

Rekindling the Epistolary: Email and the Arabic Novel

Mohamed Hassanein

Department of Arabic Language and Literature

Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman

Email: m.hassanein@squ.edu.om

Aya Akkawi

Department of English and Translation

Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman

Email: a.akkawi@squ.edu.om

Abstract With email replacing conventional letters as the main means of communication, the internet revolution has resulted in a resurgence of the epistolary form in literature. This paper presents a textual analysis of the following novels: Yaser Shabaan's *Sons of Democracy*, Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*, and Ibrahim Jadallah and Kalshan AlBayati's *Emails after the Night* to investigate how the Arabic novel employs emails as a technique to construct its narrative and examines its impact on internal narrative methods and techniques. This experimentation has an impact on the narrative structure, level, and function, pushing the boundaries of this genre and enriching the landscape of contemporary Arabic literature. The study recommends further exploration of email as a narrative tool by comparing e-pistolary Western novels with Arabic fiction and delving into disciplinary approaches related to linguistics and cultural studies.

Keywords E-pistolary novels; *Sons of Democracy*; *Girls of Riyadh*; *Emails after the Night*

Authors **Mohamed Hassanein** is Assistant Professor of Arabic literature at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. His research interests include classic and modern Arabic literature, comparative literature, cultural studies, and Arabic literature with other interdisciplinary tracks like cognitive approach; **Aya Akkawi** is Assistant Professor of English Literature at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. Her research interests include English and American postmodern literature, science fiction, comparative literature, cultural studies, and English with other interdisciplinary tracks.

Introduction

Emails influence our daily lives in the digital world and continue well beyond the initial novelty. For many, emails have become a preferred alternative medium—in many cases—to traditional mail, since they allow for the quick interchange of files, documents, and books that used to arrive in packages after weeks of waiting¹. Given its practical and deliberative nature, emails, as a replacement of paper-based letters and diaries, draw storytellers and researchers' attention to explore this technique in various literary genres. Notably, the western literary interest in embracing emails as a tool for constructing and developing the narrative framework, whether through digital or traditional texts, is pointed remarkable. Employing emails in digital narratives purportedly precedes the stage of their use within the space of printed or written narratives.

Emails have rejuvenated the textual structure and developed its historical qualitative form, represented in the epistolary novel, in the Western heritage. The written email novel witnessed a great spread in the last two decades of the twentieth century, experimentally expressing communication through virtual worlds (Kastan 287), and affecting the message form itself. Contemporary epistolary novels showcase the ongoing development of this form compared to the old epistolary form. Laua Santini prefers to use the term e-pistolary novel to refer to

those printed novels that rely only on the new means of communications and technologies so that e-pistles are never letters as traditionally conceived, namely paper-based exchanges, but only correspondences carried out through digital or electronic devices and anyway via the internet connection. (203)

The Epistolary novel in the 21st century has been affected by the digitized revolution where traditional letters are excluded and digital correspondence in the forms of emails or texts qualifies it as an e-pistolary work of fiction. Many Western printed novels have taken the email, as a general framework, for writing narrative text and governing the narrative content. A number of novels adopted this contemporary setting of e-pistolary form in the West, including Meg Cabot's *The Boy Next Door* (2002). This romantic comedy narrative unfolds through email exchanges

1 Paper mails have not been entirely replaced by emails. Work-related functions like concluding contracts related to legal traditions and privacy rules, for instance, are best done by regular mail. Hence, real documents will continue to have a firm place in official dealings, and it will be difficult and perhaps impossible for them to be replaced by email (Crystal 31).

between Melissa Fuller, a gossip columnist for a New York newspaper, and the newspaper's human resources department, after witnessing an elderly woman next door lying in a coma following a vicious attack. Within a humorous and paradoxical framework, suspicions swirl around that woman's nephew, and via the exchange of emails, Fuller investigates the story of that woman, gets to know the nephew, and unexpectedly falls in love with him.

Where Rainbows End (2004) is a novel written by the Irish novelist Cecelia Ahern. It revolves around a long-distance romance between two individuals living in two countries, America and Ireland. The story is told solely through letters, emails, and other digital interactions, demonstrating the progression of communication techniques. Unlike epistolary novels, which rely primarily on conventional mail, *Where Rainbows End* combines the immediacy of internet communication which mirrors how communication has changed in the modern world.

In addition, Daniel Glattauer's *Love Virtually* (2006) touches on the complexities of romantic relationships in cyberspace. The story begins with an email mistakenly sent from an unknown woman named Amy to a man named Leo, who kindly responds to her email. With time, their exchanged emails develop into a profound emotional bond. However, their relationship remains within a virtual context that clashes with reality. Since Amy is happily married, the two lovers acknowledge the limitations of their virtual relationship and choose to preserve it within the digital realm.

Midnight Movie (2011), co-authored by Tobe Hooper and Alan Goldsher, belongs to the horror genre and features emails, blog entries, and Twitter conversations. Lynn Coady's *The Antagonist* (2011) is based on a collection of emails that a former hockey player exchanges with his friends, in which he refers—after twenty years of being hidden from his friends—to the much suffering he has faced from his peers. The messages range from anger to sometimes humor.

Exchanging emails with an anonymous person is the focus of S. D. Chrostowska's *Permission* (2013). Throughout the year, an anonymous person exchanges a number of emails with a contemporary visual artist and develops a friendship with him. The novel tells about the reality of Poland after the Cold War, and the narrator's hope to find a safe passage to America.

