Contesting Narratives: Sibling Relations as Political Allegory in *Lā tukhbir al-ḥiṣān*

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This article explores sibling relations in Mamdūḥ ʻAzzām's (1950-) *Lā tukhbir al-ḥiṣān* (2019, Don't Tell the Horse). Using Mikhail Bakhtin's (1895-1975) theories on the dialogic nature of the novel and the polyphony of voices existing in a single text, the article charts the characters' movement in and out of the different storylines in ʻAzzām's novel, and the way in which this informs the dynamic of the family story. Lending itself to multiple perspectives, ʻAzzām's novel foregrounds the siblings' voices over a singular authorial voice, highlighting not only their relationships in the novel, but also the way they offer an intricate portrayal of a family's unraveling. The novel poses ontological questions on the state of being present/absent and the dynamics of human relations. Furthermore, the novel's polyphonic narrative technique and multi-focal perspective constantly remind the reader of the intangibility, as well as shifting nature, of stories. It also emphasizes this constant shifting in its portrayal of the complex and conflicted sibling relations. The novel presents the reader with a multiplicity of stories intertwined with the siblings' narrative, and yet distinctly separate. In addition, ʻAzzām employs an omniscient narrator whose presence in the novel is secondary vis-à-vis the presence of the more overpowering narratives of the siblings. In this way, ʻAzzām's approach resonates with Bakhtin's analysis of the the key aspect in Fyodor Dostoevsky's (1821-1881) writing technique, namely, decentralizing the authorial voice and foregrounding individual speeches and perspectives. This intentionality in using individualized stories becomes a discursive tool through which ʻAzzām situates the siblings' relationships in a larger and more universal framework, relatable to the context in which his novel was written.

The first section of the article contextualizes contemporary Syrian writing within the developments of the post-2011 uprising and subsequent civil war. This serves as a backdrop for understanding the way Syrian writers, such as ʻAzzām, approach the conditions of sectarianism and violence in their writings. This contextualization highlights two key aspects that impacted contemporary Syrian writing: firstly, how the political and social conflict shattered the myth of unity that was pervasive prior to the civil war, and, secondly, the challenges that Syrian writers face in order to narrate the Syrian struggle against destruction and censorship. In the second section, the article employs Bakhtin's theory on the polyphonic novel and Suad Joseph's concepts of kinship and patriarchal structure to explore sibling relations in ʻAzzām's novel. The complex relationship among the siblings in his novel offers a medium to reflect on family struggles. It also indirectly mirrors the context of the Syrian conflict, and problematizes the socially accepted notions of unity, harmony, and brotherly bonds.

Contesting Reality: The Syrian Condition Post-2011

One of the important aspects of the conflict in Syria and the ensuing civil war is the disillusionment with the pervasive official narrative prior to the onset of 2011, i.e., the portrayal of social and political unity. With the eruption of the 2011 uprisings, the demonstrators were chanting in the streets that Syrians are "one people." A unified front against oppression was seen as key to the country's temporary victory over the forces of oppression. However, present-day Syria is more divided into various spheres of influence than ever before. Moreover, having been prohibited from traveling across the country, Syrians began to experience a sense of entrapment and isolation that further reinforced the feeling of separatism and fragmentation (Kahale 53). In her examination of Arab women writers during war, Hanadi al-Samman explains that one way in which writers choose to depict war is to "shatter the sacred war myth," and show how "wars dismember rather than protect the body of the motherland" (145). Even with the com-

ing of the Arab Spring and the slogans of unity and dignity, Arab countries–including Syria–were not in fact united. The coming of uprisings, and the ensuing conflicts, highlighted the sense of division, and in some cases sectarianism, and deepened the people's sense of detachment. Samar Yazbek's memoir *Taqāṭu' al-nīrān: Min yawmiyyat al-intifāḍa al-Sūriyya* (*A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*) was published at the onset of the Syrian uprisings in 2011, chronicling her firsthand experience of the divisions and cruelty instigated by the war in Syria. One example that Yazbek narrates is the Daraa incident where 'Ātif Najīb, a high-ranking official in the Assad regime, kidnapped and tortured fifteen children who wrote anti-Assad slogans on the walls of their school. Yazbek herself comes from Jableh, the hometown of Najīb. She explains that, in Jableh, people are divided when it comes to condemning the horrors of Najīb and the Syrian regime: "The murderers and I are from the same city. Some of their blood flows in mine. Some of my relatives are theirs, people who embrace murder and bloodshed" (274). This divided political stance is not a byproduct of the uprisings and ensuing civil war; it represents an already existing disintegration.

