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Eduardo Balbo, Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”

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Identity Threats and Coping Strategies in Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Nabī’s *Fī Ġurfat al-‘Ankabūt*

Eduardo Balbo

Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”

eduardo.balbo11@gmail.com

ABSTRACT¹

This paper seeks to evaluate the different stages of the identity process that can be distinguished in Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Nabī’s novel *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt* (*In the Spider’s Room*, 2017), a novel that can be collocated into the contemporary genre of the “coming-out story”. The fragmentary structure of the novel displays the attempt of the main character and narrator Hānī Maḥfūz to reshape his own identity after the traumatic events of the Queen Boat case (2001). This paper draws on an integrated approach that consists of the combination of Identity process theory and Social representations theory. It underlines the steps of Hānī’s identity process and his coping strategies to respond to identity threats. His process is inhibited by the hegemonic social representations of homosexuality deriving from the religious and secular domains. The novel gives to the Quranic symbol of the spider (‘*ankabūt*) a new layer of meaning, employing it to represent the homosexual community. Meanwhile, “hegemonic masculinity” prevents him from assimilating the masculine models of his family. This study points out Hānī’s struggles in constructing his own identity without the interference of hegemonic representations in order to accept himself and feel free in what he considers a subjugating society.

KEYWORDS

Identity process theory / Social representations theory / Queen Boat / LGBTQI+ / contemporary Arabic literature.

1 - Introduction

In the conclusions of his PhD thesis, M.A. Zaki claims that gay men in Cairo «[...] negotiate between their sexual subjectivities and other subject positions [...]»² and that

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Nesma Elsakaan, the anonymous reviewers, and the proofreaders, for the valuable comments they have given me concerning the present research. I would also like to thank Professor Gail Ramsay for providing me with the translation of her presentation of the novel from Swedish to English.

² Zaki, Mohammed Abbas. 2013. “*And They Say There Aren’t Any Gay Arabs...*”. *Ambiguity and*

they attempt «[...] at building a scene [...]».³ Such a description is crucial to understand what frequently happens in the Cairene context, in which a scene (the homosexual one) that is different from the hegemonic one (the heteronormative one) is being built.

In 2017, the Egyptian writer Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Nabī published his novel *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt* (*In the Spider’s Room*, 2017),⁴ in which he tackled the theme of the “Queen Boat” case (2001). On that occasion, the Egyptian government arrested and prosecuted fifty-two gay men. The novel is open to different readings and studies.

On the 12th of June 2017, the research collective “Ikhtiyar ‘Choice’ for Gender studies and Research” released on its SoundCloud channel a conversation held by Professor A. Chreiteh and the poet and scholar M. Kareem, in which they analyzed the novel from a feminist perspective.⁵ In 2018, R. Haddad submitted his MA thesis in which he compared this novel to Salīm Ḥaddād’s *Guapa*,⁶ conducting an analysis of queerness and sexuality. His purpose was of examining «[...] the role of shame, space and language in the formation of queer identity [...]».⁷ Apart from these studies, along with some blog posts⁸ and scholar G. Ramsay’s brief presentation in Swedish,⁹ little has been published about the novel.

The present work adds a new piece to the puzzle by the application of different approaches. It shows how the novel is imbued with phenomena that often arise in the Cairene context. However, some dynamics in the novel are not equivalent to the real ones since the author re-elaborates certain representations about homosexuality making them converge in a “personal representation” (see below). In *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt*, the hegemonic social representations of male homosexual individuals inhibit the protagonist Hānī from constructing and maintaining his identity. The aim is to retrace Hānī’s steps in his identity process by illustrating how hegemonic social representations constitute identity threats.

As for the research methodology, the framework within which this study ope-

Uncertainty in Cairo’s Underground Gay Scenes. PhD thesis. London: The London School of Economics and Political Science. 216.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ ‘Abd al-Nabī, Muḥammad. 2017. *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt*. Cairo: Dār al-‘ayn.

⁵ “Naqd min manzūr niswī li-riwāyat ‘Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt’”. Online audio. SoundCloud. Published by Ikhtiyar “Choice” for Gender Studies and Research. Last accessed 17/05/21. <https://soundcloud.com/ikhtiyar-knowledge/ygzpolqe3eqq>.

⁶ Ḥaddād, Salīm. 2016. *Guapa*. New York: Other Press.

⁷ Haddad, Ralph. 2018. *Analyzing Queer Shame, Space, and Language In Saleem Haddad’s ‘Guapa’ and Muhammad ‘Abdul Nabi’s ‘Fi ġurfat al-‘ankabūt’*. MA thesis. Montreal: Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University. 2.

⁸ “The Queer Lives of Arabic Literature”. Asymptote. Last accessed 04/08/21. <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2020/10/07/the-queer-lives-of-arabic-literature/>.

⁹ Ramsay, Gail. 2019. “I spindelns rum. Av Mohammed Abdel Nabi”, *Karavan* 4, 59.

rates is the combination of Identity process theory and Social representations theory. According to the former theory, identity is produced by the interaction of psychological and social processes.¹⁰ It is regulated by two universal processes: “assimilation-accommodation” (the assimilation and adaptation of new components) and “evaluation” (the attribution of meaning to these components).¹¹ Various motivational principles guide the identity process, but when one of those principles does not operate, the individual experiences a threat to his identity.¹² It enables coping strategies that operate at different levels: “intra-physic level” (i.e., “denial” and “transient depersonalization”); “inter-personal level” (i.e., “isolationism” and “compliance”, namely hiding one’s true identity and playing a role); “intergroup level” (i.e., joining groups with individuals of similar mindsets).¹³ It is possible that individuals may modify social representations that threaten their identity in personal use, thus social representation «[...] can be re-anchored (linking it to a different prior set of referents) or there is a minor tweak to the objectification [...]».¹⁴

From Social representation theory, we adopt the concept of “social representation”, which is described as a system of values, ideas and practices that guide individuals on how to behave and communicate.¹⁵ We focus on “hegemonic social representations”, which «[...] prevail in all symbolic or affective practices».¹⁶ In particular cases, we deal with “personal representation”, namely a social representation that is «[...] the manifestation of a social representation at the level of the individual».¹⁷

We adopt the Foucauldian meaning of “discourse”, according to which it is «[...] a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements [...] that [...] produce a particular version of events [...]».¹⁸ We also adopt his perception of the nature of discourses as intertextual and belonging to a discursive formation rather than consis-

¹⁰ Breakwell, Glynis. 2015. “Identity Process Theory”, Sammut, Gordon et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Representations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 250-266. P. 251.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹² *Ibid.*, 256.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 264. “Objectification” is the concretisation of “anchoring”.

¹⁵ Moscovici, Serge. 1973. “Foreword”, Herzlich, Claudine (ed.). *Health and Illness. A Social Psychological Analysis*. London: Academic Press. IX-XIV. P. XIII.

