

# The Socio-cultural Influence of Arab Spring on Arabic Literature and *Knights of Dead Dreams*

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## Abstract

In the last decade, the Arab world has observed a historic revolution that has changed a lot, some for the better and some for the worse. This revolution is commonly known as the “Arab Spring”. It started with the self-immolation of a young Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire on 17th December 2010 in the small Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid protesting against the harassment and humiliation by a municipal official. Most people think the Arab Spring brought to the Arab world destruction and loss. This historic event layout a greater space for historians, academicians, political and social scientists, and intellectuals to debate and discuss as well as opened the door for poets, authors, and writers for writing and describe these events from their perspectives. A large number of Arab writers produced literary pieces of writings in the form of poems and novels.

Ibrahim Al Kunii a Libyan novelist wrote a novel named “*Fursan-ul- Ahlam Al Qateelah*” which was translated as “*Knights of the Dead Dreams*” He tried to show how the uprisings began in Libya and what was the result of these uprisings. Through a postcolonial approach, he tried to address many issues like displacement, terrorism, exile, etc. the study found that the condition became worst after the Arab Spring and deteriorated the living condition of Libyan people. The aim of this study is to understand whether Arab novelists are influenced by their political, ideological, and identity or the politics of the region, or if they took neutral positions while narrating Arab Uprising events.

**Keywords** Arab Spring, Arabic Literature, Revolution, Society, Nights of the Dead Dreams.

## Introduction

The period leading to the Arab Spring witnessed a series of political and social unrest in the region. Police brutality, unemployment, high food prices, governmental corruption, electoral fraud, political censorship, low wages, and high poverty rates dominated the Arab countries<sup>1</sup>. The shared sense of oppression, along with the shared sense of identity, among other factors<sup>2</sup>. facilitated the speedy transmission of the rebellious movement. In 2008, a series of several protests and strikes were spreading. Violence with the police erupted during a labor force strike in a textile factory in Egypt. Meanwhile, in Tunis, the revolt of the Gafsa Mining Basim, a social movement and demonstration, went violent when a riot broke out between the protestors and the police. The demand of the protesters was simple: a stable job<sup>3</sup>. The causes, of course, go much deeper but are beyond the scope of this paper, which seeks to outline the role of Arabic literature therein. The economic deficiency is the main factor in the frustration of the Arabs with their governments, but the police brutality and governmental as well as corporate corruption are what erupted the situation<sup>4</sup>. With the still-ongoing Arab Spring that has passed in most of the Arab countries, the basic slogan has been freedom, we notice that the educated youth have been part and parcel in igniting the uprisings. so where does that motivation come from? How can we articulate the youth’s role in the Arab Spring? Were education and Arabic literature an eye-opener for the youth? Had Arabic literature, in all of its forms, been an influence on the early steps of the call for freedom? How has the Arabs been implemented or described in the pre-Arab Spring narratives? As a result of oppression, especially against Arab

<sup>1</sup> See for further details <https://www.britannica.com/event/Arab-Spring>

<sup>2</sup> See for further readings on the reasons behind the Arab Spring read Analysis of the Arab Spring by Iffat Idris.

<sup>3</sup> Saidin, Mohm, Irwan. **Rethinking the Arab Spring: The Roots Causes of the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution and Egyptian**, International Journal of Islamic thought: (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 04

intellectuals and academics, a relatively new form of literature emerged, called prison literature. This paper investigates how the social and political environment was imagined across Libya, Egypt, Syria, and other countries during the Pre-Arab Spring. In this case it is literature- that might have been one of the sparks that ignited the Arab Spring.

