

# Envisioning a Bleak Future in Al-Wardānī's *Heads Ripe for Plucking*

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**Abstract** This paper explores Mahmoud al-Wardānī's employment of the theme of decapitation in his historical novel, *Heads Ripe for Plucking*. It shows how the author uses this physical impairment to replicate his sociopolitical concerns under the reign of successive totalitarian political regimes in his country. The novel constitutes an elastic Egyptian setting capable of providing a terrifying panorama of tyranny and political oppression throughout the history of Egypt. The leitmotif of multiple beheadings along with the fragmentary structure of the narrative function as an allegory for the historical forces which impeded the nation's development. Furthermore, the paper traces al-Wardānī's interplay of magical realist and science fictional tropes as apt modes of expression to expose injustice and lack of democracy and to reflect the future dystopian existence the author aims to warn against.

**Keywords** Mahmoud al-Wardānī; decapitation; magical realism; science fiction; dystopia

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## Introduction

Mahmoud al-Wardānī (b.1950) belongs to the 1970s generation of Egyptian writers whose main fictional concern is to reflect the turbulent sociopolitical scene in the aftermath of the 1967 War. His novel *Heads Ripe for Plucking* (*Awan al-qitaf*) (2002) represents a vivid example of how the social and political transformations in Egypt during that period have played a prominent role in inspiring writers, enhancing their creativity, and shaping their artistic talent. As a historical novel,

it features an elastic Egyptian setting to provide a terrifying panorama of tyranny and political oppression throughout time. By so doing, it simultaneously explores the repercussions of the 1967 defeat on Egypt and denounces the brutality of the successive totalitarian police state regimes which caused the spread of corruption, poverty, and suppressed political freedoms.

Al-Wardānī and his contemporary Avant-Garde writers like Sonallah Ibrahim, Ibrahim Abdul Majid and others, departed from the conventions of realist fiction because they were no longer convinced that such conventions are capable of representing the status quo in Egypt and the rest of the Arab World. To articulate their anxieties, they experimented with narrative techniques which best replicate the chaotic and oppressive conditions in their country. In *Heads Ripe for Plucking*, the six stories about the different protagonists fragment the novel's form, whereby the novel's fragmentary structure acquires an allegorical dimension that symbolizes the conditions in Egypt. In fact, its allegorical dimension corresponds with Walter Benjamin's clarifications of the baroque allegory in Avant-Garde art. Benjamin maintains that the essence of the Avant-Garde art constitutes emphasizing the extreme fragmentation of the modern allegorical image (58). In complementing the work of Benjamin, Peter Bürger states that the Avant-Gardists are allegorists because their works "are non-organic, [and] fragmented, [from which] false appearance of totality is extinguished." Their allegories form "an expression of melancholy" because "[a]llegory, whose essence is fragment, represents history as decline" (Benjamin 68).

### **Magical Decapitations and Envisioning Dystopia**

As a historical novel, *Heads Ripe for Plucking* goes back to the beginnings of Arabo-Islamic history to draw an analogy between past tyrannical events and contemporary ones in order to expose the injustices of totalitarian regimes. Al-Wardānī divides the novel into several stories of beheadings and uses multiple narrators; hence, the novel's allegorical form symbolizes the historical forces which impeded the nation's development. Al-Wardānī's second story recounts the historical events that led to the beheading of al-Imām Ḥusayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad, in Kūfa, at the hands of the Umayyad Caliph Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiya. Because the latter usurped the office of the Caliphate, al-Ḥusayn refused to pledge him allegiance. Upon his death, al-Ḥusayn's head was taken to Egypt, while his body was buried in Iraq. For al-Wardānī, the demise of al-Ḥusayn and his family illustrates the measures that autocratic rulers would take to stay in power. Thus, even though al-Ḥusayn is the Prophet's beloved grandson, Yazīd does not spare his

life and he sends his family into captivity. The Prophet's granddaughter, Zaynab, screams in agony, "O Muḥammad! O Muḥammad! Behold al-Husayn in this bare land, besmeared with blood, his limbs mutilated. Muhammad, your daughters are enslaved, your offspring murdered" (Al-Wardānī 118).

