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Under the Gaze of Ra: Surveillance and Subjection in Sonallah Ibrahim's *The Committee* and Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*

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Abstract

This paper examines how surveillance socially controls individuals and designates them as subjects in Sonallah Ibrahim's *The Committee* (2001) and Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* (2016b), employing surveillance studies and Louis Althusser's (1971) theory of state apparatuses—focusing equally on both repressive state apparatuses (RSAs) and ideological state apparatuses (ISAs)—and concept of interpellation as its theoretical framework. In *The Committee*, interpellation is enforced through the state apparatuses; characters internalize their being under the constant gaze of the State and develop a kind of self-discipline that ensures their automatic conformity to the dominant ideology. Similarly, *The Queue* portrays the effects of social control and surveillance on individuals. The queue becomes a symbol of the complete subjection of the people to the almost incomprehensible dictates of the authoritarian regime. By analyzing the dynamics of power and the interplay of surveillance and/by the state apparatuses in these two novels, this paper demonstrates how surveillance operates as a powerful mechanism of social control, shaping individual consciousness and behavior in profound ways. It highlights the enduring relevance of surveillance studies in understanding the complex relationship between the power of the gaze and individual subjection in contemporary societies.

Introduction

Egypt, one of the first known states with a centralized government in the world, has made use of all the state apparatuses typical of such a political system. Through its written history inscribed on the walls of temples, amulets, or papyrus, it becomes clear that Egypt was a monarchy where the Pharaoh ruled by divine right. His authority was sanctioned by his status as an intermediary between the gods and his people. At the top of the divine hierarchy comes Ra: sun god and creator of all other gods and humans alike. Being the most important god, forever sailing in the sky from sunset to sunrise, Ra was the source of authority; his all-seeing eye represents his ability to have all his creatures under the gaze of divine power. The Pharaoh derived his power from Ra, and keeping his subjects under surveillance was one way of guaranteeing the

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continuity of his rule (Wilkinson 2017). As Jan Assmann (2002:168) puts it: “the Pharaonic state” is “constructed as a police state, where the ruling authorities offer security only to the degree that they also threaten to monitor and punish the individual.”

On a more contemporary note, surveillance still plays a very important role in how centralized governments operate and keep social control (Dean 1999). Surveillance “has emerged as the dominant organizing practice of late modernity,” which “produced downstream social changes in the dynamics of power, identity, institutional practice and interpersonal relations” (Ball, Haggerty, and Lyon 2012: 1). According to David Lyon (2018: 16), surveillance is a “culture” that moves beyond the notions of “surveillance state or surveillance society,” focusing on “the participation and engagement of surveilled and surveilling subjects.” It is “part of a whole way of life” that “is no longer merely something external that impinges on ‘our lives,’” but “something that everyday citizens comply with [...] negotiate, resist, engage with and [...] even initiate and desire [...]. [S]urveillance is now internalized in new ways. It informs everyday reflections on how things are, and the repertoire of everyday practices” (Lyon 2018: 9). The concept of surveillance has become increasingly pertinent in present-day societies, resulting in the prominence of surveillance studies as a multidisciplinary field that examines the practices, technologies, and consequences of surveillance therein (Lyon 2007).

Surveillance studies encompass a wide range of topics from various disciplines, such as sociology, political science, law, history, cultural studies, and computer science (Ball, Haggerty, and Lyon 2012). It explores how surveillance is used by governments, corporations, and other institutions to monitor and control individuals and groups (Lyon 2001, 2007). It also engages with the history of surveillance, the ethical implications of data collection and analysis, the ramifications on social relations, and the repercussions of surveillance on shaping power dynamics (Dean 1999; Lyon 1994, 2001, 2007). The ethical implications of surveillance constitute an important angle of study. On the one hand, surveillance can be used to protect public safety, prevent crime, and combat terrorism (Murakami Wood, Lyon, and Abe 2007; Hier 2010). On the other hand, it can also be used to infringe upon individual privacy, discriminate against marginalized groups, and suppress dissent (Lyon 1994; Parenti 2003).

In this context, Althusser’s (1971) theory of state apparatuses provides a valuable framework for analyzing the multifaceted nature of surveillance. Althusser (1971) distinguishes between two types of state apparatuses (SAs): repressive state apparatuses (RSAs) and ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). The RSA “belongs entirely to the public domain, much the larger part of the Ideological State Apparatuses (in their apparent dispersion) are part, on the contrary, of the private domain. Churches, Parties, Trade Unions, families, some schools, most newspapers, cultural ventures, etc., are private” (Althusser 1971: 144). RSAs, such as the police, military, and judiciary, function primarily through force and coercion to maintain social order. ISAs, alternatively, operate through ideological means to reproduce the dominant social relations.

Althusser’s (1971) concept of interpellation is closely related to surveillance studies. Interpellation refers to the process by which individuals are hailed or addressed by the State. It is how individuals appropriate their positions as subjects with pre-conditioned identities, responsibilities, and places within the social structure. Through interpellation, individuals internalize the system of meanings and values within a particular social order and accept the existing power dynamics as the norm (Althusser 1971: 173–174). The “individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection ‘all by himself.’ There are no subjects except by and for their subjection” (Althusser 1971: 182). This ensures the continuity and perpetuation of the system and the complete subjection of the individual.