By analyzing 'Azzām's novel, I attempt to debunk the myth of unity in a multifold fashion. On the one hand, this disillusionment allowed for what was historically restricted: a sense of diversity and possible inclusion of varied constituencies and viewpoints. On the other hand, this fragmentation was a leeway for contention and conflict. This does not only represent the contemporary post-war Syrian situation, but also has roots in modern Syrian history that extend decades back. This social and demographic manifestation of demystification has had an impact on the literary situation in Syria. One such outcome that affects the Syrian literary landscape is the challenges it constantly faces in attempting to evade silencing and fragmentation. The socio-historical context of Syrian literature problematizes the spaces available for Syrian writers to explore their reality.

The literature produced, as a result, has traces of what Mohja Kahf conceptualizes as "manifold silence, evasion, indirect figurative speech, gaps and lacunae," which renders the literature "jittery with what it cannot say" (235). Even though Kahf

wrote about Syrian literature at the beginning of the century, the description remains relevant. This is particularly valid when considering the contemporary Syrian context and the complexities it presents. The inability to "say"–in Kahf's term–is not simply a matter of authoritarian oppression. In a 2021 interview, Syrian novelist Khalid Khalīfa explains that writing the Syrian tragedy will require "a thousand years" ("Ḥiwār " 08:16-08:30).* The depiction of war and trauma is not a subject matter that can be easily explained and/or depicted in literature at the current moment. This circles back to Kahf's statement, elaborating on how Syrian literature uses literary techniques to write what would otherwise resist narration. In fact, Syrian writers have constantly resisted the heavy hand of the state, attempting in response to chart a literary scene that engages with the social and political with varying degrees of openness. Using their own national landscapes to map out the cultural and political, Syrian writers reinforce the idea of a "nationally committed literature," rather than discussing more international themes (Berg 10).

That said, for Syrian writers, literature is much more than a simple act of artistic production. To many of them, the way they write about the world is comprised of the nuances of what they face on a daily basis. This tumultuous background requires more than artistry to navigate. For ʻAzzām, writers have a particular role to play in the current Syrian situation. He finds that the Syrian reality of sectarian conflict, revealed following the Arab Spring, urged the writer to look deeper into the society where s/he lives, taking into consideration the vast diversity and changing nature of people when faced with conflict. He further explains that it is difficult for a writer to "stand amidst the conflicting sects" of society, showing how that forces authors to find a mode of writing that negotiates this complex web of social relations and psychological depths ("Ḥurriyyat"). Additionally, ʻAzzām outlines the multiple challenges faced by Syrian writers under the circumstances of sectarian/civil war, admitting that writing is "the only way [a writer] can navigate a world that is heading toward complete destruction," a perilous process under the current circumstances ("al-Riwāya"). One of the main reasons ʻAzzām gives for this position is the fact that writers stand

in a battlefield (or as he accurately describes it: "a bloodbath") where those individuals, who once shared this land and life, are now at opposite ends of the spectrum.

'Azzām's literary production, whether before or after the Arab Spring, deals for the most part with the disintegrating reality of Syrian society. In 2018, 'Azzām wrote *Arwāḥ ṣakhrat al-'asal* (Souls of the Honey Rock), using the civil war as a backdrop for a story of three friends whose lives intertwine over the years of destruction, and who are eventually killed. Interestingly, in this novel, 'Azzām delves into the past to highlight the individual stories of his characters, whose fateful death is reduced to collateral damage in the daily Syrian violence. Perhaps this is 'Azzām's attempt at standing in the face of annihilation, that is, asserting the humanity of people and their stories against the pervasiveness of the war machine and oppressive regimes. This preoccupation with dissecting the myth of "collectivity" is also seen in another novel: *Arḍ al-kalām* (2005, The Land of Talking), in which 'Azzām portrays the political life during the Egyptian-Syrian union in 1958. 'Azzām depicts the lack of a diverse political life, and highlights the individuality of the Syrian people and their stories in the face of a society that emphasizes unity as a political and social tactic.

