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#### Research Article

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# "Qabbani versus Qur'an": Arabism and the Umma in Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus*

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**Abstract:** In *The Road from Damascus* (2008), Syrian-British writer Robin Yassin-Kassab's debut novel, the protagonist describes "the opposing camps of [his] childhood," as narratives of "Qabbani versus Qur'an" (56). While Sami's father idolises the pan-Arabist poet Nizar Qabbani and supports the Syrian regime despite its repressive policies, Sami's mother, disillusioned with nationalist ideology, turns instead to faith, offering her son a "different mythology" based on "the adventures of God's messengers" (53). Tracing Sami's negotiations of these seemingly opposed inherited narratives, Yassin-Kassab's novel examines the lingering impact of pan-Arabism and the alternatives offered by Islamic frameworks. While critics have previously approached this novel as part of a growing corpus of British Muslim fiction, in this essay, I focus more closely on the novel's interrogation of Arab nationalism. As I will show, Yassin-Kassab's novel unfolds as a series of ideological disillusionments that chart the protagonist's confrontation with the failure of nationalist politics. Inviting the reader to follow the protagonist's successive conversions and de-conversion from various forms of nationalism, Yassin-Kassab's representation of the polarisation between "Qabbani versus Qur'an" poses the question of how one might find alternatives beyond such restrictive dichotomies, dramatizing the inadequacies of political vision in the Arab world today.

Keywords: Arab nationalism, migration, ummah

Early on in Robin Yassin-Kassab's debut novel *The Road from Damascus* (2008), the protagonist Sami describes "the opposing camps of [his] childhood," as narratives of "Qabbani versus Qur'an" (56). While Sami's father idolises the pan-Arabist poet Nizar Qabbani and continues to support the Syrian regime despite its repressive policies, Sami's mother, disillusioned with nationalist ideology, turns instead to faith, offering her son a "different mythology" based on "the adventures of God's messengers" (53). Tracing Sami's negotiations of these inherited narratives, Yassin-Kassab's novel examines the lingering impact of pan-Arabism and the alternatives offered by Islamic frameworks.

Critics have previously approached this novel as part of a growing corpus of Muslim fiction, or as Naseem Aumeerally describes it, the "emerging genre, referred to as 'Muslim writing'" which "has functioned as a powerful and creative platform [...] to chart the diverse, complex and provisional cartographies of Muslim identities" (3). Aumeerally mentions *The Road from Damascus* as well as Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) as part of this genre. Along similar lines, Claire Chambers' reading of the novel furthers her broader argument that "British-resident authors of Muslim heritage share certain preoccupations" (119). This focus is evident in Chambers' interview of the author, which begins with a question on what it means to be categorised as a British Muslim writer. Similarly, C. E Rashid has explored the novel's nuanced exploration of "British Islam" in the context of literary responses to the Rushdie affair, arguing that "this novel of transformation

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performs a new British-Islamic discourse in order to unpick the recently constructed opposition of Islam and literature" (98).

In this paper, I aim to supplement this previous work by shifting the focus from British Muslim identity politics to more closely examine the novel's interrogation of Arab nationalism from the perspective of diaspora. While Rashid argues that this is a narrative where the "protagonist partially converts to Islam," as the novel's title suggests, this is also, and I would argue primarily, a story of the protagonist's de-conversion from secular pan-Arabism (92). As I will show, Yassin-Kassab's novel unfolds as a series of ideological disillusionments that chart the protagonist's confrontation with the failure of nationalist politics. While the values and rhetoric Sami's Ba'thist father espoused seem increasingly problematic, his mother and later his wife's narrative of a united transnational *umma*, or global Islamic community, has its own complications. Inviting the reader to follow the protagonist's successive conversions and de-conversions from various forms of nationalism, Yassin-Kassab's representation of the polarisation between "Qabbani versus Qur'an" poses the question of how one might find alternatives beyond such restrictive dichotomies, dramatizing the inadequacies of political vision in the Arab world today.

Lebanese journalist Samir Kassir discusses the tension between the two dominant ideologies in the region in his brief book Considérations sur le malheur arabe, translated as Being Arab (2004). On the one hand, Kassir argues, we have "the fossilised remains of Arab nationalism which have cut themselves off from their original, universalist sources of inspiration," and on the other, he argues, what he calls "Islamic nationalism" is equally problematic in the way that it "explicitly sets out to differentiate itself from the universal, if not supplant it" (82). Since the publication of Kassir's book and Yassin-Kassab's novel in the 2000s, nationalist and Islamic discourses have of course undergone further transformations, as the post-2011 "Arab Spring" context shines a new light on the symbiotic and complex relationship between these two competing ideologies. Yet at the same time, the current context also captures the cyclical nature of the conflict. As Yassin-Kassab writes in his foreword to Madīh al-karāhiya (2006, In Praise of Hatred, 2012), a novel by Syrian writer Khaled Khalifa set during the 1980s: "[g]lancing from Khalifa's novel to internet updates, it seems that nothing has changed since the eighties [...] It's as if Syria is locked in a recurrent curse" (xiii). Syrian writers have in particular drawn attention to the ways in which the 1982 rebellion in the city of Hama foreshadows what would happen in 2011. As Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami note in their book on Syria, Burning Country (2016), "the fact that the regime felt the need to make such a terrible example of the city shows how little it could trust the consent of the masses" (14). Given the brutality of the regime, Yassin-Kassab suggests the challenge Khalifa faced in writing his novel, and perhaps the challenge he himself faced in writing The Road from Damascus, was "how to represent recent Syrian history, which has often been stranger and more terrible than fiction" (xii).

