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Charlotte Pardey : A Body of Dissenting Images: Kamāl al-Riyāḥī's Novel Al-Ghurillā Read as an Example of Engaged Literature from Tunisia

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A Body of Dissenting Images: Kamāl al-Riyāḥī's Novel *Al-Ghurillā* Read as an Example of Engaged Literature from Tunisia

Charlotte Pardey

Introduction¹

As a “piece of glowing ember,” a man falls from a tower in central Tunis. This image is not very far removed from the man who set fire to himself in Sidi Bouzid in December 2010. While the latter ignited the Tunisian uprising of 2010/2011, the man on the tower is the central image of Kamāl al-Riyāḥī's novel *Al-Ghurillā* (*The Gorilla*, 2011). With W.J.T. Mitchell, I intend to consider literature as, aside from being literal, also a visual art form. That “images, pictures, space and visuality may only be figuratively conjured up [...] does not mean that the conjuring fails to occur or that the reader/listener ‘sees’ nothing” (*Picture* 96). In the following I would like to reflect on the images in al-Riyāḥī's novel before employing them to identify and examine the social and political issues the novel addresses and engages with.

The concept of engaged literature or *adab multazim* entered into the Arabic literary scene around 1947 as a translation of Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of *engagement*, which privileged literature that expressed the “commitment of literati to revolutionary values” over literature following the paradigm of art for art's sake (Klemm, “Literary Commitment” 149). Since then it has undergone various interpretations, ranging from those of a Marxist leaning to existentialist positions. Engaged literature may have been committed to the support of a certain government or may have served as a form of literary protest, leading M.M. Badawi to state that “the most common denominator in all the usages is [...] the need for a writer to have a message, instead of just delighting in creating a work of the imagination” (2–3). While engaged literature is generally studied with respect to the main centers of literary activity (such as Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq, later on Palestine with the ‘resistance poets’ around Maḥmūd Darwīsh), this paper looks at al-Riyāḥī's novel as a Tunisian example of modern day literary engagement.²

The editor of the Lebanese monthly periodical *al-Ādāb*, Suhayl Idrīs, described *adab multazim* in 1953 as “effective literature that interacts with society: it influences society just as much as it is influenced by it” (qtd. in Badawi 12).³ Elsewhere Idrīs is quoted as regarding “responsible identification with ‘society’ and ‘epoch,’ as well as sincerity in literary production guarantee[ing] true *iltizām*” (Klemm, “Literary Commitment” 151). Both claims, literature's interaction with society and identification with its concrete historical surroundings, will be followed up in my analysis of *Al-Ghurillā*.

I hope to show that this novel is exemplary for the engagement of the multi-media uprisings of winter 2010/2011. As such, the span of its references is sweeping: From global pop culture through to religion, it includes TV commercials and is narrated by multiple narrators to escape a patronizing auctorial narrator. It is not the resistance poet who is telling the story here (neither directly nor behind a mask of allusions), but different sections of society or ‘communal narrators,’ and it is this approach that sets the novel apart.

Several allusions or partial images are brought together in the central image of the man on the tower—referred to as ‘the Gorilla’ throughout the text—to form what I would like to call a *composite image*. In all of these allusions and images bodies are dominant and, as Mitchell writes, “the language of the human body” is used “as a vehicle for narrative, dramatic, and allegorical signification” (*Picture* 26). With regards to *Al-Ghurillā* I wish to argue that protest, racism, and the Tunisian uprising are discussed via the employed images. The partial images that I shall analyze in greater detail are Jesus, Bilāl the muezzin, and King Kong—this is the groundwork necessary to gain an understanding of the composite image of the Gorilla.

Plural Narratives—Plural Truths: Kamāl al-Riyāhī’s *Al-Ghurillā*

‘The Gorilla’ is Ṣāliḥ’s nickname, given to him as a child because of his dark skin and ape-like posture. He is subjected to exclusion and racial discrimination from infancy, growing up as an adoptee without an established family background. At the beginning of the novel he climbs the famous Seventh November Clock Tower in Tunis, chaining himself to the dial of the clock. An audience of onlookers and security personnel quickly gathers around the tower. These onlookers, former companions and adversaries, as well as the Gorilla himself narrate his story in retrospect. Speaking from various standpoints (both literal and figural), they reveal what has led to the occupation of the landmark, which the authorities as well as the gathering spectators understand as an act of protest. The main device used in accomplishing the occupation, in defying the authorities, and communicating the protest is the Gorilla’s body: Never described or discussed neutrally it is always connoted as one that is black, male, and underprivileged, and—as I hope to show—this makes racism a central concern of the novel.