While 'Azzām writes with the Syrian history and reality as a backdrop, it is worth noting that he does not view the novel as a tool for documentation. The writer, in 'Azzām's opinion, stands in the middle of chaos with one job: contemplating it ("al-Riwāya"). This might seem to be a reductionist view of what the novel is as a genre, and what it should do in relation to reality. Yet 'Azzām explicitly notes that, in terms of formal aesthetics, the novel is "static" while the revolution/political scene is dynamic. A novel does not simply alter its function in accordance with the changing reality surrounding it ("Min" 10:20-10:25). 'Azzām argues that writing a novel at a moment of political upheaval or drastic social transformation is important; however, it should not be simply narrowed down to reporting. In addition, he finds that a novel should not depict its reality in a straightforward fashion. For 'Azzām, the novel remains an "elusive genre" ("Min" 14:24-15:39). Moreover, similar to Khālid Khalīfa, 'Azzām believes that narrating

a present socio-political moment with any kind of precision requires retrospectivity, which in turn requires time and distance. However, ʻAzzam believes that a writer would find it difficult to fully assess the context in which s/he lives, since it is hard to withdraw from it and write objectively about it ("al-Riwāʾī").

In *Lā tukhbir al-ḥiṣān*, ʻAzzām moves away from the strictly political to show how war impacts the reality of Syrian society, represented by its most basic unit: the family. The novel does not take place during the Syrian revolution, nor is it set during any major political moment. Rather, the novel seems distant if the reader attempts to strictly contextualize it within the current Syrian landscape. Nonetheless, the allegorical nature of the novel presents a domestic portrayal of conflict and disintegration in a Syrian family, while offering an insightful look at the possibility of a multiplicity of realities and perspectives.

Telling the Story of the Najjār Family

An intriguing aspect of the novel is the way it challenges the validity of common assumptions about reality, and the reliability of any single perspective or "truth." Each individual voice in the family exemplifies the way ʻAzzām actively engages the reader in the interplay of perspectives as opposed to reality. This is done to urge the reader to widen the scope of the siblings' implication in the story. In doing so, ʻAzzām centralizes the question of "justice" when presenting his characters' narratives in the novel. With the narrative shifting from one character to another, ʻAzzām's literary technique further illustrates the difficulty of finding linearity, thoroughly and unequivocally depicting characters at moments of crisis. However, ʻAzzām does not offer a resolution for this technical difficulty, nor does he deliver a cryptic message for the reader to decode.

The dark shadow cast over the Najjār family permeates the novel. Firstly, there is the unstable father-figure, whose presence poses an existential threat to the family's survival. Secondly, there are the four siblings from whose perspectives the novel is mainly told, at odds with one another, with the father, and with themselves. This dark family dynamic results in a complicated web of fragmented relationships with varying degrees of detachment.

The constant shifting between the seemingly stable family image and the reality of its situation introduces questions regarding the notion of a "unified" family structure and sibling relations.

It is vital for the writer to be inquisitive in order to be creative. However, ʻAzzām negates the fact that a reader has to accept what the writer proposes, equally dismissing the idea of the writer having an ultimate answer. In his view, the act of writing a text is more about the artistry of the profession than being preoccupied with a message, the latter being a byproduct of a good text written with aesthetics ("Mamdūḥ"). This view of the novel as a "democratization process" without a particular controlling message is vital in appreciating and understanding ʻAzzām's choice in writing a multi-perspective novel. His narrative choice presents a variation on the question of the ownership of stories in which multiple voices present the narrative "in conflict with each other and in any case in dialogue with each other" (Shuman 44). Evidently, the decision to marginalize the writer, or the potential authorial voice and/or central character, in favor of collective storytelling is ʻAzzām's way of acknowledging the flexibility of storytelling and the vacillating nature of reality.

While the novel utilizes the siblings' viewpoints, highlighting the intricate nature of their inseparable narratives, it still presents a delicate and almost precarious center. On the narrative level, this centrality presents itself through the existence of a narrator who occasionally resurfaces on the periphery of a dominant narrative. On the level of family dynamic, the centrality is seen through the father-figure, who ironically enough only exists through the narrator. This interplay between the center and periphery, on both the narrative and family levels, is an integral part of reading ʻAzzām's novel. It both impacts and informs the way the siblings are perceived, how their reality is presented, and how the family situation eventually unfolds. In what seems to be a subtle reference to the nature of reality and narration in the novel, the title indicates the complexity intended in the narrative: "Don't Tell the Horse." The juxtaposition implied in using the imperative "do not tell" in a novel with multiple stories postulates an epistemological impossibility. The novel thus presents the dilemma of a commitment to the democratization of

voices within the narrative, while maintaining a form of silence only hinted at in the title. I argue that this presents an ontological question about the nature of narrative. I show how, in employing these techniques, ʻAzzām attempts to reevaluate the notions of storytelling, reality, family heritage, and patriarchy, highlighting the primacy of marginalized stories over central narratives.