Furthermore, surveillance in literature exceeds its function as a thematic concern to be an important narrative strategy that necessarily shapes and alters character development, plot progression, and the ideological

fabric of the work (Marx 1996; Pignagnoli 2017). Literary texts utilize surveillance as a critical lens to examine and challenge existing power structures, giving voice to societal anxieties about privacy and autonomy. On the contemporary Arabic literary scene, with its rich tradition yet increasing constrictions, authors find themselves obliged to grapple with the pressing problems of their immediate surroundings while navigating censorship and authoritarianism (El Shafee 2012; Naji 2023; Rabie 2016; Towfik 2011). The resulting narratives simultaneously resist and reflect the realities of their sociopolitical environments.

Using surveillance studies and Louis Althusser's (1971) theories, this paper seeks to investigate how narrative plays a crucial role in exposing the effect of surveillance on the broader context where both individuals and groups fall prey to power structures and social control. By filtering our understanding of surveillance through this framework, we can better analyze how power structures manifest within texts and influence their narratives, particularly in the context of Arabic literature. These thematic and technical concerns will be analyzed through Sonallah Ibrahim's Arabic novel *al-Lajna* (1981), translated into English as *The Committee* (2001) by Mary St. Germain and Charlene Constable and with an afterword by Roger Allen, and Basma Abdel Aziz's Arabic novel *al-Tabur* (2013), translated into English as *The Queue* (2016b) by Elisabeth Jaquette.¹

Like key works representative of surveillance literature, such as George Orwell's *1984* (1949) or Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1992), Sonallah Ibrahim's *The Committee* (2001) and Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* (2016b) are both vivid examples of surveillance literature that address systems of observation and control through an allegorical, dark-humored critique of authoritarianism and capitalist ideology. Ibrahim's critique transcends Egypt, engaging global systems of surveillance and ideological control through an anti-hero who lives under the gaze of a higher power, an intricate system of observation and control. Likewise, *The Queue* presents the mechanisms of surveillance, repression, and bureaucratic control within an authoritarian regime. The similarities between the two novels are such that Abdel Aziz plainly declares: "I love Sonallah's *The Committee*. It's one of my favorite novels. The similarity was actually from this nightmarish state. People here and there in the two novels, they live in a continuous and endless nightmare. This state of unpredictability, of uncertainty, of what may happen and may not happen, I guess" (qtd. in Ma 2022). Both novels "[drill] into the psychology of running up against the all-seeing gaze and suffocating embrace of the state" (Leber 2017). *The Committee* and *The Queue* fit within the surveillance genre by depicting a society under the watchful eyes of an authoritarian bureaucracy that employs all state apparatuses, both RSAs and ISAs, to ensure authority and impact individual autonomy.

Sonallah Ibrahim's *al-Lajna* (*The Committee*)

Sonallah Ibrahim (1937–2025) is a renowned Leftist Egyptian novelist and social critic, known as a prominent figure of the sixties generation. His novels are characterized by realism, sarcasm, dark humor, and a tendency to use documentary texts (e.g., excerpts from newspapers, magazines, political speeches, official documents, ect.) heavily. His writing style can be too forward sometimes: "Ibrahim's own prose is the antithesis of lyrical obfuscation—his typical sentences are blunt to the point of inelegance—and his novels are dense with quotidian complexities" (Creswell 2021: 150). Imprisoned for five years by the Nasserite regime (1959–1964), Ibrahim used his agonizing prison experience in his writing, which perhaps accounts for the fact that the "content of his pieces is generally depressing but the writing is talented and reflects shrewd observation of the minutiae of daily living" (Bowder 1980: 121). He is a fierce opponent of Egyptian regimes, an opposition that earned him a heroic status when he publicly refused the Egyptian Ministry of Culture's "Arab Novel Award" in 2003 and "excoriated the regime for its feckless foreign policy, its endemic corruption, and its use of torture, all of which, he said, gave him no choice but to refuse

¹ All quotations from the novels will be from the English versions titled *The Committee* (Ibrahim 2001) and *The Queue* (Abdel Aziz 2016b).

the prize” (Creswell 2013). In Ibrahim’s opinion “it was awarded by a government that lacks the credibility to bestow it” (qtd. in Creswell 2013). Sonallah Ibrahim’s *al-Lajna* (1981), *The Committee* (2001), is set in the late 1970s and early 1980s of President Sadat’s Egypt, an era marked by “Infitah” (open-door market policy). Due to its subject matter, peculiar form, and documentary language, “there is no question of [*The Committee*’s] relevance in and outside of the Middle East today,” presenting “very real and pertinent issues in a compelling and even entertaining fictive form” (Stone 2002: 158). The novel traces its narrator’s life under constant surveillance via three meetings with the mysterious Committee that has a universal air; its language is not Arabic, and its members seem to belong to various nationalities. Required to present “a study on the greatest contemporary Arab luminary” (Ibrahim 2001: 31), the narrator settles on “the Doctor,” a man who “provides us with one of the most provocative and inexplicable phenomena;” namely, “the presence of many like him in each Arab nation, in spite of disparate social and political systems, characteristics, and laws” (Ibrahim 2001: 95). Finding information about “the Doctor” proves to be challenging, and seemingly unwelcomed by the Committee, thus proving “the failure of words in the face of bland, corrupt power” (England 2003/2004: 116). The bleakness and sense of anxiety permeating the entire novel could be attributed in no small part to the fact that its nameless narrator, as Paul Starkey (2016: 74) describes him, shares “many of the features of the archetypal ‘anti-hero’; indeed, the narrator is here condemned not simply to impotence and failure” but succumbs to the Committee’s harsh punishment at the end of the novel with no resistance. He remains under the Committee’s power and surveillance from beginning to end. His one act of defiance results in the dear price he must pay at the end of the novel: namely, to consume himself.

