

Title: Protheses of Disability: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Disabled Body in Postcolonial Arab Fiction¹

Abstract: This essay focuses on the representational relationship between disability and Islamic fundamentalism in select contemporary postcolonial literary texts by Arab authors. The essay draws mainly on critical disability theory on the concept of prosthesis (Mitchell & Snyder; Cheyne) to argue that disability functions as a narrative and emotional prosthesis to narratives on Islamic fundamentalism at the same time as it lays bare this very process of instrumentalization. To this end the essay asks: What are the privileged affects that attach themselves to representations of disability in fictions of Islamic fundamentalism? How do textual and affective prostheses emerge out of, or feed back into, Islamist contexts, worldviews, and subjectivities? Finally, in what ways do the narratives under analysis uphold, lay bare or dismantle such prosthetic functions of the disabled body? In particular, this essay focuses on three specific prostheses of disability in the texts: conversion narratives, contemporary histories of Islamic fundamentalist violence, and the figure of the disabled Islamist.

Keywords: Disability, Islamic fundamentalism, postcolonial, Arab, prosthesis

In a 2008 article entitled ‘Bombs Strapped to Down's Syndrome Women Kill scores in Baghdad Markets’, the Guardian newspaper reported on what it called one of the ‘bloodiest days’ in Baghdad since the US invasion in 2003. To a cursory reading, Michael Howard’s report appears horrifying enough: two women acted as suicide bombers in a coordinated attack on central Baghdad by al-Qaeda that killed at least 73 people and wounded around 150. However, Howard then goes on to quote the chief Iraqi military spokesman in Baghdad, Brigadier General Qassim al-Moussawi, who adds the appalling detail that the two women in fact had ‘mental disabilities’, specifically Down’s Syndrome, and that the suicide bombs were detonated remotely by mobile telephones. In al-Moussawi’s verdict, the two women thus ‘may not have been willing attackers’ and so were *themselves* the first victims of this terrorist attack.

To be sure, al-Qaeda and other Islamist groups had a track record of weaponizing vulnerable groups and individuals as suicide bombers—women, young people, and the disabled—in order to circumvent security measures, but the reportage on the Baghdad bombing is perhaps a microcosm of a certain *representational* violence in which both Islamist groups and their critics are arguably complicit. It is worth stressing here that a great deal about this incident remains unclear even today—such as whether the women actually had any mental disability at all, whether that condition was Down’s Syndrome, and whether, if they did, they did indeed lack the mental capacity to know what they were doing. As Howard notes, al-Moussawi ‘did not elaborate on how the Iraqi military knew about their mental condition’. If Western media commentators did not hesitate to see the exploitation of the disabled as yet another sign of the obscene depths to which al-Qaeda were prepared to sink to orchestrate their deadly attacks, it is thus possible to suspect that this moral outrage itself depends on (at best unsubstantiated) assumptions about disability, gender, and lack of agency: mentally disabled people cannot possibly know what they are doing. In a disturbing irony, this prejudice about disability is precisely what al-Qaeda’s policy of using disabled suicide-bombers exploits: what makes many see those with disabilities as perfect victims—that they are passive, innocent, and politically incapable—is what also makes them into perfect perpetrators.

If the Baghdad event inevitably seems to demand and require an emotive response—even or especially when it is unclear whether that emotion has any factual warrant or legitimacy—it is perhaps because our response is a classic example of what the disability literary critic Ria Cheyne calls the ‘*emotional prosthesis*’ that immediately attaches itself to encounters with disability. To put it in Cheyne’s words, ‘disability makes us feel. This is what guarantees its perpetual representation [...]’. Whether it is encountered in representation or reality, adhering to one’s own body or someone else’s, disability evokes and invokes a host of affective responses that blur the boundaries between emotion, sensation, and cognition’ (2019, 1). Yet, the emotional response we feel to disability is also an emotional ‘prosthesis’ because—like all prostheses—it is never entirely natural, immediate, or spontaneous, but is inevitably mediated by cultural and normative assumptions or frameworks *about* disability. In literary representations of the disabled body—which, as we have begun to see, are all too often representations *of* representations of disability—readers can both perform their emotional prostheses and defamiliarize or demystify them: our emotional responses to disability are laid bare as constructions.

Perhaps, to return to the Baghdad attacks and the representation of the two female suicide bombers (or victims), it is possible to add one further prosthesis to this emotional prosthesis about disability itself, namely, our emotional response to Islamic fundamentalism. To be clear, any discussion or representation of Islamic fundamentalism is itself often accompanied by a strong emotional charge— frequently taking the form of moral outrage or condemnation— that is, in turn, the product of a set of covert assumptions and preconceptions about what Islamic fundamentalism is and is not, what is politically natural or normative, and what is not and so on. In the Baghdad report, what we experience as emotionally or affectively immediate— shock, revulsion, outrage—is thus at least partly the product of two intersecting hermeneutic prostheses: disability and Islamism.

This essay focuses on the representational relationship between disability and Islamic fundamentalism in select contemporary postcolonial literary texts by Arab authors:² Syrian Fawaz Haddad, Egyptian Ezzedine Choukri Fishere, Lebanese Jabbour Douaihy, and Algerian Yasmina Khadra. To be clear, this body of work has— despite differences of context, narrative approach, and even in the language of production (Arabic and French in this instance)— already been recognised, both regionally and internationally, as offering a complex picture of Islamic fundamentalism that moves beyond a reductive or binary hermeneutic framework.³ However, my claim is that the works of these authors also establish an intriguing short-circuit between disability and Islamic fundamentalism. For these authors, disability both functions as what disability scholars call a ‘prosthesis’ whilst, at the same time, this very function is deconstructed or rendered ambiguous. Drawing on critical disability studies (especially Mitchell and Snyder’s work on ‘narrative prosthesis’ and Cheyne’s work on ‘emotional prosthesis’) and postcolonial theory, the essay asks: What are the privileged affects that attach themselves to representations of disability in fictions of Islamic fundamentalism? How do textual and affective prostheses emerge out of, or feed back into, Islamist contexts, worldviews, and subjectivities? Finally, in what ways do the narratives under analysis uphold, lay bare or dismantle such prosthetic functions of the disabled body? In particular, this essay focuses on three specific prostheses of disability in the texts: conversion narratives, contemporary histories of Islamic fundamentalist violence, and the figure of the disabled Islamist.

