islamists suffered in Syrian prisons.

¹⁰ Marilyn Booth, "Women's Prison Memoirs in Egypt and Elsewhere: Prison, Gender, Praxis," *MERIP Middle East Report: Human Rights in the Middle East* 149 (1987): 35–41.

¹¹ On the experience of her incarceration twice during Anwar Sadat's rule, in 1973 and 1980, see Safinaz Kazem, *An al-Sijn wa al-Horreya [On prison and freedom]* (Cairo: Al-Zahrā Lil "ilām al-Arabī, 1986).

¹² The narrative was published in 2007 in serial form by the Cairo Institute for the Study of Human Rights (CIHRS) and later appeared as a book: Rosa Yassin Hassan, *Nīghātīf: Min dhākirat al-mu'taqalāt al-siyāsiyyāt* (Cairo: CIHRS, 2008).

Yassin is one of many Syrian writers who documented the atrocities committed in al-Assad's prisons. Heba al-Debbagh's *Khams Daqa'iq wa Hasb: Sanawat fi- Sijun Sureya* (*Just Five Minutes: Nine Years in the Prisons of Syria*, 1995) chronicles her years in jail, and Hasiba 'Abd al-Rahman's documentary novel *Al-Sharnaqa* (*The Cocoon*, 1999) documents her seven-year imprisonment in the same decade.¹³

Palestinian and Lebanese prison writings by women are only a small portion of the long tradition of political prisoners who have served very long sentences in Israeli jails. One is Souha Béchara's classic account of her ten-year imprisonment, *Muqawama* (*Resistance*, 2000), an exemplary text by an Arab woman freedom fighter.¹⁴ In the case of Palestine, and the dire state of life under Israeli occupation, scores of academic and oral narrative projects over several decades form a repertoire of Palestinian women's prison writings as an offshoot of "resistance literature."¹⁵ Moreover, the narratives of wives and mothers of political prisoners extend the parameters of Israeli prisons to encompass Palestinian life as a whole. In a women's storytelling project in the West Bank, a woman relative of a political prisoner put it very succinctly: "Our life is prison, prison, prison. . . . Outside is no better than inside."¹⁶ Once again, prison memoirs by women go beyond the representation of the private experience. They are informed by political awareness and the need to promote major social and political transformations.

Prison Writings after 2011: From Artists to Activists

Prison writings after 2011 in the Arab world include many mediatized forms of expression: murals, graffiti, street performances, popular songs, and multimodal art exhibitions. These alternative new media projects are the latest manifesta-

¹³ Both texts have been published in book form without identifying the publishers. They can be found online at https://archive.org/details/booksbylanguage_arabic. See also special report on prison literature: "Infernal Kingdom of Silence during Assad's Era," Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, December 27, 2020, <https://www.harmoon.org/reports>.

¹⁴ Souha Béchara, *Muqawama*, trans. Antoine Abu Zaid (Beirut: Dar Al Saqi, 2000).

¹⁵ I am using the term "resistance literature" in the sense that Harlow uses it in *Resistance Literature*. For a detailed account of the experiences of Palestinian women former political detainees who joined the armed struggle between the 1960s and 1980s, see Nahla Abdo, "Political Detainees and the Israeli Prison System," in *Captive Revolution: Palestinian Women's Anti-Colonial Struggle within the Israeli Prison System* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 124–66.

¹⁶ Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson, "'Our Life Is Prison': The Triple Captivity of Wives and Mothers of Palestinian Political Prisoners," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 9, no. 3 (2013): 55.

tions of a long tradition of radical, oppositional, and sometimes underground forms of expression, but this new literary output of the young “artists” (politically active artists) can be understood in terms of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari view as smaller, nomadic, and “rhizomatic” moments of resistance.¹⁷ In keeping with the spirit of the youth revolutions (*thawraat al-shabab*), these young artists’ contributions amount to artistic revolution as they transform mainstream Arabic prison literature written by canonical literary figures into more radicalized and popular literary and artistic forms.

