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**The Queue and Arab Spring**

A dystopian fiction-novel *The Queue* written by Basma Abdel Aziz describes the story that seems already too familiar to many of the readers. Amidst the tyrannical authoritarianism by their governments, inhabitants in the Middle East, both in the novel and Arab Spring, strive to bring about democratic reforms and social justice in their environments. In many ways, predicaments in Arab countries and the book share similarities that they are ridden with repressive regimes in which individual’s rights are overlooked and centralized states rein in full control of their populations. *The Queue* meticulously delves into different aspects of individuals in the novel that describe how regimes attempt to contain their populations and how people react correspondingly. In many ways the course of events folded in the book is also observed in Egypt in larger magnitude. At the end, just as how ambiguously the book had come to the conclusion, so was Arab Spring in Egypt.

In Arab world and *The Queue*, the main characteristics that define their authoritarian regimes are corruption, lack of democracy, bad governance, and economic stagnation. Corruption is apparent in forms of rigged elections and nepotism. Democracy is stomped through states’ control of press and censorship; false imprisonment and violence, if necessary, of opposition; and reinforcement of ordinances on people’s daily actions. Economic stagnation is marked by downsizing of employement and rise of taxes on expense of populations. There are various reasons attributing to these characteristics. First, U.S. and British foreign policy support Middle Eastern states to maintain autocratic states because they believe strong centralized powers, whether democratic or repressive, are able to execute bold decisions, such as negotiating peace treaty with Israel, and collaborate with western nations that their populations would otherwise object to. They support maintaining status quo in the region which would hinder its polarization and ensure constant flow of oils to West. Secondly, states believe that centralized state is the key to modernization and economic nationalization. By nationalizing oil companies and kicking foreigners out of the country, Arab states seized complete control of their oil production and gained unrivaled political powers to wield their populations through benefits-for-compliance system. Therefore, states do not feel bounded by their populations and can act on their own. Third, Middle Eastern states inevitably met economic stagnation due to their centralized economy. Nationalization of properties had its limit and along with world economic crisis and decline of oil prices also put hold on their economies. Unemployment rate reached high and dissatisfaction of youth loomed in large. Lastly, corruption was brought by crony capitalism. When United States, with an assistance of International Monetary Funds (IMF) and other financial institutions, imparted a model of neo-liberalism throughout the world, Arab states had to comply with their paradigm in order to request billions of dollars of credit lines. Henceforth, with undercutting subsidiaries for foods, welfare, and no guarantees for employment anymore, privatizations of industries brought crony capitalism and nepotism. As a result, states had to respond with manipulation of public opinions and brute violence to keep public dissents in check. In *The Queue*, Basma Abdel Aziz uses various settings and describes events in which these characteristics are manifested symbolically.

In *The Queue*, bad governance, democracy deficit, corruption, and economy stagnation can be observed both symbolically and explicitly. Firstly, the Gate had complete control over press and newspapers. For example, *The Truth,* a news outlet singly reigned over any other like and exercised its monopoly (Aziz 112). Ehab’s publishes on accounts of microbus drivers who had witnessed bloody consequences of Disgraceful Events, were immediately censored (Aziz 183). Accounts of bullets among casualties or injured were dismissed as false rumors and instead protesters were blamed for having wicked morals and mental diseases (Aziz 52). The Gate also manipulated public opinions, supposedly conducting “unbiased” polls in which people unanimously agree with states’ decisions (Aziz 68). Second, the Gate also did not hesitate from unleashing violence against people. During the Disgraceful Events, as Mahfouz had done, Quell Force fired bullets and bludgeoned protesters with truncheons. In the queue to the Gate, many people were suddenly disappeared, and Ameni was forcibly detained and tortured when she was caught in vain efforts to obtain Yehya’s X-ray (Aziz 153). Third, the Gate directed many aspects of daily lives of citizens. For example, The Gate of Maladies forced Amani to change the cause of her daughter’s death, that is, not due to high medical fees but merely due to her destiny (Aziz 67). Then when Ines commended one of her students for her paper on conditions of the district she lived, she immediately became a subject of supervision and was required to obtain Certificate of True Citizenship from the Gate (Aziz 13). Fourth, corruption in rigged election and nepotism are displayed from an account of old southern woman, Ines, and High Sheikh. When southern woman voted a wrong candidate, shops refused to sell any bread to her (Aziz 12). Ines, after fully conforming to the authority, later married the man in *galabeya*, symbolizing nepotism in favor of those who abide by the authority (Aziz 189). High Sheikh who released fatwas on behalf of the authorities, was also granted preeminence and praise by news outlets, being rewarded for his unequivocal commitment to the Gate (Aziz 132). Economic stagflation in Arab World is also shown in *The Queue*. The Gate imposed costly fees on almost anything, from window-shopping to even strolling in the park, and deducted a portion of salary to raise revenue (Aziz 32). Many companies went bankrupt due to exorbitant fees and many employees were laid off to curb financial loss (Aziz 32).