These various works, found in the contemporary Western literary canon, suggest authors' attempts to explore new trends in narrative writings. Yet, email narratives are not exclusive to the West as many Arab novelists have embraced this form in their writing. This paper attempts to investigate how the Arabic novel employs this technique to construct its narrative and examines its impact on internal

narrative methods and techniques.

The E-pistolary Novel in Arabic Literature.

In the context of digital interaction and experimentation, Arabic novelists have explored new tendencies in narrative writing, one of which has been to embrace emails as a new storytelling tool. Some novels utilize the personal mail technique in which one person sends an email to another person while other novels' interaction is modeled by mailing groups where someone sends emails to a group of people and they all correspond and assist in building the narrative.

The Arabic novels under study utilize email as a means of communication between characters. However, the level at which email influences the general narrative structure varies. For example, in Ibrahim Abdulmajid's *Every Week Has a Friday* (2009) and Ashraf Nasr's *Freedom.com* (2010), email plays a partially functional role in shaping the narratives; a website and a blog dominate the general narrative framework. Other novels use email as their core narrative structure. The investment in this framework is based on the form of personal and contact group emails. In Ibrahim Jadallah and Kalshan AlBayati's *Emails after the Night* (2015) and Yaser Shabaan's *Sons of Democracy* (2006), characters communicate through personal emails, while Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (2007) is unique in exploiting the dynamic of contact group emails for communication and interaction.

Personal Email Narrative

Personal email allows for immediate and direct communication with people we often already know. Its format is straightforward in use: an email address is required to sustain the message delivery along with a subject title and the message itself. Once the email is sent, an automatic date and time is provided. Regarding the message body, there are a few general guidelines that should be followed because this medium necessitates a message that goes beyond repetition and clearly states its objective. Additionally, the message should not go above the sixteen lines that the computer screen can display, in most situations (Crystal 140-142).

The Arabic personal email narrative sometimes adheres to these structures or prescriptive rules and sometimes embraces creative freedom. *Emails after the Night* can be categorized under collaborative writing, co-authored by the Egyptian novelist and playwright/ Ibrahim Jadallah, and the Iraqi writer and journalist/ Kalshan al-Bayati. This novel represents an indicative example of personal email context (AlBuraiki 169-170). What distinguishes *Emails After the Night* on a creative level from other established narrative structures is that it employs modern media in the

form of digital communication. The novel is structured via the exchange of emails between the two authors. One of them writes a chapter and sends it electronically and the other writer is prompted to respond via email or messenger to add another section or chapter to the novel. The digital format, which facilitates collaborative writing, goes beyond the constraints of paper-based writing and the conventional idea of a single author. It also promotes breaking the spatial boundaries between an Egyptian novelist and an Iraqi journalist by allowing them to participate together in writing a novel despite their physical separation.

The story opens with Manar Al-Iraqiya searching the web for Hassan Al-Masry's email address, who fled Iraq after being pursued by US occupation forces and returned to live in Egypt. The exchanged emails reveal that Manar and Hassan are close friends. Their friendship began in Iraq when Hassan was residing there fleeing his persecution by Egyptian authorities for his political affiliations against Sadat's administration. The narrative also highlights the difficulties Manar faces in Iraq during the American occupation. The novel's narrative structure is built on thirty emails mostly exchanged in an almost continuous and alternating flow between Manar and Hassan. Only Hassan's incarceration during the Kefaya Movement protests against the Egyptian regime ends this conversation, and Manar, Hassan's daughter, begins responding to Manar Al-Iraqiya's emails on his behalf. The exchange is again interrupted by another character, represented by an embedded email message sent by Latifa Al-Dulaimi, one of Manar and Hassan's friends.

Rajaa AlSanea's *Girls of Riyadh* adheres to common email standards such as email address, date, and message title. In contrast, *Emails After the Night* adopts a different pattern by omitting the traditional email elements. As the characters deliberately neglect the presence of these elements in their exchanged emails, the narrative creates a seamless flow that allows the reader to focus on the characters' interactions. In addition, the novel's approach contradicts the brevity of real-life emails when one message often becomes a whole chapter in the novel.

While the characters in *Emails After the Night* share a history and memories, the email in Shaaban's *Sons of Democracy* becomes a means of communication with an unknown person. The narrator, assumingly Shabaan, receives an email from an anonymous sender who identifies himself as an Arab American citizen. He states in his email that his father immigrated to the U.S. more than half a century ago. After his father's death, the sender found a novel. So he photographed it and sent it to some email addresses bearing Arabic names including the narrator. Intrigued, the narrator tries to respond to the sender to ask him for more details about his father. This email is sent amidst the backdrop of the 9/11 attacks and the Iraq war. Email

has a clear purpose in establishing the external story framework and arranging the narrative content. The novel's constructed world reshapes reality and history by purposefully subverting the linearity of the narrative structure and replacing it with overlapping and concurrent worlds: the virtual and the real. The first world is that of the embedded photographed novel emailed to the writer whereas the other world is the writer's real world, which is also immersed in the digital sphere of emails and subsequent communications that disrupt the reading of the attached narrative. Similar to *Emails After the Night*, the standard email elements are also absent in this novel. The focus is on the narrative parallelism established by alternation between reading the graphic novel and successive email messages from other parties.

