



DOI: 10.1515/rjes-2017-0005

THE IMPACT OF WORLD WAR I ON MIDDLE EAST
“ARABS” IN AWWAD’S “AL-RAGHIF”:
A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

LATEEF WISAM HAMID
West University of Timișoara

Abstract: *My paper will explore the genre of war narrative from a cultural perspective, namely the impact of the Great War on Arabs in the novel Al-Raghif (The Loaf) in 1939 by the Lebanese novelist Tawfiq Yusuf Awwad, as it is the first Arabic novel which is totally concerned with WWI and its long-lasting consequences: hunger, despair and the elusive promise of freedom to Arabs.*

Keywords: *Arab identity, consequences, diachronic relevance, great famine, macro-history, micro-history, refugee, the First World War.*

1. Introduction

When the First World War broke out, the entire Arab provinces, some of them being under Ottoman rule, were dragged into this colonial war, so that they should be re-divided. Such desires to control and possess were the reasons to drag the Arab provinces into this war. The Germans attempting to obtain a vantage point in the Ottoman Empire’s provinces put the position of Britain in the Middle East under threat. France also wanted to lay hands on Great Syria as well as the British wished to get hold of Palestine and Iraq and also to keep its control in Egypt.

As Lenin puts it in his collected works:

The war was brought on by the clash of two most powerful groups of multimillionaires, Anglo-French and German, for the re-division of the world. The Anglo-French group of capitalists wants first to rob Germany, deprive her of her colonies (nearly all of which have already been seized), and then to rob Turkey. The German group of capitalists wants to seize Turkey for itself and to compensate itself for the loss of its colonies by seizing neighboring small states (Belgium, Serbia and Rumania). (Lenin, 1917:335)

Each side of the belligerents exploited and utilized all kinds of resources and bases of the Arab provinces that were under their control. Britain and France (the Allied) used the land and resources of Sudan, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and the British spheres in the Arabian Peninsula. Germany and its ally, Turkey concentrating on its own provinces, exhausted all the manpower and natural resources of Iraq, Syria, Palestine, the Lebanon and part of the Arabian Peninsula (Lutsky:1969)

The involvement of the Arabs in First World War, on one side or on the other side, still did not reveal the real attitude of the Arab people. In fact, they were antagonistic to all sides and the rear fronts of Britain and France as well as Germany and Turkey were unsecure and unsteady. The Arabs loathed these overseas persecutors, and this loathing was competently applied by one imperialist bloc against the other. (Ibid)

In Arabs' homeland, each one of the belligerents supported nationalism and the revolutions in the rear of the other side and urged them, in order to achieve their own goals. The resistance against the British, French and Italian colonization started in Sudan, Egypt, and the countries of North Africa. The strong resistance was exactly in Libya and Morocco. Turkey and Germany used the Arab tribes in Libya to resist the British colonization in Egypt and by organizing much of the Bedouin attack from Libya on the Egyptian province. On the other side, the Anglo-French alliance used the nationalism in the Arab province obedient to the Ottoman Empire for the resistance against Germany and Turkey. The Arabs manage a preliminary survey mission and vandalize places behind the Turkish front and spark off the anti-Turkish revolution. (Ibid)

The Ottoman Army was located in Great Syria, a country that was totally not ready for such a kind of war. Syria's economy was unable to bear up the consequences of war. Hence these conflicts led to cause the Great Famine in the mountains of Lebanon, which was the disastrous consequence of both policy and environment, the amalgamation of an acute dry spell with locusts attack and a suffocating siege. Since the Ottoman Empire entered the war on Germany' side, the allied forces had laid a maritime siege to the Mediterranean Sea to block all kinds of goods from reaching the Ottoman Empire. On the other side, Jamal Pasha, chosen to be the minister of Navy over Great Syria at the same time, also laid the same siege along the eastern Mediterranean rim to prevent supplies from reaching Britain through the Suez Canal which also stopped any goods from reaching the people of Lebanon. This was the main reason which led to the death of thousands of people. He was called as "Al-jazzar" or "Al-saffah" which means "the butcher" and "the blood-shedder" due to his slaughter of Lebanese as well as Syrian people.

