Unreliable Author: Narrative Duality in Sonallah Ibrahim's *ʾAmrīkānlī*

WESSAM ELMELIGI

Abstract: In his novel *ʾAmrīkānlī* (2003), Sonallah Ibrahim contextualizes individuality and history within a narrative of decaying academia, ineffectual sexual desire and identities determined more often by ethnicity and heritage than by a genuine search for truth. Ibrahim's novel conceptualizes the intersection of the literary and the historical by introducing autobiographical elements, set in binary oppositions of the public and the private, the academic and the personal, the objective and the subjective. Ibrahim's semi-autobiographical fiction stages a comparison between history and literature, positing literature as an alternative to historical questions. This article examines the duality of the unreliable narrator as authorial voice in *ʾAmrīkānlī*, highlighting how Ibrahim's narrative embodies the binary existence of the main ideas that the novel addresses by constantly emphasizing the availability of two perspectives.

Contributor biography: Wessam Elmeligi has a PhD in Literary Theory. He is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Macalester College, St. Paul (Minnesota) in the United States, and Associate Professor at the Department of English, Damanhur University, Egypt. His research interests include gender studies, narrative theory and visual analysis.

In any historical account, we are faced by several clashing perspectives, not least of which our own and everyone else's. Sonallah Ibrahim contextualizes this duality in his novel *ʾAmrīkānlī* (2003).[1] A novel about history as private as the middle-aged narrator's restroom, and as public as a conference held on a university campus in California where he is a visiting professor, *ʾAmrīkānlī* contextualizes individuality and history within a narrative of decaying academia, ineffectual sexual desire and identities shaped more often by ethnicity and heritage rather than a genuine search for truth. As Mara Naaman puts it,

> *ʾAmrīkānlī* is, more than anything else, a novel about what it means to tell history, and the ways in which personal histories become vehicles for understanding larger historical convergences. (89)

[1] The novel was translated into French by Richard Jacquemond as *Armikanli: un Autumne à San Francisco*, published by Sinbad in 2005. It has not been translated in English to date. All translations in this chapter are mine. All page numbers refer to the Arabic edition published in Cairo by Dār al-Mustaqbal al-'Arabi in 2003.

An important theme in the novel is migration. Taking place at a university campus in California, the narrative brings together the protagonist, Shukrī, an Egyptian history professor invited as visiting faculty, and the person who invited him, his former student, Māhir, who is now an Egyptian-American professor and director of an institute for comparative historical studies. Shukrī, whose story overlaps significantly with that of the author, is asked to design a course about his approach as a historian, rather than on a specific issue or period (25). The interaction between Shukrī and Māhir frames the narrative as a convergence of the visitor and the assimilated, the traveler and the settler; thus, positioning much of the narrative in a dialogue of migration, both physically and intellectually. Ibrahim does not specify a real university in the novel, but he himself was a visiting professor at the University of California at Berkeley (Starkey ch. 10), significantly where then faculty member Stephen Greenblatt coined the term 'New Historicism' in 1982 (Warley "New Historicism")—referring to a critical perspective that arguably informs *ʾAmrīkānlī* to such an extent that it might be called a New Historicist novel.

As Shukrī meets with his students, he shares with them a narrative of his experience with history, and, simultaneously, with the reader a more intimate narrative of his experience that he does not share with his students, including his impression of and relationships with the students. In doing so, Shukrī engages his students and readers alike in an intellectual and historical discourse of imperialism in general, with a focus on the American imperialist role in current history, as well as his intimate personal interaction with Americans, daily American life and American academia. In a sense, Shukrī's blend of the historical and the personal, the factual and the fictional, offers an interesting fictional perspective of Greenblatt's notion of "permeability of the historical and the literary" (1). Ibrahim's novel conceptualizes the intersection of the literary and the historical with a parallelism of the public and the private, the academic and the personal, the objective and the subjective, within a context of purported binaries that—as we shall see—sets all main elements of the narrative in dualities. The visitor and the immigrant, American and Egyptian, male and female, are all entities explored through characterization and the thematic interests of the narrative. This paper examines the duality in *ʾAmrīkānlī*, highlighting how Ibrahim's narrative embodies the binary existence of the main ideas that the novel addresses by constantly emphasizing the availability of two perspectives, combining the role of the unreliable narrator with the authorial voice. This narratological analysis will show how this novel presents a rewardingly complex case study for the relationship between fictionality and autobiography in life writing.

The duality in the novel starts with the title. *ʾAmrīkānlī* can be read as a reference to Arabic adjectives taking the -li suffix, a linguistic feature established largely under Ottoman rule. Such words were used usually to indicate a nationality, the most prominent example being precisely *ʿuthmānlī*, or Ottoman (El-Ghobashi 29). The use of this grammatical form suggests a link between the Ottoman Empire and American imperialism, with connotations of hegemony, military presence, economic control and other tactics associated in this novel with the American presence in the Middle East. Another potential reading of the title deconstructs the title into a phrase, *amri kan li*, which literally means, "My Affairs were Mine", which can additionally be understood as "my life was

mine," or "my decisions were mine", especially given that the word *amr* in Arabic has a double meaning, an affair or issue, as well as a command or an order. This single central word in the title, therefore, also carries the duality of privacy on the one hand and control on the other. The phrase stands in sharp contrast to the motif of control implied in the first reading of the title. The word "American", therefore, with a suffix that denotes a first-person possessive pronoun, *-li*, is presented as the two sides of a struggle of hegemony and self-determination.