How this history continues to haunt the present is central to the plot of *The Road from Damascus*, where much of the narrative tension is dependent on the revelation of a terrible family secret. The story follows the British-born Syrian protagonist Sami, who as the novel opens has abandoned his failing marriage and his doctoral thesis on Arabic literature to visit Damascus. Once there, he meets a previously unknown relative, his uncle Faris, who has just been released from prison after more than twenty years, accused of being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood at the time of the Hama uprising in 1982. Unable to reconcile this story with his nationalist vision, Sami soon returns to London, where both his marriage and his ideological commitments proceed to unravel. Towards the end of the novel, we return to its beginning with the revelation of what readers have already suspected, that Faris was, in fact, betrayed by Sami's once idolised Ba'thist father Mustafa.

The arc of his narrative of disillusionment is already implicit in the opening pages, where Sami is initially hopeful that his visit to Damascus, the "home of his ancestors," will reconnect him to his identity, seeking to "bathe in the wellsprings of the original city...[w]here Ibn Arabi wrote his last mystical poetry, where Nizar Qabbani wrote 'Bread, Hashish, and Moon'"(1). The nostalgia here heightens the emotional impact of Sami's uncertainty, as he begins to learn more about the impact of the events in 1982. Sami recalls what his father Mustafa has to say about the Syrian government's suppression of the uprising: "[i]n the face of the Brother's fanaticism, the government stood unwaveringly firm. Sami's father, Mustafa, safe in London, had explained it to him" (3). However, this narrative is quickly challenged when Sami meets his maternal

relatives in Damascus and understands how they have suffered as a result of the regime's brutality. The justifications his father had given him seem valid until Sami is forced to confront the cost to his own family.

Upon his return to London, Sami comes increasingly to doubt the validity of his father's ideology and see its dogmatic fundamentalist aspects and its devaluing of the individual. The loss of this inherited set of political ideals leads to a search for alternative forms of belonging, as Sami begins to contrast his own identity struggles with the paths taken by others around him. Those others include his Iraqi wife Muntaha, who disavows the "Arab Nation" and redefines herself as a "British Muslim" (98), as well as his hot-headed brother-in-law Ammar, who transitions from a hip-hop phase to take on the garb and rhetoric of an Islamist. Sami's father-in-law Marwan, meanwhile, once a secular nationalist poet imprisoned by Saddam Hussein's regime, seeks out places where he can connect with those who share his background "on the wide-ranging circuits of Arab London" (79). The different trajectories of these characters take the protagonist, and the reader, on a journey through a variety of modes of belonging, which are at first embraced and then discarded in an effort to fashion a stable identity in exile.

In what follows, I will first discuss the novel's representation of wataniyya, nationalism based on statehood, before addressing its exploration of pan-Arabist *qawmīyya* or peoplehood. In the third section, I examine the protagonist's various attempts to imagine the Islamic *umma* as a potential alternative form of nationhood. Through the novel's exploration of these three intertwined forms of belonging, the reader is invited not only to question the comforting narratives of national pride, but to reflect on the limited options for defining oneself, and to consider if and how the impasse between such delimited forms of nationalism can be overcome.

# "Cacophonous Country": The Failures of Wataniyya

Already in the opening pages of the novel, though Sami hopes to feel that he has returned to his roots by travelling to Damascus, he is aware that his longed-for homeland is, in fact, a "cacophonous country" with "each individual playing his own score" (2). He recognises the exclusionary practices that are constitutive of nationalist discourse, imagining a future Syria with "roadblocks, men with armbands and guns and armed identities." As he reflects: "That's what it could be like, very easily. The wrong identity would end you at the intersection. Dead for wearing a cross. Dead for wearing a hijab. Dead for Ali's sword swinging from your car mirror" (7). The tensions beneath the discourse of unity are, he realises, "just under the smiling face of this hospitable people" (5).

