

Beyond Punishment: Waiting Under the Panoptic Gaze in Aziz's *The Queue*

*Cezanın Ötesinde: Aziz'in
The Queue Romanında
Panoptik Bakıřlar Altında Bekleme*

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine how waiting becomes a disciplinary apparatus in the dystopian and Kafkaesque world of Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* (2013). A society structured as a Panopticon forces State approval of every personal and professional work and yet pauses its bureaucratic machinery indefinitely, after facing dissent. Known as the Gate, it imposes and encourages a queue in front of it for approval of papers, while maintaining pervasive surveillance all around. When contextualised within the Arab Spring in Egypt, the queue and the accompanied waiting in the novel raise existential questions and point to the experimental forms of punishments that help maintain hegemonic power over people. The paper examines the prominent instances of waiting in the novel vis-à-vis Foucault's idea of panopticism and Schweizer's theory of waiting. In a nation engulfed in the inherent arbitrariness of waiting and its psychological effect, it implies a punishment meant to control and constrain personal freedom. Thus, the paper depicts how disciplinary apparatuses like imposed waiting and Panopticon are used as implicit and perpetual forms of punishment. Basma Abel Aziz uses the conventions of dystopian fiction to envision an alternate reality, developing out of unpleasant realities of the context.

Keywords

dystopia, *The Queue*, Basma Abdel Aziz, Panopticon, Arab Spring, Kafkaesque

Öz

Bu makale, Basma Abdel Aziz'in *The Queue* (2013) adlı romanının distopik ve Kafkaesk dünyasında bekleyişin nasıl bir disiplin aygıtı haline geldiğini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Panoptikon olarak yapılandırılmış bir toplumda devletin her kişisel ve profesyonel işi onaylaması zorunlu hale gelir ve bu durumda dahi devlet dirençle karşılaşınca bürokrasi makinesini süresiz olarak durdurur. Romandaki *Kapı* belgelerin onaylanması için kendi önünde kuyruğa girilmesini zorlar ve teşvik eder, bu aynı zamanda yaygın bir gözetim ağı kurmasını sağlar. Romanı Mısır'daki Arap Baharı ile bağlamsallaştırınca, romandaki bu sıraya girme ve sıradaki bekleyiş hali birçok varoluşsal soru ortaya çıkarır ve insanlar üzerinde kurulan hegemonik güce yardımcı cezalandırma sistemlerinin deneysel türlerine işaret eder. Bu makale romandaki belli bekleyiş örneklerini Foucault'un panoptikon kavramı ve Schweizer'in bekleme teorisiyle birlikte incelemektedir. Doğuştan gelen keyfi bekleyiş ve bu bekleyişin psikolojik etkileri tarafından yutulmuş bir ulusta yaşanan bu durum insanların özgürlüğünü kontrol edip sınırlandırmak için bir cezalandırma işlevi görmektedir. Bundan dolayı bu makale birer disiplin aygıtları olarak "empoze edilen bekleyiş" ve panoptikonun örtük ve kalıcı cezalandırma türleri olarak nasıl kullanıldıklarını incelemektedir. Basma Abel Aziz distopik kurmacanın konvansiyonlarını kullanarak alternatif gerçeklikleri tasavvur etmektedir, bu alternatif gerçeklikler ise bağlamın rahatsız edici gerçekliklerine dayanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

distopya, *The Queue*, Basma Abdel Aziz, Panoptikon, Arap Baharı, Kafkaesk

As Henri Bergson waits for the lump of sugar to dissolve in water,¹ his imagined yet felt duration is telling of the surreal experience that is waiting. If the sugar never dissolves and the wait is endless, it is a dystopic image that emerges akin to a Beckettian waiting that is meaningless and futile. Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* presents a Kafkaesque² image of an ever-increasing queue, where citizens wait endlessly in the hope of bureaucratic work to be done. Waiting, when used as a disciplinary apparatus, depicts one of the many possibilities of a Panoptic State. It reveals the power structures in a dystopian society and also the absurdity of such an existence. Against the backdrop of the socio-political turmoil that Egypt underwent, it becomes pertinent to contextualise the novel within the Arab Spring under which Aziz constructed such a dystopia.