The use of the first person highlights duality not only as a pronoun in the title, but also within the novel for the narrator. Shukrī, narrator as well as protagonist, underlines the role the semi-autobiographical nature of the novel plays in sustaining such duality. Ibrahim's use of autobiographical elements from his own life for Shukrī's fictitious framework can reflect a developmental stage in the writing of autobiography that heralded its theoretical death, a concept based on an understanding of the self as an elusive notion that cannot be represented but only reflected as a textual illusion (Sprinker 349). Closer to the role the narrator Shukrī plays in his own narrative, however, the autobiographical element in the novel is intertwined with notions of Shukrī's identity, and on a larger scale the contrasting cultural identities which he juxtaposes. In so doing, Ibrahim's use of autobiography emphasizes its duality as a creative process as well as a historical reference (Bruner 64). His writing, in that respect, lends itself to an understanding of life writing from a narratological standpoint, as it foregrounds the fictionality of autobiography and the narrativity of the self. Such an understanding intersects with duality as it posits a fictional autobiographer as both a narrator and an experiencer, a duality that can be expressed through focalization and unreliable narrators (Löschnigg 259). In *ʾAmrīkānlī*, the narrative enhances such duality as it progresses in two layers that are formed around focalization. Both of these layers each have two narrative trajectories.

The first layer is characterized by means of public focalization, where Professor Shukrī addresses his students. We see this in class, whether in his lectures or his students' presentations. In this layer, Professor Shukrī's interactions are in turn divided into two trajectories. The first is the academic, with in-depth discussions of history, critiquing sources and arguing about theories. Those discussions shed light on the students' backgrounds that influenced their learning, and are reflections of productive and creative tension that is unavoidable when discussions of history involve religious, political and national identities and ideologies. The second trajectory, while still public, is more personal. Professor Shukrī adopts a personal approach to teaching history and shares with his students some of his personal memories, focusing on his journey as a historian. His story touches upon the injustices he faced, the encroaching influence politics has on academia in Egypt, and his relationships with women at different stages of his life that seem to punctuate his transition from one academic interest to another.

The second narrative layer stems from private focalization. Shukrī does not don his academic persona, and addresses the reader within this layer. The narrative he shares with his reader is not shared with his students. This layer, however, still follows two trajectories like the public one: academic and personal. The academic trajectory is presented in long and exhaustive footnotes that

explain to the reader some of the references Professor Shukrī and his students cite in their conversations. They refer to historians, texts, and historical events that they are familiar with as specialists. The footnotes explain those references to the non-specialized reader. Professor Shukrī's indulgence in footnotes and citation can be seen as a nod to New Historicism as it reflects New Historical acknowledgment of the historicity of text and textuality of history. The second trajectory is personal. Like in the public layer, Shukrī uses his personal life to accentuate his intellectual development and even his career choices. Shukrī shares with the reader the same stories he shares with his students as Professor Shukrī, but provides the reader with intimate details that he does not disclose in class.

The particular use of narratorial voice also reinforces the duality in the novel. The narrator offers a dual perspective. On the one hand, Professor Shukrī is closer to the notion of an unreliable narrator, especially from the perspective of his students and colleagues. An unreliable narrator can be defined as a narrator whose views contradict with the implied author. An implied author can, in turn, be defined as the perceived persona of the author as it is formed by the reader. The distinction between an implied author and a narrator is that the former is deemed responsible in the reader's perception for all choices pertaining to the narrative, whereas the narrator is responsible for recounting those choices (Prince 42-3). In *ʾAmrīkānlī*, readers are allowed to be privy to a narrator who shares secrets that he holds back from the people with whom he interacts, which include secret thoughts about some of the characters that he reveals only to the readers. This is evident in the frequent description of women's bodies that the narrator offers the reader during situations that are quite formal and professional, involving colleagues and students. The question remains, however, of how far readers can trust a narrator self-positioned as unreliable. This single fact seems to lie at the heart of the narration in *ʾAmrīkānlī*, posing a question, or rather a questioning, of all historical accounts, as semi-reliable and multi-layered at best, just like the duality that the narrator and his narrative provide. Ibrahim, in an interview with Yusuf Rakhā for *Al-Ahram Weekly*, speaking about issues of truth and textuality, with the unreliability of narration and historical accounts, "Any literary text is a lie; hence the idea of fiction. I too lie, I lie in favour of the text" (quoted in Starkey ch. 10). It is because of this notion that this article refers to an unreliable *author* and not just an unreliable narrator, as Ibrahim's insistence on unreliability as a main trait of semi-autobiographical narrator and protagonist projects such unreliability on himself as an author as well.

As said above, Ibrahim orchestrates narrative duality in the novel through specific binaries of perspective. The binary perspectives alternate between critiquing the Egyptian milieu of political oppression and corruption, and critiquing American political and economic choices that reveal imperialism, bigotry and inequality. Both elements, however, are tempered by references to an admirably deep-seated Egyptian heritage of assimilation and resistance, and a genuine effort in providing free access to knowledge in American society. There are two unifying elements that run through both experiences, the American and the Egyptian. The first element is the eroticization of the personal historical accounts of the narrator's life. The second element is a series of texts and resources that combine both facts and works of fiction, written over the centuries by historians and

creative writers who shape the amalgam of the human journey depicted in the novel, presented through class discussions and as footnotes directed to the reader. This binary of social, political and economic critiques places the autobiographical element beyond retrospective rendering. Rather it posits it as an act of identity construction (Löschnigg 256). In that sense, the autobiographical aspect of the novel can be read as an attempt to reconstruct Shukrī's identity, and in so doing reconstruct Ibrahim's identity as well.