Prosthesis

To be sure, there is considerable critical work on the concept of the ‘prosthesis’ and the various ways through which it can be understood and interpreted. Some of these works have addressed the relationship between the body, technology, and modernism and, more broadly, the question of what constitutes the human (Haraway 1985; Armstrong 1998; Smith and Morra 2006). Others have focused on the relationship between physical or empirical prosthetics and lived bodily experience, foregrounding the concrete phenomenological dimensions at play in this interaction while revealing tensions in more metaphorical or symbolic construals of it (Siebers 2008; Sobchack 2005; Shildrick 2015). Still others have deployed the figure of the prosthesis to deconstruct or problematise the relation between body and word and nature and technology (Wills 1995). This heightened attention to and interest in the trope of ‘prosthesis’ is, according to Sarah S. Jain, a reflection of ‘the prosthetic imagination’

which has both underpinned the ‘potential’ of the concept at the same time as it has ‘overburdened’ it (1999, 32).

For the purpose of this essay, I draw on critical ideas on the ‘prosthesis’ from a literary standpoint, mainly David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s concept of ‘narrative prosthesis’ as well as Cheyne’s idea of ‘emotional prosthesis’. In their highly influential study of literary representations of disability, Mitchell and Snyder argue that disability is a ‘crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality and analytical insight’ (2000, 49). To this end, literary works draw on the trope of disability as ‘a stock feature of characterization’ and an ‘opportunistic metaphorical device’ (47). Within this critical account, disability becomes a convenient mode through which to highlight social problems and tensions rather than the disability experience itself. So, ‘the disabled body’ is rendered ‘a potent symbolic site of literary investment’ (49). This focus on prosthesis as a representational lens through which to investigate narrative structure, characterization and meaning is further explored in Cheyne’s work on *Disability, Representation and Genre* (2006) but specifically via a focus on affect and effect. If Cheyne’s analysis is situated in the context of Western contemporary genre fictions such as melodrama, romance, and horror, I strategically borrow her term ‘emotional prosthesis’—despite the differences in context and approach—in order to expand the lens through which we can interrogate the question of the emotional and the affective in non-Western literary works that focus on narratives of political violence. In my analysis, the dual narrative and emotional prosthetic function of disability allows us to unpack the complex histories at play in the story of Islamic fundamentalism on the one hand and its entanglement with disability discourses and metaphors on the other.

Conversions Narratives

In many ways, the most pervasive prosthesis function of disability in contemporary Arab fictions of Islamism is the postcolonial historical experience itself. ‘To tell a story about colonialism or its aftermath’, Clare Barker writes on disability narratives in postcolonial fiction, ‘it is often necessary to tell a story about disability’, adding that ‘where disability is linked straight to (post)colonial injury or trauma disabled characters also have narrative and aesthetic function’ (2017, 106). Given the ways in which religion (Islam in this instance) has frequently been politicized and mobilized in the struggle against colonial occupation and as an expression of postcolonial malaise, encounters with disability are not unusual in narratives whose central story-line revolves around Islamism and its discontents. Indeed, this intersection is a persistent narrative framework and representational tool in a range of works by Arab authors publishing in Arabic, English, and French, especially in the last two decades. More importantly, this intersection often occurs at the level of the construction of a conversion narrative to and away from Islamic fundamentalism.⁴

To begin with, one key example of this intersection within the conversion story is *Les sirènes de Baghdad* [translated into English as *The Sirens of Baghdad*] (2006) under the pseudonym Khadra. The novel utilizes disability as a metaphor for colonial oppression and disablement at the same time as it renders it the site of a politics of resistance grounded in an ideology of Islamic fundamentalism. Set between Baghdad and Beirut, *The Sirens of Baghdad* is the story of the conversion of

a young Iraqi Bedouin man into Islamic fundamentalism that sees him participating in bio-terrorist attacks. Yet, prior to his conversion, we are told that the anonymous protagonist was raised in a small, remote village known as Kafr Karm, described as ‘a village lost in the sands of the Iraqi desert, a place so discreet that it often dissolves in mirages, only to emerge at sunset’ (2008, 2). Marked by the experience of dictatorship on the one hand and war and destruction on the other, the young man seeks to improve his standing in life by getting a degree from Baghdad University. But just as he starts attending his course, his dreams and aspirations come to a halt because of the American invasion: ‘The University was abandoned to vandals and my dreams were destroyed too’, he says (18). When he later returns to his village, news of ‘the tragedy depopulating [his] country’ spreads and the village itself can no longer remain immune to this (45).

In a poignant scene that is central to the broader conversion narrative, Sulayman, a young man with an unspecified intellectual disability from the village, is being transported to a nearby clinic because of a self-inflicted injury. But the car transporting him is stopped at an American checkpoint and those in the car subjected to forceful interrogation. Not comprehending what is happening around him, Sulayman begins to panic causing his father to tell the soldier: ‘I beg you, please don't shout [...] My son is mentally ill, and you're scaring him’. But the soldier screams: ‘*Shut up! Shut the fuck up or I'll blow your brains out [...]*!’ (Khadra 2008, 56).

During this violent exchange, Sulayman becomes terrified, escapes, and is shot dead by the American soldier. The narrator recounts:

Sulayman ran and ran, his spine straight, his arms dangling, his body absurdly tilted to the left. Just from his way of running, it was evident that he wasn't normal. But in time of war, the benefit of the doubt favors blunderers over those who keep their composure; the catchall term is ‘legitimate defense’.