So if these two sieges were not enough, especially to the people in Mount Lebanon, what came was even worse. A dry spell hit the region and was followed by a locusts attack. On the one hand, the siege by the allied forces led to the Ottomans taking hold of resources and grains from the people to feed the army. On the other hand, locusts ate everything where they landed, thus removing any probable resources of livelihood. This led to famine and the increase of diseases like typhus, malaria, and smallpox in villages.

A grim conclusion emerges: disaster was two-fold. On the one hand, anthropomorphic disaster (the slaughtering, the cannon-fodder thereof) is noticeable; on the other hand, the natural disaster (the locusts attack) that was superimposed to the former in a strangely palimpsestic way.

For months, the small but greedy creatures ate anything that was left behind by the Turkish army, who had prioritized grain and food reserves for their own soldiers as part of the effort of this colonial war. This signalled the beginning of an era that is currently just an annotation in the history books. Note the marginality thereof:

The Great Famine of 1915-18, which left an estimated 500,000 people dead. With a lack of accurate data, estimates range from 100,000 to 200,000 deaths in Mount Lebanon alone. At this time, the population of Lebanon was estimated at about 400,000, meaning that half its people died. At 250,000, the American Red Cross estimated an even higher death toll. It was the highest death toll by a population of the First World War .(Ghazal: 2015).

There was information of people eating dogs, rats and cats, even of cases of cannibalism. There is a compelling story told by a church priest who narrates the experience of a father who wanted to confess and said that he ate his own kids, in a stance of forced cannibalism under the duress of war.

2. The Arabic Novel and the Great War: *Al-Raghif* “*The Loaf*” (1939) Tawfiq Yusuf Awwad:

When the First World War sparked in August 1914, the Arabic novel was still taking its first steps, hesitant in describing the personal adventures, recording the historic glories of the past, religious preaching, or translating some of Western narratives. Arab novelists did not focus that much on this great global event, and it lasted until 1939, the emergence date of the novel *Al-Raghif*, which derived its narrative events from the Great War, and its impact on the Arab region, and thus first Arab novel about the First World War came into being.

Tawfiq Yusuf Awwad (1911 – 1989) is a Lebanese writer and diplomat. He published two novels and four short stories. His 1939 novel *Al-Raghif*, “*Loaf*” described the great famine in the mount Lebanon as well as inspired by the Arab resistance to the Turks in World War I, “was quickly recognized as a landmark in the literary expression of Arab nationalism” (Tanoos 1994:71) As the Palestinian- Lebanese writer May Ziade puts it: “No one has documented the tragedy which was experienced by my country except Awwad in “*The Loaf*”. Awwad has lived it (tragedy) on behalf of all of us.” (Al-Abtah:2014). The representational power of this author is indeed noteworthy, as are his characters saliently archetypal.

The novel *Al-Raghif* was derived from the events of the Great War, and its impact on the Arab region, which becomes the first Arabic novel that revolves around the First World War, *Al-Raghif* stands for starvation and humiliation caused by hunger, and also the novel amply recounts the uprising against the monopolists who put their hands on wheat and flour in anticipation of profit and wealth, while the common people are starving and they are displaced in search of a morsel and dying on the roads and in the fields with swollen bellies. And the humiliation in some people went so far as to make them look for the remains of barley in cow dung. “There was a woman lying on her back, covered with lice. A newborn with enormous eyes was at her breast. The child kept pressing the breast with his hands and lips and would then give up and cry and cry.” (Awwad 1939: 169)

Arguably, this is a striking image, not dissimilar to those so dear to naturalistic writers such as Emile Zola. Indeed, the emphasis is laid on physiology here, in an attempt to portray victimhood as an aftermath of the Great War. The mechanics of gratification is hardly working here, as the suckling tries to get fed to no avail. The woman herself lacks functionality as a mother as she is covered in lice. Sanitary considerations are overridden here by survival from poverty and famine at large.