This uneasy sense of something beyond the "smiling face" is repeated when Sami visits his maternal aunt Fadya, who on the surface is welcoming, but who "stage[s] a smile" when he naively begins to ask academic questions intended to elicit the responses of "ordinary Syrian Arabs" (5). In the conversation that follows, Fadya tells Sami the story of her brother Faris' two-decade-long imprisonment. At this point, Sami is still unaware of his uncle's history, and so the story is related to him as an exemplary tale, "the story of a man in this country" (5). This anonymised tale of state brutality sets the tone of this section, describing the violence inflicted on opponents of the regime, and ending with the consequences of the imprisonment that reduces Faris to silence: "[p]olitics is men's business, so he had nothing to say" (8). The repressive state disciplines and infantilises; all Syrian citizens are the children of the benevolent father of the nation, Hafez Al Assad, and thus barred from a critical engagement with politics. As I have discussed elsewhere, the novel lays bare the ways in which representation of the Arab leader as the father of the nation uses the legitimating metaphor of the nuclear family to naturalise power imbalances and silence dissent, leaving no space for alternative understandings of nationhood (Qutait).

The idea of the nation-state as family and as home has already been symbolically undercut in an earlier scene where Sami watches Ottoman-era houses in the capital's old town being demolished and examines "the hitherto private squares of paint" and the swirling dust motes which he describes as "[h]istory refusing gravity" (2). The destruction of these homes highlights the erasure of private and public, where what is "hitherto private" is exposed to view, as well as suggesting an intentional erasure, a certain disregard for the impact of history in the present. The tearing down of historical buildings captures the novel's concern

with the political ramifications of deliberate, institutionalised forgetting and erasure, suggesting the metaphorical ruin of the "the nation as a sufficient, nurturing home" (Strehle 3).

With this link between homeland and home in mind, we come to Fadya's description, a few pages later, of the return of political prisoners to their homes after decades in prison: "[s]ome came out but found everyone dead. Some found their homes, but the key wouldn't fit the door. There were strangers inside" (8). Imagining this scene of impossible homecoming, the revelation that home is no longer home, Sami is reminded of

Palestinian families in the refugee camps and their useless keys sometimes brought out of a cabinet to show to a guest, sometimes hooked on a nail in the reception room, thicker and heavier than keys of today. The image extended. Entire countries and pasts: houses without keys. (8)

The pervasive image of home as nation has its own particular symbolism in this context, where the keys of Palestinian refugees have become the icons of national failure in the Arab imagination. To cite only one example, in Elias Khoury's novel *Gate of the Sun* (2007, *Bāb al-Shams*, 2000), one of the characters living in a Palestinian refugee camp mocks an academic's obsession with this subject: "he says we have to collect the keys of our houses in Jerusalem [...] Collect our keys when the doors are already broken!" (118). The search for the keys to the broken doors here become a powerfully ironic image of clinging to nationalist symbols while the dream of the nation has already been shattered.

In this context, Sami's linking of returning political prisoners locked out of their homes to the "useless keys" of Palestinian refugees highlights a broader association of personal exile and estrangement with collective exile and a lost homeland. The iconic keys which symbolise being locked out of the homeland reflect what Lorenzo Casini has described as the alienation characteristic of contemporary Arab literature, where characters experience both "an exclusion [...] from the nation and other forms of collectivity" and "an exile from History that takes the form of the impossibility for the characters to be active actors" (7). Sami's description of "[e]ntire countries and pasts" as "houses without keys" encapsulate exactly this exclusion and helplessness in relation to the national project.

Sami is not the only character in the novel who confronts the failure of the nation-as-home. In fact, the narrative of de-conversion from state nationalism is perhaps dramatized most overtly in the story of Marwan al-Haj, Sami's Iraqi father-in-law, once a secular poet who "believed he was a model citizen of the new Iraq" (70). After Marwan is imprisoned by Saddam Hussein's regime and later exiled to London, he abandons his earlier ideals and instead starts going to the mosque to foster a sense of community. In an interview about his novel, Yassin-Kassab suggests that Marwan "represents what happened to that generation of Arabs: they were secularist and internationalist, and now they're conservative and vaguely Islamist" (Jackson). Yet even this new insular religiosity is inextricable from the questions of nationhood, as Marwan finds that Arab exiles spend their time talking "of going home, even the Palestinians from disappeared villages" (80). This sense of suspension in diaspora captures André Aciman's insight that "exiles can be supremely mobile, and they can be totally dislodged from their original orbit, but in this jittery state of transience, they are thoroughly stationary" (13). The talk of an impossible return is a reflection of this state of being at once transient and stationary. As Marwan soon realises, though homesick, "plotters, journalists and other exiles" still fear the reach of authoritarian governments: "[t]hey talked a lot of politics but seldom involved themselves in the opinions they gave [...] [t] hey preserved the survivalist suspicion they had brought with them" (80). The exiles' unwillingness to commit themselves politically allows them to avoid confronting the difficulty of return, as untenable as that return might be.

