

## Story and Narrative Time Influences on Creating Suspense in Abu Gati<sup>٤</sup>

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### Synopsis:

The present article scrutinizes two narrative aspects: story time (erzählte Zeit<sup>1</sup>) and narrative time (Erzählzeit) in Shamran al-Yasery's tetralogy Abu Gati<sup>٢</sup> examining their functions in generating atmosphere of tension and suspense. Gerard Genette in Narrative Discourse (1980) clarifies that 'story time' points to the chronological sequence of the events and incidents in a story. While 'narrative time' refers to the 'pseudo-temporal order' of the incidents and their arrangement in the narrative.<sup>3</sup> Examining the narrative 'anachronies'<sup>4</sup> of Abu Gati entails inspecting different sorts of discordance in the narrative structure of the scenes which are diagnosed, in the present article, in three kinds: reversion, ellipsis and inversion. Through a textual analysis of specific scenes, events and incidents are examined and their connections to story time and narrative time are accentuated pinpointing within the process their thematic reference. While measuring forms of anachronies, selected letters and numbers are given to the addressed incidents in order to establish ample connections between them and to render the analysis lucid and comprehensible.

### Keywords:

#### 1. AbuGati: Plot Summary

Abu Gati<sup>٥</sup> (1989) is a tetralogy of four parts: al-Zinad (The Rifle), Balabush Dunya (Dammed Life), Ghanam al-Shyukh (The Sheep of the Sheikhs) and Fulus Hmayid (Hmayid's Money).<sup>6</sup> The novel has no single protagonist as the focus is divided among the main members of al-Muhalal tribe.<sup>7</sup> They are mainly; the sheikh<sup>8</sup> of the tribe Saadun-al-Muhalal, his cousins Husain and Khalaf and the shepherd of the sheikh Hmayid Abu al-Benah. In the third and fourth parts of the tetralogy, the narrative attention is polarized on the second generation, the sons of the first generation; Dhary, Fadhil, Malla Ni'ma and Salih Abu al-Benah. al-Zinad depicts Iraq under the British mandate<sup>9</sup> governed by King Faysal I. 10 Three years after the Twentieth Revolution<sup>11</sup>, Thawrat al-Shreen, the British governor, as part of a policy to maintain the allegiance of the southern tribes, pays large amounts of money as gifts, hadiyya, to the sheikhs of the tribes. Sheikh Saadun gains privileges and achieves profits from the generous British offerings. Following the advice of his close friend sheik Saadun buys water pumps to irrigate the lands of the farmers in return for a share in their crops. The more affluent and wealthy Saadun grows, the higher the rate of the share he demands. His exploitive policy angers the tribesmen and set them to furry. Husain and Khalaf, Saadun's cousins, refute the sheikh's exploitation and scorn it. However, their protests were feeble and soon were abated.

In the second part, Balabush Dunya, sheikh Saadun died leaving the leadership of the tribe to his eldest son Falih. The new sheikh exceeds his father not only in his greed and exploitation, but also in the moral corruption. Falih seems to immerse himself in drinking, celebrating gratifying nights with the kawliya<sup>12</sup>, and indulging himself in sexual affairs with the wives of his relatives. Balabush Dunya narrates the tragic death of Nasir, Husain's son, who is shot in a demonstration against the British authority in Kirkuk. In al-Batra', Mallah<sup>13</sup> Ni'ma, Nasir's brother, fearlessly stands to defend the farmers' right in the ownership of their lands. Heated political circumstances such as the attack on Egypt in 1956<sup>14</sup> and the assassination of the Iraqi prime minister Nury Sa'id<sup>15</sup> are portrayed with the attention divided on the two opposing camps; the farmers' riots and uproar and the gradual collapse of the feudal system represented by sheikh Falih.

Ghanam al-Shyukh portrays a new era in Iraq as the country becomes a republic after the coup d'état led by Abdulkarim Qasim<sup>16</sup> (1914-1963) in 1958. The new law of agricultural reform has destroyed the materialistic and financial privileges sheikhs like Falih enjoys. The government confiscates the ten thousands of miles of land Falih owns leaving him only a one thousand plot as his rightful property. The loss includes his hundreds of sheep as well which is another striking blow to the sheik, but more to the shepherd Salih Abu al-Benah who stealthily sells and smuggles the sheep. Making good use of the riot erupted in the village, al-Benah and his sons covertly depart delving into the heart of the marshes.