Contact Group Email Narrative

The foundation of a contact group is an email address that relays messages to many addresses (Crystal 167). These lists are frequently used to share news and/or ideas on a broader scale than through personal correspondence; they may contain anonymous individuals whose contact emails are simply shared in the group. The sender sends a message to the group's email address and the group receives it. It is easy to unsubscribe with a simple message delivered to the initial group email. Narratives based on contact group email interaction offer an intriguing avenue to examine the complexities of human communication in the digital age. Al-Sanea's *Girls of Riyadh* follows this approach in constructing the narrative structure through a series of emails exchanged among a group of friends. The novel's first page shows an email list that facilitates communication among a group:

Welcome to the Subscribers' List of
Memoirs Disclosed
To subscribe, send a blank message to:
seerehwenfadha7et__subscribe@yahoogroups.com
To cancel your subscription, send a blank message to:
seerehwenfadha7et__unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com
To contact the list manager, send a message to:
seerehwenfadha7et@yahoogroups.com (Alsanea 16).

Aside from the "cancel or unsubscribe" function, the recipients' subscriptions and communication with the writer are the bases for forming the narrative structure.

Before examining the impact of this approach in constructing the narrative, it is vital to explore one significant element of using contact groups as a means of

correspondence rather than personal email. The inherent qualities of an email group list include its ability to spread users' and members' perspectives and its penchant for exchanging unusual and urgent news among this wide group. Perhaps the title given to the group (Memoires Disclosed) indicates the intention of popularization, breaking the stereotype of personal email and personal correspondents' limitations. The novel, in a sense, aligns itself with the same narrative technique for delivering the message and disseminating it among a large number of subscribers. The narrator writes: "to everyone out there who has got enough inner courage to read the naked truth laid out in the World Wide Web and the resolve to accept that truth ...it is to you that I write my emails" (9-10). This approach adopted by the writer, highlights how information, scandals, and disclosure can easily be shared and possibly reach a big audience in the digital world.

The novel consists of fifty messages sent to the group members' email addresses. As is customary in group messages, the subject line, the date of sending, and the email address of the group appear before each message:

To: seerehwenfadha7et@yahoogroups.com

From: "seerehwenfadha7et"

Date: February 13, 2004

Subject: I Shall Write of My Friends

Ladies and Gentlemen: You are invited to join me in one of the most explosive scandals and noisiest, wildest all-night parties around. Your personal tour guide—and that's *moi*—will reveal to you a new world, a world closer to you than you might imagine. We all live in this world but do not really experience it, seeing only what we can tolerate and ignoring the rest. (Alsanea 17).

The date and address of the email provide a tool for organizing letters and constitute an alternative style to the commonly recognized epistolary novel. Through the date fixed on each email, the novel frames the external chronological structure of each letter. The novel depicts an exchange of communication that lasts for a year among the group members, from February 13, 2004, to February 11, 2005. There is a one-month break during Ramadan, from August 10, 2004 to December 11, 2004. The narrator, then, has sent fifty messages to the mailing list during this time, one email each Friday. Instead of traditional chapter titles, the subject in the emails stands as a significant header that announces the content's primary purpose and goal. The email subject also provides an opportunity to deviate from the standard language used in communications by combining colloquial, formal, and regional dialects.

The format found in the exchanged emails among the mailing group influences the style of narrative. From the start, we notice two addresses: one for the narrative

sent by the writer and another for receiving comments from the subscribers. As a result, the messages take on a fixed, unchangeable structure: quotes and statements that guide the message, discussions of the responses the narrator receives to her mail, and the message, or the narrative, about the characters in the novel. Although this structure may appear to be a basic artistic structure in building the narrative framework, it serves various narrative purposes that influence the deep structure of the narrative text and the construction of its world. The numerous quotes, proverbs, poetry, and Quranic verses, to mention a few, add a parallel layer to the narrative. The narrator attempts to present a semantic collision with the facts and events described by constructing a satirical and humorous dimension dominated by the paradox between the statement and the event.

Email Narrative Functions

Using emails as a constructive narrative device in the above-mentioned novels raises an understandable concern about how their employment can signify a shift in the epistolary form. In other words, what value does email provide to the epistolary genre? What functional role does email play in the narrative? To answer these questions, it is important to distinguish between two methods of communication that differ depending on the medium: oral communication based on the spoken language, and written communication. In his book entitled *Literatura y significación* (1971), Todorov portrays the difference between spoken and written communication. He argues that verbal communication has “phonetic and non-material support” (29). It does not have a lasting physical form like written ones. Words disappear as soon as they are uttered, unlike written language which relies on a tangible medium like paper to stay preserved. Depending on how they are delivered, spoken words can change the meaning and the emotional impact of the statement. A trembling voice, for instance, delivers a different message than an overly calm one. Written text can be preserved, thus contrasting with the immediacy of speech. For the same reason, it can be reiterated without significantly altering its meaning¹ (29). Considering email as a written message, it is clear that what distinguishes email from paper-based mail

1 Todorov's statement was translated and paraphrased by the researchers from its original source. The quote, in its original form, states that “Podríamos vernos tentados de señalar que la materialidad de la carta la distingue de muchos otros signos (o mensajes) y en particular de la lengua hablada, que tiene un soporte fónico y no material. Pero, si se entiende este término en un sentido más amplio, podremos también dar cuenta de estos cambios en el sentido del enunciado que se deben a una voz trémula o demasiado sosegada, a movimientos de las manos muy rápidos (en un lenguaje de gestos) y así sucesivamente. Este aspecto del enunciado, excluido con razón del campo de la lingüística clásica, se hace pertinente en un examen semiótico. Sólo teniendo en cuenta esas facetas materiales de los enunciados podremos precisar la relación entre lo escrito y lo hablado. El texto escrito puede conservarse (se opone de ese modo a la instantaneidad de la palabra). Por la misma razón, puede ser reiterado sin que su sentido se altere sensiblemente” (29)

is the duality of the material and the immaterial. Email is prone to disappear which results in data loss. However, what makes email significant is its flexibility; it offers unparalleled freedom of communication and combines some of the characteristics of verbal and written messages.