Like the other exiles, Marwan finds it easier to present himself not as a former political prisoner but as a temporary expatriate "waiting for his children to finish their education before returning home" (80). In Marwan's pretence that he will one day go home, the unqualified nostalgia that ties in with nationalistic rhetoric is a performance that overlays a more ambivalent position, recognising the impossibility of return. This scene captures the duality that Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef expresses when he writes "[t]he country we love was finished / before it was even born / The country we did not love has claimed / the blood left in our veins" (71). Youssef depicts the postcolonial nation both as stillborn and as a vampiric force,

creating a country that citizens could not love, and robbing them of a country that they could have loved. In Marwan's experiences, this duality means that the state no longer functions as the idealised space keeping the myth of return alive. Similarly, for Sami, his visit to Damascus in an attempt to reconnect with his roots reveals instead the depredations of state violence as experienced by his own family. This first movement of de-conversion thus dramatizes a rejection of the nation-state as a source of belonging, forcing the protagonist to question his assumptions about a naturalised link between identity and territory. Yet rather than turning to new forms that escape the bounds of the nation, belonging for Sami remains crucially interlinked with his father's pan-Arabist rhetoric and what it means to be Arab, which Sami seeks to define for himself in part through eclectic and invented performances of how he understands this identity.

## "Transplanted Nationalism": Performing *Qawmīyya*

In his search for a sense of coherent selfhood, Sami is attached to Arabness as a cornerstone of identity, a central tenant of modern Syrian nationhood which is here expanded beyond territory, beyond watan, to encompass the notion of Arab qawmīyya or peoplehood. As Richard Werbner suggests, despite "often cruelly violent moments within twentieth-century nation-state building," the attachment to nationalism remains "energised by a myth of being prior to the postcolonial nation state, of carrying forward primordial identities" (92). Sami's investment in primordial identities, and in particular in the notion of peoplehood, is highlighted in an early scene where he recalls his first meeting with his wife Muntaha, an Iraqi woman who migrated to Britain with her family after her father Marwan was arrested. Sami sees Muntaha for the first time in a Mesopotamian exhibit at the British Museum and initially connects her with the artefacts from the exhibition:

Sami turned from an ancient diadem and glimpsed her, the kind of woman who would have worn such jewellery [...] she was entirely still, an exhibit herself. A Mesopotamian woman in communion with Mesopotamian art about to launch herself from its past into Sami's life. (15)

Sami's objectification of Muntaha as "an exhibit herself" identifies her as an authentic link to the past and to Iraq. He is pleased that "[h]er accent confirmed she was Sumerian, Iraqi" (16). Sami's interlinking of the ancient past and the present, of Sumeria and Iraq, leads him to ask Muntaha if she is proud of the exhibition because "it comes from your land." Muntaha however immediately rejects this framing, resistant to the use of ancient history for modern nationalist purposes, which she experienced under Saddam's regime. Stating "I'm from Iraq, not Sumeria. We have different gods today," she repudiates the myths of the authoritarian nation-state and the idea that the modern state of Iraq is the heir to an unbroken succession of ancient civilisations (16). For Muntaha, it is impossible to feel pride in the nation that has imprisoned her father and made her an exile. As she puts it: "I learned all about this at school in Iraq [...] the teacher read nationalist poetry and made speeches about the people and the leader [...]. It didn't make me proud to be Iraqi" (17). Yassin-Kassab thus uses this scene of a British Arab couple courting among Mesopotamian artefacts to set up a contrast between Muntaha and Sami. Muntaha is intensely aware of the violent histories elided in official nationalist discourse due to her family's experiences in Iraq, while Sami finds in the ancient past a static and satisfying contrast to his own confused, hyphenated identity as a Syrian raised in Britain.

Despite their political differences, Sami and Muntaha, as well as Muntaha's brother Ammar, are united by their efforts to find new modes of belonging in the diaspora. According to one reviewer, the characters, "whether religious or agnostic [...] have the commonality of an angry alienation" (Athanasiadis). This description would seem to make this novel a fictional equivalent to what Ghassan Hage has critiqued as the tendency of academic writing on diaspora to turn the "yearning for home into a single 'painful' sentiment," a focus which is "guided by a 'miserabilist' tendency in the study of migration that wants to make migrants passive pained people at all costs" (417). However, I find that despite the novel's focus on the quest for an elusive sense of belonging on the part of the protagonist and his fellow Arab Londoners, the descriptions of diaspora life in this novel are as much focused on creative adaptation and performance as "angry alienation." This becomes clear early on when we are introduced to Sami's development of "a

transplanted nationalism in which the significance of signs had swivelled away from their original focus" (13) as he invents traditions to connect him with his heritage and to come to terms with his identity: "He was an Arab, was all" (14).

For Sami, being "an Arab" elides the variety of religious and ethnic identities that he is aware exist in Syria, the nuances that he knows he does not have to consider when performing his Arabness in a metropolis like London. In wearing a kuffiyeh scarf, for example, Sami recognises that "a member of his class in Syria would never wear one. Wouldn't be seen dead in one. But this wasn't Syria" (13). He can then knowingly appropriate the kuffiyehs of the "farmers and labourers" as markers of his ethnic identity and as a way of claiming for himself an association to the Palestinian intifada. That is, he can create a link back to the homeland through markers of authenticity that he knows are inauthentic. In fact, Sami sometimes wears his scarf "actually in a Kurdish style," ironically using a cultural marker that he knows would identify him as non-Arab in the region (and from a minority suppressed by the pan-Arab ideology his father supports) to mark himself as Arab.