The title of al-Wardānī's novel alludes to the infamous speech of the ruler of Iraq, al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf al-Thaqafī, whom the Caliph Yazīd sends to al-Kūfa to suppress the mutiny of al-Imām Ḥusayn's followers. Al-Ḥajjāj addresses the Kūfans saying: "I see heads before me that are ripe and ready for plucking" (qtd. in Ḥalīm159). Because the novel's central theme revolves around the beheadings of opponents, the first story functions as a frame for the entire novel, and it connects the stories thematically. At the same time, al-Wardānī evokes literal and metaphorical decapitations of political opponents, intellectuals and otherwise throughout history. Accordingly, in the novel's context, al-Imām Ḥusayn functions as an archetypal sacrificial figure whose narrative raises the novel to a mythical level. As a result, the novel acquires a circular mythical time that suggests the repetitions of historical patterns. As such, al-Wardānī's marvelous elements fit easily with the novel's dystopian atmosphere because magical elements highlight incredible historical events.

*Heads Ripe for Plucking* opens with the frame narrative in which the anonymous narrator tells his story in retrospect, after which the novel recounts the beheading of the several characters that appear in six separate stories. The narrator is beheaded while travelling on a train. Jumping onto the train roof, he dances sprightly with his eyes shut for a few seconds, and the iron bridge impales his head (Al-Wardānī 2). The image of the narrator's impaled head hanging over the bridge with his wide open eyes which gaze toward the south foreshadows the horrific tales that he narrates later in the novel.

The narrator relates the details of other beheadings to create an extended image of the status quo in Egypt. These decapitations encompass the liquidation of the communist leader Shuhdi Attiya al-Shafie in detention camps during the reign of President Gamāl 'Abd al-Naṣer, and the two schoolboys who unwittingly get involved in the demonstrations of the indigent during al-Sadāt's rule. The narrator also mentions the beheading of the man who comes home from the Gulf to retire. Together, they represent the metaphorical decapitation of intellectuals and the negative impact of the weak Egyptian economy on the people.

Magic performs a pervasive element in al-Wardānī's text and it functions as the writer's most effective fictional tool through which he expresses political oppression. This element manifests itself in the form of a number of beheaded

characters which retain some human attributes and take part in the action of the novel in spite of decapitation. These physically impaired characters appear within different contexts in the novel's different settings. Even though the narrator's head gets severed in a freak accident, he is capable of thinking, contemplating, and telling stories. On the other hand, al-Ḥusayn's severed head has a will of its own and manages to fly magically from Kūfa to Egypt. However, the most intriguing of these heads appears in the futuristic setting al-Wardānī envisions in one of the novel's subplots. The government formats the brain of the slain citizen and then they reassemble his head and body once the doctors accomplish their mission of downloading the desired programs on the man's brain. The citizen resumes his normal routine after they discharge him from hospital. Al-Wardānī aptly fuses magic with science fiction to portray the most hideous dystopia where authoritarian systems regularly brainwash their citizens to guarantee their conformity.

In her article "Middle Eastern Writers Find Refuge in the Dystopian Novel," Alexandra Alter argues that dystopian themes are not alien to Arabic fiction but the "genre has proliferated in part because it captures the sense of despair that many writers say they feel in the face of cyclical violence and repression. At the same time, futuristic settings may give writers some measure of cover to explore charged political ideas without being labeled dissidents" (Alter n. p.). Likewise, in "Dystopian Future in Contemporary Science Fiction," Chintan Ambalal Mahida clarifies that the main features of dystopian science fiction include "technological advances that enslave humans or regiment their lives; the mandatory division of people in society into castes or groups with specialized functions; and a collective loss of memory and history making mankind easier to manipulate psychologically and ultimately leading to dehumanization" (2).

For al-Wardānī, dystopian tropes articulate his objection to the ongoing political oppression. After displaying the various forms of repression that autocratic regimes have exerted over the past years, he imagines how technology and science may change their life for the worse. In his opinion, rapid technological advances will provide the oppressive institutions with new means of control and surveillance instead of improving people's life. It signifies that al-Wardānī has a completely pessimistic outlook for the future. He believes that the cycles of violence and the repression of freedoms will prevail unless the nation revolts to break this vicious cycle.

In addition to the magical severed heads, al-Wardānī resorts to folktales to glorify al-Husayn's martyrdom. One tale goes that Al-Husayn's severed head miraculously flees to Cairo against Mu'āwiya's wishes; while conveying al-

Husayn's head with the procession of captives on the way to Damascus, the seat of the Ummayyad court, the "noble head escape[s] . . . and land[s] in the arms of a woman known as Umm al-Ghulam in one of Cairo's alleys" (3-4). Although the narrator declares that some people discredit the incident on the ground that Cairo had not yet existed at that time, the magical incident has a fictional significance. The escape of the severed head functions as a blunt act of defiance against oppression and violence. Mu'āwiya's mundane control over al-Husayn ends with the brutal murder. Al-Husayn's head refuses to be the usurper's trophy. Death liberates al-Husayn from Mu'āwiya's tyranny and it enables him to choose his destination this time. His escape to his desired place affirms his spiritual status as a martyr with special miracles; additionally, it devalues the triumph of the tyrant who has limited and mundane powers.