He then goes on to recount the moment Sulayman is shot dead and his own emotional response to the killing:

The first gunshots shook me from my head to my feet, like a surge of electric current. [...] Every bullet that struck the fugitive pierced me through and through. An intense tingling sensation consumed my legs, rose, and convulsed my stomach. (Khadra 2008, 57)

The narrator’s point-of-view description here places him fully in Sulayman’s own personal experience of the killing. The physical reaction he registers as he watches Sulayman’s death is such that he literally feels and experiences the shooting in and on his own body. In taking on the identity of the disabled boy, the narrator’s body and consciousness become the first prosthesis of disability.

For Khadra, Sulayman’s death causes great grief and angst in the village. Perceived as harmless, and loved by all, the villagers refuse to ‘accept any justification for firing on a simple-minded boy— that is, on a pure and innocent creature closer to the Lord than the saints’ (61). Further, Sulayman’s disability, perceived as helplessness, becomes symbolic of the state of political disablement that his father and the rest of the villagers experience because of the invasion and the

presence of the soldiers. This sense of disablement is further compounded through two other violent events in the village, also perpetuated and carried out by the American soldiers: a fire that destroys a wedding and the beating and humiliation of the narrator's own father. In the end, this set of events are presented as the catalyst for the narrator's own decision to join an extremist group.

In many ways, the narrator's witnessing of the killing of Sulayman and the latter's cry that was 'penetrating, immense [and] recognizable among a thousand apocalyptic sounds' (Khadra 2008, 56-57) thus becomes an allegory for an oppressed and fragile postcolonial state as well as an emotional impetus to radical action which, in the narrator's case, translates into an embrace of Islamic fundamentalism and, through it, terrorist attacks on Western contexts and sites. Describing the way in which Sulayman's death haunts him, the young protagonist says:

Memories of the awful scene tormented me without letup [...] I dreamed of Sulayman running, his stiff spine, his dangling arms, his body leaning sometimes to one side, sometimes to the other. A multitude of minuscule geysers spurted from his back. At the moment when his head exploded, I woke up screaming [...]. (69-70)

Yet, even as he notes that he was 'indeed angry', he acknowledges that 'I couldn't see myself indiscriminately attacking everyone and everything in sight', adding that 'war wasn't my line. I wasn't born to commit violence—I considered myself a thousand times likelier to suffer it than to practice it one day' (99).

Despite his insistence to the contrary, the narrator's stance changes dramatically after he witnesses another abusive event—this time involving his 'invalid' and 'sick' father. As the US soldiers dragged the old man from his house, the narrator notes that his father '[...] was the very image of boundless distress, walking misery, an affront personified in all its absolute boorishness'. Elsewhere he continues to describe the spectacle of his elderly and 'painfully thin' father whose 'wounded eyes' and dangling arms are such that he tells the soldiers 'my children are here. It's not right; what you're doing is not right'. In the moment when the fragile and disabled man is struck to the floor, the protagonist is confronted with a powerful visual symbol of how the soldiers have violated the honor and dignity of Kafr Karm. For 'as the family's honor [the father figure] lay stricken on the floor [...]' the narrator beholds a sight he 'was forbidden to see'. He says: 'I saw my father's penis, rolling to one side as his testicles flopped up over his ass'. For the narrator, his father's aging body and his masculine disablement at the hands of the US soldiers revoke all his earlier attempts to avoid slipping into a world of violence and war: his father's vulnerable body represented 'the edge of the abyss, and beyond it, there was nothing but the infinite void, an interminable fall, nothingness' (Khadra 2008, 100-101).

The images used to describe the body of the narrator's father emblemize his vulnerable and disabled state: his penis is insignificant, crippled, and withered, a symbolic expression of his place in Kafr Karm—and indeed the place of all the men in the village. Inevitably, the collapse and breakdown of the male body and its health becomes an embodiment of the disintegration of male dominance, selfhood, and ideology within a Bedouin context where male authority is often regarded as the

indisputable norm.⁵ So traumatic and troubling is this realization that the narrator announces ‘*at that very instant [...] I understood that nothing would ever again be as it had been*’ and he heard the ‘*foul beast roar deep inside me [...] I was condemned to wash away this insult with blood*’ (Khadra 2008, 102). The protagonist thus joins the throngs of young men turning to fundamentalist and terrorist groups to avenge private and public humiliations and disablements. Reflecting on his own acute sense of disablement, the narrator notes:

I found myself hating my arms, which seemed grotesque, translucent, ugly, the symbols of my impotence; hating my eyes, which refused to turn away and pleaded for blindness; hating my mother’s screams, which discredited me.
(102)

In the violent scenes involving Sulayman and then the narrator’s father, colonial and postcolonial experiences are thus represented as destroying core tribal values, deconstructing masculine ideals, and abusing human vulnerability that is (admittedly problematically) recognized as “innocence”: the performance of a national ‘ableness’ is thereby rendered impossible. This traumatic encounter with disability in a postcolonial context produces an emotional and narrative prosthesis which will culminate in a conversion to Islamic fundamentalism.

If *The Sirens of Baghdad* offers a relatively straightforward conversion narrative which mobilises disability in a conventional manner, then Douaihy’s *al-Hayy al-Ameriki* [translated into English as *The American Quarter*] (2014)⁶ provides a more ambiguous and multi-layered account of the prosthesis function of disability in relation Islamic fundamentalism. This takes place against a backdrop of a series of political and historical events which contextualise the postcolonial experiences in the novel. From the failure of Arab nationalism, the 1967 Arab defeat, the long-standing Palestinian struggle to the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent violence in the country, *The American Quarter* accounts for the complex ways in which lived experiences of postcolonialism have fostered the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and jihadi operations across the region.