## Arab Spring, Background, and Consequences

At the end of 2010, a 26-year-old Tunisian set himself on fire in front of a governmental building as a demonstration against social and civil injustice. As a result, a video of the incident flooded social media awakening dormant anger and frustration toward the government. Consequently, some of the most influential slogans were taken from a revolutionary Tunisian Poet Abu El-Qassim El Shabby, who died almost 77 years before the Arab Spring<sup>5</sup> came to be. In criticism towards the government at the time, the Tunisians, and later other Arabs, felt it best to express their frustration. The long wait for democracy and the cry of ending corruption, injustices, greed, and autocratic rule that sprung up during the Arab Spring was incontrovertibly driven by social injustices, Economic hardships, and autocratic- Political rule. Although, as stated and described in this paper most believed that the uprising of the Arab Spring was due to socio-political factors and anger that arose from the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi<sup>6</sup>. However, novelists, poets, and writers of all forms started the revolution in the hearts of most citizens through their words. One could also easily deduce how scholars, novelists, and poets made use of peaceful words such as that of Alaa Alasharee which sort to ignite some awakening of political issues in the hearts of citizens and stir some enthusiasm and zeal of citizens in fighting for their fundamental rights and democracy<sup>7</sup>. As stated by Guerin (2020) “what shapes poets and others to write such disruptions in poetic forms is not to convey ‘information’ to a reader but to induce or evoke new experiences and ideas for the reader. This is to say novelists and other writers made use of their words to evoke new experiences be it new knowledge or new action. Tunisian Arab poet Abu al-Qassim al-Shabi works can be considered as structural pressure not only on political leaders of his country but also on the citizens on waking up to stand and fight for freedom and democracy.

It is arguably clear that there exist differences in views and the approach of how novelists/writers compared Scholars when it came to the revolution of Arab Spring<sup>8</sup>. Most Scholars such as Ali Gomaa wanted the same things as many citizens but wanted it in fusion with Islam and that the path to democracy should be guided in the Islamic way. Just like him, most Arabic Scholars far wanted democracy and had been speaking out about socio-political issues that were affecting their countries but wanted a gradual and Islamic approach to it. That is to say, everything that could be done in getting the attention of the sitting government should be done peacefully and desist from violent demonstrations and looting. Novelists/writers made use of different approaches when they wanted to evoke pure patriotism from within citizens and vehemently seek democracy and social justice. It can, however, be deduced how Novelists/writers throughout decades sought to stir passion and enthusiasm in citizens which later took effect soon enough in various forms during the Arab Spring.

Arab scholars played a cautious-political approach to the uprising of the Arab Spring. This is because most scholars who seek a democratic way of governance and wanted social justice for the people somehow had political motives of also soon to be in political power or office. A good

<sup>5</sup> Although I am aware of the problematic implications of the term “Arab Spring”—a term primarily used in the Western world to refer to the 2011 Arab uprisings and agree with the many scholars and critics who have pointed to the Orientalist nature of the term ‘Arab Spring’ (see, for example, Rami G. Khouri, “Drop the Orientalist Term ‘Arab Spring,’”), I will still use this term in this paper since I am specifically discussing the ways in which the Arab uprisings have been told by (*Western*) *outside* spectators and how translated Arab literature that is read by a *Western* audience intervene in these (Western) narratives.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 05

<sup>7</sup> Simon, George A. **Poetry and Arab Spring**, The city university, NY: 2015

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed overview of the first year of the Arab Spring uprisings (17 December 2010 – 17 December 2011), see the interactive timeline of the Arab Spring launched by The Guardian that brings together all key events of the uprisings in the different countries (Blight, Garry, Sheila Pulham and Pauley Torpey. “Arab Spring: An Interactive Timeline of Middle East Protests” The Guardian 5 January 2012. Web. 11 June 2014).

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/interactive/2011/mar/22/middle-east-protest-interactive-timeline>

example is the leaders of the Brotherhood. But when it comes to novelists/writers. All that most seek was to get the attention of how the government was governing the country and educating as well as keeping citizens abreast of socio-political issues of a state. Most of these poets wrote about injustice and autocracy ruling just as a common citizen will see it and connect it to themselves<sup>9</sup>.

Novelists/writers started this uprising long before Arab spring 2011 in all these countries that stood up to demonstrate against their country's government cause most of them started writing and predicting such an event long before it happened. Just as the Arab Spring kindled the spirit and feelings of the Arab youth, it certainly had a great impact upon contemporary writers and Arabic literature in general<sup>10</sup>.