Conventional mail is bound by spatial and temporal rules and limitations whereas emails transcend these boundaries as they arrive immediately the moment they are sent. The immediacy of email encourages a rapid flow of messages sent and received, akin to dialogue, except for the absence of face-to-face interaction. The physical “presence” and its relation to physical proximity or distance is eliminated in email interaction. Therefore, the term “telepresence” is different from the term “presence,” as the latter refers to “the experience of natural surroundings ... in which sensory input impinges directly upon the organs of sense”, while “telepresence” expresses its meaning via “the experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium” (Milne 1).

Email as a Form of Communication and a Medium of Imagination.

Email exchanged between characters in a novel creates a unique narrative contract between the sender and the receiver(s). It identifies with a formal structure and stimulates its reception according to special expectations. By imitating the structure of electronic messages in the narrative, email creates a special space for communication between the characters and establishes perceptions about place, time, and types of relationships among them.

Unlike traditional letters that assume, at the very least, a known recipient or addressee, an email can be sent to an anonymous individual. Email in a narrative establishes communication in a virtual world in which characters may or may not simulate the formal structure of real-life communication. This is evident in the opening of *Sons of Democracy*, when the writer decides to respond to an unknown sender, stating:

My friend... I don't know who you are... I don't know if you are a real person... or part of the virtual reality that surrounds us... it doesn't matter... but I have a mysterious feeling connecting me to what you sent, and I don't know - as usual, should I ask you for more details?" Do I ask you to send me any papers related to your father? My friend, do you want to communicate with me, even by email? Do you want us to create a virtual reality where we can reshape

reality, change destinies, and tamper with historical events?¹ (Shaaban 11-12).

Narrative fiction exploits the process of email exchange to the utmost degree to promote narrative imagination. Email becomes a medium to communicate with a mysterious, enigmatic person. What is important here is not the physical presence of the anonymous figure, but rather his presence as a narrative self, a persona crafted to establish the structure of communication between the sender and the recipient. This form parodies grand narratives established throughout history to spread hegemony and manipulation.

Since email transcends temporal and special limitations, it, sometimes, erodes anonymity and distance among the communicating partners. In *Girls of Riyadh*, communication takes place between two parties who have not previously known each other. The list manager and all recipients communicate through a digital medium and its references indicate a virtual world in which real names do not exist. On a different level, email, in *Emails After the Night*, serves to bridge the gap between the communicating characters and break the sense of alienation and distance. This is evident in the email Manar sent to Hassan:

I hope we can stay in touch via emails to know your latest news. Email has become the train that takes us wherever we want after travel became difficult for us, and our means of movement became restricted due to the deterioration of the security situation and its daily escalations.”² (Jadallah and AlBayati 10)

The functional and formative value of email extends beyond a formal aspect that aims merely to provide a modern means of communication or to excite the reader. It imposes a distinct epistolary template that deviates from the conventional epistolary structure of a narrator and a plot. Email contributes to the construction of the narrative, the diversity of narrative actors, and the formation of the plot. It leads to an interplay between narrative voices through letters, which mirrors the structure of dialogic epistolary novels.

1 This quote, originally written in Arabic, was translated by the researchers. The quote, in its original form, states: " صديقي.. لا أعرف من أنت.. لا أعرف هل أنت شخص حقيقي.. أم جزء من الواقع الافتراضي الذي " يحيط بنا.. لا يهم.. لكنني أشعر بعلاقة غامضة تربطني بما أرسلته، ولا أعرف -كعادة هل أطلب منك مزيداً من التفاصيل؟ هل أطلب منك أن ترسل إلي أية أوراق تخص والدك؟.. صديقي.. هل تريد التواصل معي ولو عبر البريد الإلكتروني؟ هل تريد أن نبثدع واقعاً افتراضياً بنا نعيد خلاله تشكيل مفردات الواقع وتبديل المقدرات والعبث بالأحداث التاريخية؟

2 This quote was translated by the researchers. The original statement is "أرجو أن نتواصل في (الإيميلات) لتوافيني بأخر أخبارك -الشخصية والعامة - (الإيميل) صار القطار الذي يوصلنا أينما نريد بعد أن عسرت علينا السفرات، وضائق بنا سبل الحركة جراء تدهور الوضع الأمني وتفاقمه يوماً بعد يوم

Contrary to snail mail, email provides a kind of instantaneous and continuous communication, akin to an extended dialogue between the characters. The novels exemplify the form of the polyphonic epistolary novel¹ in incorporating multiple voices and perspectives. They utilize the email communication model in constructing the narration between multiple voices, allowing them to simultaneously transmit narrative visions from various and disparate locations. The two-voice epistolary structure is found in *Emails After the Night* as Hassan AlMasry and Manar Allraqiya exchange emails throughout the novel. The email communication between them is interrupted only once, in the fifth letter, when Hassan is arrested during the Kefaya Movement demonstrations. His daughter Manar interferes and responds to Manar Allraqiya's email. She, then, prints out the latter's email and takes it to her father to read. An overlapping dialogue takes place between Manar and Hassan and some messages also seem to echo each other, creating a layered conversation where one speech is built on top of another. For instance, the protest movements against the political and intellectual repression that led to the January 25 revolution are paralleled in Manar's letters by the references to the American occupation of Iraq, the various raids, the sound of explosions, and the cutting of telephone and Internet lines.