To a large degree, Douaihy’s novel participates in the intellectual endeavour outlined by postcolonial critics Priyamvada Gopal and Neil Lazarus in a special issue on postcolonial studies ‘After Iraq’, and which they summarise as follows: ‘To work towards the production of the ‘new history of the present’ which takes on both the history of imperialism and the history of resistance to imperialism in the long twentieth century’ (2006, 9). The novel highlights the histories of violent occupation, anticolonial movements, and ‘the terroristic and sub-terroristic shapes and rhetoric these histories and forms have taken’ (Boehmer and Morton 2015, 8). Central to this re-examination of imperialism, as well as the postcolonial resistance to it, is the employment of disability, as a narrative strategy, a metaphoric device, and an emotive tool to underscore the colonial and postcolonial stakes.

Written by one of Lebanon’s renowned novelists, *The American Quarter* is set in an impoverished neighborhood in Tripoli, a predominantly Sunni Muslim city in the north of the country, that has in recent years become known as its ‘jihadi city’. The novel is set in 2003 in the Bab al-Tebbeneh district— also known as the ‘American quarter’—and chronicles the lives of three characters whose stories are

intertwined: Ismail, who has mysteriously and dramatically disappeared; his mother Intisar; and his mother's employer, Abdelkarim. As the different threads of this disappearance unfold, the reader is given a retrospective account of Ismail's upbringing and his decision to join a regional jihadi group that assigns him the task of undertaking a major suicide bombing in Iraq. Within this subplot, the narrative repeatedly establishes links to and parallels with disability themes, metaphors, and contexts: disability is once again interwoven into the narrative in a manner that accounts—both emotionally and symbolically—for Ismail's conversion to Islamic fundamentalism and back.

This focus on disability as the emotional driver of Ismail's turn to Islamic fundamentalism is initially played out indirectly, via his relationship to his younger brother who has a (again unspecified) physical disability. Early on in his life, Ismail becomes the guardian and protector of his brother, looking after him, and defending him from any bullying and harassment that targets his disability. In one scene, whose significance only becomes clearer in the latter half of the novel, two young boys follow Ismail's brother mocking the manner in which he is walking: 'They were imitating his brother's awkward limp and trying to hold back laughing at their own performance' (Douaihy 2018, 68). As Ismail beats the young boys for ridiculing his brother's disability, a central feature of the former's character is thus established: his strong desire to help and protect vulnerable individuals and those in need.

Later in life, Ismail works at a bakery where he is slowly introduced to the ideology of a jihadi group that has a strong base in his district. Through the baker, Ismail becomes involved with an organization that undertakes charity work for the vulnerable, needy, and disabled—famously known as The Islamic Guidance Association. Yet, this association is a cover for a regional terrorist organization with links to al-Qaeda, and the Islamic fundamentalist leader Abu Mussad al-Zarqawi in Afghanistan. The terrorist organization, we learn, uses the charity as a means of recruiting young men to carry out suicide missions in the region, especially in Iraq following the invasion.

When Ismail first touches base with the association, it is with the intention of supporting its charity work. In his role of welcoming visitors, he 'saw the people as they arrived and heard their requests' and his exposure to the vulnerable moves beyond just the figure of his disabled brother to take into account those in his wider district and beyond. Some of the people who come had 'festered wounds', others required 'medicine after being refused emergency treatment at all the hospitals', and still others 'dreamed of insulin shots, after having nearly gone blind from diabetes'. In some cases, the people who visit are so abject that they struggled to even make their requests known, such as the 'paraplegic who took a long time to say what he wanted'. Ismail experiences these encounters as an 'endless sea' of suffering and pain (Douaihy 2018, 122).

For Ismail, the predicament of the people who visited the association are, once again, a reflection, or intensification, of his own. As the narrative highlights, 'Ismail grew up among them: these were the only people he knew. Their poverty and ailments were an extension of his life and theirs' (Douaihy 2018, 122). The disabilities and ailments of the people the young protagonist meets become a mirror of his own life and existence. Writing on the function of the mirror in the context of intellectual

disability, philosopher Licia Carlson notes its ontological/existential dimension. She argues that one side of this ‘ontological/existential mirror’ makes of the disabled the ‘occasion for one’s own self-reflection’: ‘The boundaries of disability as a category are permeable and thus there is a sense in which we are all temporarily able’, adding that ‘the existential awareness of one’s being-toward-disability [...] may provide the impetus to critically examine one’s relationship to the possibility of disability and the meaning of disability in a broader social context’. This can translate and manifest into a ‘we are all disabled somehow’ narrative whereby ‘the us/them dichotomy’ collapses (2010, 191-192). In many ways, Ismail’s work with the Islamic Association embodies the very ontological/existential relation that Carlson highlights here: Ismail’s identity becomes deeply intertwined with the vulnerability of the people around him to the point where he experiences it as his own vulnerability and “disablement”.

As Ismail supports the disabled people from his neighbourhood and elsewhere, and grows increasingly disenchanted with a political and social climate which does nothing to help them, he seeks radical action in the ideology of Islamic fundamentalism. The narrator writes:

[...] He couldn’t take it anymore. He would return home at the end of the day a broken man. He grew more religious and prayed more intensely. In the morning, he would discuss with al-Shami [the Sheikh] the need to free the *ummah*, the worldwide Muslim community of believers, from the bonds of oppression.

This sense of emotional and existential disablement renders Ismail the ideal candidate for joining an Islamist militant group. Indeed, the latter identify him as emotionally susceptible to being recruited and the “‘ghost” of the [charity] association’ soon contacts Ismail (Douaihy 2018, 122-123).

In *The American Quarter*, Ismail’s conversion to Islamic fundamentalism and his decision to travel to Iraq to carry out a suicide operation are thus driven less by religious fervour and more by his acute awareness of the vulnerability of those around him as well as an attempt to counter his own corresponding sense of disablement. The narrative of Ismail’s conversion is played out through the trope of disability and his own charity work towards the disabled and precarious: the disability of his brother, the disability of the people who visit the association, his work at an association that offers charity to those with a disability, and his own sense of association with disabled people along with the general atmosphere of social and political disablement. Combined together, these disability references underpin ‘disability’s complex affective power’ (Cheyne 2019, 16) and the ways in which disability encounters generate emotional responses ranging from feelings of vulnerability, injustice, loss, and death. These, in turn, become the drivers for why and how Ismail turns to Islamic fundamentalism.