Ibrahim portrays the Committee along aloof, non-receptive lines. Upon their four-hour tardiness to the first meeting, they enter through “another entrance” (Ibrahim 2001: 3). The separation between the esteemed Committee and other “subjects” is established from the beginning. The head of the Committee is described as “a decrepit old man who wore thick eyeglasses and held a paper so close it almost touched them,” and who “[does] not hear well with this ear” (Ibrahim 2001: 8, 10). Such a description creates further dilemmas for the narrator who has to make himself understood before a head who is half deaf and practically blind (Mehrez 1994: 47). The fact that the language of the Committee is different from that of the narrator’s is another problematic issue. The walls that separate him from them, along with the language barrier, influence his visibility by them and by society at large since “[v]isibility is more than a sensory experience. Both walls and foreign languages can obscure actions—in the first case, by preventing spectators from physically seeing what is going on; in the second, by preventing them from understanding and interpreting an action” (Marquez 2012: 10). The narrator is denied “mutual watching/veillance” (Mann 2013); he is not allowed to “look” into the room of the Committee, nor is he allowed to use his own languages—projecting Sonallah Ibrahim’s previous problems with censorship and the need to publish abroad because of objections to his language, among other issues; Ibrahim’s “language was in obvious conflict with that of the authorities. It is therefore not surprising that he creates, within the text of *al-Lajna* two ‘languages’ which are in conflict: that of the Committee and that of the narrator” (Mehrez 1994: 47). When he finally meets the Committee, the narrator is made to dance, answer questions about a report detailing his inability to perform with a certain lady, strip, and take a rectal exam performed by a Committee member. The meeting serves to consolidate the Committee’s image as an allegory for State control, where the protagonist’s subjection to arbitrary and opaque scrutiny reflects the repressive apparatuses of the authoritarian State.

Louis Althusser’s (1971) concepts of RSAs and ISAs feature prominently in *The Committee* (Ibrahim 2001). The larger-than-life Committee functions as a state apparatus that operates without explanation, creating a sense of control through ambiguity. The bureaucratic surveillance of the protagonist also reflects Althusser’s (1971: 174) notion of “interpellation,” where the narrator is “hailed” and constantly reminded of his subjugation. He is unable to get information on the committee members and “found a shroud of secrecy veiling their names and jobs” (Ibrahim 2001: 7); he cannot count their number, but recognizes “familiar faces, which had looked out at [him] [...] from the pages of newspapers and magazines,” and notices “the military represented among them. On their collars, red ribbons edged with gold indicated their high rank”

(Ibrahim 2001: 8). He was once under the impression that “the Committee was a combination of civilians and officers,” but upon seeing them again and noticing a change in costumes discovers that they exchange roles (Ibrahim 2001: 111), which highlights the Committee’s heterogenous “surveillance assemblage,” with their smooth interoperability (Lyon 2007) and their continuous “processes of disassembling and reassembling” (Haggerty and Ericson 2006: 4), functioning as both RSA and ISA with the authority to hail, shape, influence, control, and punish individual subjectivity.

A combination of the effect of surveillance and state apparatuses makes itself apparent in the difficulty of the protagonist’s assignment on the Doctor. Sonallah Ibrahim (2016: 38:18) explained in an interview that he came across contradictory headlines in the newspapers, which led him to hoard all the available media resources, reading them carefully, cutting out potentially important pieces, and cataloging them in notebooks for documentary use in his novels, which later came to be banned by state apparatuses. *The Committee*’s protagonist, modelled after his creator, tries to obtain information from all the available ideologically controlled resources (Ibrahim 2001: 43). However, the narrator “was surprised at the lack of anything about the Doctor [...] small sections had been carefully cut out of the pertinent issues with a razor blade” (Ibrahim 2001: 46), an act that confirms the Committee’s dataveillance. The narrator’s attempts to obtain information get hindered at every stage and “the narrative reads as a critique of the hypocrisies and conflicts of interest that characterize ‘official’ historiography” (England 2003/2004: 116). He is constantly under surveillance, where the state apparatuses are always one step ahead of him as clarified by the Committee: “[w]e had thought that the obstacles placed in your path would divert you to another subject” (Ibrahim 2001: 68). The protagonist is denied access to the knowledge that is privy only to the Committee and other related apparatuses.

The narrator discovers the well-hidden information within “the social calendar, the business section, and the obituaries” in small-circulation publications (Ibrahim 2001: 52). The Doctor’s relations to RSAs become apparent: “[f]rom a long obituary about some woman related to him by marriage, I discovered an extensive network of relationships linking him to the best-known, richest families and to the individuals holding the top positions in the justice department, the police, the army, the administration, and the world of business and finance” (Ibrahim 2001: 53). The narrator’s need to dig up history this way is in accordance with Omnia El Shakery’s (2015: 920) investigation of Sonallah Ibrahim’s ability to demonstrate “two senses of the phrase ‘history without documents,’” where one refers to the “chronophagy of the state, the way it devours the past through either the material destruction of archives or the presentation of a history purified of antagonisms and embodied in empty commemorative accounts,” and the second “refers to the history that we might seek to reconstruct because of, and despite, the absence of access to such documents.” In the absence of any credible archive from which to obtain information, the narrator’s success in reaching this much data becomes miraculous.