The contrasting of Egyptian and American lives contributes to the duality of perspective that runs through the novel. This is evident consistently in the complicated relationship between Māhir and Shukrī. Apart from the rather stereotypical aspects of comparison in favor of American lifestyle, such as respect for traffic lights (112) and better health care (156), the positive elements of American life in the novel are largely seen in association with academic progress and career achievement, both invariably linked to the success of Māhir, the Egyptian-American a director of the fictitious Institute of Comparative History who invited Shukrī as a visiting professor (51). From the very beginning of the novel, Māhir uses what he knows of Shukrī's grievances about the education system in Egypt as a means to validate his own decision to immigrate, repeatedly reminding Shukrī of the oppressive lack of academic freedom and lack of funding in Egyptian academia when compared to the American counterpart (39). Shukrī does not give Māhir the satisfaction of agreeing with him, but he shares with the reader an image of Egyptian universities with heavily policed campuses as opposed to mostly gateless American ones, as well as tired and downcast Egyptian students in contrast to high-spirited and healthier American ones (40).

Shukrī's misgivings about Egyptian academia go beyond religious radicalism and state surveillance. He envies the freedom given to American students protesting on campus for all kinds of causes and especially notices students' vocal support of Affirmative Action legislation, liberties he remembers being denied to students on Egyptian campuses (228). He distinctly remembers how his academic career was shackled by politicized corruption personified by his graduate thesis adviser nicknamed "Biba", an Egyptian colloquialism for smoking pipe (131) who censored students' academic research interests to satisfy his superiors (188).

The most personal example of the corrupting influence of economic and political interference with academia is Shukrī's graduate school colleague, Hilmī', who changes allegiance and tailors his academic pursuits to the shifting political landscape in the Middle East. His research endorsed socialist and nationalist ideologies under Nasser's regimes, then denounced those ideologies with the end of Nasserism and the advent of oil countries and their support for Islamism after he has traveled to a Gulf country, not only rich but also with new research agendas propagating censorship of Shukrī's research on the grounds that questions religious discourse (280). The conservative censorship of academia exemplified by the fictitious character, Hilmī, reflects a real case that Shukrī brings out with his students. Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, an Egyptian professor, wrote his books for promotion to professorship on issues pertaining to medieval controversies on whether the Quran was a written text or a created entity. Not only was his promotion denied, but Abū Zayd was sued and excommunicated out of the entire faith of Islam, an isolated incident in Egypt's modern history (369).

The negative influence of Arab oil countries that Shukrī cited earlier to his students is reiterated during a conference in which Māhir asks him to participate. Shukrī does not hide his disdain of the conference's sham academics and is surprised to hear from Māhir that the conference, as well as the entire institution that Māhir and now Shukrī work for is funded by someone referred to as Prince Jāsim, from a Gulf country (51). Māhir, in turn, does not hide the fact that Shukrī needs to comply with Prince Jāsim's show since it is the prince's money that pays Shukrī's salary (52).

While the comparison between opportunities offered by American and Egyptian practices are unfavorable for the Egyptian side, Shukrī is still critical of the American experience in its own right, especially of American politics and media. He sees a strong capitalist drive behind the American lifestyle that shatters a stereotype of immigration as an opportunity for a better life. Depictions of homeless people in the street, including the daughter of the institute's coordinator (112), a television show about teen pregnancy (45), frequent news about rape on campuses (83), drugs in a park by the Golden Gate (137), and mega-corporations driving out small businesses as happened to the father of Shukrī's student Shirley (359) are examples scattered across the narrative to counter-validate Māhir's validation of immigration. In one of the more powerful critiques of American racially complex history in the novel, Shukrī and his Egyptian-American student Fadya are in Chinatown in San Francisco. Shukrī narrates to the reader, "I found out we were standing next to the statue of a deity of democracy, built after the events of the Tiananmen Square in 1989" (86). Fadya, who was showing Shukrī around, tells him that this part of the street was famous for lynching. The word lynching is not translated. It is transliterated in Arabic script and explained by Fadya as a racist practice of over a century ago whereby a mob decides to hang a black or a Chinese person and carry out their sentence without a proper trial (87). Shukrī's remark about the commodifying of everything is part of how he sees the power of capitalist politics in a world of hypocritical ideologies. As much as a street known for its history of lynching carries a democratic symbol, he later visits another space that marks similar hypocrisy: the Metropolitan Museum, where he sees ancient Egyptian artifacts that were given to the United States government as gifts by the socialist Nasser, the iconic anti-capitalist figure of Egypt.

The novel's critique of both the American and Egyptian record of political and economic lack of integrity adds to the duality of perspectives that is central to the narrative. Parallel to this double critique, Ibrahim's narrator offers a long survey of sources that address the historical periods and issues he discusses. The sources he presents also display two types of duality. The first type is related to exposure. The sources are divided into two types. Some are shared in Professor Shukrī's class during his discussion with students. Others are shared with the reader only, in footnotes that usually expound what the specialized characters discuss in the academic setting of the narrative. The second type of duality is related more directly to the New Historicist approach towards an intersection of literature and history. Some of the sources are historical research, while others are historical novels. Shukrī uses both to shed light on the formation of his identity as a historian, and to elaborate the intertwining of fact and fiction in human consciousness. Through Shukrī, Ibrahim reveals self-conscious awareness but refrains from didactically displaying his values, thus also following Greenblatt himself who declared that he was not against methodological self-consciousness, but did not welcome overt expression of one's values (Greenblatt 1990, 11).