The narrative structure of the novel is fragmented to create plural truths. Shifting through a host of narrators, the storyline focusing on the Gorilla occupying the tower is interwoven with the personal memories of other characters, thus giving a broad picture of Tunisian society.

There are also accounts by an omniscient narrator without focus on the Gorilla or another character, e.g. in the chapter “Kalām fi-l-binā” (“Conversation on the building”; al-Riyāhī 97–100), which contains a section on the clock tower, the surrounding square and its forgotten history while describing the process of the clock’s assembly. Other accounts are first-person narratives, for example the chapter “Kartūsha” (fr. ‘cartridge’; 156–164), which opens with the character Kartūsha’s thoughts on the Gorilla as a muezzin.

The Gorilla’s voice is heard both indirectly as well as directly over the course of the novel. An example of the former is the chapter “Ṭifl Būrqiḇa yanḥuru irthahu” (“Bourguiba’s son kills his inheritance”; 130–33) where “his eyes wander over the roofs of Tunis. Below him is mankind like the fan community of a famous singer—Michael Jackson, maybe. They are standing there for a spectacle without sound” (130).⁴ A direct perspective can be found in the chapter “Al-Ghurillā ‘alā al-sikka” (“The Gorilla is on the street”; 22–26), in which the Gorilla thinks back to an event two years ago, when he ran amok and fired his weapon on visitors of Bourguiba’s mausoleum where he was working as a guard: “That night, two years ago, I had not anticipated what would happen to me. The hysteria that took hold of me and made me fire all those bullets in Bourguiba’s final resting place dissolved itself like dark clouds” (22).

Yet, in most accounts an onlooker is the focus of the omniscient narrator: This perspective becomes very clear in the sections featuring Ḥabība (a prostitute and former lover of the Gorilla), e.g. in “Ḥabība tashta ‘ilu fī-l-sāḥa” (“Ḥabība lights up in the square”; 32–36).

The power lighting the square beneath the clock tower has just been cut, and so the Gorilla's body on the tower disappears from view. To usher in her memories the text describes Ḥabība lighting a cigarette that illuminates her face for a moment, "as if she had to ascertain her position for the narrator" (32). This direct reference to a narrator occurs rarely however; most of the other chapters focus on onlookers without drawing attention to the narrator interchanging with first-person narrations.

As the Gorilla's only clear cut opponents, the authorities are represented in the accounts of 'Alī Kilāb, a former criminal and social climber with contacts to the ruling family and a career—merely alluded to—in the Armed Forces. His and the Gorilla's paths have crossed several times before. The Gorilla once refused to pay protection money to the extortionist 'Alī Kilāb and a feud has simmered ever since. As soon as he finds out that it is the Gorilla who has occupied the tower he breaks off his vacation and heads for the square, immediately interfering with the authorities' work. He orders the intimidated officers to wrap a plastic cover around the bottom of the tower as this would help them to bring down the Gorilla unhurt and without causing a stirr among the bystanders (see "Bayt min juthath" ["A house of dead bodies"]; 80–85). However, the genuineness of 'Alī Kilāb's intention is challenged by the later chapter "Kalālīb" ("Many dogs"; 94–96) where the plastic cover turns out to screen scenes of torture:

We were informed that 'Alī Kilāb had positioned dogs and wires, realizing his plan by himself so that it all seemed natural and not like an electric shock. The young officer had warned him that what he was doing was against the law. [...] With every electric shock the Gorilla was swaying. (94)

Interesting here is also the use of the collective "we" to refer to the narrative voice, which is however not taken up again in the chapter.

Doubt is cast on several accounts, making them seen unreliable and evoking a sense of uncertainty. The earliest look back at the Gorilla's life, the description of his adoption, is found in the chapter "Fī maqḥā Tūnis ḥadīth gharīb 'an aṣl al-Ghurillā" ("In Café 'Tunis' there is weird gossip about the origin of the Gorilla"; 37–41): An old man on the square recognizes the Gorilla from his work in a children's home thirty years ago, where childless couples could pick out a child who suited them. He tells a second old man—with a certain sympathy—that the poor wretch (*al-miskīn*) was the baby no one wanted. The latter however disregards this account as idle talk (*ḥikāyāt fāriḡha*). Another section where doubt is cast is the beginning of "Al-Ghurillā yata' ammalu ibṭahu fī-l-samā'" ("The Gorilla watches his armpit in the sky"; 58–62): Here it is stated that no one understands what is going on in the Gorilla's head and that the previous narrator (Shakīrā, a transvestite) is just an old gawker unable to get through to the Gorilla's heart and mind (cf. 58).