Intriguingly, Ismail’s ultimate de-conversion from Islamic fundamentalism and his decision not to detonate the explosives that were strapped to his body in such a way that ‘his body and the explosives had become unified’ also occurs through the trope of disability affect. This occurs through the parallel that is established between his brother’s physical disability and another young Iraqi boy’s faltering walk. When

Ismail gets onto a bus heading South from the capital Baghdad, he tries to remain focused on his prayers and ‘inside his bubble’ so that his determination to commit the terrorist attack does not wane. Just as he arrives at Mahmudiya city, where the explosives were intended to detonate at a ‘crowded station’, however, Ismail catches sight of a little boy coming towards him ‘from the front of the bus’. While it is not clear whether the boy has a physical disability, the nature of his walking and the manner in which he had ‘one shoe off and one shoe on’ reminds Ismail of his own brother so much so that Ismail ‘wanted to make sure [...] that he wasn’t his brother’. A strong feeling of protectiveness takes over him as the boy stands in front of him. This feeling is analogous to the feelings he felt when in the company of his own disabled brother: ‘He was overcome with a strong desire to hug the boy in his arms, ask him his name, kiss him for a long time on his slender neck’. It is at that precise moment that Ismail’s ‘body disengaged from his [explosive] vest’, because ‘from deep inside himself, he’d awakened’ (Douaihy 2018, 137-138). Consequently, Ismail discards the explosive vest at the earliest possibility and becomes a fugitive without name or identity. While the news reports identify him as a dead martyr, which leads to his name being celebrated in his own North Lebanese town, Ismail in fact ends up running from the fundamentalist group that had assigned him the suicide mission and from a global anti-terror unit that is trying to arrest him.

So, both the conversion to Islamic fundamentalism (and de-conversion away from it) in *The Sirens of Baghdad* and *The American Quarter* are intimately connected with the prosthesis of (post-)colonial disability in various ways. To this end, the turn to Islamic fundamentalism and the willingness to carry out terror acts becomes an emotional response ‘to a state of disorder, colonial intervention, dire economic conditions, and the collapse of alternative resistance imaginaries such as Arab nationalism’ (Bradley & Hamdar 2016, 448).⁷ To read *The Sirens of Baghdad* and *The American Quarter* is to encounter the ways in which multiple grievances that humiliate and alienate individuals and communities are represented as the key emotional impetus behind the embracement of Islamic fundamentalism.

In their attempt to highlight these various grievances, Khadra and the late Douaihy draw on the trope of disability and disability affect: disability and disability themes become ‘the crutch’—as Mitchell and Snyder put it—which supports and sustains the conversion narrative (2000, 49). This is clearly evident in the conversion narration that both *The Sirens of Baghdad* and *The American Quarter* underscore. If anything, the turn to Islamic fundamentalism is not seen as the result of religious commitment or zeal nor is it a pure desire for heavenly reward.

As we can see from the above examples, fundamentalism is portrayed as the result of a set of colonial and postcolonial experiences whereby individuals and groups encounter life-changing traumas and humiliations that drive them to embrace Islamic fundamentalism. By the same token, the encounter with the effects of fundamentalist violence, mainly bodily wounds and disabilities, also evokes an emotional state of horror and an abandonment of the destructive actions it perpetuates. Yet, one could also argue that what these novels (especially *The American Quarter*) reveal is that there is ultimately no clear-cut “read across” from disability to Islamism, especially as evidenced in the encounter between the suicide bomber and the second disabled child on the bus. In summary, these novels lay bare and make visible the very ambiguity of what we have called the emotional prosthesis of disability: the fact

that disability affect can be mobilised and exploited for radically different ends (suicide bombing or not) underscores the fact that the emotional response is not simply a natural and immediate one but remains largely determined by various political contexts and sub-texts.

States of Violence and Terror

A second prosthesis function of disability in Arab fictions of Islamic fundamentalism emerges in relation to bodily wounds and traumas. To return to Barker's study, she observes that, whilst postcolonial novels often draw on disability as an allegory of colonial oppression, they also 'deal with the everyday realities of disabled experience' whereby disability is caused by violence and wounds. '[I]f we see colonial histories as histories of violence', she writes, then we cannot but acknowledge that these histories are also 'histories of mass disablement [...]' (2016, 104). In postcolonial Arab novels on Islamic fundamentalism, we detect a similar dynamic at play: every attempt to depict the contemporary history of violence of Islamic fundamentalism relies so heavily on the trope of mass disablement via bodily injuries that Islamist violence effectively becomes equivalent to, and indistinguishable from, the colonial violence it supposedly resists.

To take one example of this focus on bodily impairment and injury, Choukri Fishere's Arabic novel *Ghurfat al-'Inaya al Murakaza* [Intensive Care Unit] (2008)⁸ begins with a suicide bombing on the Egyptian Consulate in Khartoum, Sudan in 1995. As four Arab characters from various walks of life and religions become trapped under the wreckage and await help, they reflect on the violent events in a series of monologues. Central to these reflections is a focus on how their own bodies and the bodies of others have been (or may have been) physically disabled by the explosion.

Firstly, intelligence officer Ahmed Kamal, who is lying under the rubble, wonders whether his 'arm is still in its place'. As he tries to convince himself that both his legs and arms are where they should be—because otherwise he would have 'felt their loss'— he begins to reflect on how people can 'live without their arms and legs' (Choukri Fishere 2008, 6). This early and repeated focus on the trope of amputation because of the suicide bombing is juxtaposed with memories of classic Egyptian films where characters lose their eyesight. The filmic scenes haunt Ahmed and become a symbolic embodiment of his own sense of visual impairment as he lies in total darkness with no access to the outside world. Likewise, images of shattered buildings, broken glass, and smashed stones become synonymous with the violation of human bodies. In Ahmed's account, architectural ruin is interweaved with broken, wounded bodies to the point where he says: 'All I see is the end of my shoulder inside cement' (66).