Dystopias are imagined during existential uncertainties and prolonged acts of oppression when power is performed and exerted to discipline the body and the mind. Basma Abdel Aziz, born in Cairo in 1976, writes in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The term "Arab Spring" may have been first used in 2011 by Marc Lynch, a political scientist, which "grossly generalize(d) tumultuous events" of different countries.³ A period of political revolution against authoritarian governments was initiated in Tunisia in late 2010 when a Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest after officers vandalised his shop.⁴ It triggered widespread anger and dissent that spread to other parts of the Middle East, including Morocco, Syria, Libya, Kuwait and Egypt. It seemed to be the "consequence of decades of oppressive and authoritarian political systems, failed economic policies, and socially alienated and disaffected populations, namely youths."⁵ The causes for dissent also included

1 Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: Dover Publications, 2007), 113.

2 Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "Kafkaesque" as characteristic of Franz Kafka's nightmarish setting in his works, with the word "often applied to bizarre and impersonal administrative situations where the individual feels powerless to understand or control what is happening." Source: "Kafkaesque," Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, accessed September 22, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Kafkaesque>.

3 Ibrahim N. Abusharif, *Parsing "Arab Spring"* (Qatar: Northwestern University, 2014), 10.

4 Kareem Fahim, "Slap to a Man's Pride Set Off Tumult in Tunisia," *New York Times*, January 21, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/22/world/africa/22sidi.html>.

5 Lieutenant Colonel El Hassane Aissa, *The Arab Spring: Causes, Consequences, and Implications* (Pennsylvania: U. S. Army War College, 2012), 2, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA560779>.

a high rate of unemployment and economic inequalities.⁶ The increasing cost of food also proved to be another contributing factor.⁷ Thus, the demand for education, democracy and political freedom increased as “people demanded to bring down the regime.”⁸ In Egypt, the anger of the people was directed towards the incumbency of Husni Mubarak, who was in power since 1981. Nepotism, corruption, violent forms of discipline and draconian laws were rampant during the period. Consequently, the protestors clarified that their “movement favoured freedom and democracy,”⁹ demanded that fair elections be held, and the voices of common people heard. Individual freedom was undermined and society grappled with hopelessness, and the revolution did not even yield satisfactory results, as the Arab Spring is considered “neither fully successful nor unsuccessful.”¹⁰

Aziz, a psychiatrist by profession, received wide critical acclaim with her debut novel *Al-Tabuur* (2013). Elisabeth Jacquette later translated the novel from Arabic into English as *The Queue*.¹¹ Aziz is a human rights defender and an outspoken critic of the Egyptian government. She is qualified in sociology, neuropsychology, medicine and surgery, and has spent several years working for the victims of torture.¹² *The Queue*'s publication got her mentioned as one of *Foreign Policy*'s Global Thinkers.¹³ In *Temptation of Absolute Power* (2009), which is a sociological and historical study by Aziz, she examines the violent conduct of the Egyptian police and the security forces towards the citizens.¹⁴ *The Queue* also has been long-listed for the Best Translated Book Award (BTBA) in 2017 and short-listed for the Translators Association (TA)

6 “A BBC Trust report on the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC’s coverage of the events known as the ‘Arab Spring’ (2012),” *BBC*, August 6, 2013, https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/impartiality/arab_spring.html.

7 Tom Gjelten, “The Impact Of Rising Food Prices On Arab Unrest,” *NPR*, February 18, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/2011/02/18/133852810/the-impact-of-rising-food-prices-on-arab-unrest>.

8 Aissa, *The Arab Spring*, 6.

9 “A BBC Trust report.”

10 Abdul Qadir Mushtaq and Muhammad Afzal, “Arab Spring: Its Causes and Consequences,” *JPUHS* 30, no. 1 (2017): 9.

11 The paper will be referring to Elisabeth Jacquette’s version of the novel called *The Queue*, which was translated in 2016.