Following al-Husayn's narrative, al-Wardānī sets the next stories in modern Egypt. Nevertheless, themes of political oppression, tyranny, and decapitation recur variously in each of them. Through the different threads of narrative in the novel, he shows that overthrowing the monarchy and establishing the Republic of Egypt in 1952 by the Free Officers have not fulfilled the aspirations for democracy in the country. The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed the advent of several autocratic regimes in Egypt which have betrayed the Revolution's main slogans of liberty, constitutional and economic reform, and social justice. Each of the stories represents a vivid dramatization of the tyranny and the unjust practices of these political systems. They also reflect the Egyptians' repeated feelings of frustration and disillusionment during the rule of different authoritarian leaders.

For al-Wardānī, the precursor of these totalitarian systems is President 'Abd al-Nāṣir's regime because it has established a legacy of dictatorial and violent rule in Egypt. Shortly after assuming power, 'Abd al-Nāṣir declared Egypt an Arab State with one-party political system. According to Morton Kondracke despite some of 'Abd al-Nāṣir's national accomplishments, he arrogated exclusive power, turned the country into a police state, placed citizens under strict surveillance, and violated human rights in many ways. He nationalized most of the important newspapers to be mere horns for authority (15). His Intelligence apparatus opened personal letters and taped private phone calls. Most importantly, Kondracke points out that 'Abd al-Nāṣir maintained detention camps and torture facilities where he has kept his political opponents (15). Without official and fair trials, he has imprisoned many of his rivals in remote military jails.

'Abd al-Nāṣir's autocracy crystallizes in his brutal liquidation of the leader of The Democratic Movement for National Liberation, Shuhdi Attiya al-Shafie,

in 1960. Al-Wardānī sets Shuhdi’s story in Abu Zaabal Prison and narrates the circumstances of his martyrdom from the perspective of several other political prisoners who witnessed the awful stages of this shameful crime. The names of the real political prisoners who appear in his story give it more credibility and attest to the tyranny of the system towards many people. Shuhdi brilliantly explains to Nūr Sulaymān, another political prisoner, the crux of his controversy with the new born regime. In his opinion, admiring President ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s national achievements should not encourage the politicians and activists of all parties to overlook their need “to uphold [their] call for democracy, the annulment of martial law, and wresting [their] rights and the rights of all the political forces to independent organization” (Al-Wardānī 29). Evidently, the regime criminalizes these demands and penalizes those who advocate them.

Al-Wardānī’s use of the historical incident of Shuhdi serves to exemplify the violence and cruelty of ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s regime and its repetition of the mistakes of the authoritarian system it had revolted against in the first place. In addition to that, the brutal murder of Shuhdi attests to the system’s disgraceful ingratitude to its most loyal supporters. In his conversation with Shuhdi, Nūr wonders “what I find hard to understand is how a nationalist government like President Nāṣir’s would actually take it upon itself to sanction the torture, humiliation, wounding, and murder of Communist nationalists who stand by it” (Al-Wardānī 28). On the other hand, it surprises Abd al-Hamid Haridi that Abdel Nasser uses the executioners of the monarchy and imprisons people without a fair trial; he laments, “[t]hey sent us Ismail Himmat, who had specialized in torturing Communists since the days of the King, to undertake disciplining us himself. We are all now detainees. Whether sentenced or not, everyone was a detainee” (Al-Wardānī 34). Replicating the mistakes of the former system frustrates people and turns their dream of democracy into a terrifying nightmare.

Despite the fact that Shuhdi belongs to the Communist Party that supports ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s nationalist government, the jailors subject him to severe torture and humiliation. Shaved down to the scalp and barefoot detainees watch an officer on horseback order Shuhdi, “Say ‘I’m bitch,’ boy!” (Al-Wardānī 86). Shuhdi reminds the officer that he belongs to a nationalist movement that supports the President and even if he does not, it is “barbaric” (Al-Wardānī 86) to treat him in this way. The officer ignores Shuhdi’s words and orders the jailors to whip him repeatedly, drag him on the floor, and then stretch him on a wooden maiden. Whenever Shuhdi loses consciousness, they dip his head into a nearby canal in order to sober and then they resume their torture. The other prisoners feel sorry for Shuhdi but the “brutality of

the butchers" (Al-Wardānī 27) does not surprise them. They get used to forced labor in the mountain, to replacing their names with numbers, and to "the regular feasts of torture prescribed all morning" (Al-Wardānī 26). All this makes them contemplate the worth of their higher education.