This unreliability is paired with accounts which seem to verify the oddity of the black man on the tower: Twice chapters with the title "Khabar 'ājil" ("Breaking News"; 30–31)⁵ present television news coverage stating that a young black man (*shābb aswad*) has refused to come down from the tower for the last two hours and that conflicting opinions regarding his identity and his demands abound. The mention of "demands" alludes to the fact that his behavior is perceived as protest. Aside from their verification effect, the news broadcasts enable a 'view from a distance' that at the same time brings the Gorilla's message closer: He is incomprehensible for the people on the square but, as the first chapter explains (11), seems to be understood via the broadcast.

It is apparent that the narrative structure is fragmented and due to frequent switches maze-like; different views and opinions are mixed together, creating the illusion of orality. Actions

are not explained with the intention of making them understandable but are rather shown in a way that forces the reader to make up his or her own mind. The effect created is best captured by the theatre and performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte's concept of the 'performativity of texts': Texts acquire performativity due to their ability, in the act of being read, to produce something they are not yet themselves (136). They create repercussions in readers through structural devices like the ones described. As Fischer-Lichte sees it, readers immerse themselves in a text, devouring and incorporating it. What is read becomes part of them and can thereby have somatic (i.e. physiological, emotional, energetic) effects. The immersion, additionally, leads to a liminal situation detached from real life which allows for new possibilities of imagination, reflection, emotion, and through this, transformation (138).

The narrative structure with its different perspectives on a protagonist understood as an 'other' in various moments of exclusion suggests a discussion of the problem of representation (as described by G. C. Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 1988). This, however, demands an analysis of the employed images and how/by whom they are produced. For now, the act of reading as a performance, as an interaction between different voices in the text and the individual reader can be understood as a specific realization of the "ethical encounters" Sara Ahmed has suggested in her *Strange Encounters* (2000) as a way of avoiding the issue of representation. In an ethical encounter "hearing does not take place in my ear, or in yours, but in between our mouths and ears" (Ahmed 158), it is "not only a meeting of bodies, but between bodies and texts (the face to face of intimate readings) in which the subject is moved from her place" (40).

The Gorilla is formed by images others have of him but also through his embodiment speaking for itself. This allows, to speak with Sara Ahmed, "[t]he strange body [to become] a fetish which both conceals and reveals the body-at-home's reliance on strangers to secure his being—his place—his presence—in the world" (54). The perspectives of various counterparts on this 'other,' this 'strange body' are given to the reader, reflecting or making accessible different aspects of Tunisian society.

Towards the Gorilla as a Composite Image

Images understood as allusions to figures and pictures of popular knowledge partake in the creation of the textual world: Through their innate performativity they offer material to the individual reader to recreate the fictional reality presented and appeal to the collective memory of the readership. Here, Mitchell's conceptual differentiation between image and picture is of importance:

You can hang a picture, but you cannot hang an image. [...] It is what can be lifted off the picture, transferred to another medium, translated into verbal ekphrasis [...]. The picture is the image plus the support; it is the appearance of the immaterial image in a material medium. (*What do Pictures Want?* 85)

Al-Riyāḥī's uses various allusions to create the image of his protagonist. The allusions or partial images that I will address are Jesus, Bilāl the muezzin, and King Kong. I will show how they are used to discuss protest, racism, and the Tunisian uprising, before evaluating the novel's engagement.

The Gorilla's occupation of the clock tower can be considered a commentary on protest which, in common usage, refers to the declaration of dissent with *something*, an act of objection or a gesture of disapproval. In the more narrow sense as defined by Harry Pross, it is

the public disagreement with preceding information or a position with two addressees: The initiator of the information or position and an audience which is meant to be won over to the opposition. Both addressees and the protester are connected by a *common issue*, and the protest itself is understood as an act of communication between them (qtd. in Virgl 27–28, 60). This *something* against which the protest is directed, or the *common issue*, actually seems to be missing in *Al-Ghurillā*. The Gorilla gives no explanation as to his actions, but is instead described as speaking unintelligibly (al-Riyāhī 14). He does not call his occupation of the tower a protest. He merely enters a forbidden space and refuses to leave it, meanwhile exhibiting his body (8). Others, however, interpret his action as protest: An audience gathers immediately (ibid.), while the security forces feel affronted and try to prevent onlookers from taking pictures (10). The Gorilla's actions are described as “a big crime and an unforgivable act of rebellion (*ma'siyya*)” (ibid.). These reactions could be due to the historical importance of the clock tower, erected in commemoration of Zayn al-‘Ābidīn Bin ‘Alī's coup, replacing a Bourguiba statue when the latter was ousted from power, a historical detail the novel explains in a footnote (7; 9). By disregarding a ban on entering the space, the Gorilla questions the authority of the President; the fact that he is black and at the center of attention means that he is countering strategies of silencing that are part of the discrimination against black Tunisians.