Early in the narrative, Shukrī's cooking causes the fire alarm to sound. He does not know what to do until he learns from the landlord's handyman, Fitz, that he can do whatever he wants at home as long as he covers the smoke detector to prevent triggering the alarm (44). This incident can be seen as a metaphor for what immediately follows it in the narrative. Shukrī covers the smoke detector with two towels, turns on his oven, and, reassured that its alarm will not go off now, sits down in his kitchen and reads the newspaper. He reads about a reporter who was fired from the *New York Times* after writing more than 4000 articles over 25 years because he fabricated a story about two children, one white and the other black, who died of cancer. The newspaper story goes on to show the friendship that developed between them at the hospital and how the white family generously pays ten thousand dollars for the black child's family after his father loses his job. The article states that the newspaper has lost 2 reporters in 9 weeks due to charges of fabricating stories (44). This early detailed incident sets the tone for the unreliability of historical accounts, and hints at media blackouts with the metaphor of covering the smoke detectors to ignore the smoke it is supposed to detect.

The smoke detector and the unreliable news reporter are immediately followed by Professor Shukrī's first class. He tells his students that his relationship with history started when he tore up a history book as a child before he could even read, yet scribbled on whatever he could lay his hands on. It just happened as he found out later that they were all history books (45). Shukrī adds that those books were books about Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secular modernization of Turkey, the origins of the Nile, daily life in Britain, the history of nationalist movements, and the history of the military (46). Ibrahim's choice of books for young Shukrī to tear may be significant. They focus on secularism, colonialism, nationalism and militarization with Egypt as a central figure of all that represented by the Nile that runs through it all. The passages Shukrī as a child desecrated represent issues that have surrounded the regional history and helped shape its relation with the rest of the world, specifically America: religion, imperialism, nationalism and war are key definers of that relationship, whether during their hegemony or when the people resist them. The repeated reference to colonialism is in line with Greenblatt's discussion of colonialism in his writings on post-colonialist literature (Greenblatt 2006, 34), as Shukrī's critique of colonialism is often through textual and postcolonial writing.

Shukrī's earliest understanding of history started with historical fiction. He reminisces about *Riwāyāt al-Jayb* ("pocket novels"), a weekly journal in Egypt that his father used to buy. Shukrī writes his first footnote to the reader for this series, explaining that it was among the earliest series of historical world fiction available in Arabic. Shukrī tells his students how he was infatuated by the historical world created in novels such as *The Three Musketeers*, *Les Misérables*, and *Scaramouche* (46). The latter was written by Rafael Sabatini (1875-1950), an Italian-English novelist whose romances had a historical backdrop that fed Shukrī's interest in history through fiction, embodying for him at an early age their permeability (47). To balance the duality, and true to the nature of comparative history, Shukrī moves on from Sabatini to Jūrjī Zaydān (1861- 1914), Lebanese historian, novelist, translator and journalist who established *al-Hilāl* literary magazine, referred to by Shukrī in a footnote as "the dean of the Arabic historical novel" (48).

Shukrī's referring to historians and historical texts early in the narrative marks the progress of the discourse used in the novel, alternating personal and public accounts as well as literary and historical sources. He mentions his first love interest, Rajāʾ, a teacher assistant with whom he was infatuated as an undergraduate (100). Shukrī tells his class that Rajāʾ criticized the curriculum of history in Egyptian academia and said it was dictated by politicians in order to instill nationalistic fervor among students at the expense of true historical inquiry (101). When he notices a sarcastic, rather gloating looks from two of his students, he rushes defensively to add that this issue is not unique to Egypt but is common in many countries. He cites Eric Hobsbawm who critiques the politicization of curricula in Western countries to date (101). Shukrī's defensiveness stands in sharp contrast to his admission earlier that Rajāʾ was critical of state-controlled curricula. Shukrī's reaction reflects the tension between subjectivity and objectivity, another binary that contributes to the dualities in the narrative.

The next round of discussions which necessitates more historical sources focuses on American history, with special emphasis on militarized mediation with the American war in Vietnam and the American support of the Israeli military. For this topic, two other historians are also cited by Shukrī's student Larry, who says he owes his interests to two mentors, Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky (128). In the footnote addressing the reader, Shukrī introduces Zinn as a historian whose work has earned him the title "the historian of the people," while he introduces Chomsky saying that the Guardian described the latter as the "conscience of the United States" (128). A similar discussion takes place in Shukrī's class later, this time using sources for the history of Egypt, which for now is clearly being presented as a counterpart to American history. For this discussion, Jamāl Ḥamdān is discussed by Fadya as a controversial and eclectic Egyptian historian known as much for his ambitious project of linking Egypt's history and geography in *shakhsiyat misr* ("The Character of Egypt") as by his personality and sudden mysterious death (155).

The intersection of literature and history is tackled at greater length later in the novel as Ibrahim offers a more in-depth view of the interaction of literature and history when Shukrī expounds on the theories of Taha Ḥusayn. Shukrī's expository lecture about Ḥusayn to his students emphasizes Ḥusayn's revolutionary rejection of the use of classical religious and literary Arabic texts as valid historical sources in his 1926 book *On Pre-Islamic Poetry* (214-18). Ḥusayn's work is an early precursor of the discourse about the polemics of literary and historical studies on the one hand, and religious and historical authenticities on the other hand.

Discussions of Ḥusayn's work on the authenticity of religious texts heralds a narrative turn where Shukrī discusses his academic interests into Islamic history. In his class, Shukrī discusses Fatima Mernissi's work on the position of women in Islam (238). He shares with the reader that his students seem to be over-excited about the veil, or hijab, "their favorite subject" (237). Shukrī's remark implies that there is an Orientalist tendency to oversimplify complex religious and sociocultural issues and reduce them to single topics (237). The complexities of Islamic history and, more specifically, recording Islamic history, is revisited at length when Shukrī discusses his personal experience as a historian when he attempted to study Islamic history as a graduate

student. After his aforementioned advisor, Biba, rejected all the topics he wanted for his thesis, Shukrī finally convinced him to grudgingly accept a topic on the history of Qarmatians in Iraq (278). It is significant that Shukrī uses several sources in his discussion about the Qarmatians, building his argument on the prejudice of historical writing about them which resulted from their Ismaili and Shiite tendencies (279). This part of the novel is centered around political bias as a major aspect of the unreliability of historical accounts.