¹⁶ Moscovici, Serge. 1988. “Notes Towards a Description of Social Representations”, *European Journal of Social Psychology* 18(3). 211-250. P. 221.

¹⁷ Breakwell, Glynis. 2014. “Identity and Social Representations”, Jaspal, Rusi, & Breakwell, Glynis (eds.), *Identity Process Theory. Identity, Social Action and Social Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 118-134. P. 120.

¹⁸ Baker, Paul. 2006. *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis*, London-New York: Continuum. 4.

ting of single statements,¹⁹ and his view on “hegemony”, namely the cultural leadership of certain ideas gained through consent that allows knowledge to be perceived as the truth.²⁰ From Men studies, we have employed the analytic tool of “hegemonic masculinity”²¹ and from Queer studies we have employed Butler’s application of Kristeva’s “abjection”.²² We also employ these notions, particularly the latter, through the scope of corpus-based discourse analysis.

We should say that our analysis of the religious symbols employed by the author is not meant to be descriptive of the real hegemonic representation of homosexuality in the Quranic commentaries and readings – and of its actual hegemonic representations in contemporary Muslim societies. Therefore, it aims to understand how the author employs Quranic elements to characterize the psyche of his protagonist, since they are a constant concern to him. Consequently, in some cases, we preferred not to put forward clear-cut hypotheses that pertain to the Cairene context – and, more in general, to the Egyptian one. On the contrary, this paper aims to position itself as a springboard for further studies that move towards an understanding of the Egyptian LGBTQI+ community moving from individual expression (in this case, a literary work) – or, better to say, from personal representation – to the general one under the scope of Identity process theory.

Although it is not the first time that Identity process theory is employed by academic studies concerning queer individuals,²³ there is a lack of critical literature concerning the application of Identity process theory and Social representations theory to the literary field and within the frameworks of Queer and Gender studies. Nonetheless, the versatility of these fields allowed us to move towards their employment to the literary one, hoping that this paper may open a dialogue with more studies that employ similar methodologies.

2 - The LGBTQI+ community in contemporary Egypt and the “Queen Boat” case (2001)

It is difficult to assert that a LGBTQI+ community can be found in contemporary Egypt, if we use this label to indicate a community that shares a set of features with its

¹⁹ Hall, Stuart, Evans, Jessica, & Nixon, Sean. 2013. *Representation*. London: Sage. 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

²¹ Connell, Raewyn. 2005. *Masculinities*. Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press.

²² Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York-London: Routledge.

²³ Jaspal, Rusi, & Cinnirella, Marco. 2012. “Identity Processes, Threat, and Interpersonal Relations. Accounts from British Muslim Gay Men”, *Journal of Homosexuality* 59(2). 215-240.

European and American counterparts.²⁴ Serena Tolino claims that many scholars used an essentialist approach and applied this label to the Middle Eastern context without any problem;²⁵ on the other hand, other scholars employed a constructivist approach applying this category carefully.²⁶ According to Tolino, «[...] we can use the category of homosexuality provided that we are careful and avoid any risk of essentialism».²⁷ Thus, the integration of these two approaches may appear worthwhile.

Indeed, we can observe an emergence of a homosexual community in the Middle East, even if it is not always comparable to the European LGBTQI+ community. There are several associations, such as Ḥulm (Helem) in Lebanon²⁸ or Abū Nuwās (Abu Nawas) in Algeria.²⁹ In Egypt there is the association Bidāya (Bedayaa), which operates underground.³⁰

Although a homosexual identity as we mean it is becoming ever more visible in the Middle East, in Egypt it is sometimes difficult for a homosexual individual to recognize himself as part of an established group. Zaki points out this absence of an out-and-out LGBTQI+ community in Cairo. In his ethnographic field research, focusing on gay male individuals, he detected the different means by which gay identities are received and criticized. He states that:

[...] Cairo’s gay community was nothing more than fragmented circles of social relations that had occasion to interact with one another through social or sexual liaisons mediated by internet dating websites. A situation which [...] was further exacerbated by the fragmentation of the ‘community’ along class lines.³¹

After these claims, he maintains that «[...] there still seemed to be some general understanding of what it meant to be part of an imagined gay collective and, at the very

²⁴ For further information, see Massad, Joseph Andoni. 2008. *Desiring Arabs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²⁵ Tolino, Serena. 2014. “Homosexuality in the Middle East. An Analysis of Dominant and Competitive Discourses”, *Deportate, esuli, profughe* 25. 72-91. P. 74. One scholar from this current is S. Kugle: see Kugle, Scott. 2010. *Homosexuality in Islam. Islamic Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.

²⁶ *Ibid.* One scholar from this other current is the above-mentioned J. A. Massad with his controversial *Desiring Arabs*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

²⁸ Helem’s website: Helem. Last accessed 27/07/21. <https://www.helem.net/>.

²⁹ Abu Nawas’ Facebook page: “Abu Nawas”. Facebook. Last accessed 27/07/21. <https://www.facebook.com/AbuNawasDz>.

³⁰ Bedayaa’s website: Bedayaa. Last accessed, 27/07/21. <https://www.bedayaa.org/?fbclid=IwAR0BhxhDDSC5EoR-xITrwPMHQBOASJ-NxQYkON34qzD0lBjmaZXS9W-eng>.

³¹ Zaki, “*And They Say There Aren’t Any Gay Arabs...*”, *op. cit.*, 10.

least, to be part of “the scene”»³² and that «[...] a sense of precariousness and instability seemed to pervade and permeate through the scene».³³ In other terms, the gay Egyptian community manages to carve out a niche in the collective scene, despite being a loose-knit grouping of individuals.

However, the Egyptian government has hindered this process by leading a series of persecutions. Even though it was not an organized entity, the LGBTQI+ community has been assaulted various times. The most significant crackdown on homosexual individuals occurred in 2001 and it is known as the “Queen Boat” case or “Cairo 52”. Fifty-two homosexual men have been charged with threatening «[...] the moral security of the nation»³⁴ and «[...] this crackdown had announced the radical and unanticipated break with a preceding tradition of turning a blind eye to the scene’s existence».³⁵

The persecutions had started on the 24th of April, when State Security Investigations officers arrested Šarīf Farḥāt, a thirty-two-year-old engineer, executive, amateur photographer, and devout Muslim, and sequestered everything from his apartment.³⁶ He was interrogated and in the prosecution interrogation sheet it is noted that Farḥāt recounted a dream that he had had years before. In this dream he saw the Prophet Muḥammad with a blond Kurdish boy that, after a Turkish attack, would take revenge on the world (especially on Jews, Christians, and Muslims) since they did not help the Kurdish population.³⁷ Investigators quickly labelled Farḥāt as homosexual and said that he was connected to a blasphemous cult. The reason behind this charge was that debauchery (*fuḡūr*) was not pursued as much as a security offence, so they made him «[...] liable for “contempt of heavenly religions” under article 98(f) of the Criminal Code [...]».³⁸