The procedures of announcing Shuhdi's death provoke the indignation of one of the political prisoners, Badir al-Rifai, who considers them to be "altogether surreal," and some sort of "madness" (Al-Wardānī 142). After their vain attempts to resuscitate Shuhdi, they move his body to a cell and hang on the door a handwritten sign that reads "hospital" to mislead the delegates from the public prosecutor's office. As much as Badir despises the officers for their impudence, he does not totally exonerate the rest of the prisoners from guilt because they do not retaliate when they witness such a crime. He remembers, had "we not kept silent about the murder of Farid Hadad?" (Al-Wardānī 142). The inhumane murder of Shuhdi only instances the system's readiness to shed innocent blood. Badir tries to find an excuse for the muffled prisoners as he thinks about the constant and unbearable torture they have to endure on a daily basis: "[t]hey had succeeded in turning us into animals with no thought for anything other than staying on the right side of death" (Al-Wardānī 142). The more important matter that preoccupies Badir's mind is whether there will be a fair interrogation of Shuhdi's brutal murder.

Al-Wardānī maintains a discernible parallelism between Shuhdi's liquidation and al-Ḥusayn's martyrdom. They are both dedicated to a noble cause, tolerate acute physical torture, and courageously embrace their dignified death. Despite the huge time difference between the two stories, the two heroes valiantly oppose the rulers' arrogation of absolute authority and their total neglect of the people's rights and demands. Like al-Ḥusayn, who does not heed the several warnings about the imminent danger and decides to proceed to Karbala, Shuhdi willingly assumes the role of the spokesman for his colleagues and he represents them in court in spite of the extra punishment he expects for doing so. They both refuse to succumb to their executioners when they ask them to yield. When al-Ḥurr requires from al-Ḥusayn to pledge allegiance to Yazid immediately, al-Husayn answers him defiantly, your "death would precede it" (Al-Wardānī 56). Similarly, Abd al-Latif Rushdi fails in getting Shuhdi to say, "I am Shuhdi the bitch" (Al-Wardānī 87). Instead, they withstand severe torture until al-Ḥusayn's "body had sustained thirty-three spear wounds and thirty-four sword blows" (Al-Wardānī 117), and until "Shuhdi's bones had been totally broken" (Al-Wardānī 139).

Shuhdi's executioner hits him on the crown of his head and he drops dead. The final resemblance between the two stories resides in the fact that the heads of



the murdered heroes end up with their wives. Roxanne, Shuhdi's Greek wife, has a bizarre dream that foreshadows Shuhdi's death while waiting in her car outside the doors of Abu Zaabal Prison. She dreams that her husband loses his eyeglasses and bumps into the table and she cannot help him because someone shackles her. When he "started to fall slowly to the floor . . . [she] took Shuhdi's head in her arms. Shuhdi was silent but she felt his warm, sticky blood" (Al-Wardānī 90). Shortly after that, a young soldier reports to her the death of Shuhdi under torture and affirms her misgivings.

The martyrs of Anwar Sadāt's tyranny are two innocent young boys, Mustafa and Umar, who lose their heads during the demonstrations. In spite of Sadāt's changes to Egyptian foreign policies, his presidency has been redolent of 'Abd al-Nāṣir's rule in terms of domestic strategies and interior affairs. In this respect, Jason Brownlee maintains that "[f]ollowing his predecessor's mold, [Sadāt] also expanded the internal security apparatus and detained thousands of Egyptians calling for a freer press, constitutional reform, and fairer elections" (Brownlee 641). His inability to successfully deal with the several challenges of the period enraged the Egyptians and instigated the rebellion against him. Kondracke believes that "Sadat repeatedly has raised his people's expectations—for peace, for democracy, for relief from poverty—but has failed to deliver on any of them" (15). His policy of "opening the door" to private investment in Egypt did not solve the country's economic predicament. This greatly distorted his image as the earnest reformist who understands the needs and the aspirations of the peasantry because he is one of them, as he always claimed. Moreover, his reinstatement of the political multi-party system did not relinquish the latent presence of the intelligence state during his reign.