This new generation of artists has witnessed major contemporary Arab literary figures, serving a “major function” in the exercise of power, whether political, social, or cultural.¹⁸ At moments of intense nationalism, such as post-1952 Egypt, such figures were expected to play a major function through extreme devotion to the nation. The intricate relationship between writers in the Nasser era and the regime involved a specific concept of the nation and the national. Some writers, such as Fouad Haddad and al-Abnoudy, sang of their relentless loyalty to the nation and the Nasserite project itself, even when they were the target of state oppression that reached as far as prison detention. Other writers, notably Sonallah Ibrahim and poet Ahmad Fouad Negm, seemed to disregard the atrocities they had experienced firsthand in the regime’s prisons. It is puzzling to trace in their writings a degree of admiration for Nasser as a leader and a certain veneration of the Nasserite project of socialism and national liberation. In one of Ibrahim’s testimonies on his prison experience, he points to the writer’s dilemma in relation to the political regime at the time: “I was put in jail by the forces of a regime I supported and continue to fully support despite the fact that this very regime was guilty of torturing political prisoners and committing other terrible atrocities.”¹⁹ Scholarly debate around the intricate relation between Egyptian Marxists and state-sanctioned organs of power has been the subject of a number of critical studies.²⁰ A significant turning point in the history of the Egyptian Marxist movement was when its leaders opted to liquidate their communist party in the early 1960s in favor of joining Nasser’s Arab Socialist Union. As they eventually became “regime intelligentsia,” they

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 23.

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 23.

¹⁹ Sonallah Ibrahim, “Testimony,” in *Adab Al-Sujun* [Prison literature], ed. Shaaban Youssef (Cairo: General Book Organization, 2014), 246.

²⁰ For a discussion of this debate, see Shaaban Youssef, “The Seeds of the Clash between the Communists and the July Regime,” in *Adab Al-Sujun*, ed. Shaaban Youssef (Cairo: General Book Organization, 2014), 89–98. See also Anouar Abelmalek, “Nasserism and Socialism,” *Socialist Register* 1 (1964): 38–55.

were appointed to various official press services. This generation was far from attaining any form of “socialism from below” because their relation to the political regime proves they were driven mostly by the tactics of realpolitik rather than strategic dynamics toward any real transformation, let alone revolution.

By contrast, post-2011 young activists are the product of an era that witnessed the failure of global left-revolutionary movements and the ostensible victory of market capitalism. They have inherited different forms of disintegrating social and political systems, in contrast to their forebears, who lived and thrived on the dream of Arab unity of the 1950s and 1960s. Their alternative and activist resistance to the cultural fragmentation manifests itself in “smaller” forms of activism, and their artists fit the description of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “minor” writers.²¹ Moreover, the gap between today’s activists and the authors of yesterday’s canonical prison literature is also reflected in the medium of expression. Canonical prison literature writers had a combination of mainstream media (state press publishing houses, newspapers, and print fiction) and underground or radical forms of media (small-press publishing houses) at their disposal. Conversely, Arab activism today uses the internet and related technologies, emphasizing principles of citizenry, activism, and community engagement. Their literary and artistic output seems to foster what Leah Lievrouw calls “folksonomies,” that is, “organic, dynamic and bottom-up classification schemes for organizing and categorizing.”²² The January 25, 2011, Egyptian revolution is a case in point. Young people then had a plethora of social media platforms to facilitate their ostensibly leaderless movement. Such platforms included Facebook and Twitter for protest planning and Wikithawra for updating the events, different forms of street art like graffiti and murals, and more.²³

Indeed, as these activists strive to compete for legitimacy and jostle for a place in a history that is still in the making, they have imbued contemporary Arabic literary tradition with new mediated modes of expression. While prison literature before 2011 manifested in traditional literary forms, narrative or autobiographical, young artists/activists are now more into resisting and talking back to the dominant media culture and politics. In contexts where young activists have been arrested on petty charges like demonstrating without

²¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 25–26.

²² Leah A. Lievrouw, *Alternative and Activist Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 16.

²³ Wikithawra was a database that was created in the early days of the Egyptian Revolution in 2011 and continued to archive the events until 2014. See <https://wikithawra.wordpress.com>. For a discussion of the role of street art as a form of popular resistance, see John Johnston, “Democratic Walls? Street Art as Public Pedagogy,” in *Translating Dissent: Voices from and with the Egyptian Revolution*, ed. Mona Baker (London: Routledge, 2016), 178–93.

a permit, activists have developed new forms of organizing as a way of creating communities of support and resistance to the limiting of civic spaces. Storytelling projects, campaigns to release prisoners, and the widespread use of social media and internet platforms for communicative purposes have all become tactics that activists use. Thus, the potential for transforming the authoritative and canonical literary tradition in the post-2011 era is one of the contributions of the “minor” activists. This generational shift reflects the transformation from a national consciousness and concept of the nation co-opted by mainstream political interests to an alternative and activist consciousness that seems to interrogate these principles.