The fourth part, Fulus Hmayid, focuses on the conspiracies between Jnedy and Mhedy, two sons of Salih al-Benah, who set a scheme to rob their father's buried money. Accidentally Salih meets sheikh<sup>17</sup> Hasan al-Karbala'i and his companion and cautiously inquires about the tribe and the farmers in al-Batra'. To his delight, he comes to know that sheikh Falih has launched a prosperous business and the farmers each gained a plot of land to cultivate as their property. Before al-Benah celebrates the joyful account, he is struck with the news that the new republic government has changed the old currency. Thus, al-Benah's buried money which he and his father have gathered throughout the past years is valueless now. With this blow, he falls to the ground desperate and motionless.

#### 2. Generating Tension through Story and Narrative Time

The opening scene of al-Zinad depicts sheikh Saadun al-Muhalal and members of his tribe entertaining their evening in al-Rab'a, the tribe's gathering hall, listening to popular verse recited by Husain, the tribe's poet:

The beads of the rosary danced in his [Husain's] hand, then he rolled the rosary around his wrist and curled his moustache. They couldn't see his facial expression in the dark, but his voice was tender as he recited:

Oh, shall I tell you  
Of the charm of your eyes  
Cox and Delly's<sup>18</sup> art and their troops  
Approach you to seduce  
But when family from you depart  
We draw enchanted close  
And your heart softly embraces  
Leave your heart with us to brace<sup>19</sup>

Though the gathering is attentive to Husain's lyric, sheikh Saadun appears oblivious initiating no response. The author's comment unveils the cause behind his bewilderment:

Their babel didn't drive Saadun out of his silence, he was occupied by the news they unfolded earlier. It isolated him away from the surrounding. He felt the urge to hear it again so he asked Khalaf to tell it exactly as it came to him. Khalaf related the story for the third times: I met Ibn Turfa in the afternoon. He has just come back from Baghdad having with him a thousand ruppiya<sup>20</sup>, a present from the English governor. He said sheikh Sigab received the same and other sheikhs from various places were not less rewarded. (al-Zinad, 13)

The story of the English governor offering a thousand ruppiya to sheikhs of various tribes, which has been mentioned by the gathering two times before, captivates Saadun's thinking rendering him inattentiveness to his tribesmen.

The story time of the previous scene has the following chronological sequence: first, Khalaf's story about Ibn Turfa and the British gift, A1. The second is related to Saadun's reaction and his sense of bewilderment, A2:

A1 → A2

Concerning the narrative time of this scene, it reverses the order since the reader is introduced first to sheikh Saadun's state of absentmindedness, A2. Gradually the obscurity of the scene is cleared when Khalaf is asked, for the third time, to narrate his encounter with Ibn Turfa, A1. Accordingly, the scene order becomes:

A2 → A1

This reversion creates a sense of tension and colors the scene with an era of perplexity and ambiguity. William Nobel in *Elements of Fiction Writing: Conflict, Action and Suspense* (1994) comments on the strategies involved in a suspense scene "we must see it [suspense scene] as a building up of uncertainty, keeping the reader guessing, and leaving question marks".<sup>21</sup> On another level, such reversion contributes in bringing forth past incidents into the present for purposes of commentary and critique. The story of the English gifts emerges out of the present situation while Saadun and his company entertain their evening. This technique rims the past incidents with 'the point of view'<sup>22</sup> of the present. This is caught in Ghafil and Khalaf's interpretation of the story:

-Tell me men...this English governor...why is he giving this amount of money? The sheik inquired.

-He buys men with it. I swear on the soul of Muhalhal that this is the reason. What else Ghafil affirmed.

-He [the English governor] is not losing anything. This note of a hundred they print it by their own hands...dammed life. Khalaf said (al-Zinad, 13-14)

The sheikh's cousins offer two justifications for the governor's gifts: first, he seeks the sheikhs' allegiance particular after the Twentieth Revolution. Second, the British authority is the ruling power of Iraq, it enjoys the liberty of managing, administrating and extravagantly spending from the country's budge. Bringing in a past incident into a present situation makes possible not only for the comments of the group to be delivered after listening to the story, but even while the story is narrated. This is caught in Husain's flow of memories while he is listening to Khalaf's account:

Husain remembered when he sat a trap for a group of thieves...some distance from his house. The village's dogs were fighting on a donkey's carcass, when a hyena passed by. He belittled the dogs' threats, snatched the carcass and carried it in his jaw. Husain inquired within himself: is it true what they say? The smell of the carrion attracts the hyena from a long distance. (al-Zinad, 13)