Al-Wardānī captures the sociopolitical upheaval during Sadat's presidency in the schoolboys' story whose decapitation takes place during the demonstrations of the indigent in the streets of Cairo. On January 18, 1977, the ardent student, Mustafa, turned fifteen and feels so excited that he will celebrate his birthday with his classmates while on the school trip to Port Said. The school bus does not reach its intended destination because of the overwhelming demonstrations that pervade almost all the streets of the capital. The situation seems extremely alarming because the number of protesters grows larger and larger by the minute. When the chanting crowds block the streets, the driver parks the bus and the students disperse uncontrollably about the city. Mustafa and his two other friends, Nagi and Umar, melt into the huge crowds of angry-looking people which surge them forward in the streets and squares of Cairo. The chaos in the city leaves them no choice but



to enmesh themselves in this historical moment. After losing Nagi, Mustafa and Umar's long and tiresome day ends tragically. A group of thugs besieges them with some other people in a side street and strikes their young heads with swords and bayonets.

In the novel, al-Wardānī monitors the shortcomings of Sadāt's totalitarian regime through the wandering eyes of Mustafa. The teenager roams the streets of Cairo and reports to the reader the actions and the slogans of the demonstrators in different places. Though the events take place in one day, they perfectly reflect the sociopolitical scene during Sadat's reign which lasted for eleven years. The demonstrators voice their protests about utter poverty as they chant "[t]ell the sleeper in the palace/ [t]he workers sleep on empty stomachs" (Al-Wardānī 69). Other demonstrators who come from different directions gather in one united mass and chant: "You who rule us through your secret police/ Everyone knows about your injustice" (Al-Wardānī 69). Mustafa and his friend, Nagi, also find themselves holding a boy up on their shoulders and chanting after him "Parliament's all cronyism and spin/ While people's freedom is reined in" (Al-Wardānī 71, *sic*). Though the teenagers do not seem to fully comprehend the situation, they are capable of sensing the anger of the crowds and the legitimacy of their demands.

Through Mustafa's story, al-Wardānī registers Sadāt's violent repression of the revolting citizens to show how he denies them their basic human rights and freedom of expression. Mustafa describes a number of massacres and bloody scenes before he meets his own doom. The demonstrators sabotage the notorious Sayyida Zaynab police station where officers subject many citizens to brutal and even fatal torture. The security forces use tear gas and bullets against the angry demonstrators to make them retreat; they injure and kill many people in the process. A similar scenario takes place in front of Sadat's house where "the soldiers battered [the cursing demonstrators] with their batons and shields" (Al-Wardānī 72). Mustafa mentions that it "was another massacre that nothing could stop. People were screaming as they dropped, but no one paid any attention to them" (Al-Wardānī 73). Killing the demonstrators who express their anger about political corruption and poor economic conditions indicates the tyranny of the system which subordinates the will of citizens and confiscates their right of rejecting corruption and injustice.

In another story, the beheaded Egyptian citizen does not qualify for a martyr because of the many flaws in his character. However, one can safely consider him a victim of the corrupt regime. The story depicts the negative economic and social impact of totalitarian systems on the common man in Egypt. Al-Wardānī believes that different Egyptian regimes have repeated the same mistakes and have not

brought about any economic reforms.

This explains the indefinite time of this story which could be plausible any time in the second half of the twentieth century. The story centers on a greedy Egyptian citizen who resigns from his job with the government and travels to the Gulf to amass a fortune which he thinks will guarantee his happiness. After ten years of hard work, he goes back to his homeland dreaming of establishing his own business and of enjoying the rest of his life with his small family. However, his wife surprises him with her own plans for their future. In the presence and consent of their daughter, the wife's lover slays the husband at the night of his arrival and in his own bed.

Totalitarian regimes indirectly slay citizens when they fail to provide decent living conditions for them. Poor economy and unemployment force them to seek jobs in other countries. The citizens' constant endeavors to achieve their legitimate aspirations of living a proper life can be dehumanizing and even fatal. The retiree who returns from the Gulf represents the Egyptian expatriates who travel abroad to find job opportunities and to save more money; however, they lose their dignity in the process. Settled into his seat on the airplane on his way to Cairo, he thinks appreciatively of his accomplishments over the past years. He now owns two apartments, a taxi, a piece of land, and a fairly big amount of money in the bank. Nevertheless, he also remembers the hardship he went through to finally achieve his goals.