The choices a younger Sami makes to identify and perform as an Arab in multicultural London follows the logic of the pan-Arabist ideology he inherited in that it deliberately erases class and ethnic differences in Syria. In these negotiations of identity, Yassin-Kassab explores how a second-generation British-Syrian identity is self-constructed. As an older Sami recognises, his performance of identity owed much to a youth culture of "[s]triking poses, claiming allegiances" including a "recycling of third world meanings" (13). The attachments to the homeland here are ambivalent, at once seeking to perform Arabness and distanced from the violence of nationalist ideology.

Sami is not alone in performing this "transplanted" form of nationalism. Hasna, another character in the novel who flees her homeland to London and who later becomes Marwan's wife, is described as "building a shrine to Iraq [...] representing her sacrifice in an iconography of lost bliss" using "traditional craftwork items she'd never been interested in before" (81). At first glance, this seems to capture the uncritical romanticising of the nation, a concrete example of the ways in which "displacement is more likely to produce immobile memories," as Julia Creet describes it in her discussion of the crucial role memory plays in the context of migration (10). However, Hasna's sudden interest in the traditional, like Sami's transplanted nationalism, is a reminder that identity relies on performance, a reproduction of what is deemed authentic as a strategy to create a sense of belonging.

While Sami is experimenting with performing Arabness, his wife Muntaha begins to come to terms with the reality that "[n]obody anywhere lives in smooth connection to the past" (86). Her recognition that "[e] verybody changes and disperses" (235) repositions her family's exile as part of the inevitable fluctuations of identity, her focus having shifted from the territorial frame of identity to understanding subjectivity as unfolding continually. Yet she also performs authenticity, putting on hijab to "to feel and look more like a Muslim woman" (99). At this point in the novel, there is a widening gulf between the increasingly religious Muntaha and the nationalist, secular Sami. Muntaha, in pointing out to Sami that "[n]obody talks about the Arabs anymore," highlights the anachronism of Sami's clinging to a receding Arabism (98), while for Sami, his wife's religiousness is similarly outmoded; "the long childhood of a people" (60). Muntaha finally separates herself from Sami's talk of "the Arab nation" by stating "I'm British anyway. I'm a British Muslim" (98). This yoking of her religious affiliation to her adopted country becomes a way of rejecting Sami's politics, detaching herself from this context and inscribing herself into a multicultural Britain. As a consciously personal form of religion (Muntaha's faith is clearly defined as a spiritual "expression of wonder" rather than a dogmatic or political creed), this might resonate with what Asef Bayat and others have described as a post-Islamist trend, tending towards a re-secularisation of religion which limits its political role (93). Yassin-Kassab's exploration of the divergent paths Sami and Muntaha take thus becomes an enquiry into the different conceptualisations of what it means to be Arab and/or Muslim in Britain.

In their study on Arab British activists, Caroline Nagel and Lynn Staeheli state that while activists acknowledge that "Arabness is culturally bound up with Islam," they try to promote an Arab identity which is separate from "a British Muslim identity, which, they argue publicises, and politicises religious affiliation" (107-8). These identities have become conflated in different ways over the past couple of decades. Investigating this intersection in *Britain's First Muslims: Portrait of an Arab Community* (2010), Fred Halliday

argues that it is only since 1990 that "it became more common to talk of a 'Muslim community' in Britain, of 'Islam in Britain' and of 'British Muslims'" rather than referring to communities in ethnic or geographic terms (ix). This shift, he maintains, emerged in part following the campaign against Rushdie's The Satanic Verses in 1989 and the Gulf War in 1990-1991 (xvi).

We see this context around Islam becoming the primary marker of identity in Yassin-Kassab's novel, as Sami's Arabist beliefs are further undermined by the Gulf war and his realisation that there are "only [...] evil options" (90). At first, the pan-Arabism Sami espouses leads him to "support Saddam, but quietly out of deference to [Muntaha]." Yet the disjuncture the war represents in terms of any coherent ideological position soon becomes undeniable; as Muntaha soon realises, "[h]e was disturbed by it all. She could see him turning away from his Arab rhetoric, feeling unstable on his symbols [...] Everybody was disturbed, all the Arabs" (90). Since the realities of the war disrupt the notion of a united people, they force a confrontation with the ways in which efforts to integrate the Arab world have deviated from goals of unification to legitimating authoritarian rulers. In a sentence that captures the centrality of disillusionment as a force for transformation in this novel, Sami recognises the extent of the war's impact and concedes that "[i]t's only by being disillusioned that you know you had illusions in the first place" (91). For Sami, it is this realisation that a unified "Arab nation" has always been an illusion which finally drives his turn towards a quest for religious belonging, a shift from his father's nationalist narrative of "Qabbani" to his mother's alternative narrative of "Qur'an."