Along with the blond Kurdish boy, there was another key element: copies of a nine-page booklet had been allegedly found in his apartment, as well as photographs with scenes of naked young men where Farhat was supposed to appear. Investigators have never produced this evidence in court. The booklet had been called “Agency of God on Earth: Our religion is the religion of Lot’s people, our prophet and guide is Abu Nawas” (*Wakālat Allāh fī-l-arḍ: dīnu-nā dīn qawm Lūṭ wa-nabī-nā wa-muršidu-nā Abū Nuwās*) and there were several topics. They referred to a new blasphemous religion, with the addition of misogynistic warnings and the recognition of homosexuality as a

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Long, Scott. 2004. *In a Time of Torture. The Assault on Justice in Egypt’s Crackdown on Homosexual Conduct*. United States of America: Human Rights Watch. 23.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

human right.³⁹

This event raised a substantial amount of dust around the country due to the fact that the government and the media perceived it as a threat to national security and heteronormative practices.⁴⁰ The campaign reached its peak on the 11th of May, when the police led a raid on a floating nightclub named “Queen Boat” that had been popular among gay men. They detained thirty people and they had already arrested twenty-two men that were supposed to be homosexuals with the charge of *fuḡūr*.⁴¹ This is why the event has been named “Queen Boat” case, or “Cairo 52”. In 2002, half of the prisoners were acquitted, while the other half were sentenced to hard labor.

3 - Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Nabī’s *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt* (2017)

Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt was published in 2017 by Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Nabī (b. 1977) and it was shortlisted for the 2017 International Prize for Arabic Fiction (*al-Ġā’iza al-‘ālamīyya li-l-riwāya al-‘arabīyya*). It has been translated in English and French.⁴² Even though it was at the Abu Dhabi Book Fair, the novel has been banned in the bookstores in the Emirates.⁴³ As for its reception in Egypt, the author says that «I was left alone by security on this subject, they just asked me to delete one phrase about national security [when it was reprinted]». ⁴⁴

The protagonist of the novel is Hānī Maḥfūz, a Cairene fictional character who gets arrested in 2001 in Taḥrīr Square. He is one of the fifty-two people arrested in that year during the “Queen Boat” case. He narrates his memories from his childhood until his adulthood. During his childhood, he negotiates his identity trying to grow up like the masculine models of his family: his father and his grandfather. During his adolescence, he starts to have sexual intercourse with other men, culminating in his adulthood into a dissolute life. He then falls in love with ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, but he feels compelled to have a marriage of convenience with a woman. Consequently, he gives an account of his experience in prison, during which he loses his voice because of the mental and physical

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Pratt, Nicola. 2007. “The Queen Boat Case in Egypt. Sexuality, National Security and State Sovereignty”, *Review of International Studies* 33(1). 129-144. P. 129.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴² For the English translation, see Abdelnabi, Muhammad. 2018. En. tr. Jonathan Wright. *In the Spider’s Room*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press (Hoopoe Fiction). For the French one, see Abdelnabi, Mohammed. 2019. Fr. tr. Gilles Gauthier. *La Chambre de l’araignée*. Arles: Actes Sud.

⁴³ “Writing (and Translating) Queer Characters in Egyptian Novels”. Arablit. Last accessed 25/07/21. <https://arablit.org/2019/04/25/writing-and-translating-queer-characters-in-egyptian-novels/>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

abuse that he endures. In prison he meets Karīm, a boy fond of Sufism. After the prison term, he isolates himself in a hotel room in the company of a spider that he has found in a drawer and he deals with his Post-traumatic stress disorder by writing about his experiences on the advice of his psychiatrist. Eventually, after accepting his homosexuality, he gets his voice back. At that moment, he decides to set out with ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and his friend Muḥammad Sukkar to help Karīm.

Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt adheres to the Arabic literary trend that depicts homosexuality as an identity and not as a sexual practice or as something that came from the West – even though the hegemonic discourses against homosexuality in the novel pertain to the latter domains. A significant number of fictional works in Arabic employ homosexuality to talk about the hypocrisy of certain socio-political contexts, the tools of torture employed by the state against political dissidents, the «[...] traditional power dichotomy of the active colonial other and the passive Arab partner»⁴⁵ and the cruelty of war.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, in this novel, homosexuality is described in its purest form by the protagonist-narrator, that is, as a sexuality. He aims to accept it as a sexuality that is different from the heteronormative one and his constant struggle derives also from his impossibility to accept it as a mere sexual practice.

The novel begins with Hānī and ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s imprisonment in Tahrīr Square. After that event, the novel becomes a collection of memories narrated in a fragmented way. The narrator, who is Hānī himself, comments on certain events, sometimes making a link between past and present. The structure of the novel is like that of a *Bildungsroman*. However, if compared to it, the novel differs for a focus shift from the youthful development of the protagonist to his coming-out process. His perspective is retrospective: Hānī is a grown-up man who recounts his whole life with accuracy. We read about a series of events that lead him to think about himself and to accept his sexuality. Afterwards, the process moves from the inside to the outside. In the post-traumatic phase of his narration, he identifies his coming-out with the therapeutic drafting of his story. Even if she did not argue her labelling, Ramsay labelled it as a “developmental novel” (*Entwicklungsroman*, or “novel of mere growth”), a sub-genre of the *Bildungsroman*.⁴⁷ *Entwicklungsroman* «[...] contain[s] important scenes of initiation, of some sort

⁴⁵ al-Samman, Hanadi. 2008. “Out of the Closet. Representation of Homosexuals and Lesbians in Modern Arabic Literature”, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 39(2). 270-310. P. 288.

⁴⁶ For further information, see Langrange, Frédéric. 2000. “Male Homosexuality in Modern Arabic Literature”, Ghoussoub, Mai, & Sinclair-Webb, Emma (eds.), *Imagined Masculinities. Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East*. London: Saqi Books. 169-198; and Hadeed, Khalid. 2013. “Homosexuality and Epistemic Closure in Modern Arabic Literature”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45(2). 271-291.