On the other hand, the novel employs a technique where embedded messages are found within the message itself. This technique reveals how characters from diverse Arab countries are spatially alienated and fragmented. For example, the second email Hasan sent to Manar includes a message he received from Lutfia Al-Dulaimi. Similarly, Manar, in her eighth email, conveys a message she received from the same friend. There are references to other messages within the correspondence process, all of which carry similar concerns, such as the reference to William and Bayda's message. In this way, the exchanged emails contribute to fueling a dynamic dialogue between the two characters and play a role in presenting an open- ending conclusion to the novel. The last chapter in the novel marks a break in the communication between Hassan and Manar, but the closing statement—

1 For more information about polyphonic epistolary novel, please read:

- Janet Gurkin Altman: *Epistolarity, Approaches to a Form*: Ohio State University Press: Columbus, 1982. Pp 194, 196.
- Jenene J. Allison: *Revealing Difference: The Fiction of Isabelle de Charrière*. University of Delaware Press, 1995.P 65.
- Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook: *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters*. Stanford University Press, 1996. P 31.

“Manar is absent for a little while, and Hassan is expected to return—”¹ (213) indicates that the communication between correspondents will be later resumed.

In *Sons of Democracy*, there is no flow of exchange communication between the narrator and the anonymous person who sent the novel/embedded text. However, several emails that the narrator receives from various sites provide diversification in the narrative discourse and establish various types of relationships between the real and virtual worlds. This expresses a narrative alternation as will be discussed later.

The contact group technique in *Girls of Riyadh* creates a dialogue between the narrator and the subscribers. The dialogue extends beyond two parties and the diverse responses reveal a range of viewpoints. This technique has led to a rich tapestry of reception patterns and their conceptual differences, indicating a continuous disruption of a fixed recipient image. Correspondence in the contact group world does not only present a dialogue between two parties but also creates a theatrical aura with diverse opinions and points of view open for debate. Diversifying the personalities and viewpoints of the addressees is a technique employed in this novel to foreground the communication style towards a more public sphere. These diverse responses allude that the messages are directed to the community to engage in a heated debate. Therefore, the narrator justifies this conflict by various means, noting that she wants reform, or that she is a character who is not afraid of anything, “I expect nothing. I fear no one. I am free” (AlSanea 18).

The public reception of the novel was mostly negative and “the Ministry of Information placed it for a while on its lengthy list of banned books” (Ahmed 2007, n.d). However, the narrative’s negative reception does not justify this approach since “sometimes the line between boldness and recklessness, realism and vulgarity, frankness, and insolence, and other similar dualities seems very thin”² (Alghamdi 137). We suggest that what intrigued readers’ opposition to the novel was not due to the sensitive issues scandalized in the narrative because a good reader can notice how “some of these characters are superficial, some are defiant and critical of gender roles in Saudi Arabia” (Al-Ghadeer 299). On the contrary, the novel’s disavowal, we believe, stemmed from the confrontational and biased style the writer adopts in presenting ideas.

1 This statement is translated by the researchers from its original Arabic text which states “منار”
الغائبة قليلاً، وحسن المترقب العودة”

2 The original text in Arabic reads: “ فالفرق أحياناً بين الجرأة والتهور، والواقعية والابتذال، والصراحة والوقاحة، ”
وغيرها من الثنائيات المشابهة يبدو فرقاً ضعيفاً جداً”

Diversity and Overlap in E-Narrative Levels

As previously stated, the novels under study employ the email form, to send, comment, or respond to messages as well as attach/include embedded files/letters. All of these contribute to the diversity and overlap of narrative levels which is defined as “the nesting structure of narrating and is explained as ‘a narrative narrated within a narrative’” (Akimoto 344). Narrative levels clarify the narrative voice when multiple stories and narrators are present. Email provides a context for the diversity of narrative levels, allowing multiple voices to narrate the story and take turns expressing their different narrative visions.

The narrative structure in *Emails After the Night* centers on two main characters, Hassan and Manar, who serve as both characters and intersecting narrators. Email as a narrative structure creates a diversity of narrative levels. The narrators weave a web of new stories, incidents, and characters. In every letter, a new character appears and disappears, but his/her appearance in the two voices forms several internal and sub-stories which enriches the overall narrative.

In *Sons of Democracy*, the diversity of narrative levels is shown through the writer’s shift between the real and the virtual worlds. In his physical reality, the writer has his own opinions and thoughts. However, the virtual world has two realms: the online space which he interacts with and checks his emails, and the embedded graphic story of *Sons of Democracy* sent anonymously to him. The embedded story, narrated by Maxwell the grandson, tells a story full of adventure about Maxwell the grandfather who lived in Liverpool and loved a woman named Mary. Mary’s father refused their marriage and took his daughter to America. A year later, Maxwell received a letter from his beloved telling him that they were living in Boston and asked him to come as her father finally agreed to let them marry. The ship Maxwell took to America was intercepted by a pirate ship. He fought with the crew and managed to escape. When he arrived in Boston, Mary was already dead after receiving news that Maxwell was killed by the pirates. Maxwell, consumed by vengeance against the pirate who intercepted his travel, killed his enemy and became a known pirate himself. Yet, he fell into the grip of British ships and was imprisoned there in the Great Prison with the most brutal criminals. An insurgency erupted in the prison and the English minister negotiated with the prisoners to grant them their freedom in exchange for becoming missionaries. Ironically, the minister failed to convince them of the kind of missionary work they were supposed to spread. Finally, he ordered that they should preach democracy in the colonies since they were the Sons of Democracy. The prisoners revolted, indicating that they were

children of sin. In contrast to the world of this story, which took place at the end of the eighteenth century, another world that refers to the impacts of the 9/11 attacks and the invasion of Iraq interrupts the continuity of the story's events.