For the Islamist lawyer Dalia al-Shinawi, however, the question that occupies her as she lies in hospital, unsure of what damage the explosion has inflicted upon her body, is whether she is in a coma and can ever move again: 'I am wounded to the point that I've lost all sensation'. As she tries to move her body, she describes her inability to do so as an absence of corporeality itself: 'It is as if my body does not exist, as if I am a soul without a body' (Choukri Fishere 2008, 16). In another

monologue, the Coptic human rights activist Nashat Ghaleb considers how the suicide attack will be reported in the press, drawing attention to the collective disablement that Islamic fundamentalism causes as well as its subsequent normalisation: ‘You might have lost an eye, a leg, or an arm but you will remain part of the tens of anonymous [people]’ and ‘no one will care’ (150).

In many ways, then, the narrative of *Intensive Care Unit* blurs the ontological divide between the disablement of human bodies, on the one hand, and the destruction of spaces and places on the other. It also registers a move from individual bodies with individual wounds to a collective portrayal of disability where large numbers are rendered impaired and disabled. This is accompanied by a blurring of past and present events: the monologues of the different characters repeatedly move back and forth and across different historical and political epochs such as the 1967 defeat, the 1973 war with Israel, the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the overall decay of contemporary Egyptian politics and society. For Choukri Fishere, individual disability again becomes an allegory for larger national states of disorder, vulnerability, and inequity: the characters’ focus on the trope of amputation, visual impairment, and even muteness becomes symbolic of their lack of agency amidst the state of economic, social, and political crisis pervading Egypt and other Arab countries. In a sharp critique of militant Islamism, the narrative again explores the symbolic function of disability and its intersection with colonial pasts and postcolonial presents.

Along a similar vein, Syrian Fawaz Haddad’s Arabic novel *Junud Allah* [God’s Soldiers] (2010)⁹ employs the trope of disability to offer a virulent critique of the violent structures inherent in Islamic fundamentalist terror. The physical and psychological wounds that Islamic fundamentalism inflicts are represented as being as disabling as colonial violence itself and merely serve to reproduce the violence of the latter. To quickly summarise the novel’s plot, *God’s Soldiers* tells the story of a secular Syrian intellectual who heads to Iraq after the US invasion to search for his son, Samer, who has become the leader of a militarized Islamist group undertaking suicide operations in Iraq. During the father’s journey to Iraq, he also confronts what Achille Mbembé in his celebrated essay ‘Necropolitics’ describes as ‘*death-worlds*’ whereby ‘weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons’ and ‘new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjugated to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living-dead*’ (2003, 40). If necropolitics embodies the end or death of human populations, it is also about what Mbembé calls ‘small doses’ of death that puncture individual lives (2019, 38). In *God’s Soldiers*, such small doses of death can be witnessed in the repeated portrayal of various forms of physical and psychic mass disablement.

For Haddad, *God’s Soldiers* exposes in great detail the various necropolitical devices employed by both Islamic fundamentalist groups and the invasion forces in conflict-ridden Iraq: mass tortures, mutilations, and killings. The novel is permeated with graphic images of wounded, vulnerable, and disabled bodies on a scale that signifies a descent into total anarchy. This violence is depicted so that the reader is no longer able to distinguish between the wounds and disabilities brought about by militant Islam and those caused by the presence of the invasion forces. In news briefings, the reports of casualties inflicted by militant Islamist terrorist activities and those caused by the US and coalition forces is interweaved in such a manner that the

‘why’ becomes an irrelevant equation in the story of the suffering of Iraqi civilians (Haddad 2010, 157).

In the representation of a collective and indiscriminate disablement, this equivalence between Islamist and the American-led coalition forces is dramatized most starkly. It quickly becomes clear that the corridors of the different hospitals the narrator visits become one and the same: ‘The halls echo with the screams of men and women who escaped quick death [...] and who are now suffering from slow death as their wounds ooze blood and pus’. The narrator describes patients who have had ‘their legs or arms amputated’ and children stricken with fear and panic as they are treated for ‘first and second-degree burns’ (Haddad 2010, 183-184). Elsewhere, he describes an encounter with a ten-year old boy who has had his ‘arm amputated’ and who is asking about his dead sister. As the boy’s parents debate how to tell him of the fate of his sibling, they also hide the fact that his amputated arm was sitting next to him ‘wrapped in a gauze inside a bag’ (186). The narrator shows little interest in identifying the perpetrators of these acts, however, and banally reports that the injuries have been caused by ‘an American attack or a suicide attack or the explosion of a car’ (184). If a novel like *The American Quarter* lays bare the contingency of the prosthesis of disability by showing how it can produce radically different emotional and political responses in the same actor—whether violent or non-violent—this novel appears to destroy the function of the prosthesis altogether: our response to disability is rendered indiscriminate, affectless, and meaningless. In *God’s Soldiers*, there is no longer any distinction between colonial, postcolonial, and Islamic fundamentalist violence: all parties are imbricated in a necropolitics that has rendered the population disfigured, disabled, and virtually or really dead.

Anti-Heroes of Jihad

In the final section of this essay, I would like to explore another prosthetic signifier which has remained on the margins of the discussion so far: the disabled Islamic fundamentalist themselves. As we have already seen, disability is often employed in the work of postcolonial Arab novelists to draw attention to the causal impact of colonial oppression upon militant Islamic fundamentalism. Yet, Arab literary works that explore the causes of Islamic fundamentalist worldviews and subjectivities also directly depict the figure of the disabled Islamist. For many postcolonial Arab authors, the disabled Islamic fundamentalist revealingly functions as the locus of an oppositional counter-narrative to the prostheticization of disability in Islamist rhetoric more broadly whereby the disability of the Islamist veteran is glorified as a badge of heroism.¹⁰ To what extent do postcolonial Arab literary productions represent the wounded body of the Islamist fighter as a kind of counter-prosthesis of disability?