⁴⁷ Ramsay, “I spindelns rum”, *op. cit.*, 59.

of ordeal which precedes one’s coming to adulthood, one’s departure from childhood». ⁴⁸ However, the main topic of the novel leads us to label it as a “coming-out story”, even though it shares a series of formal features with the *Entwicklungsroman*. The permeable genre of the “coming-out story” is thus described by J.A. Cuddon:

The act of “coming out” usually refers to an individual’s declaration of a minority sexual identity [...]. A coming-out story, usually told by the individual in question, recounts that disclosure and its consequences [...]. Some works in this genre are fictions; often they are at least partly autobiographical. They tend to focus on an individual coming to terms with his or her homosexuality (or more rarely, bisexuality or transgenderism) without necessarily ending with a public declaration. Typically the protagonist is shown negotiating adolescence, though usually the narrative voice is retrospective and that of an adult. Thus, the coming-out story may be considered a kind of Bildungsroman [...]. ⁴⁹

There are similarities between this novel and two others that deal with female homosexuality, namely Şibā al-Ḥariz’s *al-Āḥarūn* (“The Others”, 2006) ⁵⁰ and Ilhām Maṣṣūr’s *Anā hiya anti* (“I am you”, 2000). ⁵¹ Both novels are mostly narrated by their heroines and they deal with the self-recognition of their protagonists’ sexuality – even though the focus in these novels is slightly different than the simple coming to terms with one’s homosexuality. ⁵² Thus, we claim that, even if it may not be the only “coming-out story”, *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt* still maintains its originality in the Arabic literary scene and represents a perfect example of this genre. Its originality is mentioned by its French translator G. Gauthier, who also claims that «Muhammad Abdelnabi opened a door, took a step, and things will never be the same again». ⁵³

4 - Hegemonic representations of homosexuality in the novel

Two main discursive formations nourish the hegemonic social and personal representations that inhibit Hānī from shaping his own identity. The first formation is the one that depicts homosexuals as criminals. The criminalization of homosexual indivi-

⁴⁸ Baird Shuman, Robert. 1970. “Portis’ ‘True Grit’. Adventure Story or ‘Entwicklungsroman?’”, *The English Journal* 59(3). 367-370. P. 368.

⁴⁹ Cuddon, John Anthony. 2013. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Malden-Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. 140-141.

⁵⁰ al-Ḥariz, Şibā. 2006. *al-Āḥarūn*. Bayrūt: Dār al-Sāqī.

⁵¹ Maṣṣūr, Ilhām. 2000. *Anā hiya anti*. Bayrūt: Riyāḍ al-Rayyis.

⁵² Guardi, Jolanda. 2014. “Female Homosexuality in the Contemporary Arabic Novel”, *Deportate, esuli, profughe* 25. 17-30. P. 27.

⁵³ Snaije, *Writing (and Translating) Queer Characters in Egyptian Novels*, op. cit.

duals is erected on two sub-formations: a religious one and a moral one.

The religious sub-formation connects homosexuality to “theological associatoinism”, or simply, “polytheism” (*širk*). The enigmatic title of the novel has more than one layer of interpretation. The most superficial one is the literal one: it refers to the hotel room where Hānī seeks refuge and has a little spider as his companion. Looking with more attention, the title also refers to a set of religious symbols that are re-employed in the novel in an original way.

The Quran has a Meccan surah, the XXIX, called *Sūrat al-‘ankabūt* (“Surah of the Spider”). Its sixty-nine verses cover a number of different topics, including sincere devotion, polytheists, prophet Lot’s story and the fate that befell on Sodom and the sodomites.

مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ كَمَثَلِ الْعَنْكَبُوتِ اتَّخَذَتْ بَيْتًا وَإِنَّ أَوْهَنَ الْبُيُوتِ لَبَيْتُ الْعَنْكَبُوتِ لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ

The likeness of those who have taken to them protectors, apart from God, is as the likeness of the spider that takes to itself a house (*bayt*); and surely the frailest (*awhan*) of houses is the house of the spider, did they but know.⁵⁴

The spider symbolizes the “polytheist” (*mušrik*) who has associated other deities to God, thus violating the principle of God’s unity and unicity (*tawhīd*).

فَإِذَا رَكِبُوا فِي الْفُلِكِ دَعَوْا اللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ فَلَمَّا نَجَّوهُمْ إِلَى الْبَرِّ إِذَا هُمْ يُشْرِكُونَ لِيُكَفِّرُوا بِمَا آتَيْنَاهُمْ وَلِيَعْلَمُوا فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ

When they embark in the ships, they call on God, making their religion sincerely His; but when He has delivered them to the land, they associate others with Him, that they may be ungrateful for what We have given them, and take their enjoyment; they will soon know!⁵⁵

According to these verses, if a person calls on God only when he needs him, he will be punished because his devotion would not be sincere.

In the novel, religious strain is merely functional. The terrifying God ready to punish the sinner appears only in those moments in which Hānī meditates about his homosexuality.⁵⁶ The protagonist identifies the divine judgement as a mysterious and

⁵⁴ Quran XXIX,41. En. tr. Arthur Arberry. 1996. *The Koran Interpreted. A Translation*. New York: Touchstone.

⁵⁵ Quran XXIX,65-66. *Ibid*.

⁵⁶ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 69.

menacing force that is always ready to fall upon him in every moment,⁵⁷ sometimes perceiving it as hellish.⁵⁸ He defines his devotion as insincere and deceitful, meditating on whether he turns to God or to the government and its laws.⁵⁹ Thus, Hānī seeks for God’s comfort or menace only when he intends to define his identity and approach the society, displaying an insincere devotion.

Hānī feels like the spider mentioned in the Quran that is unaware his frail house will be soon destroyed by God. The main difference is that he is totally aware of his destiny. Thus he says: «[...] and then I went back to writing, imagining myself as a dumb spider spinning a *frail web* around himself to protect himself from destruction»⁶⁰ ([...] *tumma ‘udtu li-l-kitāba wa-anā ataḥayyalu nafsī ‘ankabūtan aḥras yansaḡu min ḥawli-hi bayta-hu al-wāhin ‘asà al-lā yaḏī‘a*).⁶¹

In this passage, the association between Hānī’s destiny and the spider’s one is clear. It is also supported by the adjective “frail” (*wāhin*) used to refer to the web (*bayt*, “house” in Arabic), since its root *w-h-n* brings to mind the elative form “frailest” (*awhan*) used in the Quran to refer to the spider’s house. But why should Hānī compare himself to the Quranic symbol of the spider?

Looking at other passages, it becomes clear that in this novel the spider represents the whole group of the homosexual individuals. A group of spiders – or, as he says, their whole kin (*‘ašīra*) – has been haunting him since his childhood, thus becoming a constant nightmare that would abandon him only after his death.⁶² The term *‘ašīra* refers not to an individual, but rather to a group.

The combination of his experience in prison and writing down his memories helped Hānī to gradually accept his spider(-homosexuality):

[...] صاحبُ العنكبوت، وعرفتُ طريقي إلى هذه الدفاتر [...] مع توالي السطور والصفحات، كنتُ أشعر أن جلدًا قديمًا يتقشّر عن جسدي [...] وفي الحين نفسه لم أكن أعلم أيّ جلدٍ جديدٍ قد بدأ يتكوّن [...] .

[...] I made friends with the spider and found my way to these notebooks [...]. As line followed line and page followed page, I felt I was shedding an old skin [...] and at the same time I didn’t know what new kind of skin had started to form.⁶³

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁶⁰ Abdelnabi, *In the Spider’s Room*, *op. cit.*, 22. Emphasis added.

⁶¹ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 41. Emphasis added.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 254.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 319; Abdelnabi, *In the Spider’s Room*, *op. cit.*, 234-235.