12 Annie Gagiano, “The African Library: *The Queue* by Basma Abdel Aziz,” *Litnet*, accessed August 26, 2022, <https://www.litnet.co.za/the-african-library-the-queue-by-basma-abdel-aziz>.

13 “Basma Abdel Aziz,” *Words Without Borders*, accessed August 26, 2022, <https://wordswithoutborders.org/contributors/view/basma-abdel-aziz>.

14 “Basma Abdel Aziz,” *Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin*, <https://literaturfestival.com/en/authors/basma-abdel-aziz>.

First Translation Prize in 2018.¹⁵ The novel reflects the turmoil of the socio-political atmosphere of Egypt, as the dystopia imagined is an expression of the hopelessness faced by people. Queues in front of government offices were a common sight in Cairo.¹⁶ Punishments were meted out to the citizens for acts distinctive of personal freedom, and there was constant surveillance of them.

The Queue can be placed in the rising literary trend of dystopian fiction in Egypt that has been written in the context of the Arab Spring. Bakker¹⁷ gives an overview of the literary trend of Egypt's dystopian fiction, examining various novels. Ahmad Khālid Tawfiq's *Yūtūbiyā* or *Utopia* (2009) is a "science fiction failed utopia"¹⁸ that shows an imagined new source of fuel in Cairo. Set in 2020, it depicts a sharp economic divide, mass poverty and violence amidst the indifference of the rich. O. R. Hamilton's *The City Always Wins* (2017) seems to refer directly to the uprising in Egypt by relying "on the author's personal experience" as it represents and fictionalizes events from October 2011 to July 2013.¹⁹ *Uṭārid* or *Otared* (2014) by Muḥammad Rabī is another novel that shows a twisted form of resistance, as former police and military officers plan to incite a revolution using civilians by killing them. Furthermore, a critical study by Alessandro Buontempo²⁰ tries to establish Aziz's *Al-Tābūr* and Yūsuf Rabu's *Al-Tamāsīh* within the literary convention of Egyptian fiction and the progress of it post Arab Spring.²¹ The focus of the author is on their political backgrounds, the idea of power structures and their tools in the novels. However, our paper explores the hegemonic power structures and the unconventional forms of punishment, by positing how, in Aziz's dystopia, the act of waiting and the panoptic vision of the government are used as psychological and existential means of control over people. The imagined failed uprising in *The Queue* leads to the Kafkaesque events of the novel, constructing a dystopian setting.

15 "Basma Abdel Aziz," *Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin*, <https://literaturfestival.com/en/authors/basma-abdel-aziz>.

16 A Shiva Prasad Sharma, "Postscript Of Egyptian Revolution: An Analysis Of Production Of Egypt As A Space In Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* (2016)," *Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology* 17, no. 2 (2020): 252.

17 Barbara Bakker teaches courses in Arabic at Dalarna University.

18 Barbara Bakker, "Egyptian Dystopias of the 21st Century: A New Literary Trend?," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 21, no.1 (2021): 84, <https://doi.org/10.5617/jais.9151>.

19 Bakker, "Egyptian Dystopias," 85.

20 Alessandro Buontempo is a lecturer in Arabic literature at the Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio" di Chieti-Pescara.

21 Alessandro Buontempo, "The Egyptian Revolution and its Discontent: *al-Tābūr* by Basmah 'Abd al-'Aziz and *al-Tamāsīh* by Yūsuf Raha," *La rivista di Arablit* 9, no. 10 (2015): 38-53.

When Jeremy Bentham introduced the idea of a Panopticon, an architectural design, he intended a type of prison that would liberate convicts from extreme forms of institutional violence.²² According to his philosophy of utilitarianism, punishment was an “evil in itself, allowed only if it excluded greater evil.”²³ The Panopticon consists of a surveillance design that makes it possible for the prisoners, in several cells in the periphery, to be watched efficiently from a central tower by any administrator. Foucault’s idea of panopticism is based on Bentham’s Panopticon. He explores the power structures inherent in such a design, and the uses and implications of it. The constant visibility of the watched and the improbability of when someone is being watched or by whom creates a power relation between the two and “assures the automatic functioning of power.”²⁴ Due to the ease of observation, the Panopticon was also a “laboratory,” a place for experimentation, “to try out different punishments on prisoners, according to their crimes and character, and to seek the most effective ones.”²⁵ The discipline mechanism of the panoptic structure improves the efficiency of the power exercised over people; it is a “design of subtle coercion.”²⁶ Consequently, the internalisation of the power relation leads to the disciplining of the self.