Isomorphous to Salman Rushdie’s concern for the overlap micro-history/macro-history, *Loaf* tackles the intricacies of the two inter-woven categories. Indeed, the highly personal, the physiological is used here to hint at the deteriorating nature of all things political. Not only is the biology of man precarious, but also politics is.

The novel begins with the narrative perspective of Turkish soldiers as they enter one of the Lebanese villages in November 1914, as the story unravels in time between 1914 and 1918 and most of its events happen in a small Lebanese village called “*Saqiat Al Misk*” and tells the biography of a revolutionary hero, Sami Asim who was struggling for the independence of Arab countries from the Ottoman Caliphate; he subsequently becomes a fugitive hiding on the outskirts of the village in “*Khuria cave*”; nobody knows his hideaway except “*Zina*” his beloved, who visits him from time to time, to provide him with food and news, and after several attempts, he is held captive in the hands of Turkish soldiers who abused him before putting him in Alia Prison, where he suffered the worst kinds of torture, before they issued a death sentence within the executions campaign led by Jamal Pasha against the Lebanese Resisters, after prolonged suffering he managed to escape and joined the Arab revolution in the desert, which was launched from the Hijaz in 1916, led by Sharif

Hussein; he led several military attacks against the Ottoman forces in Arab areas, until he reached the limits of Beirut . (Tanoos 1994:72-74)

Sami Asim did not live to achieve his dream and died in the battle of Arab forces on the outskirts of his village, but before his death, he had an epiphany that Arab nationalism was born at that glorious moment, in the heart of the battlefield, so he says to his companion Shafiq in what looks like a national sermon: "Today the true Arab nationalism was born, the mother is this revolution in which I am the Arab Christian walking by your side you are the Arab Muslims, to fight a common enemy of our country, that is the Turks".(Awwad 1939:207)

3. Conclusion

3.1. Micro-history and Macro-history

The novel seeks to monitor the effects of war on the Arab world, through the village which is a mini-society. "Saqiat Al-Misk" represents the Arab world that had been living in peace and tranquility, and had been enjoying the bounties of its town despite scarcity. But with the beginning of the Great War its conditions changed, its inhabitants became obliged to search for their daily bread and starve.

What is intriguing in this novel – and this arguably makes it a good novel, in the vein of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), is the co-existence of micro- and macro-history. Indeed, the intricate interplay between micro-history (life histories of starvation and deprivation) and macro-history (the history of Arab nations during the Great War) is reminiscent of Rushdie's subtle interwoven narratives in the novel quoted above, i.e. the micro-history of Saleem, born on the same night as the independence of India:

I was born in the city of Bombay ...once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more ...On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowds. (Rushdie 1981:9)

Quite intriguingly, the protagonist's fate is inextricably linked to that of his country, as is the fate of the Arab protagonists in the novel under scrutiny here. The juxtaposition thereof is redolent of the ideological passion behind the narrative.

3.2. Diachronic Consequences. Now and Then

The refugee and immigrant disaster nowadays in the Arab homeland and Europe brings to mind the suffering and privation of Arabs at another time of great turmoil: in the Great War and after its end and the ensuing agreements.

In terms of migrants and modern migration, it is again Rushdie who has something to say – as his preoccupations are not merely literary, but critical as well: in his volume of critical essays, *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), he argues,

The effect of mass migrations has been the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things, people who have been obliged to define themselves – because they are so defined by others – by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves. The migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier. (Rushdie 1991: 124-125)

What is relevant here is the eclectic nature of the migrant's psyche that Rushdie reveals, i.e. this new type of human being, whose relation to the – ever-shifting – world around him is ever more complex and quite extraneous to that of sedentary populations. The operative vectors of the migrant's personality – as they emerge from Rushdie's analysis – are both ontological (what they were, past ontology, mind you) and topographically-informed (where they find themselves – note the Present Tense here). This makeshift combination, between past ontology and present *locus* is what renders complexity and uniqueness to the modern migrant. Equally relevant, it is only by crossing frontiers, as Rushdie puts it, or, in other words, by transgressing boundaries, be they imaginary or real, can one experience epistemological awareness (i.e. truly know things, or see things plainly, in Rushdie's words). Consequently, albeit driven by warfare or famine, migrants are complex protagonists of history and literature.