That the Gorilla does not articulate an *issue* could make it debatable whether his actions are really a form of protest: Virgl writes that without a goal or demand it is impossible to mobilize others, and that the issue has to be relevant for society and bring social contradictions to the public's attention (45; 75; 86–87). However, I would argue that the novel shows in its narrative structure and images that the Gorilla offers messages to the different characters who see protest in his actions and, in the end, themselves protest against his murder by the authorities: The half-naked body of the Gorilla is directly opposed to a regime that does not refrain from displaying its brutality against his vulnerability. But, as Mitchell writes, “[t]he attempt to destroy or kill an image only makes it more powerful and virulent” (“Future” 139). Thus, when the spectators witness that the Gorilla is being riddled with bullets, uproar breaks out. They scream “Murder! Murder!” and later “Leave! Leave!”, showing their disapproval of the security forces' actions (al-Riyāhī 177–79). Although the Gorilla dies, he lives on in the protest of the people. In contrast to the Gorilla's occupation of the clock tower, their protest has a clear issue galvanizing their dissent: The authorities' repressive dealing of the incident.

The message of protest is conveyed in images either connected to the Gorilla by onlookers or embodied by himself, and these are sometimes alluded to in the text directly, sometimes indirectly. One image is that of Jesus on the cross as captured in numerous iconographic representations. The similarity between poses, positions, and actions evoke the association. The Gorilla is elevated above those who describe him, while his body is fastened to the clock with his leather belt (8). He asks for water, a policeman brings it to him and uses a rope to pass it to the Gorilla (11). This could be compared to Jesus' thirst on the cross that was quenched with vinegar handed up to him with a sponge (John 19, 28–30). The Gorilla is described as bare-chested after throwing away his shirt “to seek refuge in his nakedness” (al-Riyāhī 25), yet at the same time surrendering his bodily integrity to the will of the authorities. Thinking about his unknown black ancestors, the Gorilla resolves that even his hidden origin no longer matters now that he was on top and could light his cigarette on the stars, the moon, or a shooting star (59), a thought that alludes to and evokes a certain transcendence.

The authorities eventually shoot the Gorilla after the electric current they had circuited to the tower had proven ineffective in getting him to descend. The scene is graphically described:

The Gorilla screams in his defiance. Bullets riddle his body [...]. He opens his arms and his head to God's seeing eye. He awaits the bullet that splits his guts and goes into his heart [...]. He cries his final cry like a king who has lost his troops and for whom nothing remains but to pray with his eyes. [...]
He lifts his arms. [...] He opens his hands to allow history to run its course. It removes him to God's eye. His vision blurs and he flies into the darkness below as a piece of glowing ember. (177-78)

His arms (at least ultimately) are outstretched to the sides as he dies in an act of self-sacrifice. While his soul is taken to God, his physical being is turned into a self-consuming object expressed in the metaphor of the glowing ember.

The description of the Gorilla's end can also be read as a reply to Saeed the Pessoptimist, the satirical anti-hero of Emile Habiby's (Imīl Ḥabībī) political parody *Al-waqā'i' al-gharība fī ikhtifā' Sa'īd Abī al-Naḥs al-mutashā'il* (1974; trans. *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*, 1985): Saeed, a Palestinian collaborator with Israel, finds himself on top of a stake not knowing whether he is dreaming or awake:

So, why am I still here on this stake, being bumped and buffeted by the cold, without a cover, back support, or companion. Why don't I go down? [...] Why hesitate? For fear of falling from my enormous height down into the depths below, like a duck killed by a hunter to suffer pain and to die? (Habiby 118)

If we transpose this question to *Al-Ghurillā*, the plausible answer is that his death triggers resistance, for it moves the people to protest.