In *The Queue*, a physical and symbolic structure called the Gate was erected after a failed revolution called the First Storm, which aimed to overthrow the regime. The second failed revolution, termed the Disgraceful Events, was a form of dissent against the authoritarian rule of the Gate, where several citizens lost their lives and many were injured, including Yehya who is shot. The novel follows Yehya Gad el-Rab Saeed’s ordeal, who is a “non-ideological nonconformist and an idealist who is inadvertently drawn into a politically oppositional role – really only for seeking treatment for a bullet wound.”²⁷ However, the government denies any existence of bullet wounds, as “the report emphasized that no bullets had been visible on the man’s X-ray.”²⁸ The Gate’s existence is justified and validated through its role of issuing the Certificate of True Citizenship, which is only issued once there is irrefutable proof of no political

22 Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings* (London: Verso Books, 2010).

23 Maša Galič, Tjerk Timan, and Bert-Jaap Koops, “Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond: An Overview of Surveillance Theories from the Panopticon to Participation,” *Philosophy and Technology* 30, no. 1 (2016): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-016-0219-1>.

24 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 201. Subsequently, Foucault’s text will be abbreviated as *D&P*, followed similarly by the page number.

25 Foucault, *D&P*, 203.

26 Foucault, *D&P*, 209.

27 Gagiano, “The African Library.”

28 Basma Abdel Aziz, *The Queue* (New York: Melville House, 2016), chap. “The Night of June 18”, Kindle. Aziz’s novel will be further be abbreviated as *TQ*, followed by the chapter name.

activity. After the Disgraceful Events, all the bureaucratic paperwork is paused, the Gate is closed indefinitely and the people lined up in the queue are made to wait. Along with Yehya, the novel follows the (in)actions and the dilemma of Doctor Tareq who examines his gunshot wound but cannot perform surgery. Amani, the beloved of Yehya, suffers psychological and possibly sexual trauma when she tries her utmost to retrieve Yehya's reports from the hospital.²⁹ It also follows an array of characters who are waiting in the queue for the Gate to function again but in vain.

A queue brings forth an image of a single straight line, one that by nature requires a certain degree of self-discipline, brought about by the internalisation of the power hierarchies. When the state closes the means of authorisation required to sustain daily life, waiting becomes a subtle form of punishment that is imposed under the Panoptic gaze of the State. The act maintains the hegemony of the authoritarian government over the people and ensures the non-disturbance of power relations, quelling any chance of revolution. The constant presence of the bullet in Yehya's body compensates for the absence of visible repressive state apparatus such as the police or military and intensifies the dystopian nature of the surveillance state. The society depicted, with the queue taking up a major part of its space, is structured as a Panopticon. The surveillance kept over the people is constant and unverified. The novel never confirms the specific means of surveillance or even the nature and ideology of the State. The Gate's propagation of the queue, despite never resuming its operation, evinces experimentation on the people. To curb any dissent in the aftermath of two failed revolutions, the State opts for a subtle form of punishment, one that necessitates people to wait. It is a dystopia enveloped in absurdity and marked by waiting.

Harold Schweizer, an Emeritus professor of English at Bucknell University, posits a theory of waiting. He bases it on Bergson's concept of temporality, where mental time becomes lived, rather than simply thought. The experience of waiting manipulates perception, and enlarges it; it makes the person conscious of her "own existential enduring" and "duration."³⁰ Waiting is uncomfortable, intimate. One is forced to listen to the "uninterrupted humming of life's depths" where lies the "real duration" of time.³¹ With waiting also comes hope, and "hope is endured."³² As Schweizer puts up existential questions, the psychological effects of time also need to be confronted. The helplessness endured during the span of waiting, compromises the usually envisaged self-worth, lowering it to the bottom of an inevitable power hierarchy that is established between the one waiting and the one being waited for.