But the protesters could not achieve any progress in most of the Arab world because the regional and international power protected the regime. The International and regional powers conspired to keep instability and uncertainty in the Arab world. The uprisings converted to civil wars in Yemen, Syria, and Libya. The global powers helped the previous regime to come back to control the political situation as what occurred in Egypt and Syria. The regional and international powers were not happy with such liberating movements. They worked with the political leaders whose interests meet with them to put an end to the youth revolution.

So, the Hope for the transition from Arab uprising to Arab Spring has not yet materialized nor succeeded. Only in Tunisia and you might add Sudan has somehow a form of democratic transition taken place. In two countries Egypt and Bahrain, the state instruments with external support forced a counterrevolution and the situation turned ups to down. In three other countries, Libya, Syria, and Yemen neither transition nor effective counter-revolution prevailed, and they indulged in the civil war and state failure, and complete collapse<sup>11</sup>.

## Knights of Dead Dreams

Ibrahim Al Kunii was born in 1948 in Ghadames City and was raised in the open-air desert of Tuareg. Living in a desert has given Al Kunii a special style of living and writing. He accomplished his study in Mosco which taught him a great sense of thought liberation and word freedom, regardless of his study in the area of comparative literature has refined his skills and talents and given him full insight into the literature's perfect potential. Al Kunii has published a large number of literary/ non-literary works that exceed eighty books in the varied area of literary studies, novels in particular. Such works led him to be rewarded with many international awards. A good number of his books and articles have been translated into many international languages to engrave a name to him in the global arena as one of the biggest novelists of the world in general and in the Arab world in particular<sup>12</sup>.

Al Kunii's *Knights of the Dead Dreams* (2012) reveals the reality of the political situation in Libya before or during the Arab uprising in Libya. It reflects the reality that has been lived by the author, it recorded the bloody moments, fear, and turmoil that swept the whole cities of Libya. He presented a reality, which he was a part of it, but he lived its events as a Libyan citizen. It is difficult to differentiate between its imagined facts and the realities lived. He represented the community he is a part of it and his direct contact with its people, and its daily life whether during the Arab uprising or before it. The author had been affected negatively by its consequences.

The narrative reflects the last days of the ex-regime of Al Qaddafi, which controlled Libya for more than 40 years of oppression, freedom restrictions, and excessive power against the citizen. The regime did not provide any chance to the journalists and intellectuals or writers to express their ideas without interfering with the regime to shut their mouths terror. The political instability and turmoil

<sup>9</sup> Kadalah, Mohammad. *The Impact of Arabic Literature on the Pre- Arab Spring Time Period*, University of Connecticut: 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 05

<sup>11</sup> Salem, Paul. Time Magazine, 05 January 2021. <https://time.com/5926292/arab-spring-future/>

<sup>12</sup> See for further details: <https://www.arabicfiction.org/en/ibrahim-al-koni>

led many writers and authors to write about the miseries of the Arab people with their authoritarian regimes.

## Libya before Arab Uprisings

The protagonist of the novel starts to compare his life before the uprising and the transformation during the revolution or uprising. He is a part of that place and he belongs to its people. The narrator is the protagonist, he does not only tell a story related to him only, it is the story of anyone in Libya, but in the world of Arab Spring. He shows the pains and griefs of his life, which are the miseries of many people. He symbolizes the youth of the revolution as knights; However, it is a symbol of many states in the Arab uprising world.

The protagonist is one of the Knights of the Dead Dreams whose dreams are born dead and do not help him to move easily to stability and enjoy the life of revolution that supposes to bring stability and safety to the citizen. The counter-revolution makes their dreams into dead ones. The conspiracies of the ruling governing force do not provide the revolutionaries a chance to breathe the air of freedom. The international world that finds its interests in the ex-regime could not grant the people and youth expected peace.