Centrality, Fragmentation, and the Myth of Unity

The peculiar nature of the family dynamic in ʻAzzām's novel stems from the centralized yet fragmented nature of the Najjār family story, which here represents the social context of post-war Syrian reality. It could be argued that choosing a family as a site of conflict in the novel is deeply rooted in the patriarchal nature of Arab societies, their political systems, and the related notions of unity and harmony. This relationality is key, as it is one of the most defining features of Arab societies, particularly in terms of the cultural concept of the collective versus the individual. According to Suad Joseph, "kinship" is more than a family-related notion; it defines social and political relations, producing and reinforcing behaviors that foreground relationality as pertinent to one's existence, making "one's sense of self, and other people, . . . relatively fluid" ("Patriarchy" 18). In this way, kinship dictates connections within the social and political structure, highlighting the centrality of power as the way one interacts with the outside world. Thus, kinship is conceptualized as "the core of social identity, economic stability, political security, and religious affiliation" (Joseph, "Among Brothers" 171). However, within the context of patriarchal Arab societies, kinship does not necessarily mean lack of conflict.

Joseph explains that the idea that brothers will always ally with one another is not entirely true. She finds that "kin have often allied with strangers against each other," creating spaces for contention, even rivalry at times ("Among Brothers" 171). This complex nature of sibling relations, particularly in the context of an Arab society, provides a background for ʻAzzām's characterization and development of narratives in the novel. The notion of kinship relevant to the familial, political, and social structure is

juxtaposed with ʻAzzām's view of Syrian reality as a site of conflict and change. ʻAzzām notes in particular the way this change is even more impactful due to the absence of diversity prior to the Arab Spring. The changing socio-political structure defies the narrative of unity and harmony dominant prior to the revolution and the ensuing civil war.

The novel offers what seems to be a single story of a unified household. The father, Salīm al-Najjār, returns home from a twenty-year military post outside his hometown. An officer of the state, the father is seen as a typical patriarch. His timely return, bringing in its wake a horse into the family dynamic, triggers varied responses among the siblings. And the latter, in particular, are seen as divided. On the surface, this division seems to be a result of the unexpected arrival of the horse and the economic implications of their father's decision to keep it. However, as the story gradually moves away from this "central" idea, it weaves individual stories that uncover the true depth of the siblings' division, verging on alienation, resentment, and even animosity.

ʻAzzām's novel, which ostensibly conforms to notions of central patriarchy and familial social unity, in fact subverts these notions. The Najjār family dynamic is profoundly nuanced. While the father is a powerful figure, his power is evidently undermined. The narrative does not allow Salīm to assume the authority of a first-person narrator throughout the novel. He is constantly either a backdrop for the siblings' narratives, or himself narrated through an anonymous, and equally evasive, narrator. Salīm, through this mysterious narrative technique, is thus decentralized and marginalized in favor of the siblings' overpowering narratives. It could be argued that this is ʻAzzām's way of destabilizing not only the father's narrative, but also that of the entire family. By choosing not to centralize the narrative, ʻAzzām allows for a manifold perspective, as well as challenges the validity of the characters' reliability. In doing so, ʻAzzām offers a narrative that does not "lend itself to an ordinary pragmatic interpretation at the level of the plot" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 7). Moreover, ʻAzzām's polyphonic narrative pertains to what Bakhtin views as the "position from which a story is told," namely, "a portrayal built, or information provided [that] must be oriented

in a new way, to a new world–a world of autonomous subjects" (7). This autonomy, though still relational, further downplays the centrality of patriarchy and dismantles family unity.