Before retiring, he commits himself to an arduous plan of hard work that develops into a self-imposed enslavement. He first sends his resignation from the post of librarian in the headquarters of the ministry to make sure that he has "burned [his] bridges" (Al-Wardānī 8) and that he will never think of resuming his old job. He works seven days a week and maintains several jobs. He works for a school in the morning, a private company in the afternoon, and spends his evenings either giving private lessons or fixing electric appliances for colleagues and acquaintances. His full awareness of the extent to which he has stooped renders him ready to admit "I crawled on my belly, fawned on all and sundry, and toadied up even to the Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. I was always ready to do the locals any favor they asked for" (Al-Wardānī 59). Besides his lost dignity, he notices in the last few years that his health deteriorates and he has less stamina and diligence than usual.

Al-Wardānī shows that economic problems can destroy individuals and consequently produce dysfunctional families. In spite of all of his personal follies, the returner from the Gulf is a typical victim of poor economy. His need for money wipes out his identity and turns him into a mere machine. The former librarian

severs all his familial ties because of his new work. He does not visit his parents for years and he does not contact his old friends. Similarly, he neglects his wife and children until they become like strangers rather than family members. This becomes quite evident when he refuses his wife's "insistent request to send her power of attorney so she could receive the apartment [he buys]" (Al-Wardānī 121). Likewise, his daughter does not show him any affection when he returns after a long absence and treats him with cold politeness.

The beheading of the retiree may seem to be his penalty for marginalizing his family for the sake of money. He becomes so obsessed with amassing his fortune to the extent that he only remembers his family at the end of each month when he has to send them their allowance. He spends three consecutive years abroad and he contacts his family through the phone every month or two. Ironically, the taxi driver whom he hires to work for him uses the knife he brings from the Gulf to slay him. The returner from the Gulf's character typifies many Egyptians who find themselves forced to accept menial jobs abroad to avoid poverty and unemployment in their homeland. The fissure in his family also resembles the social challenges many Egyptian families face in the absence of the father figure. Rather than condemning this category for humiliating themselves in this manner, al-Wardānī censures the lame political systems which drag society to this abyss.

The "harshest and most painful of [the narrator's] beheadings" takes place at the turn of the twenty-first century and without shedding "a single drop of blood" (Al-Wardānī 36). During the reign of President Husni Mubarak, tyranny and autocracy take different forms from that of Nāṣir's detention camps and Sadāt's violence towards demonstrators. The Egyptians' major disappointment at that period emanates from the regime's suppression of freedoms and its inability to fulfill the people's long-postponed dreams of justice and democracy. Al-Wardānī depicts the plight of intellectuals and artists who live under totalitarian systems and shows how they frustrate them and impede their creativity. Repressive measures of censorship and the restriction of freedom hinder writers and artists of all types from pursuing their mission of enlightening people and of providing constructive criticism for the status quo in their country. By forbidding intellectuals from inspiring generations and from freely expressing their thoughts, such regimes "metaphorically" slaughter and impair them. More importantly, these oppressive systems disconnect the present from the past and totally disregard the significance of history. Al-Wardānī reflects these thoughts through the exiled intellectuals, artists who commit suicide, and the decapitated Sphinx which appears in this plot.

Inadvertently, Alia, the main character in this story, bears the legacy of the

previous generation which has “left everything in ruins for their successors,” (Al-Wardānī 102) and she strives to make the best use of this legacy. She belongs to the young generation of enlightened and educated Egyptians whose awareness of their reality renders them with “no dreams, no wishes whatsoever” (Al-Wardānī 102). In order to function as a link between two different generations, she revolves within a circle of frustrated intellectuals who are either her relatives or acquaintances. Her father, Shaker, writes a scenario about the nationalist hero, Ahmed ‘Urābī, who revolted against Khedive Tewfik. Colonel ‘Urābī remains an Egyptian icon because his revolution called for freedom, social justice, and opposing foreign intervention in the country’s affairs. Shaker’s interest in ‘Urābī’s life reflects a romantic nostalgia for the heroism of the past. A soldier finds the scenario next to Shaker’s headless body in Iraq during the Gulf War in 1991.