Eventually, he fully accepts his spider(-homosexuality) and he sets it free to build its own house near to the drawer where it has been held captive.⁶⁴

The most explicit association between homosexuality and the spider occurs when Hānī finds out that his friend Karīm is HIV-positive. He narrates that «A little spider in my heart bit me when I heard Mohamed say, “We found out from the tests that Karim is HIV positive.” [...] There are poisonous varieties of spider too»⁶⁵ (‘*aḍḍa-nī ‘ankabūt ṣaġīr fī qalbī ‘indamā sami‘tu Sukkar yaqūlu-ha: ‘arafnā min al-taḥālīl anna Karīm muṣāb bi-firūs al-īdz [...] hunāka anwā‘ sāmīna min al-‘anākib ayḍan*).⁶⁶ Thus, the protagonist connects homosexuality to the Quranic symbol of the spider, giving to it a new layer of meaning. But why does Hānī make this link? How does he connect homosexuality to *širk*, since, in the Quranic surah, the spider represents the *mušrik* (“polytheist”) and not the homosexual individual?

Whenever the homosexual subject offers his body to a man, the writer employs verbs and nouns based on the Arabic root *s-l-m*, which carries the meaning of “peace”. In a number of derived verbal stems, the root acquires a meaning related to submission (e.g., the form IV *aslama* “to commit o.s. [...] to the will of God [...]”,⁶⁷ whence the term *islām*; the form X *istaslama* “to surrender”). For instance, Hānī says «[...] where I stripped naked and submitted»⁶⁸ ([...] *ḥaytu ata‘arrī, wa-astaslimu*)⁶⁹ and «Repressed anger seemed to have accumulated over his lifetime and now he was finally letting it out, disguised in the form of sex with a man who submitted to him voluntarily»⁷⁰ ([...] *ka’anna-hu kāna yurākimu ġaḍaban makhbūtan ṭūla ‘umri-hi, tumma aṭlaqa-hu aḥīran, mumawwahan fī ṣūrat ġins ma‘a raġul yuslimu-hu nafsa-hu ‘an ṭayyib ḥāṭir*).⁷¹

In some passages, the “sexual partner” (*šarīk*) is represented as an “idol” (*šanam*) that needs to be satisfied with sacrifices.⁷² The term *šanam* brings us back to the Arabic pre-Islamic context that witnessed the supremacy of *širk*, considered one of the major sins in Islam. The root *š-r-k* of the word *širk* comes back in the term *šarīk* (partner, associate) employed in one of the above-mentioned passages.

The author therefore employs the Quranic symbol of the spider for the “personal

⁶⁴ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 328.

⁶⁵ Abdelnabi, *In the Spider’s Room*, *op. cit.*, 255.

⁶⁶ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 346-347.

⁶⁷ Cowan, J. Milton (ed.). 1994. *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic (Arabic - English)*. Urbana: Spoken Language Services. 496

⁶⁸ Abdelnabi, *In the Spider’s Room*, *op. cit.*, 47. Emphasis added.

⁶⁹ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 72. Emphasis added.

⁷⁰ Abdelnabi, *In the Spider’s Room*, *op. cit.*, 214. Emphasis added.

⁷¹ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 290-291. Emphasis added.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 67-68, 156.

representation” of the homosexual individual as someone who, in the midst of his blasphemy, surrenders to a force that is higher than himself, as if it was a new divinity. Hānī ignores his true and only God that is ready to punish him and to destroy his frail house. The analogy between homosexuality and a new blasphemous creed is more explicit in other passages. In this novel, the first defendant of the Queen Boat case is a fictitious man, Samīr Barakāt. Despite the new name, the author makes reference to specific elements pertaining to the Queen Boat case, such as the booklet, the blonde Kurdish boy, polytheistic activities, and the religious group in its concreteness. Homosexuals are also described as Satanists. This last element has a parallel not only in other Arabic literary works,⁷³ but also in the real Egyptian context, where different *fatāwā* describe the homosexual as an individual led by Satan.⁷⁴ The following is one of the most explicit passages, where after remembering all the charges against the defendants, the narrator claims:

اتضح لنا أن التهمة تجاوزت مجرد اعتياد ممارسة الفجور، إلى ازدياد الأديان وتكوين منظمة دينية سرية. [...] إن بعض الصحف قد أعلنت ببساطة: (القبض على ما يزيد عن خمسين عضوا من جماعة لعبادة الشيطان كانوا يمارسون الشذوذ، ويلتقطون الصور العارية). [...]

It was clear that the charge went beyond merely having illicit sex regularly, and included blasphemy and forming a secret religious group. [...] Some newspapers announced simply: “More than fifty members of a Satanist group arrested: engaged in perversions and took pornographic pictures.”⁷⁵

Thus, the “personal representation” of the homosexual individual as *mušrik* culminates in the “hegemonic representation” of homosexuals as Satanists and blasphemous people.

As for the second discursive sub-formation, it connects homosexuality to *fuḡūr* and it provides the “hegemonic representation” of *fuḡūr* with the conclusion that it is something that must be condemned. The term “prostitution” (*dī‘āra*) is different from *fuḡūr*. The former connotes «[...] prostitution in the sense of commercial sex [...]».⁷⁶ In Egypt’s parliament «[...] legislators stated they meant *dī‘āra* to describe “immorality” by women, *fujur* “immorality” by men».⁷⁷ As Zaki states, Egyptian homosexual indivi-

⁷³ In Ġāda al-Sammān’s *Bayrūt 75* (1975), the homosexual intercourse is described as a contract with the devil, making a parallel with Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*. See al-Sammān, “Out of the Closet”, *op. cit.*, 280.

⁷⁴ Tolino, “Homosexuality in the Middle East”, *op. cit.*, 81. The term *fatwā* (pl. *fatāwā*) refers to a juridical opinion given by a *mufī* (a Muslim jurist) about a given subject.

⁷⁵ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 153; Abdelnabi, *In the Spider’s Room*, *op. cit.*, 109.

⁷⁶ Long, *In a Time of Torture*, *op. cit.*, 13.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

duals are afflicted by a sense of fragility.⁷⁸ This one is «[...] bolstered by an assumed and internalized sense of criminality among a large group of gay men that is continuously affirmed by a judicial process that seems hell-bent on criminalizing homosexuality».⁷⁹

We find references in the novel to the blaming of *fuḡūr*. Hānī makes explicit reference to the connection between this new religion and debauchery, saying that newspapers and magazines treated them as Satanists, adepts of “Lot’s tribe” or supporters of a new religion that promoted homosexuality, same-sex marriages, and debauchery.⁸⁰ Thus, the homosexual individual, apart from conducting blasphemous and Satanic practices, is represented as someone who navigates in immorality by carrying on behaviors related to *fuḡūr* due to which he must be condemned.