Having conceptualized political bias of historical accounts in his discussion of Qarmatians, Professor Shukrī makes it the focus of the following class. One of his students, Megan, delivers a presentation on *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* by David Landes, and cites several instances where Landes' argument attempts to absolve colonialist exploitation of the socio-economic problems that plagued colonized countries, refusing, for instance, to see the collapse of Muhammad Ali's modernization project in Egypt as a result of Ottoman, French and British imperialist sabotage (229). Other students in class did not agree with Megan and Shukrī addressed the reader in a footnote explaining bias in an earlier book by Landes, *Banks and Pashas*, where he specifically seems to downplay the negative aftermath of British colonialism on Egypt (305). The discussion about Landes' analysis leads to a more clear example of political bias. Another historian, Mattityahu Peled, wrote about the Denshaway events in Egypt in 1906 under the British occupation. The popular account in Egypt is that British soldiers violated an Egyptian village while hunting and one of them, chased by villagers, died of sunstroke. The result was an unfair trial that sentenced some villagers to death and many others to prison and flogging. Peled discredits the popular account and argues that the trial was fair and that historical accounts were insufficient to prove the popular Egyptian version (310).

Shukrī concludes the historical trajectory of the public layer of narration with two major variations of historical accounts that he does not use earlier in the novel. The first is psychological. Pushed by Māhir to participate as a guest of honor in the conference Māhir organized and Shukrī had little faith in, Shukrī could not bring himself to read a prepared paper for a conference that he no longer takes seriously, especially after Prince Jāsim gives the keynote speech. As a result, Shukrī decides to improvise his talk (318). Shukrī talks to an audience of Arab, Arab-American and American academics about how historians can choose one of two main approaches to analyzing history. The first approach is superficial, relying on a historical figure's personal life and psychological traits. As a result, a political leader's sexual preferences, amorous escapades, health condition and similar details seem to have more weight than they should in historical analysis (318-9). Shukrī cites Hugh McCleave's biography of Egypt's King Farouk, *The Last Pharaoh*, as an example that discusses such intimate details as Farouk's impotence motivated his licentious lifestyle as compensation, a lifestyle which, in turn, led to the collapse of his throne, paving the way for Nasserism and the beginning of the Egyptian republic (321). Shukrī moves on to discuss similar interests in the lives of prominent historical figures from Hatshepsut to rumors that Nasser and Tito had a secret sexual relationship (351). Ibrahim centers Shukrī's argument as a culmination of the running duality of fact and fiction, from literature and history, to political and ideological bias, and finally to superficial interests in the personal intimacies of historical figures. The progress of the

narrative, both on the public level in Shukrī's discussions in class and the conference, and the private one, in his footnotes addressing the reader, only emphasize the unreliability of historical accounts. The audience at the conference all left the hall in protest to Shukrī's talk. It is interesting to think of the conference scene as a precursor to Ibrahim's real-life speech when he publicly rejects the State Award for fiction in 2003, the same year he published *ʾAmrīkānlī*, because the government "lacks the credibility to bestow it" (Deknatel "Egypt's Conscience: The Genius of Sonallah Ibrahim").

The second approach that Ibrahim seems to endorse is covered after the conference, back in Shukrī's class. This time, Shukrī applies a new method. He shows his students a video, Tahānī Rāshid's *Four Women of Egypt*. An interview with four Egyptian women who represent the varied ideological spectrum of the intellectual and political life in Egypt, the video discusses aspects of the women's lives that shed light on conservative and liberal movements, feminism, socialist and capitalist changes, all within the structure of political oppression and the fight for freedom of expression (411). The narrative then dedicates an entire chapter to excerpts from the script (412-26) with no narratorial mediation. The reader then is transferred to an experience that textually parallels the experience Shukrī's students would have in class watching the video, thus maintaining the duality of sharing in footnotes information that the reader would not know, but Shukrī's students should. Ibrahim's investment in Shukrī's last method of historical presentation reinforces his view of unreliable accounts, as the video depends on eye-witnesses of varied backgrounds, which, in turn, confirms that those are the very two aspects that may create reliability in historical accounts: witnessing and diversity.

Ibrahim wraps up the duality of literary and historical presentations through the final paper of one of Shukrī's students, Doris. She wrote about Eduardo Galeano. This time Shukrī is not teaching. He is reading students' final papers. Interestingly, the narrative maintains the duality of main text and footnote. Professor Shukrī as a character somewhat merges with Shukrī the narrator. In the main text, Professor Shukrī notes that Doris wrote on Galeano's book that "combines scientific documentation and literary creativity" (476). In the footnote, we learn that the book is the *Memory of Fire* trilogy (476). The last reference and the last footnote in the narrative confirm the permeability of literature and history that was underlying the entire narrative from the beginning.

The private level of the narration depicts Shukrī's private life, the aspects of his personal life that he could not share with his students. This side of Shukrī's life focuses on his sexual experiences. The personal growth of the protagonist as he navigates corrupt political realities, disillusioning academia, and a world of intellectual wealth and unconfirmed facts, is dotted with a sensual attempt at making sense of it all. The result is an eroticization of history as many of the important stages of Shukrī's life, are narrated both with reference to an academic discussion of history in class, and an intimate moment of desires fulfilled or suppressed. Writing about Ibrahim's novel, *Dhat*, Mehrez describes his "strings of sentences, each relaying one distinct level of Dhat's life, which when brought together in this seemingly sequential, logical manner, generate the humor and irony in the text, injecting the political, sexual, social, and economic referent in Dhat's life" (136). Mehrez's analysis of Ibrahim's blend in *Dhat* applies to a great extent to his use of eroticism in *ʾAmrīkānlī*.