### "Contingent Faith": Belonging to the Umma

Early on in the novel, Sami recalls visiting mosques with his father Mustafa as a child, despite Mustafa's atheism, "[b]ecause of his name, because of the expectations of neighbours and acquaintances" (57). For Sami, visiting the London mosques of his childhood means praying in "the suffocating lethargy of suburban living rooms" where he feels uncomfortable and out of place (57). He likens his visits to the mosque to what "a stroll through dusty farmland might have been for a gentleman of the Raj [...] He was slumming it, in among cringing Old World reptiles," tellingly placing himself as a secular Arab in the position of a colonial elite amidst the mosque-goers of the diaspora (58).

From this initial sense of contempt towards those with "Islam's cobwebs in their eyelashes" (61), Sami begins seeking the coherent answers provided by religious ideology as a replacement to his father's pan-Arab narrative, developing what he comes to describe as a "contingent faith" (348). However, at first Sami turns not to his mother's mythology or his wife's narrative of personal faith, but rather to his brother-in-law Ammar's more strident narrative of political grievance inflected by Islamist discourse. Sami is initially drawn in by Ammar's own self-fashioning and performance of his identity. From playing Dungeons & Dragons to becoming a wannabe gangster and then declaring himself the leader of an Islamist group, Ammar's own changing identity is represented as part of the "capacity for self-definition" that is, according to Sami, a form of "immigrant strength. When you're uprooted, you get to plant yourself in a new location. You have a kind of choice" (218). That choice is however irrevocably shaped by personal experience. As Sami goes on to reflect, Ammar's "nationalist option had been shut down in his distant boyhood when people calling themselves Arabists shattered the al-Haj family. History had squashed the possibility of Arabism" (218). In Ammar's case, the injustices experienced by his family fuels his emotional rhetoric of victimisation and grievance, but from the perspective of the *umma*, the global Islamic community: "Palestine, brother. Iraq. Crusader bases all over the Gulf, on holy soil [...] Hindus desecrating mosques in Kashmir. Oppression all over the *umma*. But we waking up now. Palestine's the start of it. Soon there'll be a world intifada" (265). Ammar's rhetoric here draws from a list of nationalist struggles, unifying them through the invocation of the *umma*, as the belonging afforded by religion eclipses the emotional attachment to the homeland. In dramatizing this progression, Yassin-Kassab explores the role of religion in establishing a sense of connection to the past and to the homeland and dramatizes the Islamist appropriation of nationalist causes.

Ammar plays the role of agitator, convincing his group of followers that they should understand themselves primarily in terms of politicised religion. At various points in the novel, Yassin-Kassab

highlights Ammar's switch from a hip-hop obsession to jihadist rhetoric and shows how the two discourses are interwoven to sometimes comical effect. As one reviewer puts it, Ammar "gravitates toward political Islam" as "an ideology that voices his frustrations far more eloquently than Public Enemy and the Five Percenters" (Athanasiadis). In *Burning Country*, Yassin-Kassab and Laila al-Shami's non-fiction book on Syria, this blending is concisely described as the "new phenomenon of gangster-Salafism" (140). Through this meshing of rhetoric and politics, Ammar's ability to attract an audience depends upon his audience's identification with "our people," a narrowing of identity to the allegiance under attack, dependent in this case on the primacy of religious belonging and the suppression of all other affiliations.

These connections between grievance and radicalisation lead the same reviewer to describe the novel as a "guide into the ghetto of superficially harmonious multicultural communities that make up Britain's simmering laboratory of fundamentalism" (Athanasiadis). Yet this elides the continuity explored in the novel between Mustafa's secular fundamentalism, which supports the nation-state at all costs, and Ammar's militant Islamism, which uses religious identity as a mobilizing force and which in its fixation on injury appeals to Sami's sense that "he belonged with [the] victims" (35). After joining Ammar's group, he sees them through the lens of the violent histories shaping their present:

[t]he mosques of his childhood stretched out beyond this one like a hall of mirrors diminishing into the infinite. And the screams of Syrian detention chambers [...] echoed around the basement walls. The histories of these others too weighed down the present. The Arabs, the Indo-Pakistanis, the Irishman, the African. From what tortures had their father fled? Over which jagged topographies of pain? (223)

Sami comes to understand that these "unsettled young men" are adopting a group identity which helps them to resolve their uncertainties (223). Yet eventually he becomes as disillusioned and repulsed by Ammar's Islamist politics as he was by his father's apologetics for the Ba'ath regime. This becomes clear in the climactic event represented towards the end of the novel, the attacks of 9/11. Reactions to the live coverage of the attacks capture the characters' different political positions. First Ammar, interjecting "yo" and "man" into jihadist rhetoric, attempts to convince the others that it is "something to restore a man's pride" that "the heart of America" now "looks like Gaza [...] Looks like Baghdad" (316). Responding to this provocation, Muntaha is represented as the corrective voice, taking an "academic tone" as well as a religious one, in her admonishment of her brother (316). For Sami, having abandoned the nationalist framework that made sense of the world, witnessing the attack crystallises his ideological confusion: "What was happening? Sami couldn't tell. He had no scale to measure the event. Nothing inherited from [his father] Mustafa. No nationalist way of judging. No Qabbani verses to help him" (315). While those around Sami have their own reference system to make sense of what is happening, he, lacking his previously selfassured nationalist perspective, describes the events as "melting the frame of everything, making history collapse" (315). Without his previously self-assured perspective, Sami shifts between horror at the extent of the death and destruction, and the awareness that "there'll be wars if Muslims did it" (318).