The protagonist starts his narration by comparing yesterday and today. His past life and the current one. In the past, he was only concerned with his own business and lived his own life away from politics. He was interested in reading, attempting to keep his mind at peace and stability. However, the bloody incidents and the death of the people around him could not provide him an opportunity to rethink his decision to be one of the knights who defend the people's dignity and fight against tyranny and oppression. He revolted like the others to put an end to corruption and social injustice. The life of alienation in the past with books and reading might not assist him today. He compared himself to the book mouse whose interest was only to devour the books. His interest has prohibited books and reading. He was interested and focused on only his own business. However, today he becomes a wall mouse, moving on the wall to find a better place, Samir Pointed out the oppressive al-Qadhafi regime fostered a culture of dependency and hatred in which people were effectively deprived of their basic right to live freely. And by failing to provide or expand Libyans' access to a decent education, adequate health care, and employment, the regime robbed them of their social opportunities. The privilege of engaging in free enterprise and getting its benefits was reserved exclusively for those within the tyrant political leader's inner circle<sup>13</sup>.

Today, he has changed his life by carving a road on the wall to reach the Al Daman Building that represented the tyranny and the destructive military machinery of the regime. It reflects the symbol of death to the revolutionaries. The snipers with the modern destructive weapons awaiting to snipe the people in the streets, whether they are from the people of revolution or not. They direct their guns to any moving creature, "Do you think walking with a heavy conscience is freedom? Does freedom mean walking on the earth as a beast? No! No! Moving on the earth is not freedom, but it is a sort of moving, however, resisting the siege on the wall cracks is the genuine meaning of freedom, what freedom!"<sup>14</sup>

## Arab Uprisings United the Arab Community

Al Kuni pointed out what type of relationships were prevailing before Arab Uprising. It was very fragile and not connected to each other. Al Kuni argued, "The people were cursed. They hide a deep hatred for each other, free hatred because it has no reason, A mother of the son is not a mother; the son is not a son, what is said about the kinship relationships despite the closed connection could be said about non- relative relationships and stranger relationships"<sup>15</sup> but The Arab Uprising has united the Arabs' attitudes towards many things despite their different affiliations and it brought them

<sup>13</sup> Al Kuni, Ibrahim. *Knights of Dead Dreams*. Dubai Al Thaqafiyah, (2012). Pg 42

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 13

<sup>15</sup> Al Kuni, Ibrahim. *Knights of Dead Dreams*. Dubai Al Thaqafiyah, (2012). Pg 16



together to stand in the same way against tyranny and oppression, defending of their sacred rights of freedom. The closed relationships become torn and encompassed with hate and hatred even though relationships involved kinships. The Arab Uprising made the people reconsider their relationships with the others. It brings the people together against tyranny, The relatives forgot their differences and their hatred to stand on the same path to defend their dignity violated by the tyrant government. The generation lost its faith in the ability to change their lives for to better. The oppression and cruelty practiced against them drove them to lose their faith in everything. The trust in each other was lost. The best one of them advised living his own life, away from politics and away from other people's interests, "I huddled around myself like a hedgehog because I found isolation is the best weapon to defend myself, the best weapon to confront the enmity"<sup>16</sup> The isolation is another challenge because it may lead the person to the killing emptiness, "I came from the generation who does not believe in anything, perhaps the generation which never believes in anything one day, A generation was born dead because it opened its eyes to a dead and dark world"<sup>17</sup>.

The people of Libya, according to the narrative, do not find respect or appreciation in his home in Libya and he may not find it abroad. The Arab citizen becomes very cheap at his home and accused of terrorism outside. So, he tries for an honest life or death. Life in a big prison at home could not assist him to pursue his life away from trouble. He may find death is better than a big prison called a home, "how he didn't choose death that generation who lived in a home which is a prison, not a home. It is not sufficient for the servants of the icon to change the home into a prison, and the citizens into prisoners in their home. However, they have created to establish a prison that accompanies them wherever they are: a wicked, vile prison covered in a travel document marked with the shade of the curse that stretches out to them the hand of the unknown to imprison them in every land"<sup>18</sup>