This is particularly evident in the manner the siblings' narratives move away from the father's, turning into individual stories in their own right. These individual stories, though subtly connected to the father as a starting point, become independent of his presence. Consequently, the polyphony created in the novel runs parallel to, and mirrors, the gradual disintegration of the father as the center of the family. It also encourages the reader to replace this now decentralized figure with a more "neutral authorial voice" (Caiani 31). By choosing to do so, 'Azzām highlights the fragmentation of the narrative as a means of allowing the characters to determine their fates and tell their stories, detached from the ruling voice or authority represented by the father-figure. This narrative technique provides 'Azzām's characters with a worldview specific to their life experiences. Even under the rule of a patriarchal household, the siblings' realities are divided, nuanced, as well as contentious. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin explains how the multiplicity of realities and voices indicates the potential not only for various voices coinciding at the same time, but for multiple realities, none of which is final: "reality as we have it in the novel is only one of many possible realities; it is not inevitable, nor arbitrary; it bears within itself other possibilities" (37). These possibilities foreground the way writing a novel is associated with liberating it from a centralized narrative monopolized by one narrator or viewpoint.

The question of centrality can further be explored in 'Azzām's novel through the subtle presence of the father's horse. With the title informing the reader of the potential importance of the horse, the novel gradually shifts to include the horse as a central node. This technique is utilized to illustrate key aspects about the Najjār family dynamic. The siblings' conflicted attitudes towards the horse foreshadow the troubled relationship they have with their father, as well as with one another. This portrayal of the horse serves more than one purpose. On the one hand, it works as a catalyst for the way the family members deal with the problematic return of the father. That is, the centrality of the horse presents a pretext for the love-hate relationship that is instigated

by the father's return. On the other hand, positioning the horse in the middle of the family's unravelling is significant as it offers a possible locus for the family's converging storylines.

Multiperspectivity: The Family Unravelling

The dominant narrative in the novel is that of Kāmil, the middle child of the Najjār family. The portrayal of Kāmil's character stands in defiance of the dominant representations of masculinity and patriarchy found in most of the novel's male characters. He is seen as lacking self confidence, and fearful of his brothers. Kāmil's narrative opens with him kissing his father's hand and placing it over his head in deference (11). According to Kāmil, this is a family tradition, yet he is the only character the reader sees performing it. As the young, shy, and, at times, scared sibling, Kāmil stutters whenever he sees his father, and is bullied by his older brothers for these shortcomings. His mother, Sālīma, describes him as a trembling child who is "so scared that whenever anyone approaches him, he moves away with his whole body as if we intended to harm him" (40). This description of Kāmil's demeanor is indicative of the way he is positioned within the family dynamic. In a way, his character can be associated with what Joseph calls the "deferring brother," usually the younger sibling whose existence–as subordinate to the older siblings–helps in reproducing the patriarchal system within the family ("Among Brothers" 176).

At the beginning of the novel, Kāmil is initially dominated by his older brothers, Fāḍil and Nawfal. However, Kāmil's narrative gradually turns into a more subversive one. For him, bonding with the horse represents his newfound rebellious streak against the oppression of his older brothers, and the domineering presence of his father. His first encounter with the horse sets the tone for this rebellious side of the story: "The horse and I managed to establish a means of communication different from the one I have with my father" (13). Through Kāmil, 'Azzām exhorts his characters to become more than what the family narrative, and by extension patriarchy, dictates. In his

narrative, there seems to be a space for what Bakhtin refers to as "the solipsistic separation of a character's consciousness from the whole" (*Problems* 48). This is particularly evident when Kāmil explains that he is "betraying the family pact" of hating the horse (218). In this way, Kāmil breaks away from the role he is assigned by virtue of being the younger sibling. In turn, he proceeds to formulate his own independent narrative within the family, deconstructing its assumed "unity," and ceases to adhere to the alleged bonds of kinship with his siblings.

In addition, Kāmil's relationship with the horse eventually puts him on the unintended path of becoming what Joseph calls the "brother-patriarch" ("Among Brothers" 176), controlling the family's fate. For while the father's horse is hated by almost everyone in the family, Kāmil's closeness to it, in turn, allows him to get closer to the patriarch of the house: the father. Both share a love for the horse, the father enjoying a sense of liberation in its company (48). Moreover, Kāmil's act of rebellion against his siblings' "pact" puts him, indirectly, in a more powerful position vis-à-vis his older brothers and sister. Kāmil's narrative comes into full circle when he allows his father's horse to finally escape the torture of his brothers. This provides not only an opportunity for the horse's freedom, but also, and more importantly, agency for Kāmil himself. 'Azzām shows how Kāmil's freedom is intertwined with the horse's, and Kāmil narrates how the horse could "understand [Kāmil's] calling, as if he never knew before freedom existed as an alternative choice. He kicked the cart with his legs, breaking it. . . . He is now free" (251).