The narrator’s second meeting with the Committee occurs when its members’ visit his tiny apartment—a visit that proves to be a “colonization of the protagonist’s domestic sphere [that] reflects how, alongside the privatization of the public..., neoliberal forces operate through the de-privatization of the private... and the Committee’s presence increasingly manifests as a violent event (Ben Hammed 2019: 55). The visit is unfriendly and the Committee leaves behind Stubby who “will stay here until this thing is wrapped up, even if it takes more than a year” (Ibrahim 2001: 78–79). The narrator is astounded by the level of surveillance he is subjected to. Stubby follows him into the kitchen, then the bathroom, and finally insists on sharing the bed with him, leaving him in fear of being killed or raped. Such unwelcomed “[c]onstant observation compels individuals who are watched to act in particular ways. This intense and endless visibility is not sought by those who are watched. To the contrary, they wish to escape observation” (Marquez 2012: 11). The narrator’s fear for his life leads him to the drastic action of apparently murdering Stubby, proving “how surveillance policies and practices can paradoxically bring with them both an increased sense of security and a host of new dangers” (Haggerty and Gazso 2005: 169). The Committee’s false sense of security via increased surveillance of the narrator leads to the murder of one of their own.

Ibrahim's (2001) narrative critiques how State powers work not only through physical surveillance but also through ideological control, represented in Althusser's (1971) ISAs. The protagonist is caught in a vicious loop where ideological control manifests in intellectual, cultural, and economic mechanisms. He explains to the Committee his theory on "diversification"—a term that the Doctor supposedly coined a new meaning for (Ibrahim 2001: 124)—saying that the "regimes had applied one unchanging means of persuasion to their people: imprisonment and torture. But diversification added other sophisticated methods, from termination to television to parliamentary councils" (Ibrahim 2001: 127). In her discussion of what she calls "the conspiracy of diversification," Anna Isabella Serio (2015: 43) explains that the "political reality that the protagonist describes best resembles a clandestine plutocracy whose power comes from their ability to avoid detection, through the process of diversification—it is diversification that enables it to remain a conspiracy in the traditional sense of a number of people planning to act in secret against another party." This political reality reflects the state's ability to change colors, to modify its RSAs' means into ISAs' ones to convince its subjects to adopt new, timely favored perspectives.

ISAs appear in *The Committee* (Ibrahim 2001) via several means, the most consistent of which is the narrator's discussion of Coca-Cola—a discussion so prominent in the narrative that Tom Starkey (2016: 69) titles the chapter dedicated to *The Committee* in his book "CocaColaland: *al-Lajna* (1981)." In a rather short novel of 158 pages, Coca-Cola is mentioned forty-two times during the narrator's three encounters with the Committee. The narrator is asked during the first meeting "By which momentous event among the wars, revolutions, or inventions will our century be remembered in the future?" (Ibrahim 2001: 16). He mentions Marilyn Monroe, Arab oil, the conquest of space, many revolutions, and brand names, only to settle in the end on Coca-Cola because nothing else "embodies the civilization of this century or its accomplishments, let alone its future, like this svelte little bottle" (Ibrahim 2001: 18). Sonallah Ibrahim "utilises satire to ridicule the multinational corporations and hidden authorities that have very much influenced Egypt" (Alkodimi and Omar 2010: 53), while singling out Coca-Cola to bracket the combined efforts of ISAs, not only in Egypt but also globally, to shape citizens' consciousnesses and subject them to the ideological reach of global capitalism.

The readers' second encounter with Coca-Cola takes place during the Committee's visit to his apartment, where he recounts the relations he found between the Doctor and Coca-Cola, stating that "the Doctor was in the right place at the right time. He got a head start through his efforts to remove the obstacles and obstructions long separating this refreshing drink from its Egyptian aficionados, and as a reward for his efforts, the company granted him bottling rights using a national bottle" (Ibrahim 2001: 74). The narrator's long lecture on the history of Coca-Cola in Egypt illustrates his view that it is "the ultimate symbol of US domination and imperialism" (Starkey 2016: 75)—a view that is confirmed during the third encounter with the Committee, where the narrator sees that the names of luminaries mourning the death of Stubby naturally contain—among those of presidents, vices, and military figures—the president of Coca-Cola (Ibrahim 2001: 109). Such an involvement by Coca-Cola confirms the narrator's earlier opinion that "Since its advent, Coca-Cola has been linked with the major trends of the age, sometimes sharing to a large extent in their formation" (Ibrahim 2001: 19); hence, this proves Coca-Cola's global involvement with all RSAs and ISAs.

The narrator's speeches before the committee and his analysis of the data collected for his study present a satirical portrait of the ideological manipulation of all the State's subjects. The Doctor's enigmatic journey from poverty to a top political and economic status, coupled with complete erasure of the means of his arrival at that position, point to the State's wielding of its ISAs' resources to direct and subjugate the citizens. The Committee's influence extends to controlling information and cultural production, highlighting how cultural ISAs disseminate state-desired ideologies and suppress dissent. The protagonist's "study" on the Doctor is never allowed to see the light, which attests—as Samia Mehrez (2008: 74) explains—to Ibrahim's "acute awareness of the constraining relationship between the cultural and the political"; the narrator numbers among Sonallah Ibrahim's protagonists who are "actors of his own drama: they are all writers or citizens whose works or deeds never see the light of day because they refuse to produce or comply with

what is ‘acceptable’ and therefore compromising” (Mehrez 2008: 74). The Committee not only passed a harsh verdict against him but also “confiscated his study” and his compromised destiny became directly related to his desperate attempt “at the production of an alternative knowledge” (Mehrez 2008: 74).