In *Girls of Riyadh* the back and forth between response and narration builds two parallel worlds in which the functions of the storyteller/narrator are distributed. The first world is the main narrative which follows the lives of four girls, Qumra, Sadeem, Mashael (Mitchell), and Lamis, and their complex relationships with males under different circumstances. The other parallel world is created based on the narrator's responses which shed light on the narrative reality, the truth about the characters, the writer's motives, and the frequent accusations about her characters. The contact group technique invested in this novel forms an interactive message type which allows the narrator to foster a sense of intimacy and presence with others and establish quick relationships regardless of the physical distance. In her attempt to explore email presence, Milne notes that

Cybermind list members treat posts as authentic expressions of their authors. Thus, Cybermind group members regularly comment upon each other's "personalities". This phenomenon is exemplified in those instances when a group member writes in a manner that seems "out of character". In such cases, members either deplore the writer's deviation from what had seemed their character or invent ways of re-establishing that connection. (10)

The interaction between virtual group members allows them to pay close attention to each other's communication styles and understand their personalities and perspectives. In the novel, characters review each other's letters and establish different perceptions. Some perceptions are established and then immediately opposed, thus disrupting the image drawn by other parties. This technique "offers a certain resistance to early cyberculture narratives in which the subject was liberated from the exigencies of materiality" (Milne 11). The contact group interaction promotes a more diverse narrative experience by allowing characters to be liberated from "materiality" or physical bodies and the fragmented nature of network culture and online communication.

Two styles of narration are framed due to the text message-response dichotomy. Through characters' responses, the back-and-forth communication controls the structure of epistolary narration. The writer/author's presence also appears in confrontation with the recipients. On the other hand, the text message creates a narrative level that contains the voice of the narrator, who relies on the third-person

point of view, which makes the epistolary dimension appear clearly at the author-character level. However, tension is created between the two styles of narration. One voice is subjective in its attempt to defend, discuss, and confront what is narrated to them while the other seems objective—sometimes—devoted to narration. In sum, constructing the narrative using the contact group technique has led to the diversity and overlap of narrative levels.

Email and the Embedded Narratives

In the context of narrative theory, the embedded narrative is identified when “one narrator’s discourse embeds that of another narrator’s at a subordinate narrative level” (Herman, Jahn, & Ryan 134). Embedded stories simultaneously create a connection between multiple narratives. The main narrative sequence is interrupted by a shift to another story, then returns to the main narrative creating a sense of intertwining between the narratives. This technique is adopted in Shabaan’s *Sons of Democracy*, interweaving them into one semantic plot, in addition to establishing a kind of parallelism between the events and what they indicate. Emails in *Sons of Democracy* have a functional role in shaping its world, narratively and semantically. At the level of narrative structure, email messages establish a kind of narrative shift with the embedded story. One of the examples presented in the novel is that the narrator reads about Maxwell’s love for Mary and quarrels with her father. Then, the narrator receives several emails about a global campaign to sign against the invasion of Iraq. This technique of email and the embedded story also synchronizes, to a certain degree, between two realities belonging to two different times (the past and the present). The overlap between the emails the writer receives—which interrupts the embedded story of Maxwell’s adventures—reveals the depth of the symbolic correspondence between the writer and the anonymous sender/narrator and between the past and present. Although Maxwell’s story happened in the 18th century, and the email references indicate a present time, colonial dominance is present in both stories. Rather, the flow of emails becomes a definition and narrative interpretation of the first story, while Maxwell’s story represents the historical dimensions of what colonialism was in the past. It is not surprising then to see the parallel between ancient piracy and modern-day email espionage, between the negotiating minister and Bush, and between the prisoners’ disapproval of the minister’s offer and people’s disapproval of Bush and his declaration to invade Iraq.

Email: Beyond Fiction and Intertextuality.

The narrative shift within a story produces an interpretive and semantic dimension

that allows readers to connect real events with fictional ones. This shift also reveals the narrator's implicit desire to achieve a reflective quality to the narrative especially when he injects comments and narrates incidents happening within the novel's world that reference the story itself. In this sense, the novel can be seen as a metafictional text. Waugh notes that metafiction "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). This type of text displays "a self-reflexivity prompted by the author's awareness of the theory underlying the construction of fictional works" (Waugh 2). Through the novels' activation of metafiction techniques, an intrusive narrator is present and comments on the narrative construction and its writing processes. The use of the intrusive narrator indicates the self-reflexive awareness of the text by commenting on other characters' actions and causing the storyline to be interrupted, paving the way for an embedded story to appear within the larger narrative.

Email in the novels displays elements of metafiction in the form of, for example, using a frame narrative and the development of sub-stories or embedded narratives mentioned in the exchanged emails. In addition to these forms which were analyzed previously, metafiction can be elicited through the emergence of a kind of aesthetic distance, which is "a psychological 'distance' the audience has from the piece [of work]" (Stichter 4). In traditional epistolary novels, the narrator exists outside the story itself creating this aesthetic distance between him and the reader. However, in e-pistolary novels, the aesthetic distance manifests itself in the presence of the narrator within the email exchanges, upending the recipient's preconceived notions about an imaginary work devoid of the voice of the writer and his remarks.