Shukrī's narration of his erotic experiences starts at the age of 10 or 11. He remembers their neighbors in a narrow alley. The 17-year-old daughter frequently stood in the balcony, bent over to hang clothes on a line. Young Shukrī would steal looks at her chest, but could not see the rest of her body from the waist down behind the balcony (79). Shukrī's earliest conscious instincts were those of half seen, half imagined, motivating his search for facts but also inspiring his imagination. He continues to search for pictures of a full nude woman but only finds old magazines of celebrities with low neckline dresses, revealing the same parts he has already seen. Ibrahim then gives the search a grotesque turn as young Shukrī inadvertently finally finds photographs of many naked women. Only those were photographs of naked Palestinian women arrested at Deir Yassin (80). Shukrī then tells his students, that, since that day onwards, a connection was formed in his young mind not between sex and murder, but between the search for the female and the search for history (80). The powerful connection revealed in this early memory develops instantly as two of Shukrī's students object to the story. Mona, in particular, says that she believes that the opposite is true. It is then that Shukrī lays the ground for the rest of the narrative. His answer to Mona is that this is the problem with history. There is always more than one account to each story and it is a historian's task to scrutinize and verify each one (81). The erotic, then, is linked early on to the underlying duality of the narrative, the visible part and unseen part of the neighbor's body, representing fact and fiction, history and literature, all within a search for completion.

The sense of mystery instigated by the search in Shukrī's childhood materializes again in the present time of the narrative. Shukrī receives a series of notes, letters, and later on emails, all with an erotic content (139). Some messages give him a time and a place to meet but even when he goes, the sender never shows up. The messages reveal a knowledge of Shukrī's innermost thoughts. Some ask him whether he likes one of his colleague's legs, as if the sender knows he actually did steal a look at her legs. After a conversation with the institute coordinator who mentions that she changed her hair color, he gets a message where the sender tells him all the hair on their body is the same color.

The mysterious sender remains unidentified. Shukrī's inability to know the identity of the sender sheds light on Shukrī himself. He treats the letters with the approach of a historian, a seeker of truth. He analyzes not only the people he meets, hoping to guess who could have sent the letter, but his own responses as well. It occurs to him that it is just as possible that the sender is male. This brings memories of his brief early adolescent attraction to the lips of a male classmate (101). We never learn whether such attraction was suppressed due to societal constructs or it just naturally did not develop as Shukrī grew up. Shukrī's confession and the lack of information about its development add to both the duality and the incomplete truths of history the narrative addresses.

Shukrī continues to share with the reader his intimate sexual observations, thus instating the search, whether for history or for the female body, as a form of voyeurism, whether physical or intellectual, gratifying a sexual desire or a thirst for knowledge. Thus, his description of the thighs, breasts, and the female body of pedestrians, colleagues, students, and neighbors, takes the form of analytical, almost clinical description, rather than erotic. His description does not include eroticized

qualifiers to highlight beauty, but realistically depicts parts of the human body that he notices in the flow of bodies in everyday situations. The link between parts of the female body and history are erratic and unexpected. For instance, when Ester, Shukrī's colleague with whom he shares an office, tells him that she is celebrating the establishment of Israel but is also critical of Israeli policies towards Palestinians, she raises her arm and he notices her armpits (226). Shukrī remembers lavish receptions held at expensive hotels in Cairo for the countries' top intellectuals, politicians and businesspersons presumably under Mubarak. The conversation turns to the elite guests' travels to Paris and London, *saumon fumé*, French wine, and how none of these luxuries were possible under Nasser's rule (378). Shukrī describes an Egyptian diplomat working for the United Nations. He sits next to her and touches her legs under the table, asserting that her "job got the best of her so she did not say anything" in a thinly disguised comparison between the concessions accepted by UN diplomats and Egyptian foreign service on the one hand and sex work on the other (378).

The process of the eroticization of history in the narrative also takes the form of associating women Shukrī meets to specific historical figures. His earliest love interest, Rajāʾ, the teacher assistant, has lips that remind him of the Egyptian queen Hatshepsut (100). The similarity between the two women goes beyond physical attraction, as Shukrī admires Hatshepsut as one of the earliest known female rulers of the ancient world, and Rajāʾ as a resilient young activist under an oppressive regime whose passion for research ignited Shukrī's own passions for studying (102). It is possible to see Rajāʾ as a representation of the late monarchy to early Nasser period, full of activism and drive for change.

Another experience is with Nabīla. She meets Shukrī during Nasser's rule, and with her *minijupe* she represents a movement towards sexual liberation for women. Nabīla declares she does not intend to get married and is career oriented. When Shukrī tries to have sex with her, he drinks too much, she kisses him but refuses to have sex with him. He tries again but is clearly so drunk he falls asleep (212). Describing her, Shukrī says her face looks like the faces of the Fayyūm icons, ancient Egyptian icons from the early Christian period (211). Nabīla's presence in Shukrī's life coincides with his drafting by the military, the disillusionment of military defeat, Nasser's death, and the death of Shukrī's father. The repeated failures in Shukrī's life are parallel to his sexual failure with Nabīla. The death of the patriarchy of Nasser is reflected in the death of the father, standing in sharp contrast to the attempt to connect to a rising feminism that is enigmatic and misunderstood by the male dominant community.