To begin with Haddad’s *al-Mutarjim al-Khaen* [The Unfaithful Translator] (2008),¹¹ for instance, we find a powerful antidote to the representation of the disabled war veteran as a sanctified martyr. It is particularly relevant here that Haddad’s Islamist character Mahmoud suffers from a severe facial disfigurement. His facial disfigurement is stigmatised as a disability by others, to the extent that the young man can only ever appear in public spaces disguised by a thick scarf wrapped tightly around his face (2011, 64). For Haddad, *The Unfaithful Translator* is the story of a Syrian intellectual who has an unorthodox approach to translation and who is consequently charged with a ‘literary crime’ by the intelligentsia. As this story

unfolds, Hamid—the protagonist—has a series of encounters with alter-egos, strangers, and enemies. In one such encounter, we are introduced to the Islamic fundamentalist, Mahmoud, who occupies a beggar-like status and who spends his time roaming the streets of Damascus, eavesdropping on people's conversations, and acquiring information that could cause havoc in people's lives.

For Haddad's narrator, Mahmoud is even capable of 'murder and rape', at the same time as he prays fervently and asks God's forgiveness, all of which prompts him to ask the question: 'Criminality and religiosity, how does his life have room for both?' (Haddad 2011, 221). It is clear that Mahmoud's physical disfigurement is intended to reflect a moral and religious disfigurement which variously leads him to criminal acts and fanatical religious devotion. As the narrator recounts, 'his upper lip was slit, his right cheek was swollen, and his left cheek was eaten up': 'Disfigurement was obvious' even to the point that he was 'frightening' (70); no one wanted to hire him or work with him, and even his wife could not bear to sleep with him unless they were in total darkness. Such is Mahmoud's severe disfigurement that he himself sympathizes with his wife's sentiments: 'What's her fault? She's a human and has eyes. She cannot withstand what others can't bear!' (225). In this sense, Mahmoud is represented (even by himself) as deviant and inhuman: his facial structure was '[...] disjointed, each piece was not in its right place' (64).

Yet, even though Mahmoud is an outlaw who is hunted by state police, he is neither a member of an organized fundamentalist movement nor a heroic jihadi with a set of martyrological accolades to his name. To this extent, his lived experience exemplifies what Zygmunt Bauman long identified as the state of 'social death' that keeps him outside the margins of society (1992). For Haddad, Mahmoud embodies an essentially antiheroic counter-representation to the all-powerful and mythic figure of the disabled Islamist fighter found in Islamist ideology more broadly. In the sense that Mahmoud's facial disfigurement is devoid of any sacrificial or ideological charge, his disability is not a badge of honour but rather of horror.

Perhaps even more complex in terms of its representation of the figure of the disabled Islamist is Haddad's later novel *God's Soldiers*, which was mentioned earlier in this essay. Not only does *God's Soldiers* dramatize the stigma that disabled people generally experience in Arab cultures more broadly, but the disability of the Islamist figure in this novel even becomes the particular cause of his exclusion from the kind of jihadism that other Islamist insurgents undertake. In the case of the Syrian Abu-Maath—the Islamist militia member who is tasked with the relatively minor role of keeping the protagonist (Samer's father) under surveillance—we are told that he 'has a deformity' due to being 'one armed' (2010, 385-386).

In the course of the narrative, we discover that Abu-Maath, who is also charged with making the 'the call of jihad' every dawn, had left his wife and infant son in a small village in Aleppo to join a jihadist network in Iraq. Upon arriving three months earlier, he had registered his name on the list of suicide volunteers but had not been given any mission. This is despite the fact that others who arrived long after him have already gone to their deaths. While Abu-Maath has trained diligently, his efforts have been systematically ignored as he himself recognizes: 'It was clear that they [the leaders of the cell] did not trust his performance'. Intriguingly, however, Abu-Maath's very disability—rather than political or religious ideology—is what drives

him to desire to perform this act of martyrdom in the first place: ‘At least he gets rid of it [the disability]’, he admits (Haddad 2010, 387).

Finally, the subsidiary position that this character occupies in the insurgency is further reinforced in the association of Abu-Maath with other marginal characters in the novel—mainly women. It is striking here that the only other character who has been excluded from suicide operations is the young woman Hind who, like Abu-Maath, is less driven by religious commitment than social precarity to sacrifice her life. Interestingly, the novel’s subtle textual association of Abu-Maath with the pitiful character of Hind is reminiscent of a medieval Arabic tradition in which, as Fedwa Malti-Douglas argues, women and disabled characters (the blind in this instance) were ‘relegated to the same mental universe: one of physicality, relative physical imperfection and social marginality’ (1991, 124). If, as mentioned earlier, disability has been utilized in the discourses on martyrdom and heroism by various political parties, then *God’s Soldiers* turns this affective rhetoric on its head: the disabled Islamist is driven to perform acts of martyrdom to rid himself of his disability but, ironically, this very disability is deemed to render him incapable of even successfully dying. In this respect, Arab literary representations of the disabled Islamist depict him as a kind of narrative and emotional counter-prosthesis to the martyr: the disabled Islamist’s desire for death is not located within a glorified sacrificial narrative, nor is he cast as a model to be honored and revered, and so he remains in an abject state of religious and political suspension.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has argued that postcolonial Arab fiction on Islamic fundamentalism is the site of — variously emotional, ideological, and political— ‘prostheses’ of disability. Firstly, disability becomes a ‘narrative prosthesis’ (Mitchell and Snyder 2000) for a secular worldview and its metaphorical role in the narrative is to both critique the self-narrations of Islamism and militant Islam on the one hand and to offer a counter-narrative which shows how postcolonial contexts have led to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the first place. In this respect, disability becomes the discursive site through which a set of counter-hegemonic ideological agendas are explored and transmitted.