In terms of other examples of engaged literature, similarities with Jesus on the cross might be seen as an allusion to the poetry of Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb or 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī amongst others, both of whom used Jesus as a mask to express the ideal of the suffering revolutionary (al-Sayyāb's poem "Al-masīḥ ba'd al-ṣalb," "Christ after Crucifixion," 1957, and "Ughnīya ilā sha'bī," "A Song to my People," 1956 by al-Bayātī; Pinault 118). For both Muslim and Christian poets, "the figure of Christ [functioned] as a secular symbol of political struggle and social commitment, as an image of suffering undertaken on behalf of one's people" (Pinault 125). In al-Bayātī's poem one finds parallels to al-Riyāḥī's description of the Gorilla: Jesus is shown "alone, upon the cross," with a "shadow, which spreads its palms out to the stars" and he is watched by his people, "you who lift up your brow" (qtd. in Pinault 120). While the aspects of victimization and self-sacrifice are embodied in the Jesus image, in the last mentioned poem however, death and sacrifice are transformed through a "poetic imagination [...] into a conscious act of sacrifice and salvation" (Pannewick 109), and this is even more so the case with the Gorilla's death.

Parallel to Jesus, the Gorilla is likened to Bilāl the muezzin, a positively connoted black figurehead in *ḥadīth* literature and seemingly one of Prophet Muhammad's earliest companions. Bilāl is described as a slave of African heritage ('Arafat suggests Ethiopian; 1215) who was born in Mecca. Considered the second convert to Islam, his owner inflicted punishment and torture on him because of this conversion. Abū Bakr bought and freed Bilāl from slavery, after which he became Muhammad's personal servant. As the first muezzin in Islam, Bilāl gained great prestige during his lifetime ('Arafat 1215; Rahal 20).

The reference to Bilāl occurs in different chapters of the novel. In the above mentioned adoption scene, the first reaction the prospective adoptive mother utters when shown the black baby, is “By God, he is black, a slave?!” [*waṣīf*, lit. “slave,” fig. “black”]. Only when the warden remarks that the baby also belongs to God’s creation, the husband changes his opinion, reminds his wife of Bilāl and they adopt him (al-Riyāhī, 39). The reference is taken up again in Kartūsha’s account (see above) who likens the Gorilla on the tower to Bilāl in his function as Prophet Muhammad’s muezzin: “This is the prayer call that shakes up the city. The Gorilla is a muezzin. [...] The Ethiopian Bilāl forever” (156).

The reference to Bilāl embodies discrimination and stereotypes regarding black skin: By showing the very first reaction of the future adoptive mother, the novel alludes to the general connection black skin provokes in society, namely servitude. The majority of the black population of Tunisia (estimated at between eight and twenty percent of the overall population depending on the sources⁶) are descendants of sub-Saharan slaves brought to Tunisia during the slave trade until it was officially banned in 1846 (Rahal 13; Jankowsky 380). Black skin is still associated with “sub-Saharan primitiveness” (Jankowsky 377), which was targeted during former President Habib Bourguiba’s modernization drive. Race and ethnicity were not discussed in Tunisia prior to the Tunisian uprising (375–77; 379), and still in line with Bourguiba’s politics it was propagated that the country was a homogenous nation without minorities.

In the adoption scene, the cruelty and injustice in possibly leaving behind an orphaned baby due to his skin color is easily perceived by the reader. This is an instance of performativity, for the discrimination with which society treats black people is shown in the reaction of the mother rather than told directly or interpreted (one of Fischer-Lichte’s principles partaking in the performativity of texts, see above).

The reference to Bilāl in the adoption scene is positively connoted for the characters concerned. The repetition of this reference for the Gorilla on the tower can therefore also be considered an expression of benevolence in honor of its occupation and the Gorilla’s dark skin. Alluding to one of the Prophet’s companions who was black yet highly esteemed, functions as an argument against stereotyping dark skin. Calling the Gorilla a muezzin alludes to his function as a role model. The Islamic prayer call includes the lines “*ḥayya ‘alā al-ṣalāt*” (hasten to prayer), “*ḥayya ‘alā al-falāḥ*” (hasten to success), and “*al-ṣalātu khayrun min al-nawm*” (the prayer is better than sleep).⁷ Similarly, the Gorilla calls on the people to protest with his physical presence in a forbidden place. He awakens an awareness for the suppressive regime in their hearts and inspires them to join the struggle despite all the trials and hardships this might entail. The protest is likened to an act of worship.