29 Gagiano, "The African Library."

30 Harold Schweizer, *On Waiting* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2008), 18.

31 Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 113.

32 Schweizer, *On Waiting*, 117.

The waiting endured by the people of *The Queue* is an absurd and meaningless one, akin to Vladimir and Estragon's waiting in *Waiting for Godot* (1953),³³ where the end to their wait never arrives. The novel begins with the description of the queue, where people have been waiting for the Gate to open, and it is for such an extraordinary stretch that their destination is not visible anymore. As the novel progresses, the queue grows increasingly longer every passing day, occupying deserted districts.³⁴ The queue leads up to the Gate, and the people need to wait for it to open because all the official works, including getting a diagnosis, surgery, teaching, or any other professional work, require a Certificate of True Citizenship that is issued only by the Gate. The governmental structure becomes a "mysterious abode where "the power" resides," thus, a "sinister space."³⁵ A claustrophobic image is depicted, where people in the queue have increased "so much so that they would soon block out the sun,"³⁶ representative of the suffocating reality of living under an authoritarian government. A façade of functioning is preserved by the Gate, which makes promising announcements and keeps the people queued up on edge. As the Gate could open any time, "everyone expected the queue to move any minute, and they wanted to be ready,"³⁷ and it invoked self-conflict in those who waited and yet wanted to leave.

While the reason for the punishment is evident, as it is after a failed revolution that the Gate closes, the novel depicts a Kafkaesque bureaucracy³⁸ as the various characters are trapped in a malicious cycle of bureaucracy that is marked by arbitrariness, meaninglessness and helplessness. Yehya's ordeal to get the surgery approved is reminiscent of Josef K.'s trial in *The Trial*,³⁹ a novel by Franz Kafka. Nightmarish events engage the two men and any taken action in trying to end their ordeal is inconsequential; both of them die at the end of the two novels. Yehya wonders, "closing indefinitely made no sense, unless it was simply dealing out another form of punishment."⁴⁰ While the closure of the Gate is a punishment in itself, the necessitation of the queue and the required waiting is the Panoptic State's Kafkaesque idea of punishment, which punishes even in the absence of a definite crime. The mental

33 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting For Godot* (United Kingdom: Faber & Faber Limited, 2008).

34 Aziz, *TQ*, chap. "The Booth."

35 Wessam Elmelig, "Islands, Rooms, and Queues: Three Tropes in Arabic Science Fiction," *MOSF Journal of Science Fiction* 4, no. 2 (2021): 46.

36 Aziz, *TQ*, chap. "The Gate of Maladies."

37 Aziz, *TQ*, chap. "Um Mabrouk."

38 Stewart Clegg, Miguel Pina e Cunha, Iaian Munro, Arménio Rego, and Marta Oom de Sousa, "Kafkaesque Power and Bureaucracy," *Journal of Political Power* 9, no. 2 (2016): 158.

39 Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (United Kingdom: OUP Oxford, 2009).

40 Aziz, *TQ*, chap. "The Way to Amani."

experience of time affects the psychological state of the characters as well, waiting only makes the people suffer and renders them helpless. Schweizer emphasises the existential aspect of waiting. Despair and hope entangle to signify duration that “cannot be reverted into the measurable dimensions of clock time,” for waiting becomes “a condition of our being.”⁴¹ The wait endured becomes meaningless, yet there is no escape from the queue even if there exists no physical enforcement of the same. A slim hope during the process even ensures the perpetuation of a power balance that inclines towards the government.