The second “hegemonic representation” of homosexuality is the one that revolves around the discursive formation of “hegemonic masculinity”. Masculinity is meant as «[...] the product of the cultural meanings attached to certain attributes, capacities, dispositions and forms of conduct at given historical moments»⁸¹ and «[...] there is more than one version of masculinity [...]».⁸² Among these multiple masculinities, some may be subordinate and some may be hegemonic. The Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell investigated the concept of “hegemonic masculinity”. She stated that:

Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. [...] It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.⁸³

As for the Cairene context, the “faggot” (*ḥawal*) is de-masculinized. Even from the linguistic point of view, the plural form of the derogative *ḥawal* is *ḥawalāt*, exhibiting the feminine morpheme *-āt* used mainly for plurals of feminine nouns. Zaki argues that:

Homosexuality [...] is almost completely debilitating within normative Egyptian understandings of masculinity. *Khawal*, a commonly used insult (roughly translatable to faggot), is *an emasculating term* that [...] highlights how insulting and crippling a charge of “failed” or “improper” masculinity can be. For my informants the period following their realization of their homosexuality was fraught with *inse-*

⁷⁸ Zaki, “*And They Say There Aren’t Any Gay Arabs...*”, *op. cit.*, 52.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ḡurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 307-308.

⁸¹ Hall, Evans, & Nixon, *Representation*, *op. cit.*, 298.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Connell, Raewyn, & Messerschmidt, James. 2005. “Hegemonic Masculinity. Rethinking the Concept”, *Gender and Society* 19(6). 829-859. P. 832.

curity and travails regarding their masculinity [...]. So fear of being exposed as a homosexual became, for many of them, a fear of being exposed to the gaze of others as *not only deviant and immoral* but *un-masculine* as well. [...] [O]ne of the most troubling issues for my informants was the felt *need to marry* in order to appear to others to be progressing along an accepted and normative masculine trajectory.⁸⁴

The same behavior can be found in this novel. After her son’s coming out, Hānī’s mother addressed him using the derogative *ḥawal*. He also narrates the stories of his father and his grandfather. They performed the role of true masculine models in his life and he struggled to relate to them. Nevertheless, he was not like them. We can see this behavior when he says «Maybe all this sent me a message that I wasn’t associated with him, didn’t look like him, and would never be a man like him»⁸⁵ (*rubbamā ḥamala ḥadā kullu-hu ilay-ya risāla mufādu-ha anna-nī lā antamī ilay-hi, lā ušbihu-hu, wa-lan akūna raḡulan miṭla-hu abadan* [...])⁸⁶ or when he says «I told her many things, except for the one thing that, if a man told his wife about it, he would no longer be a man and she would no longer be his wife»⁸⁷ (*ḥakaytu la-hā al-kaṭīr: ‘adā al-šay’ al-waḥīd alladī law ḥakā-hu raḡul li-imra’ati-hi la-mā ḡalla raḡulan wa-la-mā baqiyat imra’ata-hu*).⁸⁸ Hānī repeatedly compares himself to his grandfather and his father, failing in assimilating their model because of an alleged lack of masculinity. Thus, the protagonist is struggling for the assimilation of normative masculine features that are not his own.

5 - Struggling for an identity

The protagonist deals with these “hegemonic” and “personal representations” in order to cope with identity threats and construct his identity through two processes: abjection and rejection.

In her seminal work *Pouvoirs de l’horreur. Essai sur l’abjection* (1980),⁸⁹ the psychoanalyst literary critic Julia Kristeva developed the concept of “abjection”, later taken up by the gender theorist Judith Butler to «[...] discuss the often problematic embodiment of sexuality and gender».⁹⁰ Abjection is the process of casting out what seems improper for one’s own identity or uncategorizable.⁹¹ The subject tries to purify himself

⁸⁴ Zaki, “*And They Say There Aren’t Any Gay Arabs...*”, *op. cit.*, 32-33. Emphasis added.

⁸⁵ Abdelnabi, *In the Spider’s Room*, *op. cit.*, 34.

⁸⁶ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 54.

⁸⁷ Abdelnabi, *In the Spider’s Room*, *op. cit.*, 148.

⁸⁸ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 204.

⁸⁹ Kristeva, Julia. 1980. *Pouvoirs de l’horreur. Essai sur l’abjection*. Paris: Édition du Seuil.

⁹⁰ Phillips, Robert. 2014. “Abjection”, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1(1-2). 19-21. P. 20.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

from something that stains him and that does not find place in his cultural background. The abject is what unsettles the system, something that is immoral and that does not respect the rules.⁹² Still, the abject is «[...] deeply alluring [...], always challenging – and requiring maintenance of – the tenuous borders of selfhood».⁹³ The physical response to abjection consists of «[...] excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer».⁹⁴ These excremental passages may consist of vomiting and defecation, but also of spasms and screams.⁹⁵

In some passages of the novel, Hānī perceives himself as soiled by sexual desire, which he also defined as “sordid lust”⁹⁶ (*al-raġba al-danī’a*).⁹⁷ For instance, he says «[...] I was *sully*ing myself with this young man who looked like a handsome devil»⁹⁸ ([...] [*anā*] *uwassiḥu nafs-ī ma’a hadā al-šabb alladī yušbiḥu šayṭānan ġamīlan*)⁹⁹ and «[...] with that one touch he would expunge every sin and every *defilement*»¹⁰⁰ ([...] *bi-hadihi al-lamsa sawfa yamḥū kull iṭm wa-kull naġas [...]*).¹⁰¹

Terms like “to sully” (*wassaḥa*), “sordid” (*danī’*) and “defilement” (*naġas*) refer to the semantic field of filthiness. However, instead of showing an intrinsic filthiness, they point to an inflicted one, as with *wassaḥa*. In order to claim that *naġas* and *danī’* indicate an inflicted filthiness, we have used a set of instruments given by the field of Corpus Linguistics. This methodology shows the patterns in which an item appears, how it behaves in certain contexts and the meanings it assumes.

We have investigated the occurrences of these terms in a number of chunks of sentences from ArabiCorpus.¹⁰² The term *danī’* in adjectival function occurs in 150 instances. The term *naġas* (as a noun) occurs in 404 instances. Subsequently, we have investigated the words directly before and directly after the search string, in order to examine their semantic preference and semantic prosody. Semantic preference can be defined as the «[...] attraction between a word and one or more semantic fields».¹⁰³ Semantic prosody «[...] represents a further step into abstraction and it is used to describe the attraction between a word and a positive, negative or neutral evaluation of that word

⁹² Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*, *op. cit.*, 12.

⁹³ Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, *op. cit.*, 2.

⁹⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, *op. cit.*, 134.

⁹⁵ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*, *op. cit.*, 10.

⁹⁶ Abdelnabi, *In the Spider’s Room*, *op. cit.*, 46.

⁹⁷ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 71.

⁹⁸ Abdelnabi, *In the Spider’s Room*, *op. cit.*, 38. Emphasis added.