The third image I would like to address is that of King Kong, the giant ape a white explorer captures and exhibits, provoking the animal’s destructive escape through city streets which ends on the pinnacle of a tower. In the 1933 original film by Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack it is the Empire State Building in New York where the ape is ultimately killed. Cynthia Erb writes in her analysis of *King Kong* and its reception that its protagonist is “one of the best-known characters ever produced by the Hollywood cinema and a figure repeatedly activated in art and mass culture” (1), spawning a vast array of film versions.

In the present novel reference to *King Kong* is mostly through allusions, beginning with Ṣāliḥ’s nickname ‘the Gorilla’ (coined during a game of football when the other children noticed “that his arms in a weird manner stretched out until they reached the edge of his knees”; al-Riyāhī 29) and ending with him climbing and dying on the tower.

There are also direct references to *King Kong* however. In one chapter the Gorilla sits in a cinema watching a *King Kong* movie. The chapter states that “[t]he night of *King Kong* was not an ordinary night at all” (42), which can be interpreted as describing the situation on and around the clock tower but also as a comment on the novelty of the narrative. The narrator of this chapter, Shakīrā the transvestite, fancies the Gorilla and imagines that his facial features converge with the ape on the screen, leading her to wish herself to be the beautiful woman in *King Kong*’s palm, “flying in a world of illicit lust” (45). In this last scene the application of the *King Kong* image to the Gorilla becomes especially clear. Shakīrā alludes to his blackness and virility at the same time, repeating a common racist stereotype fostered against black men in Western pop culture⁸: “The smell of negroes (*al-zunūj*) is exceptional. [...] His smell intoxicated me and an idea developed in my mind: Sex with a black man would certainly be a different experience and a delicious closure for this Saturday night entertainment” (44–45).

The *King Kong* story has been widely analyzed with reference to the question of its racist potentials, reflecting ideas of civilization and modernity versus the ‘other,’ the uncivilized ‘exotic’ prevalent in the 1930s as the first film version was shot. However, Erb sees the acknowledged popular influence of *Frankenstein* (1931, James Whale and Mary Shelley) as an indicator that *King Kong* possesses a dual quality. Beside its undeniable racism, it was also meant to show that exploitation will blow up in the exploiter’s face (xvii).

In an interview with Sousan Hammad, al-Riyāḥī comments on the problem of racism in Tunisia in relation to liberation, unequivocally stating that for him the two are connected:

We [...] will not be liberated until we liberate ourselves from the racist views we have over other races and religions. [...] We are still racist to the bone. Attempting to hide or silence this fact will not help with the matter because we are a sick society which still suffers from the complexes of colour and race. (qtd. in Hammad)

The author also reveals that he feels highly sympathetic to black people by heritage and history, for his own grandfather was called a “negro” (ibid.).

The *King Kong* theme shares the aspect of victimization already evident in the Jesus image, and this shows that the images are not strictly separate from one another but blur into each other like transparent layers of paint. Their parallel application to the protagonist of *Al-Ghurillā* lets the Gorilla crystallize into a composite image who as a character is only rarely described in his outward appearance without calling on images as mediators. For example, although a central element of the narrative there are only occasional references to the darkness of his skin, yet he is likened to Bilāl and an ape which *shows* (as opposed to *describe*, see above) him as black.

Despite his nickname the protagonist of *Al-Ghurillā* remains human, no metamorphosis takes place and the animalistic or even monstrous is only ever played with. In the epilogue entitled “January 14th 2011,” however, this play becomes real: The (fictionalized) author describes the last stages of the novel’s production in the middle of the Tunisian uprising. Taking refuge from Tunis in the countryside to finish his manuscript he had almost missed the upheavals. When he finds out about them and returns to the capital, he accidentally gets caught in a street fight and has to protect his house from thieves. He sees a car approaching when he suddenly feels black fur growing on his skin and his bodily frame enlarging. Ultimately, he lifts his fists and beats his chest like a gorilla (al-Riyāḥī 190). This is interesting since Erb notes in her study that one of the *King Kong* story’s most “intriguing aspects [...] resides in the invitation to identify with the position of a tormented monster, known for his strange love, but also for the enormity of his urban rebellion” (11) against civilization, captivity, and exploitation.