The kinship bond, "kin contract" in Joseph's terms, is tested once more when the older brother, Fāḍil, presents his own narrative. According to Joseph, the kin contract is "about the idea of family love organized within a patriarchal structure of rights and responsibilities" ("Among Brothers" 171). The binding nature of this contract is essential in understanding Fāḍil's character and perspective in the novel. As the eldest brother, Fāḍil is naturally assumed to be the "brother-patriarch," enjoying a more dominant position within the family. Fāḍil, however, sees himself as a distant observer of the family, preferring to

"remain in the backseats, seeing everything without being seen . . . quiet, lurking in the shadows of dark places" (21). Fāḍil's decision to have a less visible role within the family challenges patriarchy from within. Moreover, Fāḍil's depiction as one who sees "everything without being seen" echoes a Foucauldian sense of panopticism. A key concept related to the panopticon in Michel Foucault's (1926-1984) theory of power is how the prison structure depends on the surveillance of inmates by virtue of the invisibility of power (214). According to Foucault, "in order to be exercised, this power had to be given the instrument of . . . making all visible, as long as it [power] could itself remain invisible" (214). Seen in this light, it could be argued that while Fāḍil relinquishes power as the "brother-patriarch," he still attempts to regain it through his invisibility. He refuses to become part of the seemingly unified family structure, and resists being part of the whole. This is evident in the opening statements of his narrative when he mentions that he failed two subjects at school: religion and civic education (21), both of which have to do with belonging to a group.

Nonetheless, Fāḍil's refusal of this social structure does not stem from a rebellion against social norms and traditions. It rather emanates from a place of resentment against his brothers and sister, and the imposed "unity" around the father-figure he admittedly dislikes. Evidently, Fāḍil's selected stories about his father are ones that portray the latter as a vulnerable figure, a failure of a man. For instance, Fāḍil relates the father's failed love story; a woman abandons him for another man. However, Fāḍil's apparent rebellion against the role imposed on him does not necessarily mean that he does not enjoy exercising power in his own narrative and life. He vehemently expresses a desire to build his own world, one where he would exercise his own power (145). This attitude in Fāḍil's narrative echoes Bakhtin's views about characters in a novel having a final say in their narrative: "[W]hat must be discovered and characterized . . . is not the specific existence of the hero . . . but ultimately the hero's final word on himself and on his world" (*Problems* 48). Fāḍil is the only brother who leaves the family house completely, becoming increasingly detached from them. However, this sense

of distance does not break the patriarchal chain. Fāḍil's own sense of self is one that seeks power and domination, not only over his own life, as shown earlier, but over others' as well. When his younger sister is forcefully taken out of school, Fāḍil supports the decision. Furthermore, when she tries to take matters into her own hand by studying independently, he becomes physically violent with her, "grabbing her braided hair, pulling her forcefully, and saying: 'This is where you will end up,' pointing towards the kitchen" (173). The explicit patriarchal tone here echoes the father's equally patriarchal and oppressive decision to prohibit his daughter from going to school. In this sense, Fāḍil unwittingly reproduces the same patriarchal structure he tries to break away from. In addition, Fāḍil is the sibling who scares his brothers the most. According to Nawfal, Fāḍil "wants to prove that he is the older brother, so he never allows us any freedom, never allows us to play, and never makes working with him pleasant" (16). However, when Fāḍil attempts to beat his own mother, she overpowers him and knocks him to the ground instead. It is then that his "bones of power" are shattered, and he breaks down and cries (124). This confrontation alters the way Fāḍil is viewed within the family. His dream of patriarchal power is thus frustrated, the possibility of another patriarch in the family negated, a fact which further separates an already divided family.