I am not suggesting that no traditional forms of prison writings have been produced since 2011. In fact, a cursory look at the prison literature produced in most countries in the region after 2011 attests to a boom in memoirs and novels by both leftists and Islamists who detail torture, censorship, and suffering. Notable examples from Tunisia include Samir Sassi, *Burj al-Rumi: Abwab*

In contexts where young activists have been arrested on petty charges like demonstrating without a permit, activists have developed new forms of organizing as a way of creating communities of support and resistance to the limiting of civic spaces.

al-Mawt (Borj Roumi: *Doors of Death*, 2011), Mohamed el-Salih Fliss, *Sajin fi-Watani* (*A Prisoner in My Homeland*, 2016), Bechir el-Khalfi, *Draqa: A Cover Masking the Truth* (2011), and Emna Rmili, *Toujane* (2016).²⁴ Syria has also witnessed a new wave of prison writings after the revolution, including Bara Sarraj, *From Tadmor to Harvard*, and Mostafa Khalifa, *The Shell: Memoir of a Hidden Observer*. Both novels document the brutal violence in state prisons in pre- and post-2011 Syria.²⁵

Since the 2011 uprisings, various Arab regimes have been continuously targeting protest singers, activists, intellectuals, and bloggers who worked through online channels. Rami Essam from Egypt and al-Haqed from Morocco

²⁴ Samir Sassi, *Burj al-Rumi: Abwab al-Mawt* (Tunis: Editions Karem Sharif, 2011); Mohamed el-Salih Fliss, *Sajin fi-Watani* (Tunis: Editions Arabesques, 2016); Bechir el-Khalfi, *Draqa: A Cover Masking the Truth* (Tunis: Dar Mayara, 2011); Emna Rmili, *Toujane* (Tunis: Perspectives Editions, 2016).

²⁵ For a comprehensive review of prison literature after the Arab uprisings, see Hamed Alzaiat, “Arabic Books of Prison Literature during (1948–2020): An Analytical Bibliometric Study,” *International Journal of Library and Information Sciences* 9, no. 4 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.21608/ijlis.2021.108310.1123>.

are examples of popular young singers who were detained and imprisoned for slandering their respective heads of state and other state symbols. The national popular consciousness of these young artists is imbued with new aspirations and new definitions of the national struggle. Their consciousness does not correspond to the official state-national consciousness and distinguishes itself from the earlier generation of canonical writers, who fell short of engaging politically and socially in a revolutionary or even reform project.

I end by discussing a few examples of contemporary storytelling through the work of young artists struggling to counteract hegemonic monopoly over the means of expression, on one hand, and to resist various forms of social and political injustice, on the other.

The first example is the range of recent documentary films that chronicle life in present-day Syrian prisons. Mouhsin Ennaimi's award-winning documentary *Syria's Slaughterhouses* (2018) is one among a plethora of Syrian films and documentaries by immigrant filmmakers that have received much acclaim in international circles.²⁶ Others include Nidal Hassan, *True Stories of Love, Life, Death and Sometimes Revolution* (2012), Ziad Kalthoum, *Taste of Cement* (2017), Soudade Kaadan, *Obscure* (2017), and Feras Fayyad, *Last Men in Aleppo* (2018). These documentaries focus on prison and gruesomely chronicle Syria's detention practices in the ongoing civil war. Of particular interest are the testimonies they include from women. Syrian women from traditional, conservative Muslim backgrounds discuss the sexual and mental abuse they endured in jail and a double imprisonment as they are abandoned by their families and husbands. These women seem to be fighting their own battle for sexual and gender equality in post-2011 Syria.

The second example is the prison writings of two Egyptian political activists recently released from jail: poet Omar Hazek, who was released after two years, and engineer and writer Abdelrahman el-Gendy, released after six. The young men were jailed in 2013 for allegedly violating Egypt's notorious protest laws. In letters, poems, and a novel, Hazek, like Egyptian poets of his generation, expresses his utter frustration at the way things turned out after the 2011 revolution. His first novel is significantly and categorically titled *La 'Uhubu Haḍihi al-Madinah* (*I Don't Love This City*, 2014),²⁷ while his poems written in al-Gharabanyiat Prison on December 30, 2014, express anger and frustration. Addressing the "homeland," Hazek pleads: "But please don't say / That you raised

²⁶ Mohsen Ennaimi, *Syria's Slaughterhouses* (TRT World, 2018), available at <https://youtu.be/o-W4yCitZSM>.