“‘Discipline’ may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a ‘physics’ or an ‘anatomy’ of power, a technology.”⁴² Discipline’s inextricable relation to power can be seen in the novel when the effect of the queue and its accompanied waiting is analysed. In the duration where the characters as well as the readers wait, the Gate never opens throughout the novel. It is through the imposed act of waiting that the physical freedom of the people is curtailed. As they wait, the length of the queue increases absurdly every passing day, even if none of them has any clue as to when the Gate will open. It is only the rumours of its opening soon that keep their hopes alive. It is an Orwellian community⁴³ that has internalised discipline. Even when the characters want “to break the tedium of these countless weeks of waiting,”⁴⁴ they cannot do so. The State maintains its power through absurd forms of bureaucratic paperwork made necessary. As even a life-saving surgery requires an approved certificate, the act of endless waiting inflicted upon the people is meaningless yet an insidious punishment given to discipline the common people and nullify the possibility of any resistance. When a teacher, who had praised a student for writing a classroom essay criticizing the government, is asked to produce a Citizenship certificate just so she could continue teaching, standing in the queue she feels “like a student who had committed the gravest mistake, waiting to be disciplined.”⁴⁵ As Nagy, Yehya’s friend who accompanies him to the queue, realises, “the queue was like a magnet. It drew people towards it, then held them captive as individuals and in their little groups, and it stripped them of everything, even the sense that their previous lives had been stolen from them.”⁴⁶ The punishment, therefore, not only deprives them of their personal and professional life, it curtails their physical, mental and individual freedom.

41 Schweizer, *On Waiting*, 128.

42 Foucault, *D&P*, 215.

43 We refer to the characteristic indoctrinated community represented in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* and *1984*.

44 Aziz, *TQ*, chap. “The Way to Coffee Shop.”

45 Aziz, *TQ*, chap. “The Queue.”

46 Aziz, *TQ*, chap. “The Second Disgraceful Events.”

Since most of the action takes place in the queue and the State machineries feature through conversations, announcements and rumours, the queue becomes “a microcosm of society, a blend of all classes and lineages.”⁴⁷ As months pass and Yehya keeps waiting with the bullet lodged in his body, the State performs its act of denials through its machineries. The media, ironically represented by a newspaper named *The Truth*, acts as the voice of the government as individual officers or the ideology of the State is never specified in the novel. It denies any acts of violence against its citizens during the first and second Disgraceful Events and classifies any act of dissent as rumours, using religion as a justification for nearly all the misfortunes that befall the people. Even religion becomes a State machinery as the High Sheikh issues Fatwas, perhaps to maintain discipline or to control the population’s anger. The anonymity of power, as shown by the author, is representative of the Panoptic nature of the State, where it could be any totalitarian government and the power structures would remain unchanged in the society. In depicting it so, the novel seems to satirize the denial of the use of violence on Khaled Said by the government of Egypt. On “June 6, 2010, police dragged a computer programmer named Khaled Said out of a cybercafé and beat him to death in the street.”⁴⁸ It was a key turning point in Egypt as post-mortem pictures of his brutalised body were uploaded to social media and yet the police blamed the disfiguration on the autopsy itself.⁴⁹

The Panoptic gaze of the Gate in the novel is delineated through often unverified and hidden means of surveillance. Yehya’s patient file, which contained an unneringly comprehensive account of his life and acquaintances, is shown to be regularly updated by the administration. There are unknown officials in the queue who keep an eye on everyone, and even government officials are not spared. Ehab, a journalist who documents the situation around the queue, comes across a letter that Um Mabrouk (a working woman also lined up in the queue) had accidentally gotten from an official. He realises his phone conversations have been recorded in official reports. Thus, mobile phones are made out to be one of the confirmed devices of surveillance, even though the exact means of recording is unverified. Distributed to the people by the Violet Telecom Company, the mobiles record conversations and convey them to the Gate. The people in the queue also hear the rumours of disappearances that occur as a result of the recordings. It affects the Boycott campaign against the company, one of the few forms of dissent that were still prevalent in the queue. Such rumours threaten the individual freedom of the people and ensure a practice of self-discipline. As fear

47 Elmeligi, “Islands, Rooms, and Queues,” 45.

48 Rebecca J. Rosen, “So, Was Facebook Responsible for the Arab Spring After All?,” *The Atlantic*, September 3, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/09/so-was-facebook-responsible-for-the-arab-spring-after-all/244314>.