Through the technique of the stream of consciousness, the narrator unveils Husain's memories which pinpoint his

allegorical understanding of the relationship between the English presents and the sheikhs' eagerness for affluence and wealth. The dogs and hyenas are metaphors for the sheikhs of Iraq who are in a competition to gain the governor's presents, symbolized, in Husain's story, by the donkey's carcass. Furthermore, (Husain's memory anticipates sheikh Saadun's acceptance of the English money, an occurrence that takes place in the subsequent scenes. Therefore, the reversion in scene order culminates in an equal reversion in story time and narrative time. This technique fulfils three purposes: first, it builds up an area of mystery and bafflement, second, it permits past incidents to spring out of the present situation with critique and interpretation. Third, this narrative strategy contributes in foreshadowing coming events accentuating the era of prediction and expectation.

The narrative order of Abu Gati' entails cases of ellipsis where a portion of a sequence of events is omitted leaving a gap between the duration of the events according to story time and their duration following narrative time. In the fourth part of the tetralogy, Fulus Hmayid, Salih, the shepherd, is baffled and restlessly fearing sheikh Falih's inquiry about the shrinking number of the sheep, which Salih stealthily has sold them. Surprisingly, the sheikh appears indifferent displaying no interest in this subject. He seems captured by an indistinct affair which Salih could not decipher from the conversation between Falih and his assistance, (Dawood)

The sheikh turned to (Dawood)

-Stop the car behind the tunnel, and let them come walking

-But it is far for them, God save you. Dawood replied

-It's better to meet there...as if we are going to the kawliya

-As you wish, God save you. (Fulus Hmayid, 17)

The dialogue is abstruse and Salih, who is the center of the scene, remains disturbed unable to interpret its connotations. After a couple of scenes, a meeting is portrayed between Dawood, Malla Ali, who is responsible for the sheikh's financial state, and Ubaid al-Mentaz, the farmers' monitor, at night. The astonished Zina, Dawood's wife, watches them while bringing heavy bundles from the outside and placing them at the corner of the house:

After a while Ubaidal-Mentaz returned followed by Zina's father, each was staggering under the weight of the roll he was carrying. They repeatedly went out and returned. In the final time, Dawood accompanied them. Then Ubaidal-Mentaz began taking the rolls to his house. (Fulus Hmayid, 38)

When Zina asked about the mysterious bundles, her husband whispers 'Those are the guns and the bullets of the sheikh' (Fulus Hmayid, 38). The story order entails three scenes: the first depicts a meeting between the sheikh and Dawood as they discuss a plan to transfer guns from the sheikh's house to Dawood's, which Salih attends and could not comprehend, B1. The second, omitted from the narrative order, is the implementation of the first part of the plan when Dawood, Ubaid al-Mentaz and Malla Ali cautiously transfer the wrapped rifles and the bags of bullets from the sheikh's house to the car near the tunnel, B2. The third scene depicts the three men carefully storing the rolls of guns in the courtyard of Dawood's house, to be moved later to the house of Ubaid al-Mentaz, B3:

B1 → B2 → B3

Eliminating B2 from the narrative sequence, the narrative order becomes:

B1 → B3

The ellipsis points to the fact that the duration of the events in the story is not in accordance with their duration in the narrative. Gerald Prince in *Narratology* (1982) comments on the speed of narrative stating that "the speed of a narrative varies considerably and it is this variation which helps give the narrative a certain rhythm".<sup>23</sup> Hence, in this scene, the discordance between narrative time and story time leads to time condense, invites the reader to fill in the missing parts of

the narrative with his own imagination and generates an atmosphere of ambiguity and suspense.

Scene inversion is a decisive strategy in Abu Gati' which is frequently accompanied by an equal inversion in the story time and narrative time. This inversion contributes in highlighting elements of obscurity and tension in the text. In a scene in Balabush Dunya, the farmers are astonished marveling at a vague incident of a veiled visitor who is seen at the house of Ubaid al-Mentaz the night before:

The farmers whispered, while the Malla is away, about a mysterious incident. A strange man was seen in the little car of sheikh Dhary, the son of Falih, in the thickening darkness of the evening. The car stopped at the house of Ubaid al-Mentaz, the farmers' monitor of Mwayliha village. Ubaid, himself, affirmed later that the veiled man is an employee in the Private Section in Kut province. He came to verify the secret reports they have been receiving from the district. Ubaid hints to Malla Ni'ma having a role in these reports. (Balabush Dunya, 41)