The history and literature of the First World War both help the readers realize how that cruel past was responsible one way or another for the present chaos in the Arab homeland. On the one hand, writers and historians have attempted to cover the great devastation brought about by the Great War in the West, on the other hand, there are many in Europe and other places in the world who do not acknowledge the amount of devastation and turmoil it perpetrated in the Arab homeland. The casualties in the Arab homeland were astounding: the relentless combat did not only devastate the countries and decimate military forces; it equally devastated entire economies and communities. So we can safely say that the effect of the Great War on the Arabs is not dissimilar to the aftermath of the Second World War in Europe. The economic, psychological and social consequences were profound and destructive .

The First World War brought about extra political turmoil to the area. In Europe, the conflict consolidated and created national identities. But when we look at the Middle East, it devastated the totalitarian Turkish system which, in spite of all its faults, had allowed for a diversity of identities living together for a long time. In 1916 during the First World War, the Sykes-Picot Agreement was drawn, which separated the area into fields under the authority of Britain and France: forcefully, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine were under the authority of Britain, whereas Syria and Lebanon were under the authority of France, and this would happen only if Britain and France won the war. The controversy that no one of the Arab representatives of these areas was informed about the agreement, which was negotiated secretly and was against all values of self-determination that was the centerpiece of Wilson's "14 Points" plan for the world peace at the end of the war. In 1923, the Turkish rule was replaced by the French Mandate as a new foreign ruler to Syrian and Lebanese people and they had no say in this or they could do nothing regarding their new government. So the area was deceived in the new framework of totalitarian domination, and the bases were established on permanent reciprocal distrust. It is always tricky to tackle hegemony – and this hegemony was not to be taken lightly.

The present refugee disaster is just a consequence of the mistakes made one hundred years ago, which entailed the First World War, which brought about an aftermath of conflict and ensuing misery.

References

- Al-Abtah, Susan. 2014. "The First World War Re-appear in The Lebanese Novel" in *AL-Sharq Al-Awsat: International Arabic Newspaper*. [Online] Available:
http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=19&article=783426&issueno=13045#.V8mNv_I97IU
[Accessed 2015, April 13].
- Awwad, T. Y. 1980 (1939). *Al-Raghif*. 15th ed. Beirut: Lebanon Library. Print.

ROMANIAN JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES
RJES 14 /2017

- Ghazal, Rym. 2015. "Lebanon's dark days of hunger: The Great Famine of 1915- 18" The National World [online]. Available <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/lebanons-dark-days-of-hunger-the-great-famine-of-1915-18#full> [accessed 2016 ,March 10].
- Lenin, V. I. 2011 (1917). *Collected Works*. Trans. M.S. Levin, Vol. 23. Moscow: Progress. Print.
- Lutsky, Vladimir Borisovich. 2008 (1969). *Modern History of the Arab Countries*. Trans. Lika Nasser. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Rushdie, Salman. 1991. *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism*. London: Granta Books.
- Rushdie, Salman. 1981(1995). *Midnight's Children*. London: Vintage. Print.
- Tanoos, Jan. 1994. *Tawfiq Yusuf Awwad: Psychological Study in his Personality and Novels*. Beirut: Dar Alkutub Alalmica.

Note on the Author

Lateef WISAM HAMID is a PhD student in the English Department, West University of Timisoara, Romania. He holds a Master's Degree in English and Foreign Languages University, India. He has attended four conferences in different study fields. He taught English at secondary school for six years and was a lecturer at Al-Maarif University College, Iraq, for two years.