The final scene in the novel portrays the narrator back at his home, contemplating his situation, and having a Don-Quixotic confrontation with the Committee by facing an empty tape recorder “as if it were the Committee” and attacking it relentlessly: “My voice rang out strong and steady in the empty room. ‘I committed—from the beginning—unpardonable errors. I shouldn’t have stood before you, but against you. Every noble effort on this earth should be aimed at eliminating you’” (Ibrahim 2001: 156). The overpowered protagonist can only confront the Committee/RSA and ISAs in the seeming security of his home. He can shout at the Committee and educate its members on the cyclical nature of history only when addressing an empty tape recorder because eventually, he is subjected, hailed, and utterly interpellated. “Ibrahim’s antihero is defeated not by local dictators, nor by colonial aggressors as such, but by their united front in the global world order” (Elsadda 2012: 126), a front that has proven quite effective in turning citizens into subjects via constant surveillance and subjugation.

In his afterword to *The Committee*, Roger Allen (2001: 163) praises what has become, in “Sun’allah [sic] Ibrahim’s skillful hands, a stinging indictment of the values of an entire class in Egypt that has chosen to enrich itself at the expense of its fellow citizens.” However, Ibrahim does not only focus on the local problems and entanglements. Asked in 2017 how he sees the suffering of third-world countries under the global system some thirty-five-plus years after the publication of *al-Lajna*, Ibrahim replied that “the situation instills pessimism. We can accept the mergers of the global system provided that they do not infringe upon peoples’ interests and their standards of living, but the current situation witnesses a group of monopolies and rich ones controlling the destiny of humanity, and this is unacceptable.” It is this control by the mergers and rich elite that results in the existence of entities such as the Committee, capable of having citizens turn into subjects and be hailed to consume themselves.

Basma Abdel Aziz’s *al-Tabur (The Queue)*

Basma Abdel Aziz (1976–), a psychiatrist, activist, and writer, is the winner of both the 2008 Sawiris Cultural Award and the 2008 General Organisation for Cultural Palaces Award. Abdel Aziz’s experience as a psychiatrist and activist has influenced her writings and has impacted her portrayal of repressed and humiliated individuals. She herself has fallen victim to the security authorities, who refused to appoint her as a university staff member despite being qualified for the job. Thus, it is no wonder that the “essence” of her life and her work “is to dismantle, expose and suppress authoritarian oppressions, whatever their source, and to free people from their control” (Abdel Aziz qtd. in Haddad 2023). This essence serves as both a motive and motif in her writings. In September 2012, after returning to Egypt from France, Abdel Aziz encountered a long queue of citizens waiting outside the closed Mogamaa El Tahrir (a governmental building in downtown Cairo). The building remained closed and the queue grew despite the passage of time. This is the inspirational scene that led to her writing *al-Tabur* (2013), *The Queue* (2016b).

Abdel Aziz is aware of surveillance’s power over writers; she thus learns “to conceal her political critique,” like many Arab writers, “under layers of story in order to provide plausible deniability in the face of scrutiny by the regime” (Campbell 2018: 7). While there are clear parallels to the 2011 Revolution, Abdel Aziz states: “When I was writing *The Queue*, I chose to make it placeless, if I can say, without a specific time, because I believe that this state could happen anywhere there is a dictatorship or an authoritarian regime. . . . I wanted to make it a universal state that was not limited to Cairo, not limited to the developing world” (qtd. in Ma 2022). The events of *The Queue* unfold in an unnamed totalitarian Middle Eastern city controlled by the Gate, a surveillance entity and an oppressive system that rises to power and controls all governmental operations after an uprising fails. The novel, narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator, revolves around Yehya, who is accidentally shot by the military during one of the uprisings known as the “Disgraceful

Events.” Yehya and his friends attempt to obtain permission for Dr. Tarek Fahmy to remove the bullet lodged in Yehya’s pelvis. Yehya and other citizens wait endlessly for the Gate to open, but it never does, which symbolizes societal subjection under the Gate’s gaze. Each day, the queue of waiting citizens, who fluctuate between hope and illusion, grows longer, stretching into infinity.

The Gate as a state apparatus depends on both RSAs and ISAs, and its “intermediation” as a “ruling ideology” is to ensure a “harmony” between the repressive State apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser 1971: 150). As an RSA, the Gate “functions massively and predominantly by repression” and “violence” (Althusser 1971: 149, 145); it relies on overt force as a domination tool. The brutality of the Deterrence Force, the Concealment Force, and the Quell Force that is “better armed than any government agency before it,” and the Gate’s security units reflect the Gate’s reliance on force and physical violence to curb the uprising, “bring people to their senses,” and “clear the square effortlessly” (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 7–9). The Gate resorts to violence under the manipulative ideological pretext that protesters are “spreading chaos” and “undermining the blessed security” the Gate has established; it attempts to combine and create a harmony between repression and ideology.