In *The Queue*, each character, in their own ways, responded differently as the events unfolded. Ines viewed the world with utmost resignation. Working as a teacher, she was afraid of consequences for speaking out aloud her opinions and hence abandoned her stance immediately after she discovered that her argument with Shalaby had been recorded under cell phone surveillance (Aziz 131). She began to attend High Sheikh’s weekly lessons regularly and became subservient to the authority. Her subsequent marriage to the man in *galabeya* symbolizes her complete submission to the regime (Aziz 189). The character who was fully supportive of authority’s orders was the man in *galabeya*. He accepted and willingly complied with the Gate’s decrees and High Sheikh’s fatwas (Aziz 132). When the boycott of Violet Telecom began to gain popularity, he discouraged everyone from partaking in the campaign and dismissed eyewitnesses’ accounts of bullets being fired upon the crowds as heresies (Aziz 132). With absolute compliance, the man in *galabeya* upheld laws of authorities and denounced everyone who doubted them, pointing to their lack of faiths and religious duties (Aziz 133). A contrasting character who did not behave alike, was the woman with short hair. When men were hurling insults at her for defending the missing bag of an owner, she firmly stood her ground (Aziz 48). Upon discovering that cell phones had surveillance feature, she bravely led the boycott campaign onward (Aziz 122). Despite the relentless threats received by the man in the *galabeya* and his followers, she fought back by correcting his arguments and editorials of *The Truth* and developing a daily program in which she would read important news for those who couldn’t read (Aziz 170. Lastly, Um Mabrouk believed that bad lucks followed her everywhere and therefore it was impossible to change the course of way things are; so instead she tried to make best of her situation (Aziz 132). While waiting in the queue, she brought a mat and sold wares and goods to crowd (Aziz 88). She collected newspaper, magazines and provided them to customers as means of entertainment (Aziz 168). Despite the predicament she was situated in, of her daughters’ deaths and heart disease, Um Mabrouk actively interacted with her customers, collected enough money for her daughter’s treatment, and regularly attended sessions held by the man in *galabeya* (Aziz 169).

Soon after uprising in Tunisia, protests fiercely spread throughout the Egypt. As the protests grew larger and larger, Egyptian army stepped in and deposed Hosni Mubarak who had ruled Egypt for three decades. In aftermath, new election was held and the Muslim Brotherhood won popular mandates to enter into the government. However, as rivalry between deep states and the Muslim Brother deepened, Egyptian economy rapidly deteriorated and hundreds of thousands of protesters occupied the streets once again. As a result, military stepped in second time and established an interim government that turned out to be far more repressive. In *The Queue*, people also took out to the streets in uprising known as the First Storm and almost overthrew their ruler (Aziz 9). However, lack of transparency and unity among protesters brought fragmentation and ultimately attributed to the Gate’s reclaim of power (Aziz 9). Same can be said for Egyptian uprising. Due to the varying demands and loose organized nature of the protests, Egyptian protesters could not agree in singularity what changes they wanted to bring in after demise of the regime. There was no available blueprint after replacement of Hosni Mubarak and therefore what was handed them was a government that is hardly more democratic than the previous one.

The uprising in Egypt bore ambiguous conclusion. Protesters demanded depose of Hosni Mubarak and his inner circle and army stepped in and brought him down. There was also then new democratically held election. However, the result was not exactly what people had wanted; Army wasn’t on people’s side, per se. In fact, they were responsible for disappearance and deaths of thousands of Egyptians. After dissolving the Muslim Brotherhood, military drafted new constitution and empowered structures of deep state even more, ironically. They built much more repressive regime and buttressed authoritarianism. At the end of *The Queue*, Tarek proposed to Nagy that he would perform surgery to dislodge bullet from Yehya’s body (Aziz 216). Yehya is the living proof of Northern Building’s use of firearms and hence can be proven crucial tool in bringing down the regime. However, readers are left flustered as it was unclear whether Yehya is alive or dead at the end because a document containing an update on Yehya had come to complete stop (Aziz 217). Same ambiguity is embedded in Egyptian uprising whether or not it has brought Egyptians changes, if any, that they had wanted.

*The Queue* by Basma Abdel Aziz used many settings, characters, and elements in the story that resembles as perhaps a miniature description of autocratic states in contemporary Middle East. The uprisings and methods in which the Gate attempted to manipulate their populations all too describe well how Arab Spring came sparked in Egypt. However, Arab Spring is hardly considered to have brought any democratic advancement in Middle East. In Egypt, depose of the president gave birth to military-backed government, of which is too ambiguous to conclude if anything has ever changed on behalf of Egyptian people.

**Work Cited**

Al-Aziz, Basmah Abd, and Elisabeth Jaquette. *The Queue: a Novel*. Melville House, 2016.