The only relationship that lasts long is that with Jamālāt. Her presence, perhaps more than any other woman Shukrī meets, represents change, as she herself is the most rounded of all the female characters he meets. Jamālāt is described as belonging to the same lower middle class that Shukrī and his colleague Hilmī belong to, with her plain clothes and "dusty flat heel shoes" (131). She appears in their lives during their college years. We learn that both Hilmī and Shukrī like her, and that she and Shukrī were more clearly a couple, but Ḥilmī displays his manipulative traits and manages to marry her (133). They meet again years later. Hilmī is in a Gulf country. Jamālāt is back briefly with her two daughters. She seeks Shukrī, invites him to her house, introduces him to her

young daughters, and to her bedroom (284). As with all the other sexual interactions Shukrī remembers, this one also has its significance. Once Jamālāt is satisfied sexually, she asks Shukrī to leave (286). Before Jamālāt appears again in his life, we learn that Shukrī struggles with his PhD due to his resilience academically and politically, refusing to follow politicized intellectual trends. After Jamālāt leaves, the shock of her departure for the second time pushes him into acquiescence. His silence and passivity are rewarded with his long overdue degree. He realizes, however, that the only reason a conservative professor agreed to supervise his dissertation is to use Shukrī's leftist ideas as an example of how far left academia is leaning, in order for the professor to make the point that the university needs to be more conservative or the likes of Shukrī can prevail. Shukrī is betrayed by his professor and is used as bait. The betrayals that surround Shukrī's situation coincide with political betrayal, as Sadat was assassinated in an incident of betrayal right before Shukrī is granted his PhD (288). The series of personal betrayals, whether when Hilmī betrays Shukrī and marries the woman he loves or when Shukrī later betrays Hilmī and sleeps with his wife, even erotic betrayal when Jamālāt betrays Shukrī out of sexual gratification, reflect a wider sense of betrayal on the political, societal and intellectual level.

The next relationship comes to Shukrī at a period of shame in his life. After obtaining his PhD, and during his journey to gain tenure, he is faced by political pressure for his leftist views in an increasingly Islamized atmosphere that is reflected in academia (366). Witnessing the fate of colleagues who defied the new trend, he decides to play it safe (367). It is at this time that Bāsil, a student and a human rights activist regularly seeking signatures from professors to support one petition or another, approaches Shukrī to sign a petition for the release of Bāsil's father, a unionist and labor activist. Shukrī is about to get promoted to a professor and he does not want to take any risks. He refuses to support Bāsil, and now with his students admits he can never forget the look of disdain from the student, nor can he forget that the student's father later died in prison (369). At that time, Shukrī meets Najlāʾ, who initiates the relationship. When a reluctant Shukrī fails to consummate the relationship, Najlāʾ never forgives him. He soon finds out she becomes head of the committee that reviews his promotion file and he does not get the promotion (369). The link between impotence and failure to follow his conscience marks this stage of Shukrī's life, which occurs during the Mubarak period.

Shukrī's first true interaction with America was also eroticized. He meets Barbara, an American friend of his professor's Irish wife. They start an affair that takes him, Barbara and her mother to Aswan. Shukrī's description of Barbara's initial infatuation with him reflects an Orientalist interest in non-Western culture (184). She is clearly attracted to him during their trip in Aswan, but when they return to Cairo, she abruptly ends their relationship, saying she was probably only attracted to him in Aswan because of the heat (185). Ibrahim ridicules the short- lived attraction when Shukrī's sexual attempts to sleep with Barbara end in premature ejaculation. He does, however, save a lock of her blonde hair and keeps it in his pocket (185). If the relationship represents East and West, Egypt and America, then there is a metaphor of strong potential, but also of barriers of communication that need to be surmounted.

The eroticization of Shukrī's relationship with America is revisited at the end of the novel. Shukrī's student Shirley goes out with him more than once (349). She mentions a Lebanese restaurant that offers belly dancing shows. She says she has a belly dancing outfit and can dance for him (355). The Orientalist urge that sparked Barbara's interest in Shukrī during her visit to ancient Egyptian sites is repeated with Shirley discussing belly dancing. Eventually they are about to have sex but he stops before they do (467). In a sense, Shukrī and Shirley switch the roles of Shukrī and Barbara. This highlights the infatuation/disillusionment binary that seems perpetually repeated in Shukrī's view of America, at times impressed by its achievements and at others distanced by its betrayals, and in all cases making a connection but never fully communicating.

The problematic relationship Shukrī has with America is centered around identity. This is also reflected in the erotic aspect of Shukrī's narrative. Shukrī accompanies his landlord's handyman, Fitz, in a tour of San Francisco's more sexually active neighborhoods where Shukrī is faced with his private exposure to sexualities he has not been aware of growing up in a largely sexually repressed community (275). When he arrives home, he hears the same rhythmic drum music from his neighbors' house that he hears every weekend and wonders whether they are having sex to the tune of the music. He then wonders what part of the sexual spectrum he has learned about would their sexual activity be, and moves on to ask about his color in that spectrum as well (276).

Elements of duality in the narrative are united by recurrent motifs that run through the narrative. Metaphors and specific actions appear more than once creating a sense of integral movement through the layers and trajectories of Shukrī's narration. The first is dreaming. Shukrī shares only with the reader two dreams he has earlier and later in the narrative. In the first dream, he is married to a woman he does not know. He is ill. She is conspiring with another man against him. He threatens to leave the house but she does not take his threats seriously (67). Shukrī wonders whether the dream is the influence of the dinner he has with Māhir and Marwān's families at Māhir's home, or the influence of the film Kramer vs. Kramer that he watched (68). The dream is a reflection of Shukrī's anxiety, seeing two Arab-American families. Māhir and his wife are Egyptian-American. Māhir's wife, an Egyptian-American too, has a sudden meltdown when she meets Shukrī. She cries telling him in front of Māhir that their children do not speak Arabic and that though she has everything in the US she misses Egypt and is not happy (61). Māhir's friend, Marwān, is another professor, a Palestinian-American married to an American lawyer. His relationship with his wife is quite tense and competitive (66). Their young child is depicted as aggressive and rather spoilt by his mother (64). Later in the novel, Marwān tells Māhir jokingly that he might join the homeless as he is getting a divorce. Shukrī's dream reflects the tension immigrant identities face within a family structure.