49 John Ehab, “Journalists Protest State Media Coverage of Alexandria Police Killing,” *Egypt Independent*, June 30, 2010, <https://www.egyptindependent.com/journalists-protest-state-media-coverage-alexandria-police-killing>.

and anxiety spread and people “still didn’t know the extent of the surveillance or how long it would continue,”⁵⁰ the taxing duration of wait increases. The unverified means of surveillance and the fear of being watched by the unknown proves to be a psychological form of punishment for the disciplined subjects, who are also being repressed physically. Alfat, the head nurse at Zephyr hospital, denies the existence of Yehya’s X-ray reports when confronted by him, as it is later revealed that she was also under surveillance. She is also seen lined up in the front of the queue until she disappears suddenly, without any clues or information. With Alfat’s story, Aziz seems to point to arbitrary arrests, which were common in Egypt.⁵¹ The lack of knowledge, distortion of truth, and the spread of false propaganda ensured that people still participate in the queue, and thus, the psychological effect of time spent waiting is integrated with the psychological effect of surveillance.

The spectacle of the queue, with a pervasive atmosphere of anxiety and fear prompted by the Panoptic gaze, which compels the disciplined subject to self-surveillance and self-discipline, is also reminiscent of the horror the prisoner is subjected to in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story *The Pit and the Pendulum*.⁵² As the narrator waits for an impending death by the lowering pendulum in the pit, the psychological torment is uncannily similar to what Yehya experiences in *The Queue*. The fear of looming death is accentuated by the excruciating passage of time leading up to it, as both men wait. As Jason Haslam points out, in the backdrop of prison experiments, Poe’s tale “highlights the reduction of cultural possibilities when a narrative or a nation has terror as its governing principle” where such horrors incapacitate its subjects and produce “passive citizens.”⁵³ The possibility explored by Poe is reconstructed and reimagined by Basma Abdel Aziz, where citizens are rendered passive and unyielding by the mechanism of the Gate that has succeeded through the idea of a queue. Amani is completely indoctrinated by the Gate’s propaganda at the end, as even after waiting and suffering alongside him, she questions the existence of a real bullet.

The Panoptic State envisioned by Aziz in her dystopian fiction brings forth the queue as a space, which is an experimental prison, a “magnet” that people cannot leave, trapped in a sinister cycle of Kafkaesque bureaucracy, and Poe-esque psychological torture – both pronounced by acts of waiting. Not only is the queue unmoving,

50 Aziz, *TQ*, chap. “Ines.”

51 “Egypt: Generation of young activists imprisoned in ruthless bid to crush dissent,” *Amnesty International*, June 30, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/06/egypt-generation-of-young-activists-imprisoned-in-ruthless-bid-to-crush-dissent>.

52 Edgar Allan Poe, *The Pit and the Pendulum* (United Kingdom: Read Books Limited, 2012).

53 Jason Haslam, “Pits, Pendulums, and Penitentiaries: Reframing the Detained Subject,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 50, no. 3 (2008): 275, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40755512>.

but the lives of common people are also frozen in time. The dystopian nature of the State is epitomised through Yehya, who dies at the end of the novel, waiting and suffering. The act of waiting in *The Queue* raises existential questions as the novel depicts the meaninglessness of the actions performed. Time is used against people to punish the protestors for acting against the government, and in doing so every individual is punished, for no crime of their own, merely to curb further dissent. Waiting becomes a disciplinary apparatus of power; one that is not as pronounced as a gunshot, nevertheless, causes more anguish than a physical wound. Time passes through the disciplined subjects and helps maintain hegemony over people. Thus, in envisioning a dystopian waiting, Aziz conceives of an alternate reality that navigates one of the many possibilities of a Panoptic State, emerging out of the psychological scars of the socio-political period of turmoil that was the Arab Spring.

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A. Eram and M. Raghiful Haque

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