And an identification is what occurs here on different levels. First of all, the fictionalized author identifies with his protagonist, taking up the ape metaphor. Through the protagonist, an identification with King Kong is implied, which embodies the essence of the uprising, the impulse to rebel. Indirectly, there is also an identification with Muhammad Bou Azizi and his self-immolation. This is forged by connecting the entire novel to the Tunisian uprising in the epilogue, but also through allusions such as the Gorilla's end, described with the metaphor of the glowing ember and his act of self-sacrifice that incites others to protest. The aspect of rebellion that is part of the King Kong image is thereby emphasized and the epilogue hints at the political engagement of the novel, connecting the protest on the content level to the actual uprising on the streets. The epilogue blurs the lines between author and protagonist, between reality and fiction, clearly identifying with the social context of Tunisia. This is even more so the case as the fictionalized author mentions being approached by the *New York Times* to write an article about the uprising. A link to the article al-Riyāhī wrote about the events is provided. In fact, large sections of the epilogue are identical with the article published as an eyewitness account (Riahi, "A Night in Tunisia"). One difference between the two, however, is the emphasis the epilogue places on the act of writing, for the author a place of refuge when he is out on the street and keeping guard of his house. He describes his impulse to express his helplessness in writing, grabbing hold of his ballpoint pen (*qalam al-raṣāṣ*) while the bullets (*al-raṣāṣ*) ricochet around him (al-Riyāhī 189).⁹ Unique in the epilogue is also his metamorphosis into a gorilla beating his chest. The gesture in itself signals dominance and serves to express empowerment against all odds, especially as it is shown in a moment of acute fear. Although the author in this scene is not fighting against the regime but rather protecting his home and belongings, the gesture can be read as a reflection of how the uprising brought with it a sense of empowerment for many Tunisians. At the same time, it refers back to the novel and its protagonist.

To summarize our analysis: There are various aspects to the composite image the novel creates in its protagonist, instances of victimization and self-sacrifice from the allusions to Jesus on the cross, racism and discrimination against black people as well as allusions to Islamic culture and tradition from the Bilāl references, which situate the character of the Gorilla in an Arabic and/or Tunisian context, and lastly, a critique of racism and colonialism as well as a notion of rebellion in allusions to the King Kong story. The Gorilla's end shows him as an image of dissent: The authorities kill him because he is the living and unbearable image of one who has defied their repression and mobilized a crowd of onlookers, who eventually even take his side.

These various aspects of the Gorilla find expression in the accounts of different narrators and the multi-perspectival structure of the novel. Depending on the experiences the narrators shared with the Gorilla and their respective social backgrounds, they take different stances and create a multidimensional image. Through references to Jesus, Bilāl, and King Kong, this multidimensional image is larger than life, and so resonates with possibly different meanings for the various narrators. The narrative structure described can be seen as a communal approach instead of a top-down perspective that alludes to certain heroes or images from an elevated position. The narrative is fragmented, contains various ideological views, and as a result refrains from direct indoctrination. Rather, the issues the novel raises (racism and protest against the authoritarian regime) are "performed" by the text: Situations are shown and not told. The gaze of the others (i.e. the onlookers, members of the security forces etc.) on the 'other' (the Gorilla as an excluded black man) shapes the narrative and

the reader's experience of the text. Aspects of Tunisian society are presented in these perspectives, revealing underlying problems such as the importance of ancestry in an authoritarian regime where gangsters gain positions of power through personal relations to the ruling family but an adoptee has trouble to even get married because he has no family background.

Aspects of the narrative can be considered as instances of 'othering,' such as the Gorilla's representation in the accounts of the onlookers. These accounts are however contrasted with the Gorilla's own perspective as well as his bodily presence. His body dominates all aspects of his image: His unfortunate position in society is constructed based on his physical features; his protest and the mobilization he triggers by occupying the tower are physical; the self-sacrifice is physical, surrendering his body to the violence of the authorities. The Gorilla is however not a passive, silent object: He speaks through his body, to both the gathering crowds as well as to the reader.

As a result of the narrative perspective and the images employed—which all conform to the production of textual performativity—the reader is enabled to embody different aspects of the Gorilla while reading. I understand this to be a prime example of an "ethical encounter" (see above). Parallel to the crowds who ultimately protest against his treatment by the authorities, the reader, seeking to understand the reasons behind his actions, is led to empathize with the Gorilla, thus in turn responding all the more fervently to the gruesome instances of torture that he has had to suffer.

Conclusion

To evaluate the novel's engagement I would like to refer back to Suhayl Idrīs' demand that engaged literature should be in interaction with society and identify with its context. *Al-Ghurillā* clearly interacts with Tunisian society, firstly by giving voice to its members, in the novel a cast of figures as diverse as a black Tunisian, a transvestite, and one of the ruler's cronies. Secondly, Tunisian society in the phase of the novel's production is shown in the reference to the Tunisian uprising. The narrative is indeed interacting with recent events in Tunisia, especially apparent in the connection between the epilogue and the author's journalistic eyewitness account. All of this leads to a close identification of the novel with the Tunisian context, alluding to problems in Tunisian society: Protest and mobilizing the people are shown and the issue of racism against black Tunisians is unraveled. The overall criticism however is against authoritarian rule.