Inscrutable details are provided by a farmer who happens to be at the house of Ubaid when the visitor arrives:

He didn't enter the guest hall until we left out. When I sneaked and tried to catch a glimpse of his face on the light of my lamp, I was astonished to see the guest room was dark. But I kept watching to see who came in and out. Then I was astonished to find the man leaving with Ubaid after dinner...they went to the direction of the river...then they returned after an hour or more (Balabush Dunya, 41)

The subsequent scene clarifies the vagueness related to the indistinct identity of the visitor with the true revelation of the whole incident. Dhary, the sheikh's son, is hosting in his house Saada, a prostitute. After a gratifying night with her, the son frightfully knows about his father's sudden return. To save the situation, Dawood suggests to dress the woman in men clothes and send her back, which is the same camouflage she came in the day before. Dawood narrates to Ubaid:

Finally, I thought of dressing her from top to foot of Dhary's clothes. She appeared like a great sheikh (as you have seen). No one suspected her entry into the villa. Those who saw her thought he is definitely a friend of the sheikhs' son, a dear guest in the villa of al-Muhalal. (Balabush Dunya,42)

Dawood's account genuinely inverts the incident circulated by the farmers of what they thought to be the government sudden investigation of the sheik's house into a story of an unfortunate sexual adventure of the sheikh's son. According to story time, the sudden arrival of the father, C1, and the camouflage of the prostitute, C2, are actions that occurs prior to the curious reaction of the farmers, C3 followed by Ubaid's fabricated story of the employee from the Private Section, C4. Hence, the chronological scene order is:

C1→C2→ C3→C4

Nevertheless, an ample inversion of scene order and time sequence are diagnosed in the scrutinized scene since it opens with the villagers' gossip about a strange visitor, C3, followed by Ubaid al-Mentaz's faked declaration of the identity of the visitor, an employee from the Private Section, C4. Then the abrupt news of the arrival of the father, C1 followed by Dawood's disguise plan, C2. According to narrative time, the arrangement of the incidents is the following:

C3→C4→ C1→C2

This inversion which takes a 'zigzag' like path accentuates elements of tension, rims the scene with an era of uncertainty and paves the ground for another kind of reversal, this time in the thematic content. In the examined scene above, al-Yasery skillfully inverts what appears to have a political connotation into a non-political one. The mysterious visit of the government agent to the villa of the sheikh seems to carry hideous political references since it occurs during the turmoil of the 1958 revolution. Contrary to this is the prostitute's visit which is related to Dhary's sexual affair and his insistence to

gratify them despite the political upheaval. The inversion bestows a humorous flavor on the scene and delivers a sharp critique related to the effortless way through which simple personal affair could acquire hideous political connotations owing to the riot following the coups d'état. The skilful narrative and thematic inversion renders the novel, as Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) describes, a text of 'bliss' as it is dexterously "de-politicizing what is apparently political and politicizing what apparently is not".<sup>24</sup>

To conclude one may venture to state that al-Yasery's tetralogy *Abu Gati'* explicitly demonstrates cases of narrative discordance which highlight a disparity between narrative time and story time. The narrative anachronism of the text are implemented through a variety of strategies such as: reversion, ellipsis and inversion. These techniques accentuate an era of tension and uncertainty, intensify elements of prediction and expectation and point to the paradoxical logic of fiction which, according to Gerard Genette:

[...] requires one to define any element or any unit of narrative by its functional character, that is to say among other things by its correlation with another unit and to account for the first (in the order of narrative time) by the second, and so on whence it results that the last is the one which governs all others and is governed by nothing: this is essential locus of arbitrariness at least in the immanence of narrative itself, for it is then easy to find for it all the psychological, historical, or aesthetic determinants that we want.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. References

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### ENDNOTES

1. Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* (1980) cites the terms 'erzählte Zeit' and 'Erzählzeit' from Gunther Muller, 'Erzählzeit und erzählte Zeit', *Festschrift für P. Kluckhohn und Hermann Schneider*, 1948. *Morphologische Poetik* (Tübingen, 1968).
2. Shamran al-Yasery, *Abu Gati'* (Baghdad: Dar Babel, 1989)
3. Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 35.
4. According to Genette, *the word 'anachrony' refers to all forms of discordance between the two temporal orders of story and narrative*. See Gerard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*, 40.
5. Abu Gati' is a title, kunyya, which means "the father of Gati'", the author Shamran al-Yasery was named after it. It is the tradition in the Arab world to call the parents after the name of their eldest child through an agnomen indicating an appreciation to their social position of being a father or a mother. See the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, s. v "Kunya".