The immediate impact of the attacks in terms of what it means to be Muslim in the West is represented sometime later, when Sami is arrested because his religiosity is deemed suspicious, having been previously apprehended for drug use. As Maya Jaggi puts it, "the police conclude he has a false identity, since the pious beardie and the coked-up dissolute cannot be one and the same" (Jaggi). In a novel so concerned with exploring different modes of belonging, the suspicion around Sami's transformation from drug addict to seemingly pious Muslim perfectly illustrates both the experimentations that are part of performing identity and the boundaries that are set up around different ways of being Arab and/or Muslim in London.

For a disillusioned Sami, an identity based on faith does offer one solution to the anxieties about identity in a multicultural society. This is captured in a central yet brief moment when Sami is greeted by a passer-by: "As-salaamu alaikum! A grinning skullcapped black man of Sami's age had spied him for a brother and passed on. An instant of fraternity" (224). For Sami, this brief encounter presents an alternative "exclusion boundary" which, unlike the boundary between Sami and British society, "split open to absorb him" at least for the very brief moment of exchanging the Arabic greeting (244). This scene is remarkably similar to an encounter in another text, Syrian author Halim Barakat's

semi-autobiographical novel Crane (2008, Tā'ir al-hawm, 1997). There the narrator is again greeted by a stranger who identifies him as Muslim: "I suddenly noticed a black man coming straight toward me [...] "Alsalaamu alaykum!" he said in Arabic. I felt an enormous sense of relief" (25). The passer-by, a black man who is initially perceived as "other" in racialised terms, provides the character with momentary "relief" from his embattled position as part of a minority. In both texts, this telling and problematic interracial moment is presented as one of rehabilitation, where the interpellation by this friendly "other" confers recognition through an Islamic, Arabic greeting. As a transnational Islam is invoked through these pointedly interracial encounters, both protagonists comment on the importance of the moment of positive identification, a temporary break in the anonymity of being a passerby in a multicultural metropolitan city.

Though these moments of encounter might seem to represent a transnational mode of identification, they are predicated on the centrality of the Arabic language. From the position of the marginalised minority, the protagonists take on a more privileged position in relation to language, to Arabic as the language of the Qur'an. Importantly, soon after this scene, Sami begins to reconsider the importance of language as a focal point of identity. While he first describes Muntaha's accent as confirmation that "she was Sumerian, Iraqi" (16), towards the end of the novel, he expresses his envy of Muntaha's closeness to Arabic in terms of religion, as proof that she is

Connected. Using her mother tongue. Her lughhat al umm. In Arabic umm means mother and also origin and basis. Amma, meaning to lead a prayer, derives from the same root, as does umma, meaning the nation or the Islamic community. (323)

Sami is drawn to the ontological coherency of the Arabic terms and the potential this offers for achieving a sense of connection. In this novel written in English, the inclusion of Arabic words, tracing the etymological connection between umm, mother, and umma, (religious) nation, link linguistic competence to a more grounded sense of belonging. The connections made between etymology and origins, nationhood and belonging, are implicitly contrasted against the discontinuities, the geographic and linguistic rifts, of exile. It is the precariousness of exile that makes the promised cultural intelligibility of the *umma* appealing here.

Tellingly, Sami's reconciliation with Muntaha is based on recognising that her relationship with "her people, her ancestors, didn't mean trouble," since it circumvents the "trouble" of failed nationalist politics (323). The narrative arc makes clear that this ideological shift, the recognition of the appeal of the *umma*, is a matter of a need for connection. Given the political situation, Sami feels that "the past is a nightmare determining the present and the present is empty" (246), while he describes Muntaha as "accepting her past, hopeful for the future" (323), casting her as the ideal immigrant subject.

The connections made between *umm* and *umma* also have a clearly gendered logic. In pointing out that the root for "[u]mma, meaning the nation" leads back to "umm" the mother, Sami highlights that al-umma, as Mona Fayad has pointed out, is an "abstract feminisation of al-umm, the mother" (Fayad 6). In this context, it is significant that Yassin-Kassab's novel traces not only Sami's disillusionment but his mother Nur's as well, as she transforms from "an impressive extension to Mustafa's cosmopolitan intellectual" to a woman who rejects the false promise of the Ba'ath's nationalist project (53).