The second eldest son, Nawfal, represents a faint potential as a successor in the patriarchal family structure. An important element that consolidates the "brother-patriarch" in a family structure is the hope/possibility of younger brothers assuming the leading role in the family. According to Joseph, "deferring to the brother-patriarch helps reproduce the system which promises the deferring brother that he will become a patriarch himself or has already authorized his status as patriarch in relation to his wife, children, mother, sisters, and other female kin and junior male relatives" ("Among Brothers" 176). Nawfal is initially seen as subordinate to his older brother, Fāḍil, referring constantly to the latter's brutal and fearful presence. However, Nawfal gradually shows resistance, explaining that Fāḍil "stopped beating me up when I started having a coarser voice . . . and after I threatened to break his arms if he ever beat me up again" (16). Despite a sense

of understanding between Nawfal and Fāḍil concerning their shared hatred of the father's horse, Nawfal strongly disapproves of his older brother's violent reactions to situations, calling them a "cowardly way of dealing with conflicts" (16). Nawfal's rejection of his brother is heightened when he states that Fāḍil is "not one of us anymore," renouncing a kinship merely based on biological bond. They simply share the same last name, which is further undermined by the absence of the father-figure in the family (164). Moreover, Nawfal's relationship with his brother is further problematized as he explains: "Fāḍil adds to my sense of alienation and helplessness. I cannot face him. . . . I no longer have the courage to face [him]" (161). This tension, even animosity, in the brotherly relationship between Nawfal and Fāḍil negates the traditional sense of "bonding" that is automatically presumed in traditional Arab social and familial structures. As Hania Sholkamy notes, "social ties are [not] stagnant or conflict-free. On the contrary, brothers fight, and cousins can become worst enemies" (76). The precarious ties Nawfal has–particularly with his brother and father–further consolidate the rift within the family structure, leading to a failure of achieving familial unity. For him, the family's narrative is a lie made acceptable by the presence of a horse: "One horse is incapable of changing the situation, or bestowing a false narrative on place and time" (197). Nawfal's alienation and detachment from his family leads to a sense of existential crisis. When he is imprisoned for political reasons, Nawfal becomes painfully aware of how alone he really is. Reciting from a book he was given in prison (as a form of punishment), he reads: "Oh universe looking down from its sky . . . you are lonely in your sky . . . I am lonely in my land" (235). Continuing to read "to the void," he notes how he felt "Fāḍil has finally beaten me when words stopped having meaning" (236). Nawfal's final remark highlights brotherly conflict and rivalry, reiterating the concept of the brother as enemy, and the sense of detachment within the family.

The younger sister, Kāmila, only seen at intervals throughout the novel, presents an aspect of the family story that further crystalizes discrepancies within the family narrative. Interestingly, despite being subordinate to the rest of her brothers, Kāmila's story seems to be the only stabilizing factor in the family structure. Her narrative helps to reproduce the seemingly

unified image of the patriarchal Najjār family, showing patriarchal figures (father and brothers) controlling her presence and life. In a way, Kāmila's oppression demonstrates the only manifestation of cohesion and bonding within the family throughout the novel, namely, patriarchal unity. In its traditional manner, the brother-sister relationship is habitually seen as a relationship of safety, one that is based on "love and mutuality" in the midst of an otherwise "cold and authoritarian family system" (Joseph, "Brother/Sister" 52). This might be true in Kāmila's story as far as her caring relationship with her youngest brother, Wāsil–seen throughout the novel as almost mentally challenged–is concerned. Kāmila's relationship with Wāsil is partly motherly; she substitutes the mother who is distracted by the sudden return of the father. Nevertheless, Kāmila's relationship with her older brothers is not nearly as warm or direct. When the father denies Kāmila education and forces her to stay home, the reactions of her brothers demonstrate a range of different, at times conflicted, attitudes. Fāḍil reinforces the father's decision by beating her when she tries to resist; Nawfal, on the other hand, supports her, defying both the father's and Fāḍil's commands; while Kāmil remains neutral toward his sister, offering neither help nor condemnation. The varied attitudes toward Kāmila's decision to pursue education demonstrate the way traditional views of brother-sister relationships can be found lacking when put to practice. Kāmila is able to find a sense of support and safety from only one of her brothers, Nawfal. The other two, Fāḍil and Kāmil, traditional "brother-patriarchs" whose role is to offer guidance and nurture, reinforce those unjust conditions, depriving her of the opportunity to battle oppression.