²⁷ Omar Hazek, *La 'Uhubu Haḍihi al-Madinah* (n.p.: Dar al-Islam, 2014).

us with love / Bury us / And bury your dream with us.” On December 31, 2014, he sarcastically writes: “Merry prison to / Oh! Sorry / I meant happy new year to you / my brothers and sisters in the love of this homeland.”²⁸ In the same vein, el-Gendy used his Facebook account to post poems, articles, and reflections on his imprisonment. In one of his moving pieces, el-Gendy wonders: “Will I ever see things the way others see them? Or will the iron bars be forever before my eyes until I die?”²⁹ In the Egyptian context, what these young “minor” writers seem to have learned from the experience of their “major” predecessors is an awareness of how the state can wield nationalism to co-opt or repress (if need be) any attempts that could be considered threatening to the nation-state. In the post-2011 era, these young activists reject attempts to revive 1960s nationalism, which was marked by militarism, populism, and opposition to the imperialist West. They seek a new nationalism that is secular, inclusive, and more open to humanistic foreign influences.

Ending on a note of hope and resistance, I discuss a third activist project: a Palestinian online portal, Samidoun, dedicated to exposing the brutal reality in Israeli prisons and detention centers. The platform is one of many similar activist projects that have played a significant role in bringing to the world’s attention the plight of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. Samidoun acts as a network of solidarity with Palestinian prisoners and has been publishing testimonies of young people released from the Israeli Maskobiyah detention center. Palestinian activists document the different human rights violations in the detention center as part of their hope to use the digital technology as tools of empowerment and resistance. Samidoun, like other activist projects, promotes radical and alternative collective action through political mobilization and networking inside Palestine and through finding affiliations and allegiances in the region and beyond. Because the “major” actors on the scene, from governments to politicians to world organizations, have persistently failed to provide any spark of hope for a fair solution to the Palestinian cause, perhaps the answer resides in the “minor” activists’ projects that may be viewed as part of a global justice activism that goes beyond national, cultural, and geographic boundaries.

²⁸ “Egyptian Author Omar Hazek: ‘If I Die, Don’t Bury Me,’” trans. Zahraa Abdel Aziz, *ArabLit and ArabLitQuarterly*, June 12, 2014, <https://arablit.org/2014/06/12/egyptian-author-omar-hazek-if-i-die-dont-bury-me/>.

²⁹ Abdelrahman El-Gendy, “From Prison: Color Synesthesia,” *Mada*, October 10, 2018, trans. Katherine Halls, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2018/10/10/opinion/u/from-prison-color-synesthesia/>.

Conclusion

After the Arab uprisings of 2011, aspirations to transitional justice have stalled. Countries have lapsed into new brutal authoritarian dictatorships. With the exception of the Tunisian situation, where one can recognize steadily positive signs since the formation of its Truth and Dignity Commission in 2013, the road to equity, justice, and reconciliation in the Arab world is still very long. Prison literature has constituted a key feature of modern Arabic literary history. As it seeks to expose the hidden worlds of political repression, it also becomes a vehicle of resistance, a site for promoting gender consciousness, and a warning beacon of the ongoing injustices and the relentless human rights violations. Despite the presence of a rich body of literature on the topic, more academic exploration and scholarly attention are needed across the Arab world. Scholarly consideration of prison literature in the post-uprisings era is both timely and necessary and can contribute significantly to other areas of engagement with the current sociopolitical crises sweeping the region.

Faten I. Morsy is a professor of comparative literature at Ain Shams University in Cairo. She is the editor of *The Knotted Handkerchief: Essays on the Creative and Critical Works of Radwa Ashour* and has recently finished a book on comparative literature. She has served as a judge for the Refaa Tahtawy Translation Award, the Egyptian State Literary Awards, Sawiris Cultural Awards, and the King Hamad Prize for translation. She has served on the advisory board of *Thaqafat* and *Faculty of Arts Research Journal*.