6. The language of this is tetralogy is a mixture of the standard Arabic language and the southern Iraqi dialect. The use of the rural southern accent bestows, on the book, a sense of authenticity in its portrayal of the people of the rural southern region in Iraq during an extended period; the forties, fifties and sixties
7. *al-Muhalal tribe is one of the tribes of al-Siyyah who lived in the south of Iraq in the twenties in an area called, at that time, al-Batra, known now al-Kut governorate. For more details about the tribes of Iraq see 'Abd 'Un al-Rawdhan, Mawsu'at 'Asha'ir al-'Iraq: Tarikh, Ansab, Rihlat and Ma'athir (Amman: al-Ahliyya Publishing House, 2003).*
8. The noun 'sheikh' refers to the one whose age appears advanced and whose hair has grown white. For pre-Islamic times onward, the word is used to refer to the chief of any group. See the Encyclopedia of Islam, 1960, s. v. 'Sheikh'.
9. After the downfall of the Ottomans Empire with World War I, Mesopotamia (Iraq) was put, according to the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, under the British mandate. For more details see Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2012), 21-37.
10. The Hashemite family includes Faisal bin Hussein bin Ali al-Hashemi (1885 -1933), his son Ghazi (1912-1939) and the latter's son Faisal II (1935-1958) ruled Iraq, respectively. For more details see Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2000), 77-103.
11. The Twentieth Revolution, Thawrat al-Ishreen, began in 1920. It was first erupted in Rumetha, south of Iraq, as the tribe of al-Dhawalim attacked the government building there and set free their sheikh Shaalan Abu al-Jun, who was held a prisoner by the British authority. Series of riots followed crushing the major cities as Karbala, Baghdad and Mosul and inflicting the British forces with heavy casualties. However, the revolution was quickly abated due to the lack of a united leadership. For more details see Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (2000), 31- 40.
12. "*kawliya*" is an Iraqi colloquial word referring to the gypsy community in the country. Historians vary in their interpretations of the origin of this community. Generally, it is known for their dancing and music. See Jala al-Hanfī al-Baghdadi's *Mujam al-Alfath al-Kuwaytiya* (Baghdad: Assad Press, 1964), 300.
13. "*Mallah*" is a title given to the religious person in Islam who holds Fridays' prayers and give speeches at the mosque.
14. The 1956 Attack on Egypt or what is called the Suez Crisis refers to a military clash between Egypt, on one side, and Britain, France and Israel on the other. The reason is owing to the president Jamal Abdel Nasser's decision in 26 July 1956 to nationalize the Suez Canal. For more details see Afaf Lutfei al-Said, *A Short History of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1985),103-132.
15. Nury Pasha al-Said (1888 - 1958) was an Iraqi politician during the monarchic system. He served for seven terms as Prime Minister of Iraq. On 15 July 1958, the day after the republican revolution, he attempted to flee the country, but was captured and killed. See Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (2000), 143.
16. Abdalkarim Qasim (1914-1963) was a high general in the Iraqi army who led a coup d'état in 1958 and overthrew the monarchic system. For more details see Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (2000), 143.
17. Here the title 'sheikh' which is given to Hasan al-Karbalay is not a reference to his leadership of a tribe, rather to his religious authority being a man of piety.
18. Cox and Dolly were high rank generals in the English army in Iraq during the British mandate.
19. Shamran al-Yasery,*al-Zinad* (Baghdad: Dar Babel, 1989), 12. Further citations will be from this edition and only the title of the part and the page number will be parenthetically cited within the text. The translation into English is carried out by the researcher as no English version is available.
20. The *ruppiya* is an Iraqi currency used during the monarchic system (1921-1958).
21. William Nobel, *Elements of Fiction Writing: Conflict, Action and Suspense* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1994), 2.
22. Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 39. It is significant to mention that in his analysis of scene order of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu, In Search of Lost Time* . Genette discusses the manner through which present incidents emerge out of the past which function as 'anticipation of the present from within the past'. In the analysis above a reverse case proves possible delivering a similar function regarding anticipation.
23. Gerald Prince, *Narratology: The Form and Function of Narrative* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1982), 55.
24. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 44.
25. As cited by Gerald Prince, *Narratology*, 157.