The opaque Gate that represents the State “materialized and insinuated itself into everything, people didn’t know where its affairs ended and their own began” (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 31). It “was the singular source of all regulations and decrees. Before long, it controlled absolutely everything, and made all procedures, paperwork, authorizations, and permits—even those for eating and drinking—subject to its control. It imposed costly fees on everything” (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 31–32). The bureaucracy the Gate creates is an instrument of surveillance. The papers citizens have to submit, the forms they have to fill out, and the queuing process become means of control, immobilization, and dehumanization. Citizens who are reduced to forms, files, and numbers cannot leave their place in the queue, they are ensnared in a never-ending process of compliance. Bureaucracy, as a control mechanism that extends beyond the physical into the systemic, aligns with Althusser’s (1971) ISAs.

All systems—the Violet Telecom phone-company, television, the Truth newspaper (which ironically publishes lies), and the Fatwa and Rationalizations Committee—collaborate to enforce the Gate’s authority. The Gate depends on an “assemblage” where the surveillance systems do not just work together in conjunction with each other as a functional entity, but fuse together into an assembled unity (Lyon 2007: 98–99). This assemblage “extends the panopticon power and reflects the boundless space covered by the post-panopticon power of new surveillance” (Abdelmotagally 2021: 395). Abdel Aziz (2016a: 92) notes that, whether you are talking about religion, politics, or social issues, “it is all the same, because all these figures are in unity.” The various systems act as “agents of exploitation and repression” that “provide for the domination of the ruling class in ‘words’” (Althusser 1971: 133). They embed a system of belief within social and cultural practices, representing the ISAs that function through ideology rather than force. Violet Telecom, for example, facilitates the surveillance of users’ phone calls and then cuts mobile and internet services to restrain protests. Systems surveil citizens, disseminate falsehoods, and exploit religious pretexts to ensure subjection. In the same context, His Eminence the High Sheikh, who heads the Fatwa and Rationalizations Committee, announces a “*fatwa to the entire nation, to ward off civil strife and its evils, and preserve the country’s integrity. To keep those of faith from succumbing to sin in the eyes of God Almighty, all believers must verify any news before giving it credence, and all those who make claims must substantiate their assertions with proof, lest they spread false allegations and therefore corruption,*” adding that “[a] believer who is weak of faith, and does not join his brothers, is guilty of a sin, which shall be weighed on Judgment Day” (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 133).² The diction of the fatwa that hails citizens, addressing them as “all believers” and giving them roles within the Gate’s ideological framework, places them in a certain place in the system of power. By describing opposition as “corruption” and faith as obedience, the fatwa interpellates individuals as subjects of the state apparatuses under the guise of religious piety. As

² All italicized quotations in this article retain their original formatting from the novel.

Althusser (1971: 175) explains: “The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing.” Religious authority in *The Queue* (Abdel Aziz 2016b) functions as an ISA for manipulation to reinforce submission and control.

The perpetual state of waiting in the queue in front of the Gate implies submission and “subjection to the ruling ideology” and “the ‘practice’ of that ideology,” which mirrors Althusser’s (1971: 133) concept of ISAs functioning to maintain social disorder. The queue becomes a site where citizens acknowledge their powerlessness, revealing how the state apparatus enforces its ideology through mundane yet oppressive structures. In the waiting queue, “[n]o section of society was missing [...]. Everyone was on equal ground” (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 90). The queue develops into a microcosm where a variety of citizens interact, eat, drink, flirt, argue, pray, and listen to religious lessons. Abdel Aziz employs visuality as a narrative technique that harmonizes with the novel’s thematic concern of surveillance. Wessam Elmeligi (2024: 130–131) argues that *The Queue* intertwines “narrativity and visuality,” likening the narrative’s progression to “a handheld camera shakily moving along the long queue.” The camera metaphor captures “the people standing in line, where some of them are not paying attention and others stare at the camera, or even curse at it... with Yehya as the focal point against whom the imaginary narratorial lens rests and moves” (Elmeligi 2024: 130). The novel’s detailed visual narration encourages readers to identify with citizens under surveillance, heightening their awareness of the Gate’s voyeuristic power.

The Gate creates “a viewer society” of “*synopticism*... where a large number focuses on something in common which is condensed” (Mathiesen 1997: 219; emphasis in the original); all citizens focus on the stories that brought them to the queue. They become complicit in their own oppression. They observe and police one another, thereby creating a culture of mutual monitoring and reinforcing the Gate’s control through social surveillance in open circuits. Alternatively, Frances Pheasant-Kelly (2017: 102) states that the “[p]ower exerted by the observer causes resistance in those observed.” The visual and auditory elements, such as the cautious glances, whispers, or murmurs of citizens in the queue, function as “counter/autoveillance strateg[ies] for evading the surveillance gaze that sometimes tends to silence shapes of opposition and dissent and imposes on them censorial restrictions,” reflecting the presence of resistance alongside surveillance (Abdelmotagally 2021: 406). These tactics disrupt the Gate’s visual dominance, allowing for a richer understanding of how individuals collectively navigate surveilled environments.

Most of the citizens in the queue express support for one another. For example, Um Mabrouk, one of the citizens queuing, supports the women in the queue against the man in the *galabeya* who works for the Gate, thereby solidifying sisterhood and collective resistance. Althusser’s (1971: 178) idea of interpellation, where individuals are interpellated as subjects by ideology, manifests in the citizens’ interaction within the queue, as their personal identities are subsumed under collective experience of oppression by the Gate, which acts as “a Unique and central Other Subject.” The queue “incarnates a community from within, ties citizens with hope, and catalyzes their endeavors by a common goal, thus representing a powerful metaphor of survival and continuity of the nation” (Alhashmi 2023: 821). Hope in the queue becomes an influential power; “everyone in the queue—those behind the barriers and the rest—refused to give up hope. No one was ready to leave without receiving the resolution they had come for” (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 90). The queue thus becomes a site of surveillance and resistance, where hope and solidarity manifest as powerful counterforces to the ISAs.