Through the performativity of the text, the reader's attention is drawn to these problems but granted space to make up his or her own mind. Various perspectives are included thanks to the multiple levels of the narrative structure and the images employed. The key images—as I hope to have shown—are drawn from a global, multimedia context, including references to *ḥadīth* literature as well as Hollywood movies. In combination with the multiperspectival narration, this allows the protagonist to crystallize as a composite image featuring aspects of Bilāl the muezzin, Jesus, and King Kong.

A host of (sometimes unreliable) narrative perspectives is used to escape a single patronizing or ideological viewpoint. It is not the resistance poet who is narrating the story here (neither directly nor behind a mask of allusions) but different sections of a pluralistic society. There is no 'bigger truth' because every onlooker as well as every reader interprets the composite image of the Gorilla differently, forming various truths. The Gorilla's protest is given no definite aim. The onlookers' individual interpretations, however, lead to collec-

tive action: When the authorities try to kill the Gorilla, those who witness the scene unite in protest. The black man who falls from the tower ignites their uprising, just like Muhammad Bou Azizi's self-immolation functioned as a catalyst to the protest in 2010/2011.

Notes

- 1 This article draws in part on my previous article "Space and Experience for the Racially Marked Body: Kamal al-Riahi's *al-Ghurillā*." *Experiencing Space, Spacing Experience: Concepts, Practices, and Materialities*. Ed. Nora Berning, Philipp Schulte, and Christine Schwanecke. Trier: WTV, 2014. 169–182. Print.
- 2 The general focus on the literary centers is reflected in the research on *iltizām* such as Verena Klemm's articles "Changing Notions of Commitment (*Iltizām*) and Committed Literature (*al-adab al-multazim*) in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq" (2000) and "Literary Commitment Approached through Reception Theory" (2000) or M.M. Badawi's chapter on "Commitment in Contemporary Arabic Literature" in his *Modern Arabic Literature and the West* (1985). Badawi, however, mentions that Tunisian authors and critics addressed the issue of literary commitment during its heyday (1, also see Mikhail's passing remark on committed poetry from the Maghreb: 597). Additionally, one finds references to engaged literature in studies on Tunisian literature, (e.g. in Svetožar Pantůček's *Tunesische Literaturgeschichte* (1974) and Jean Fontaine's *La littérature tunisienne contemporaine* (1990)).
- 3 Badawi quotes the editorial note to the first volume of *al-Ādāb* from January 1953 (12).
- 4 All quotes from *Al-Ghurillā* are my translation.
- 5 The second chapter of 'Breaking News' can be found on pages 154–55.
- 6 There are no authoritative statistics as Taoufik Chairi, president of the Association for the Defence of the Rights of Blacks (ADAM), confirms (Ata, "ADAM"); however, in articles published in Tunisian media outlets since the uprising in winter 2010/2011, the estimates vary between eight (Béhi, "La Communauté Noire") and twenty percent (El Shikh, "La Tabou du Racisme").
- 7 The final phrase is only used at the Sunni morning prayer call.
- 8 In Western popular culture the stereotype of the black man as "outside the normal realm of (White) masculinity," "as 'other'" and as "a sexual monster" was spread at the end of the nineteenth century, when white conservative Americans "saw the end of slavery as bringing about an unleashing of animalistic, brute violence inherent in African American men" (Dines 291–93). Dines, Gail. "King Kong and the White Woman: Hustler Magazine and the Demonization of Black Masculinity." *Violence Against Women* 4.3 (1998): 291–307. Print.
- 9 The parallelism of bullets (i.e. weapons) and the pen (i.e. writing) is interesting here, since in committed poetry the comparison between writing and fighting is commonly drawn; see, e.g. Nizār Qabbānī's poem "Hawāmish 'alā daftar al-naksa" ("Annotations to the Notebook of the Disaster," 1967), where the author writes "Heavy-hearted country of my birth / without warning you transformed me / from a poet singing for love / to one writing with a knife" (for the translation, see: Gettleman, Marvin and Stuart Schaar, eds. *The Middle East and Islamic World Reader*. New York: Grove, 2003. 194. Print).

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