The scenario projects Shaker’s disillusionment with Saddam Hussein’s political policies and his own rejection of the American intervention in the Arab affairs they entail. Shaker also belongs to a generation whose main ordeal resides in “the implanting of Israel in the Arab body and the ceaseless blows it administrate[s] to the Arabs” (Al-Wardānī 108). The inability of the successive regimes to stop the growing influence of Israel in the region and their attempts to normalize relations with the enemy provoke people’s fury. Shaker sees Arab leaders to be flip sides of the same coin because of their inability to preserve the sovereignty of their countries. It seems to Alia that her father “had been deliberately courting death” (Al-Wardānī 94) and it makes her wonder, “Where is his head? In Kuwait or in Iraq?” (Al-Wardānī 109). Shaker does not make any effort to return to his own country at the right time. Instead, despair leads him to embrace death in the Desert Storm.

Other intellectuals appear in Alia’s life such as her paternal aunt, Iqbal, and her lover, Abd al-Wahab, who reflect other sides of the intellectuals’ dilemma. Iqbal is a journalist and a political activist who has taken part in the Students’ Movement back in the seventies of the twentieth century. She survives Nasser and Sadat’s tyranny and outlives her colleagues only to witness further oppression and disillusionment. Because of her frustration, she gets sick and ultimately commits suicide. Al-Wardānī portrays her as a martyr since Iqbal’s “entire generation owes her a huge debt of gratitude. She was the noblest of them all, and the most courageous” (Al-Wardānī 108). Her posthumously published book, *Cancer of the Soul*, reflects “the depth of the trauma of [Iqbal’s] generation” (Al-Wardānī 94) and it eloquently articulates its failures as well as its dreams. Due to its leftist ideology and wide acclaim, the book finds special appeal among Iraqi intellectuals in diasporas. It also finds its way to the Iraqi poet, Abd al-Wahab, who flees from Saddam Hussein’s authoritarian regime,

like many other artists and writers, to the Scandinavian countries. Being the brother of the soldier who finds Shaker's scenario, Abd al-Wahab first contacts Alia to pass the scenario to her. Their discussions about Shaker's scenario and Iqbal's book bring the two closer to each other in spite of the huge age difference.

Alia and Abd al-Wahab's intention to "inter the new millennium together" (Al-Wardānī 97), and to issue a joint book out of Shaker and Iqbal's unpublished writings symbolizes their attempt to use the legacy of the past to construct a brighter future. However, al-Wardānī indicates the futility of intellectuals' efforts when totalitarian regimes control their destiny. These political systems nip their talent in the bud and impede their accomplishment. Al-Wardānī captures the artist's situation in the image of Alia's unfinished statue. As a young child, she goes with her aunt to the museum to learn how to make a clay statue. She makes a palm tree shape and intends to shape a little girl beside it reaching for the dates. Alia does not manage to do so because they suspend all museums' activities in Cairo when the Gulf War starts. Similarly, the unwise choices of the Ministry of Culture for the New Year's gala at the Pyramids topple her effort to make Abd al-Wahab appreciate Egypt's great civilization. Because of her passion for history, she assumes the role of the tourist guide for the Iraqi poet and proudly shows him all the historical sites in Cairo. All the admiration and pride she makes him feel for Egypt's glorious history turns into disgust when he attends the gala and sees the shameful show.

Oblivious of proper historical dignity of the ancient sites, the Ministry allows a French musician to turn "the Pyramid Plateau into a discotheque" (Al-Wardānī 149). Alia apologizes to her guest for what she describes as a "fiasco;" and Abd al-Wahab reiterates that he finds the show "utterly tacky" (Al-Wardānī 150). At the end of their evening, a more shocking surprise awaits the young lady; she suddenly cries, "Where's the Sphinx's head? Am I dreaming? Isn't this the Sphinx—decapitated?" (Al-Wardānī 152). The bloodless decapitation of the Sphinx and the mutilation of this historical monument symbolize the regime's total disrespect for history and for artists alike.

Al-Wardānī sets the chronologically last story of the novel in the future. His nameless character in the story functions as a prototype for what he believes to be the typical future Egyptian citizen. Decapitation becomes a systematic process which all citizens undergo willingly and regularly. The narrator maintains that the man, like the rest of the citizens above the age of eighteen, "had to check in once every two years to get any damage in his head fixed. The doctors would hack off the head at the throat and send it to the maintenance department, where programs were downloaded and spare parts installed in place of damaged segments. During

this procedure...one stayed at the hospital without a head” (Al-Wardānī 20). Through this periodical “maintenance” for citizens’ heads, the regime guarantees the conformity of all its subjects. It clears their minds of undesirable thoughts or revolutionary inclinations and downloads instead calculated beliefs and ideas. Through this technological process of regular brainwashing, the regime deprives the individual from free thinking and from exercising his free will.