Bakhtin highlights the fact that a fictional character is "more than a direct realization of an idea put in motion by the author and fulfilled through a reality that possesses fixed and specific socially typical or individually characteristic traits" (*Problems* 47). This is particularly shown in how Kāmila's narrative challenges the structure that oppresses her, even if this does not lead to liberation. Kāmila's decision to study in spite of her father's wish to the contrary is a blatant defiance of the patriarchal hold he and her brothers have over her life. Narrating this incident from her point

of view, Kāmila sees her action as "an alliance" with Nawfal, a strategic move that aims at "breaking [the family's] authoritarian hold," asserting her awareness of the defiance: "Due to my disappointment and frustration, the only way I could challenge [Fāḍil] was through reciting what I memorized from books" (180). This particular aspect of Kāmila's narrative is significant in the way it further deconstructs the patriarchal image of dominance and unity.

"Don't Tell the Horse"

One striking feature of 'Azzām's novel is the way he positions his characters in a detached manner while still maintaining a point of inescapable connectivity. Besides the father, the siblings' narratives appear to be subtly connected by the existence of the horse. The latter is perhaps the only aspect of the novel that has equal proximity to all the characters. The complexity of the horse's role is explained in the way the title is echoed in the novel. When Kāmil informs his father that Wāsil hates the horse, the father asks Kāmil not to tell the horse anything about it (112). This significantly reinforces the centrality of the horse within the family narrative. Even though Kāmil constantly describes the horse as aware and sensitive, the title indicates a sense of guardianship over it which is reiterated in the father's order to Kāmil. The horse thus becomes both an instigator and a manifestation of the family's tendency for secrecy and detachment. The final section of the novel, narrated from Kāmil's perspective, combines two key incidents: the father's death and the horse's freedom, intriguingly creating a link between the two.

The father's death significantly represents an ultimate form of decentralization, as the presumed center of the narrative/family ceases to exist. And this is reflected in the final part of the novel which presents a scene where chaos prevails in the family. The scene depicts the horse being beaten up and forced into a cart. As mentioned earlier, Kāmil then unexpectedly sets it free. Remembering that the horse's name is in fact Ṣubḥ, meaning "morning," Kāmil calls on him to run. His following statement symbolizes the ultimate decentralization of the narrative, as the horse "forcefully ventured into life and never looked back once until he dis-

appeared beyond the hill" (251). Here, the power and urgency experienced by the horse, as well as the significance of his name, present an unexpectedly hopeful note for the novel, one that the reader cannot help but associate with the father's death.

Conclusion

Reading Mamdūḥ ʻAzzām's *Lā tukhbir al-ḥiṣān* offers a unique examination of a family at a moment of crisis. While the article examined the novel as a study of a family on the cusp of disintegration, the text lends itself to multiple other interpretations related to sibling dynamics, socio-political changes, and epistemological dilemmas. ʻAzzām's novel defies the single story of harmony and unity. In addition, the way he chooses to challenge these notions in the context of a patriarchal family renders a more substantial impact on the reader. Familial and sibling bonds have an almost sacred value in Arab societies. Showing how human nature affects such bonds, at times even destroys them, is thus a direct and clear attestation to ʻAzzām's skepticism about the validity of these notions.

Taking the novel as a point of departure, ʻAzzām's refusal to adhere to the notions of unity and integration is a reflection of what he witnessed in his own country over nearly a decade prior to writing the novel. ʻAzzām's reality of war and turmoil offers valid insights into the ways in which presumed unity and coherence fail to save people and/or societies in situations of dire conflict. ʻAzzām's narrative technique is perhaps the most significant aspect of the novel. It allows the siblings to present their sides of the narrative, and simultaneously makes possible the dispersing of the family story. In their attempts to shake off the patriarchal hold of their father, the brothers end up as "brother-patriarchs" exercising power over one another, as well as over their sister, main recipient of the brunt of their oppression. I argued that ʻAzzām's literary technique, reminiscent of Bakhtinian theories of polyphonic narrative, is his means of reiterating his observations about Syrian reality. In this way, the siblings in the novel view reality and the truth in multiple ways, with each equally vocal and entitled to present their points of view and inner desires.

Perhaps the socio-political situation in post-war Syria is not as hopeful as the ending of ʻAzzām's novel. Nevertheless, simply acknowledging the dividedness of the siblings and the disintegration of the family might itself be a step toward understanding contemporary political reality. As I have shown, for ʻAzzām, post-2011 conditions highlight the fact that unity was never a reality. In *Lā tukhbir al-ḥiṣān*, the Najjār siblings slowly come to realize that the bonds that bring them together are precarious, yet see some hope in the horse's freedom. Perhaps one day Syrian people too would find unity and freedom the way Ṣubḥ does.

* All translations from Arabic are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

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