The Queue (Abdel Aziz 2016b), a mélange of linear narrative and moments of analepsis, opens in medias res with Dr. Tarek Fahmy reading the documents in the file of Yehya Gad el-Rab Saeed, a thirty-eight-year-old sales representative who is injured by a bullet that wedged in his pelvis during the “Disgraceful Events.” Yehya’s bullet injury is living proof of the RSA’s role in sustaining State power through coercion. The Gate’s surveillance and bureaucracy objectify Yehya, reducing him to mere data whose medical file and surveillance reports become symbols of his identity. “Everything in his world was determined by the Gate, bound to its decisions” (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 140); no one can help Yehya remove the bullet without official

permission. Meanwhile, Yehya prefers to die rather than sign the form in the Zephyr Hospital, one of the Gate's entities. Such an act will bury the truth that a bullet existed inside his body, the only evidence for the Gate's abuse and violence during the uprising. Yehya is ensnared by "a ruling totalitarian regime, where the citizen's life is transformed [into a] continuous dystopic nightmare, and where [facts] are very hard to find" (Abdel Aziz 2016a: 92). Yehya's unwavering refusal to allow the confiscation of the bullet, despite his pain, underscores his resistance to the State's totalitarian control and its attempts to obliterate truth and silence rebellion.

Yehya finds himself trapped in a bureaucratic nightmare while attempting to navigate the oppressive system, alongside his friend Amani, whose name means wishes. She helps him hunt down his medical file and x-ray confiscated by the Gate. As a consequence, the Gate abducts and traumatizes her; even in her house, she senses its omnipresent gaze. She feels herself "slowly dissolving" until she becomes "nothingness... nothing" (Abdelaziz 2016b: 153). Amani's torture is another example of the RSA, reflecting the physical and psychological impact of authoritarian surveillance on individuals. Her experience exemplifies how oppressive systems can erode individuals' agency and instill fear, leading to their isolation and despair. Her withdrawal from assisting Yehya points out the debilitating effects of constant observation and the internalization of State control. Amani's profound sense of emptiness reflects a loss of hope and is a prolepsis that foreshadows the futility of Yehya's attempts. A futility he rejects, though he keeps fluctuating between "despair and desire to hide away" and "a yearning to survive, to start life anew" (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 94). Nevertheless, he keeps waiting in the queue and resisting the Gate's authoritarianism until he dies.

The structure of the novel reinforces that Yehya is put under the gaze of the omnipresent eye. The novel consists of six sections, each opening with Tarek reflecting on a surveilling "Document" about Yehya. Each Document consists of modified, redacted records that include Yehya's medical and personal information. Tarek notices each time he reads one of the documents that an omnipotent power continually adds and "redacts" information about Yehya, his friends, and Tarek, himself. Document No. 1, titled "Patient Information," consists of primary information about Yehya (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 2). Document No. 2 focuses on the "Time, Location and Circumstances of [Yehya's] Injury" (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 24). In Document No. 3, brackets are used to denote redacted information, mirroring the authorities' manipulation of medical evidence to obscure the truth, for example, "*visible symptoms include [...] bleeding around entry and exit wounds caused by a [redacted], sign of recent abrasions and bruising on the back, pelvis, and forearm regions, [redacted; injury written above it] penetrating the pelvic region [...]. Procedures conducted include [long sentence, redacted]*" (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 40; emphasis in the original). Document No. 4 contains information about the "Patient History," suggesting that Yehya has "*certain acts that may be described as rebellious, such as being 'in the square on more than one occasion'*" for no specific reason, "*anxiety and irritability, [...] an irrational belief that he can alter reality; a clear tendency to act in a socially unacceptable and unhealthy manner; and a sharp, unfriendly manner when interacting with others*" (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 102; emphasis in the original). Document No. 5, under the title "The Gate's Response," is a blank page (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 138). Tarek imagines that the "space on the page grew wider before his eyes, encompassing him, as if to swallow him whole and imprison him within it" (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 141). The documents highlight the dehumanization of citizens, reducing them to mere data, and expose the surveillance mechanisms of the State that trap everyone within its inescapable gaze.

Tarek, who has performed an x-ray on Yehya after he was shot, knows that the Gate has confiscated all the medical files of the patients, including Yehya's. He does not have the courage to tell Yehya the truth; meanwhile, he feels mysteriously pulled to Yehya. He finds himself in a moral dilemma. He does not know if he should operate illegally to save Yehya's life or submit to the Gate's decree, thereby risking his patient's life. He suffers an inner conflict between his duty as a physician and the omnipresent surveillance of the Gate: "[h]e considered making a copy of the file and taking it home [...] but he pushed the idea aside, afraid of the consequences" (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 6). This moment, which reflects the internalization of fear that the omnipresent Gate has instilled in individuals, mirrors the Althusserian concepts where self-regulation is

one the consequences of surveillance: “People know they are surveilled at all times, they thus internalize the surveillant gaze, regulate their own behaviour and conform to the rules imposed by those in power” (Abdelmotagally 2021: 414). Tarek’s inner conflict reflects the psychological impact of the Gate’s/State’s omnipresent surveillance, which instills fear, self-regulation, and the prioritization of subjection over moral responsibility.