However, I have also argued that the repeated attempt to draw on disability representation to critique or capture the complex origins and impetus that underscores Islamic fundamentalist ideology equally infuses the different narratives with what Cheyne calls an ‘affective’ charge. Writing on the ‘affective and effective’ power of disability representation in genre fiction, and building on the notion of Mitchell and Snyder’s concept of ‘narrative prosthesis’, Cheyne draws on the term ‘*emotional prosthesis*’ to describe the different affects that disability encounters create and perpetuate. For Cheyne, emotional prostheses thus become a kind of ‘tool to enhance the affective impact of the narrative [...]’ (2019, 15). While Cheyne acknowledges that the ‘invocation of disability in narratives to generate emotion is often problematic and *can* have harmful consequences’, they can also be ‘inevitable’ (16). Citing Luke Staniland’s argument that ‘people do not simply have positive or negative attitudes’ towards persons with disabilities (168), Cheyne makes the case for a critical focus on

emotions and affect in relation to disability representation and in relation to its transformative power on the readers themselves. The critic stresses that ‘it is vital to be mindful of the distinction between texts that use disability to generate negative emotions and texts that generate or encourage negative feelings about disability’ (17).

To be sure, it is difficult to generalise about the transformative potential of disability affect in postcolonial Arab texts on and about Islamic fundamentalism on readers themselves because what these texts ultimately do—as Cheyne puts it—is ‘remin[d] us of the complexity of disability’s affects’ (2019, 17) and the ways it is mobilised in such fictional works. To be precise, the emotional response to disability encounters in the selected texts are seemingly immediate, spontaneous, or natural responses of outrage, horror, and anger. If such responses seem purely affective, I have argued that these emotions are always permeated by various socio-political discourses, on the one hand, and stigmatized attitudes towards disability and the disabled on the other. In this sense, narrative and emotional prostheses of disability are revealed to be as artificial in nature as any other prosthesis.

In summary, then, in the novels examined disability functions as a narrative and emotional prosthesis to Islamic fundamentalism. It is undoubtedly instrumentalised as a mere tool or device which serves a larger Islamist narrative within the novel and, as such, disability itself barely figures in the texts. However, what is interesting is that, at the same time, the novels also lay bare this very process of instrumentalization: Islamism is also shown to be a kind of narrative and emotional prosthesis to the experience of disability. For these novelists, we find no simple cause-effect relation between being disabled and being Islamist to the point where it becomes unclear which is the prosthesis of the other.

Endnotes:

¹ To make the article accessible to an Anglophone reader, I use a general system of transliteration and use only the *ayn* (‘) and *hamza* (‘). I also refer to names and titles of people, places, and texts in the form most familiar to an English-speaking audience and/or in the form used by the works under discussion themselves. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Arabic are my own.

² I read the selected works as narratives that explore the conditions of postcoloniality precisely because they ‘mediate, challenge or reflect upon the relations of domination and subordination—economic, cultural and political—between (and often within) nations, races or cultures’ (Moore-Gilbert 1997, 12) at the same time as they focus on ‘those forms of colonialism that have surfaced more recently in an increasingly globalized but incompletely decolonized world’ (Huggan 2013, 10). Thus, postcolonialism here speaks to the ‘interconnected and systematic view of past and present forms of injustice and oppression and violence’ (Bernard, Elmarsafy and Murray 2006, 8). By the same token, the ‘unfinished struggle’ and ‘political spirit’ in the Arab world that Graham Huggan alludes to in his reflections on ‘postcolonialism’ (2013, 1, 3) underpins these works in complex ways that, in turn, reveal the modes through which oppositional and contested religio-political forces such as Islamic fundamentalism emerge out of, and as a result of, complex political histories, mainly colonialism.

³ See, for example, Arthur Bradley & Abir Hamdar (2016).

⁴ Terms such as ‘Islamic fundamentalism’—as well as its associate terms such as ‘Islamism’ and ‘Political Islam’—are obviously highly problematic even if this essay continues to use them. To date, there are no agreed or neutral definitions on these terms by the largely (Western) political scientists, sociologists, or historians of religion who develop and use them. For an overview of the field see Youssef M. Choueri (2010), Hamid Dabashi (2005), Graham Fuller (2003), Mansoor Moaddel (2005), and Olivier Roy (2004).

⁵ On masculinity in Bedouin contexts see, for example, Amer Bitar (2020) and Donald Powell Cole (2003).

⁶ The novel was longlisted for for the 2015 International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF).

⁷ In her book, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*, Jessica Stern cites a set of grievances that 'give rise to holy war'. Drawing on interviews with religious militants from across the world, especially the 'big three' monotheistic religions, Stern notes that some of the grievances that cause religious militants to take up arms include feelings of alienation and humiliation, demographic, history and territorial disputes. Stern writes: 'Religious terrorism arises from pain and loss and from impatience with a God who is slow to respond to our plight, who doesn't answer' (2004, x).

⁸ The novel was longlisted for the Arabic Booker Prize in 2009.

⁹ The novel was longlisted for the International prize for Arabic Fiction in 2011. An extract from the novel is available in English translation in *Beirut 39: New Writing from the Arab World* (2012), edited by Samuel Shimon, 34-42 (London and New York: Bloomsbury).

¹⁰ The Lebanese Islamist party Hizbullah and the Palestinian Hamas have often branded the disability of their veterans as a badge of martyrdom.

¹¹ The novel was shortlisted for the International prize for Arabic Fiction in 2009. Chapter 7 of the novel has been translated into English by Sophia Vasalou and can be found in *Arabic Lit & Arabic Lit Quarterly* <https://arablit.org/2020/01/13/fawaz-haddad-the-unfaithful-translator/>

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