The unnamed citizen leads a pathetic dystopian existence. During the dehumanizing process of changing his head, he maintains his ability to talk in a weird way, move around clumsily, and socialize with other patients. The narrator laments, for “four days they had left you without a head, bumping into others, clinging to the nurses ... and exchanging disjointed words with your companions in the ward. Those were the harshest days, when your organs came apart and you were incapable of pulling them together” (Al-Wardānī 133-4). The autocratic regime uses technological advances to oppress people and to strictly control their lives. It turns them into mere robots which excel in fulfilling their assigned roles but lack the capacity for independent thinking. The crippling effect of the beheading operation becomes manifest in the man’s bitter awareness of his inability to control his own organs. Headless and acting recklessly, he roams in the hospital wards until he crashes into a closed door and breaks his bones. They tie him to his bed to restrict his movement in a way that reminds the reader of the other stories’ prisoners and detainees in actual prisons.

The technologically programmed citizen is socially inept. Totalitarian regimes deliberately sever the individual’s social and familial ties to render him more controllable. The unnamed citizen seems to be emotionally detached from all those around him. His neutral feelings towards his family members and acquaintances make the narrator ponder, “he was stingy with ... his emotions, which he tended to hoard. He could not remember a time when he was in any way demonstrative, not even with his wife Hanan, with whom he felt he had shared nothing special for years” (Al-Wardānī 21). He cheats on his wife without any feelings of shame or remorse. In the retiree’s story, the oppressive political system keeps the citizens preoccupied with their poor economic conditions to distract them from protesting against their unjust leaders. Consequently, social problems arise and families become dysfunctional. However, in the dystopian existence that al-Wardānī imagines in this subplot, Egyptians lose their social bonds and their natural drive to cherish such relations because the state uses technology to dehumanize them and numb their natural feelings.

The state also dehumanizes citizens because it identifies them by their national

identity numbers rather than by their names. The security man informs the citizen that he “could have lunch at the cafeteria on the strength of [his] national identity number and the magnetic ID card while the paperwork for discharging [him] was being processed” (Al-Wardānī 135). This incident echoes the lines of one of the political prisoners’ poem which all the detainees in Abu Zaabal prison know by heart; the lines read as follows: “[w]hy was it you called me by my name, mother, / when now they call me by a number/ written on my blanket?” (Al-Wardānī 35) The patients at the maintenance hospitals represent the new version of political prisoners. In both cases, the state detains citizens in government facilities to discipline them and confiscate their human rights to freedom of thought and expression.

Another dystopian aspect of the unnamed citizen’s story stems from his loss of memory and his inability to recognize his identity and his own family. The man feels what he thinks to be the ordinary sense of numbness in the aftermath of the operation. However, he becomes suspicious when he notices more abnormal signs after this head-change. After he “had lunch, which was flavorless, [he] tried to exercise [his] memory; [he] looked at the magnetic card, but the data recorded on it gave [him] no clue” (Al-Wardānī 135). The man cannot relate to the information on his own identity card. Moreover, the simplest things perplex him like recognizing his belongings and finding his way to the outer gate of the hospital. As he leaves the hospital, a beautiful woman and her two daughters rush into his arms. Unfortunately, he fails to determine his relationship to the three of them and feels completely helpless and disoriented. He finally realizes that there has been “some mistake,” (Al-Wardānī 136) and that the head-change has wiped out his memory. Citizens without memory are more complacent and more obedient. The regime achieves the total liquidation of the citizen’s identity.

## Conclusion

In *Heads Ripe for Plucking*, al-Wardānī envisions a bleak future for Egypt because of the succession of oppressive totalitarian regimes. In the words of Alter, “writers [use] science fiction and fantasy to describe grim current political realities” more appropriately (n. p.). Al-Wardānī merges the tropes of magical realism with science fictional dystopia to warn against what might happen should present political policies continue. These tropes allow him to amplify the tyranny of autocratic political systems and to portray their oppression in its most horrible way. Such narrative techniques are highly conducive because “science fiction and surrealism have long provided an escape valve for writers living under oppressive regimes” (Alter n. p.). Subsequently, al-Wardānī achieves his fictional goals of voicing his



growing disillusionment with the status quo in Egypt; moreover, he manages to pass an urgent wake-up call for his readers. The dystopian existence he envisions aims at inspiring change rather than instilling fear or despair.

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