Sons of Democracy exhibits this aesthetic distance by highlighting, from the start, the importance of written communication and its ability to deliver a clear message. This is achieved through the use of reflective narration. Through the duality between the real and the virtual and the intermingling between them, the voice of the author is present and breaks the illusion. On the first page of the book, titled "Before Writing," Shabaan writes that he bought a novel without a cover and a title that talks about colonial attacks in the name of democracy. He further notes that "after finishing reading this novel, I decided to write a novel entitled *Sons of Democracy*, which is going to engage in a historical satirical dialogue with it"¹ (6). The writer's act disrupts the fictional world. The previous quote becomes a

1 This quote was translated by the researchers from Arabic which reads: "وبعد الانتهاء من قراءة هذا: الكتاب/الرواية، قررت كتابة رواية بعنوان (أبناء الديمقراطية)، متناصاً معها في الجانب التاريخي الساخر"

critical statement about the novel he intends to write, defining the methods and techniques of its construction. The writer places his novel in a special context for reception, even though the novel with which it claims to intersect is nothing but a mere narrative creativity from the author himself. The narrative flow that appears at the beginning of the story reveals how the writer, with critical awareness, relies on a specific narrative technique, which is the shifting between incidents in the present and the narrative in the embedded novel. Later, though, the writer expresses his boredom with the pace dictated by this alternating structure:

Boredom began to creep into me from the monotony of this alternation between what (I claim) is the text I received by email and what (I claim) are comments by the narrator, the fictional character. But no matter how talented and professional you are, some limitations force you to resort to trickery and to ignore and pretend to present a technique that relies on alternation and overlap between a set of narrative levels¹. (49)

The prominent presence of the author in the novel plays a major role in revealing the duality between the real and the virtual worlds, and the writer's internal conflict between them. At the beginning of the novel, the writer talks about his writing rituals and how writing becomes his vent when he feels weak and unable to act. This feeling coincides with the collapse of the Twin Towers and the declaration of war on Iraq. He notes: "Writing is my purification ritual when I feel weak, unable to do or say anything. This purification ritual begins by repeating these lines: A greater horror than this will come, so they either explode or die"² (8). As the war erupts, the writer follows the news, especially online war coverage. He becomes consumed by the constant flow of digital information about the war. In this manner, he questions the act and the role of writing, declaring it useless: "My aversion to writing has increased. Writing becomes to me just another sort of hallucination or

1 This quote was translated by the researchers from the original text. It states "بدأ الملل يتسلل إليّ من" رتابة هذا التناوب بين ما (أزعم) أنه نص وصلني بالبريد الإلكتروني وبين ما (أزعم) أنه تعليقات للراوي الشخصية الروائية. لكن مهما بلغت درجة الموهبة والحرفية فهناك حدود تضطرك للتحايل والتغافل والتظاهر بتقنية تعتمد على التناوب والتداخل بين مجموعة من المستويات السردية الروائية"

2 This quote was translated by the researchers from Arabic. It reads "الكتابة طقسى التطهيري عندما أشعر بالضعف، بعدم القدرة على الفعل أو القول. طقسى التطهيري الذي يبدأ بتريد هذه السطور: رعب أكبر من هذا سوف يجيء" (أخافجروا أو موتوا)"

madness when expressing myself becomes impossible”¹ (49). The narrator/author is keen to highlight his position by breaking the fictional narrative and mingling it with real incidents. His act confirms the power of writing as a form of rebellion when it cannot directly impact change.

The intersection between the real and the virtual plays a functional role in shaping the reflexive narration, through monitoring the world of narrative writing and the author’s perception positions of his text and his creative process within the novel. This duality found in Rajaa Al-Sanea’s *Girls of Riyadh* creates a dialogue between two narrative worlds: the realistic and the metafictional. This dialogue explores the narrative itself and its nature, along with the expectations of realism within the fiction. At the beginning of the chapters, the date, title, and quotations are set followed by metafictional aspects. In this act, the narrator/writer breaks the continuation of the narrative by paying attention to the email responses commenting on her stories. A networked correspondence between the writer and the contact group is established. In light of this dual structure—sending and receiving, the novel reflects on itself and questions the societal expectations of the narrative. The narrative reflexivity embraces the contradictions of acceptance and rejection of the stories and allows the readers to connect to the narrative world.

The contact group technique provides a framework for the emergence of metafictional elements. They appear in the form of networked correspondence that arise from the virtual worlds themselves. The main fictional narrative is interrupted when the writer engages in responding to the email messages. These responses reveal the amount of criticism the writer faces from the society/group members. simultaneously, they disrupt the flow of the fictional narrative, allowing it to become self-reflexive. The main fictional narrative, in this sense, mirrors the real world and creates a diverse dialogue about the novel’s characters, their believability, and the narratives’ goals and meaning. The responses inquire about the narrator/writer’s position about other characters and question whether the narrator is one of the four girls:

I am so tired of getting these boring responses that try to dissect my personality after every e-mail. Is that really what matters most to you, after everything I have written? Whether I am Gamrah or Michelle or Sadeem or Lamees? Don't you get that it doesn't matter who I am? (145)

1 This quote was translated by the author from the original text. It states: "كلما شعرت بالضيق والغضب، زادت حساسيتي، وبالتبعية نفوري تجاه الكتابة وتنبؤي لي مجرد وجهة آخر لهلوسات الجنون عند العجز حتى عن البوح"