Tarek is “a man who didn’t overstep boundaries, a man who’d never been to the Gate, not once in his life. No questions, no problems—life passed him by both predictably and monotonously, just as he liked it” (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 5), yet he feels he can relate to Yehya and realizes after reading the fourth document that they have so much in common (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 193). Tarek thus decides not to be complicit with the regime and removes the bullet for Yehya. Before the surgery, he rereads Yehya’s file and notices that “there was no record of his visit at all, not a single line or the slightest indication that he’d been there. It was strange. This was the first time nothing new had been recorded about Yehya,” which signals his actual disappearance (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 217). Tarek reads a line he barely noticed: “*Yehya Gad el-Rab Saeed spent one hundred and forty nights of his life in the queue*” (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 217; emphasis in the original). The line, which pronounces Yehya’s end, announces Tarek’s initial gesture of defiance and his readiness for action. He picks up his blue pen—which leaves “a small dot of ink on the page”—and writes his own sentence on the surveilled official document, believing it will be viewed by the Gate. “He close[s] the file, [leaves] it on his desk, and [rises]” (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 217). Tarek is no longer a passive reader; by standing firm and altering the official document, he becomes an active rebel against the Gate.

Tarek’s final attitude opposes what he had previously done with the second document. He “had drawn a figure resembling Yehya, nearly naked, and a small, solid circle, completely shaded in, occupying a space in the lower left part of his stomach [...]. He picked up an eraser and carefully erased what he’d drawn. He lifted the paper up to the light coming in through the window and looked at Yehya’s outline and the shadow of the solid circle, no longer there” (Abdel Aziz 2016b: 24–25). The final paragraph in the novel represents Tarek’s “stand against erasure. Throughout the novel, Tarek exclusively used a pencil.... In this final paragraph, the representation of the bullet is no longer drawn in erasable pencil but ‘a small dot of ink on the page,’ an indelible, unavoidable truth” (Cardona 2023: 144). Tarek’s rising is a “rising against a system that he was previously complicit in” (Cardona 2023: 145). Though Yehya, whose name ironically means to live, has died, his resistance lives in Tarek, whose name denotes night visitor, knocker on the door, and bright star. Tarek inspires passive readers to stand tall and resist totalitarian authorities.

Conclusion

Sonallah Ibrahim’s *The Committee* (2001) and Basma Abdel Aziz’s *The Queue* (2016b) take a prominent place within surveillance literature through their exploration of both physical and psychological mechanisms of control. By integrating surveillance studies (Ball, Haggerty, and Lyon 2012; Lyon 2001, 2007, 2018; Marx 1996) and Althusser’s (1971) state apparatuses, this study examines Ibrahim’s and Abdel Aziz’s critique of authoritarian surveillance and of both RSAs and ISAs as control mechanisms that sustain oppressive systems. The fact that both writers are activists with a history of dissent and of voicing their opposition to their country’s authoritarian regime and its stifling control of its subjects contributes to the overall similarities between both texts. In addition, because of the heavy hand of censorship, both try to robe their dissent in layers of narrative, making their true message simultaneously direct and imbued with subtle undercurrents for those willing to look beneath the surface. In both texts, the separation between the governing class and ordinary citizens is highlighted through the erection of walls and of the lack of common language. One of the main tools of control in both is the objectification of citizens through bureaucracy with its suffocating web of deliberate obstruction, designed to enforce compliance through endless red tape and the alarming threat of capricious denial. The Orwellian falsification of truth is also clear through chronophagy in *The Committee* (2001) and through the Truth newspaper in *The Queue* (2016b). The State in both texts ensures the final dehumanization of its subjects by invading their private spheres and depriving

them of any possible human interaction. The various systems of the state represented in the RSAs and ISAs work in unity to crush the individual into total submission creating, a dystopian bleak existence that is both spiritually barren and materially precarious.

However, Ibrahim's *The Committee* (2001) presents a bleaker portrayal of the individual's status under such a system, where complete subjection is almost inevitable. His protagonist's slight attempts at intellectual resistance are squashed and turn into ultimate compliance under the dual functions of RSAs and ISAs in suppressing dissent. The ultimate fate of the nameless protagonist—in a gesture that increases his representational importance—gains emblematic significance. The final image of him consuming his own flesh is deeply disturbing and impactful, leading to complete despair about any potential change of the status quo. In contrast, although Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* (2016b) depicts the oppressive realities of authoritarian regimes, it simultaneously celebrates the human ability for resistance and agency. Even though Yehya's attempts at resistance against the Gate's RSAs and ISAs fail and he dies in the queue, hope is still strong, and the resistance continues. If Yehya dies, Tarek is there to continue his vocation, and the movement from writing in pencil to writing in pen suggests both permanence and commitment, both of which ensure confidence in the coming change.

To conclude, through thinly disguised narratives, both writers level bitter criticism against the political regime in their country at that time. However, such criticism acquires an allegorically universal message against all such forms of surveillance and oppression, not only in the global South but also worldwide. The novels' exploration of surveillance, both institutional and internalized, contributes to the broader discourse of how power operates through observation, coercion, and the shaping of individual subjectivities in contemporary contexts.

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