Towards the end of the novel, it is Nur who reveals what Sami already suspects: that it was Sami's father who had informed on her brother Faris. The realisation that Mustafa had placed loyalty to the Ba'ath above family finally undoes the myth of the nation. Nur justifies her silence by saying "[n]obody should tell anybody that their father was a traitor" (342), but goes on to explain the motivation for the betrayal, describing Mustafa's single-minded belief in the pan-Arab narrative, and in what Syria could one day become:

He thought it was only a matter of time until everyone would work in an office, productive eight-hour days, and go home in the evening to read novels or go to the cinema to watch art films. He thought everyone would own a car and a house to fit a nuclear family [...] Progress, so-called [...] they made the country a prison to do it [...] He thought there'd be one Arab nation. One Arab nation from the Ocean to the Gulf. What we have now is everything but. We have everything smaller and everything bigger. Little sects and ethnicities, little nationalisms and big Islamism. But no Arab nation. (340)

In the phrase "they made the country a prison," Nur locates the failure of Mustafa's project in its repressive demands for conformity as a path towards progress, explaining her own abandonment of the nationalist narrative. While initially she had "mixed Islamic language with that of nationalism and modernity, not understanding how they could exclude each other," the secular, socialist Ba'athist ideology her husband ascribes to does not allow for such syncretism, leading to the dichotomous pitting of "Qabbani versus Quran" with which Sami is raised (55). At the end of the novel, having finally confronted the reality he had suspected from the start, Sami is unable to connect fully to either of his parents' ideologies. While his need for a coherent ideology is represented sympathetically, this is juxtaposed with an awareness of the dangers of constructing belonging around a single affiliation, and of the violence implicit in this enforced unitary identity.

Sami's belief in the nationalist project dissolves after the revelation about the imprisonment of Faris and the confirmation that it was his father's responsibility. This erasure symbolically parallels the process which begins Faris' imprisonment, his reduction to "Mr Nobody," as the guards make him "write his name, his family's name, and his address" and then ritualistically burn the paper "because he had no name or family or address any longer, nothing to write down" (6-7). The novel comes full circle in a sense, only at the end it is Sami rather than Faris who is "Nobody," at a loss to define his identity:

For what is he now? Not much any more. Not Mustafa's son, nor Marwan's son-in-law, not an academic. Not a member of the eternal Arab nation. So what, then? He's Nur's son. Muntaha's husband. But to define himself as other people's attributes – it isn't much. (340)

This passage clearly captures Sami's abandonment of his previous role-models, Mustafa and Marwan, to define himself instead in relation to his female relatives, his wife and his mother. Here, he finally abandons his ambition to live up to what he once considered his father's achievements, yet he remains at a loss to do more than "define himself as other people's attributes" (340). The various de-conversions he has undergone seem irrevocable at this point, but there is no alternative ideology for Sami, only an ambivalence about how he might define himself, and how he might position himself in relation to the idea of the nation.

A decade after its publication, Yassin-Kassab's novel continues to speak to the ongoing relevance of nationalist ideologies, despite their many failures in the Arab context. In particular, the novel addresses the dilemmas of Arab diaspora, and the inextricable connection between nationalism and exile which Edward Said addresses when he asks:

How, then, does one surmount the loneliness of exile without falling into the encompassing and thumping language of national pride, collective sentiments, group passions? What is there worth saving and holding on to between the extremes of exile on the one hand, and the often bloody-minded affirmations of nationalism on the other? Do nationalism and exile have any intrinsic attributes? Are they simply two conflicting varieties of paranoia? (*Reflections* 177)

Though Said concludes that these questions are unanswerable, he points to the consequences of exiles being cut off from their place of belonging as an inevitable disruption of a monolithically defined national identity: "there is certainly nothing about nationalism's public and all-inclusive ambitions that touches the core of the exile's predicament. Because exile, unlike nationalism, is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being" (Reflections 177). This discontinuous state informs the representation of the nation throughout The Road from Damascus, as the protagonist looks back on the failures of the nationalist ideals of his parents' generation. Sami's visit to Damascus, with which the novel begins, is represented as an attempt to connect with the utopian dream of a homeland, the highly charged idea of belonging to the "home of his ancestors" (2). Even after recognising Syria's "cacophonous" disunity, Sami continues to be drawn to nationalism for a sense of meaning. Having acknowledged the failure of inherited ideologies does not resolve the search for belonging. The transitions explored in this novel thus articulate the tension between the violence elided in nationalism's promise of inclusion and the compelling power of this rhetoric. Ultimately, this narrative of successive de-conversions from nationalism is also a narrative of the ongoing power of the idea of the nation ideologies, exploring the potency of the emotional rhetoric of peoplehood in the context of the ongoing political crises in the Arab world. We see the extent of nationalism's grip in following the different characters' attachment to various ideologies from Ba'athist pan-Arabism to a transnational Islamic umma, and from secular fundamentalism to militant Islamism. What is continuous through each of these transformations is the importance of the ability to change, to reject wholly what was previously believed, as a necessary condition to imagine alternative modes of belonging. The novel's central insight is summed up in Sami's belated realisation that "[i]t's only by being disillusioned that you know you had illusions in the first place" (91), thus redefining disillusionment as more than a negative force, representing it rather as a vital process of self-discovery.

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