⁹⁹ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 60. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁰ Abdelnabi, *In the Spider’s Room*, *op. cit.*, 74. Emphasis added.

¹⁰¹ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 105. Emphasis added.

¹⁰² ArabiCorpus. Last accessed 17/05/21. <https://arabicorpus.byu.edu/>.

¹⁰³ Manca, Elena. 2012. *Context and Language*. s.l.: Università del Salento. 50.

and its collocates». ¹⁰⁴

As for their semantic prosody, both terms occur with items negatively connotated. As for the semantic preference of the noun *nağas*, it attracts groups of items related to the semantic fields of:

- Religious impiety → *mušrikūn* (“polytheists”) (41), *al-šayṭān* (“Satan”) (6);
- Negative feelings → *širrīr* (“very evil”) (2), *ḥabīṭ* (“wicked”) (5);
- Filthiness → *rağas* (“filth”) (11).

The adjective *daniṭ* has a semantic preference for groups of items related to the semantic fields of:

- Actions → *fiʿl* (“action”) (9), *ʿamal* (“action”) (9), *iğtiyāl* (“assassination”) (2);
- Feelings → *ğašaʿ* (“greed”) (2);
- Intentions → *ğaraḍ* (“objective”) (5);
- Human entities → *sulṭān* (“sultan”) (2);
- Personal but non-intrinsic characteristics → *bi-uslūb* (“in a style”) (3).

As it has been claimed before this investigation, the lexical items *daniṭ* and *nağas* are connected to an inflicted filthiness that can be related to bad or immoral behaviors: the adjective *daniṭ* is always used for something that is not intrinsically filthy and the noun *nağas* is always connected to bad behaviors.

These terms are deeply connected with something that goes against the system, something that should not be in that way and that has been spoilt from the outside. The way the protagonist uses them reveals that he thinks that the sins he commits are related to a corruption of the soul and that this corruption can be taken away. This behavior leads back to the dominant discursive formation that represents homosexuality as a sinful and filthy sexual practice that should be avoided rather than a sexual orientation. ¹⁰⁵ Hānī always tries to physically reject this filthiness through water. This finds a parallel in the above-mentioned *al-Āḥarūn* by al-Ḥariz. ¹⁰⁶

In *Fī ġurfat al-ʿankabūt*, for instance, Hānī says «They have succeeded in defiling you from the inside forever, and not even a torrent of pure water could wash their fingermarks off your body» ¹⁰⁷ (*laqad nağahū fi talwīṭi-ka min al-dāḥil ilà al-abad, walan yamḥū aṭār ašābiʿi-him ʿan-ka ayy šallāl tāhir*) ¹⁰⁸ and:

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Tolino, “Homosexuality in the Middle East”, *op. cit.*, 79.

¹⁰⁶ Guardi, “Female Homosexuality in the Contemporary Arabic Novel”, *op. cit.*, 24.

¹⁰⁷ Abdelnabi, *In the Spider’s Room*, *op. cit.*, 65.

¹⁰⁸ ʿAbd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-ʿankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 94.

كان طبيبي النفسي، دكتور سميح، قد قال لي اكتب يا هاني، [...] اغسل نفسك مما لوّثها هناك. عندما قال اغسل نفسك احسست أنه يرى ما بداخلي، كأنه يعرف أنني أفضي وقتاً طويلاً تحت ماء الدش منذ أن خرجت من السجن لأنظف نفسي.

My psychotherapist, Dr. Sameeh, said, “Write, Hani, please. [...] Purge yourself of everything that made you feel dirty there.” When he said “purge yourself,” I felt he could see inside me. Maybe he knew that since coming out of prison I’ve spent a long time under the shower trying to get myself clean.¹⁰⁹

This physical rejection can be defined as a process of “abjection”, through which Hānī tries to dismiss what the cultural background he is trying to assimilate perceives as filthy and immoral. He denies it through physical rituals concerned with cleansing of the body in order to physically remove this provoked filthiness from his body and soul. He does this so that he can shape his identity by denying what he does not accept. However, this process of identity construction through the coping strategy of “denial” soon reveals its failure.

As a result, the protagonist relies on the rejection of unassimilable hegemonic models in order to build his identity. In some passages, we notice “transient depersonalization”, since he does not recognize himself in the mirror: «In a mirror behind the counter I saw someone I didn’t recognize, though he did look like me»¹¹⁰ (*wa-fī mir’ā warā’a al-bār ra’aytu šaḥṣan lā a’rifu-hu, wa-in kāna yuṣbihu-nī*).¹¹¹ There is a contrast between two images: the one created by the hegemonic representations and the one created by his own representation. When he keeps on writing his memories, he becomes more conscious – thanks to the power of words and imagination – that he is starting to abandon his discursive self by trying to remove from his identity the hegemonic features that he does not recognize as his own. Thus, he feels like a stranger «[...] who was watching Hani Mahfouz from afar»¹¹² (*yatafarraḡu ‘alā Hānī Maḥfūz min ba‘īd*).¹¹³ This lack of identification leads him to “compliance”, wearing several masks and adapting to the roles imposed by the society. He reflects on the fictitious roles he performs and sometimes he talks about a different Hānī:

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 41; Abdelnabi, *In the Spider’s Room*, *op. cit.*, 22.

¹¹⁰ Abdelnabi, *In the Spider’s Room*, *op. cit.*, 174.

¹¹¹ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ḡurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 239.

¹¹² Abdelnabi, *In the Spider’s Room*, *op. cit.*, 235.

¹¹³ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ḡurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 320.

ثم يعود المهرج إلى مرآته في نهاية اليوم. أعود إلى غرفتي المغلقة على وحدتي العارية. [...] فأشعر وكأنني صرثُ ماما نفسها، وهي تنزع عنها إكسسوار إحدى شخصياتها. لم أكن هانوشكا في الحقيقة، كان هذا هو الدور المناسب لي، مجرد دور، لا أكثر ولا أقل. ربما اندمجتُ فيه أكثر مما يجب، حتى لم أعد أعرف من هو هاني محفوظ الحقيقي، وكيف أعود إليه عندما أريد. عندي نسخٌ كثيرةٌ منه. صحيحٌ: كلها طبق الأصل، لكنها ليست الأصل، ليست أنا، كلها أقتعةٌ وخلفها لا يوجد أيُّ شيء، [...] النجمة [...] تعود إلى دورها المرسوم فوراً، فلا بدّ أن يتواصل العرض.