The narrator's response indicates her inner frustration as some readers only focus on knowing the identity of the narrator instead of engaging with the stories. The narrative also points out the perception of some responses to certain stories which expose their negative reactions toward characters' behaviors. For example, some readers express anger towards Rashid's indifference to Qumra's feelings, calling him "AlTanbal"-dumb. Others criticize Gamra's submissiveness and weakness. The writer/narrator says, "I don't analyze every move I make, and I don't worry about every act possibly being taboo and against social or religious laws. All I can say is that I do not claim to be perfect (as some people do)" (68). This critical explanatory statement reveals her beliefs and perceptions about the goals of writing. Then, the explanatory comment evolves to highlight the novel's role in reforming or rectifying certain societal perceptions:

I work hard to correct my errors and to cultivate myself. If only those who find fault with me would turn around and straighten themselves out before they start agitating to straighten me out. [...] I see nothing wrong in setting down my friends' problems in my e-mails so that others will benefit—others who have not had the opportunity to learn in the school of life, the school that my friends entered from the widest of gates—the gate of Love. The true and shameful wrong, the way I see things, would be for any of us to stand in each other's way, disparaging each other, even though we all admit the unity of our goal, which is reforming our society and making every one of us a better person (68).

The narrator's focus on the reform mission is similar to what great reformers, like Martin Luther King, did in their society (113). In some places, the metafictional commentary turns into a kind of tracking of the exaggerations and rumors that accompany the weekly letters. Rumors have swelled until it was said that King Abdulaziz City for Science is seeking to block the email site (AlSanea 113).

The novel's metanarrative framework is further emphasized by the recurring inclusion of quotations that open each chapter. These sources draw from a diverse range of materials, including the Holy Quran, hadiths, religious supplications, poetic verses by Arab and foreign poets, and statements by famous literary and intellectual figures. In most cases, these references establish a kind of semantic equivalence with the events preceding them, or they serve as a prelude for anticipating the events. For instance, the remarkable appropriation of Nizar Qabbani's poetry indicates the establishment of a semantic balance between the emotional tragedies

that the four girls suffered from, and the elegance and transparency of Qabani's images that are evident in the opening chapters; they represent what the writer fail to express sometimes.

Conclusion

Arabic novels utilize the e-pistolary form and embrace email as a narrative technique to adapt their style and technique to the digital age. They can be seen as bringing a new perspective to the conventional epistolary novel found in the Western literary canon. As a useful technique, email has shown to be an effective medium for addressing contemporary issues and themes related to globalization, identity, and social change. Arabic novels demonstrate a spectrum of email integration, ranging from a supplementary role to the core narrative structure. This experimentation has an impact on the narrative structure, level, and function, pushing the boundaries of this genre and enriching the landscape of contemporary Arabic literature. The study recommends further exploration of email as a narrative tool by comparing e-pistolary Western novels with Arabic fiction and delving into disciplinary approaches related to linguistics and cultural studies. These further research directions can contribute to understanding the potential impact of emails on contemporary and future literary works.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Fatema. "Velvet Lives." *The Guardian*, 2007. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jul/14/featuresreviews.guardianreview20>.
- al-Ghadeer, Moneera. "Review of *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* [Girls of Riyadh] by R. Sānī'." *Journal of Arabic Literature*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2006.
- Crystal, David. *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge UP, 2006.
- Kastan, David Scott (Editor): *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*: Vol. 5. Oxford University Press, 2006. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195169218.001.0001/acref-9780195169218-e-0159?rkey=tiXezI&result=158>.
- Fülöp, Erika. "Digital Authorship and Social Media: French Digital Authors' Attitudes towards Facebook." *French Cultural Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155819843414>
- Alsanea, Raja. *Girls of Riyadh*. New York, The Penguin Press, 2007.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *Literatura y significación*. 2nd ed. Planeta, 1971.
- Milne, Esther. (2003). "Email and epistolary technologies: Presence, intimacy, disembodiment." *The Fibreculture Journal*, (2). Media and Communications, Swinburne University of Technology. 2003. <http://two.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-010-email-and-epistolary->

technologies-presence-intimacy-disembodiment/.

Akimoto, Taisuke. "Narrative Structure in the Mind: Translating Genette's Narrative Discourse Theory into a Cognitive System." *Cognitive Systems Research*, vol. 58, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogsys.2019.08.007>

Herman, David, et al. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. Routledge, 2013.

Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London: Methuen, 1984.

Santini, Laura. "The Short Form Reshaped: Email, Blog, SMS, and MSN in Twenty-First Century E-pistolary Novels." *Iperstoria – Testi Letterature Linguaggi* 14(Fall/Winter), 2019.

Stichter, Anne. "The Role of Breaking the Fourth Wall in Audience Ego Identification." *Aletheia*, vol. 1, no. 2. 2016.

Arabic Works Cited

Al-Ghamdi, Saleh Moeed. *Writing the Self, Studies in Autobiography*. Arab Cultural Center, Beirut-Lebanon, 2013.

صالح معيض الغامدي: كتابة الذات دراسات في السيرة الذاتية، المركز الثقافي العربي، بيروت-لبنان، ط1-2013.

Jadallah, Ibrahim, and Kulashan AlBayyati. *Emails After the Night*. Qudmoos Publishing House, Syria, 2012.

إبراهيم جادالله وكلشان البياتي: إميلات نالي الليل، دار قدمس بسوريا، 2012.

Shaban, Yasser. *Sons of Democracy*. AlHilal Publishing House, Cairo, 2006.

ياسر شعبان: أبناء الديمقراطية، دار الهلال، القاهرة، 2006.