In the second dream, Shukrī dreams that Māhir is his father and slaps him on the face (361). Shukrī's dream is a reaction to Māhir's demands that Shukrī participates in the conference Māhir is holding, as well as Māhir's warning Shukrī about sexual harassment accusation if Shukrī is not careful with female students (41), a warning Shukrī finds hypocritical when Māhir makes lewd remarks about students (42). Māhir's slap on the face in the dream echoes Hilmī's slap on the face

in Egypt. In both cases, Shukrī is reminded of his limitations by men whose achievements are built on hypocrisies but are, not only too powerful for Shukrī to resist, but their success is also too attractive for Shukrī to deny.

Shukrī's dreams point out another motif in the narrative: fear and alienation. The entire narrative hints at Shukrī's deep sense of alienation as an Arab in an American setting. Such alienation can be seen accompanying the incomplete narration of events which, in turn, serves to enhance the theme of unreliability of historical accounts. This blend of inconclusive account and truth, however, is presented strikingly in an incident where Shukrī fears for his life. While at the library with his students, the metal shelves move suddenly towards him, and could have crushed him, but they stop suddenly when he notices them and moves away (164). He then sees Mona, his student, who apologizes saying that she moved the shelves in the wrong direction. This incident comes after Shukrī has had discussions with Mona about Arab-Israeli conflicts, with Mona repeatedly supporting the Israeli point of view while indicating a rather aggressive disdain for Shukrī. No similar incident occurs in the novel, leaving Shukrī's brush with Mona's violent intent that he could not prove as a reflection of the long history of political conflict they represent. This sense of alienation intersects with surveillance as seen in phone calls that Shukrī receives, with nobody answering most of the time, and with cursing sometimes. We never know who calls, or why. In another unrelated incident, Shukrī is at a bookstore, browsing through the pages of a book when he feels the presence of someone nearby. He is startled and looks behind him only to find a stranger reading over his shoulder. Shukrī is deeply disturbed by this unexplained invasion of his privacy (350). Once again, the discontinued incidents leave the threat of violence as a reflection of the unwelcoming atmosphere of foreignness that Shukrī is subjected to throughout the novel. This is reflected in how the incident of the moving shelves at the bookstore is linked to Hobsbawm, as Shukrī is looking at his book, The Age of Extremes, the fifth chapter on the end of civilizations when he faces physical danger, perhaps reminiscent of Hobsbawm's well-known quote in the same book, "the smell of impending death rose from these avant-gardes" (516).

A third motif is technology. Shukrī seeks to set up his office computer and email and seeks help from the institute's staff (50), but no one helps him except his student Megan's boyfriend (191-93). The disconnection of technology and other elements of the narrative is significant. In his detailed description, Ibrahim does not fail to mention how Shukrī repeatedly connects and disconnects the internet. This brings in technology within the structure of duality, as it acts both as a disruptive barrier and a means of communication. It is one of the things that create a distance between America and Shukrī, whose software, brought from Egypt, is old and dysfunctional in the much more technologically advanced American context (193). In this fictional/historical examination of imperialism and nation-state, Ibrahim comes close to what al-Musawi writes about Arab literature today. What would be at stake now, relates to identity, territorial fact and meaning, as well as to one's cherished tradition and culture (al-Musawi 310). This needs to be examined from a focused and insightful historical perspective that takes into account the movement from colonialism and the nation-state to a global reality of mixed agenda and far reaching consequences. (312)

In his interview with Rakhā, Ibrahim explains his motivation for the choice of a history professor over a writer,

> I made the protagonist a history professor rather than a writer because I wanted the text to be a kind of answer, proposed on the occasion of my close encounter with America, to the overriding question mentioned before, which has to be on every Egyptian's mind: how did we reach our present state? Why do we accept humiliation and oppression? So I set out to study the Egyptian character through the ages in an attempt to locate the moment at which that character was broken. (quoted in Starkey ch. 10).

Ibrahim's comparison between history and literature posits literature as alternative to historical questions, thus making the duality an intersection of fact and fiction, setting this binary relation at the heart of his narrative.

Ibrahim's narrative of dualities takes the duality of American and Arab migration as a central argument. Student Fadya refers in a presentation to Jamāl Ḥamdān, a controversial Egyptian historian who was mysteriously assassinated, comparing American and Arab migrant experiences and considering them antithetical. Ḥamdān argues that the American experience is a recent migration to one place by many ethnic groups that find unity in that space, while the Arab one is an ancient migration of one ethnic group to lands of many ethnicities, uniting them in their disparate places (155). According to Fadya, Ḥamdān even adds that the conflict between imperialism and the third world is going to end with conflict between the United States and Egypt, a conflict between the oldest major power in the world and the most recent major power in history (155). Throughout the narrative, Shukrī searches for a means to understand, personalize, and teach these dualities within this context of migration. Nevertheless, it is difficult to trust a narrator who does not trust historical accounts. His mistrust of history casts doubts on his narration. Only the footnotes remain verifiable, and those only lead to records and studies that offer inconclusive and contrasting perspectives. Ibrahim, through his unreliable narrator, immigrant characters with their hyphenated identities from Arab-American to native American, Egyptian characters with their shifting allegiances from left to right, and the narrative strategy combining academically detached footnotes and intensely intimate detailed, offers us dualities of identity, dualities of truths, and, at the heart of it all, a duality of control: self-control and external hegemony.

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