The joker went back to his mirror at the end of the day. I went back to a bedroom where I was alone in my nakedness. [...] It felt like I was Mother as she took off the accessories that went with the characters she was playing. I wasn't really Hanushka: that was the right role for me, but it was just a role, no more and no less. Perhaps I identified with the role more than I should, so much so that I no longer knew who the real Hani Mahfouz was or how to go back to being him when I wanted. I had many versions of him. It's true: they were all based on the original, but they were not the original. They weren't me. They were all masks, with nothing behind them. [...] The star [...] went back to the role she had been assigned, because the show must go on.¹¹⁴

His rejection reaches its peak in a section of the ending. This passage marks his rebirth as the true Hānī Maḥfūz. In a dream, he attends his own *subū*^ʿ, the ceremony that is held on the seventh day after the birth of the new-born. During this ceremony, various expressions are whispered in the ear of the new-born so that he embraces the values of his society and religion:¹¹⁵

[...] أدركتُ أنني غير مرئيّ [...]. لم أرَ شيئاً يبرز من بين لفّات القماش [...] فمددتُ يدي من فوقهنّ [...] فرحتُ أفتش داخلها بجنون [...]. لا شيء داخلها، صار هذا مؤكداً. [...] أردتُ أن أصرخ [...] أنه لا يوجد أي شيء في هذا المنخل إلا الهلاهيل، وأنتي هنا بينهن، كبير، رجل تجاوز الأربعين، وأن هذا ليس سبوعي، وأن أمي لم تلد طفلاً غيري، لكنّ صوتي خانني من جديد.

[...] I realized that I was invisible. [...] I couldn't see anything protruding from the folds of cloth[, so] [...] I reached out and touched the swaddling clothes [...] and I started searching frantically inside the cloth. [...] It became clear that there was nothing inside [...]. I wanted to scream [...] that there was nothing in the sieve but

¹¹⁴ ‘Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-‘ankabūt*, *op. cit.*, 82; Abdelnabi, *In the Spider's Room*, *op. cit.*, 55-56.

¹¹⁵ Ventura, Alberto. 2018. “L’Islām sunnita nel periodo classico (VII-XVI secolo)”. Filoramo, Giovanni (ed.). *Islam*. Bari-Roma: Laterza. 144.

bits of cloth, and that I was there among them, an adult, a man of more than forty, and that this wasn't my subua, and that my mother had never had another child. But my voice let me down again.¹¹⁶

In order to understand this ambiguous passage, it is necessary to go back to a particular section of the novel in which Hānī describes his experience in a Turkish ham-mam:

خلعت ثيابي كلها، وعلقتها [sic] على مسامير مدقوقة بانتظام على جدارٍ فوق مصطبةٍ عالية، مكتفياً بملاءة الحمام ألفها حول وسطي بإحكام. [...] كأنني أنزع الآن عن جلدي الصورة الزائفة المثقلة بالإكسسوارات والزينة، أتقشر وأتضح وأشفت؛ لكي أدخل حياةً أخرى عابرةً، أخف وطأةً. أدخلها عارياً كأنها ولادةٌ جديدةٌ، لستُ عارياً تماماً مع هذا، تستر عورتي الملاءة المهلهلة، والأستك الملفوف حول رسغي يحمل مفاتيح رجوعي إلى حياتي العلنية.

I took off all my clothes and hung them on the nails hammered neatly into the wall above a high bench. I wore just a piece of cloth wrapped tightly around my waist. [...] I feel I'm shedding a false persona that is weighed down by appendages and adornments. I lose my outer skin and appear as I really am, transparent, in order to enter a different, transitory world where I tread more lightly. I enter it naked, as if newborn. And yet I'm not completely naked. The loose cloth covers my private parts and the rubber strap around my wrist holds the key that will take me back to my public life.¹¹⁷

This passage makes clear that the cloth of the *subū* represents the collection of metaphorical garments worn by the protagonist in order to be part of his society. These garments send him back to his public life. They are hegemonic features that stop the formation of alternative versions. Hānī rejects them and he places himself outside the hegemonic representations, allowing him to admire those garments that are now empty.

6 - Conclusions

We have shown that this novel is deeply steeped in its context through the constant re-elaboration of the discourses about the criminalization of the homosexual individual. This criminalization also operates through the usage of the Quranic verses that deal with sodomy, as the intertextual analysis has shown. It has also been possible

¹¹⁶ Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-ʿankabūt*, op. cit., 341-342; Abdelnabi, *In the Spider's Room*, op. cit., 251-252.

¹¹⁷ Abd al-Nabī, *Fī ġurfat al-ʿankabūt*, op. cit., 207; Abdelnabi, *In the Spider's Room*, op. cit., 150.

to highlight in this novel a number of processes that can be observed throughout the Egyptian LGBTQI+ community, even though some actual hegemonic discourses do not share the entire amount of features of the ones provided by the novel (i.e., the religious basis of the criminalization of homosexuals built upon the symbol of the spider).

Secondly, we have retraced Hānī’s steps towards his identity. At first, he approaches the hegemonic representations of homosexuality pertaining to the domains of criminality and masculinity. The failure in the “assimilation-accommodation” of those models threatens his identity. The protagonist tries to cope with those threats through “compliance” (undertaking a heterosexual relationship) and “denial” (trying to wash away his non-hegemonic traits through “abjection”). He succeeds in finding his own identity by rejecting the hegemonic discursive formations and collocating himself outside of them. Hānī did this at first through “isolationism”. Thereafter, towards the end of the novel, he finally approached a new group that is different from the dominant one. Two main groups of coping strategies can be observed: “intra-physic” strategies and “inter-personal” ones. One might assume that the novel lacks “intergroup” coping strategies. However, by creating a new group, Hānī may derive support from it or strengthen an identity that is different from the dominant one. We argue that this constitutes the starting point of an “intergroup” coping strategy.¹¹⁸

The definition of “rejection” may seem too simplistic, because one individual modifies social representations in personal use rather than rejecting them.¹¹⁹ Nonetheless, Hānī does not appear to have completed the process of modifying them, since he is simply coping with his identity threats. Thus, “rejection” must not be seen as the culmination of his journey, but rather as the outset of his personal modification of social representations. Therewith, social processes of “anchoring” and “objectification” are not clearly visible in this novel. Hence, we conclude by arguing that in the end Hānī did not fully construct his identity, rather he just applied coping strategies after a massive identity threat concluding in the rejection of hegemonic traits that were not compatible with his true self.

We hope that this study contributes to the creation of a springboard for a deeper understanding of the Cairene context (and, in general, the Egyptian one). The application of Identity process theory leads to a better understanding of this community that is suppressed by the Egyptian government. It would be appropriate to integrate these results with studies concerning LGBTQI+ individuals from other Egyptian contexts, thus focusing on each identity and not only on homosexual men. Further studies around the

¹¹⁸ Jaspal, Rusi, & Lopes, Barbara, & Wignall, Liam. 2020. “The Coping with Identity Threat Scale. Development and Validation in a University Student Sample”, *Identity* 20(4). 225-238. P. 229.

¹¹⁹ Breakwell, “Identity and Social Representations”, *op. cit.*, 127.

reception of this novel including those focusing on its usage of Islam, the Quran, and Sufism would help to broaden the data given in the present paper, potentially leading to different interpretations of the novel.