## Symbolism in the Novel

The passport becomes an indication of the value of its holder. The passport symbolizes the value of your country in the eyes of others. "It is sufficient to be stopped by the security officer in any country as soon as he sees your passport to declare an emergency at the airport to understand that you are not worthy of life only but also you are a danger to life"<sup>19</sup>. The person gets the value from the value of his passport and the passport gets its power from the power of the country. A human being becomes worthless if his country is regarded as a source of terrorism and trouble. His passport becomes a curse and a source of trouble for its holder. To the narrative, the passport becomes a curse and symbolizes degradation and contempt because the country the citizen lives in does not show any respect to its citizens, what does the citizen expect from the others to do for him? The home turns into a prison and the citizens as prisoners. The application for a visa to any country in the world will be met with rejection to realize that the citizen is zero and he has no right to travel, but no right to live. "How the deaths do not choose the generations who live in a home which is a prison and it is not a home"<sup>20</sup>.

A street vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi, set himself on fire, which symbolizes the fuel of the Arab spring. The icon awakens the Arab people to confront oppression, nepotism, injustice, and miserable life under the dictatorship regimes in the Arab world. His sacrifice encourages the Arab people to take bold steps to liberate themselves from oppression and injustice. His death is an inspiration to many generations. "Yes, all of us on Bouazizi's religion. However, Bouazizi recognized how to dig and he succeeded, whereas we stumbled in our digging so that we were late"<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid 19

<sup>17</sup> Ibid 16

<sup>18</sup> Ibid 32

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 31

<sup>20</sup> Al Kuni, Ibrahim. *Knights of Dead Dreams*. Dubai Al Thaqafiyah, (2012) Pg 33

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 184

The Green Book of the ex-president, Moammar Al Qaddafi, is a symbol of fake promises and the arrogance of the leader who sees his theory as a solution to the world problems while his country was suffering from oppression and backwardness. He asked the Libyan citizens to believe in his theory addressed in the Green Book, to believe in its policies and plans as a holy Book. The irony is that the Green Book is a symbol of loss, lies, and false. It did not offer something tangible that may change the Libyan lives for the better.

## Conclusion

Al Kuni's *Knight of the Dead Dreams* exposed human violation during the Arab Spring in Libya. Arab peoples attempted hard to change political, social, and economic situations to be better. However, the ruling regime did not give the uprising a space to express their demands and their desire to reach a radical change in all aspects of life. The conspiracies from inside and outside their countries were designed to hinder the progress of the revolution.

Literature is the mirror of society and the contemporary Arabic novel proved it. Since the breezes of the Arab Uprisings started blowing in Tunisia, Egypt, and then in Libya, Yemen, and Syria, Arabic novelists have been observing and recording these events very carefully. The period leading to the Arab Spring witnessed the publication of literature that could have influenced the rebellion explosion. Writers such as Mustafa Khalifah's, *The Shell* (2008), Abdul Rahman Munif's, *East Mediterranean* (1975), Saleem Abdul Kader's *Period: Interrogation is Over* (2006), Muhammad Saleem Hammad's *Tadmur: Witness and Witnessed* (1998), among many others, are examples.

In conclusion, one can say that the relationship between literature and rebellious etiquette among Arabs is dependent on the national and international political, economic, and cultural conditions in which Arab society's identity is constructed. In other words, the environment or setting in which an author is living influences the literature in which he/she writes. Furthermore, since novelists share these conditions with other members of society, they can achieve two things: (1) The first is the creation of a universe that reflects the oppressive reality of the modern-day Arab World. (2) The second is the manifestation of society's frustration towards these oppressive regimes in a way where Arab people can comprehend and emotionally relate to. For this reason, and as seen throughout history, one can state that Arab literature can, to a certain extent, influence the rebellious conduct of Arab societies. Moreover, the dynamics of Arab society and its culture, language, and religion are dependent on the role of how governments operate. Therefore, with respect to Arabic societies, one can confirm that Arabic novelists are influenced by their Arab identity, and ideologies as well as the economic and political policies of the region. This can be seen in the novels published in the pre-and post-Arab Spring periods.

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