Elias Khoury

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THE JOURNEY OF LITTLE GANDHI



Elias Kboury

Foreword by Sabah Ghandour Translated by Paula Haydar



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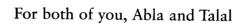
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For Adnan, who gave me the gift of Arabic

Paula

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A face is only one, yet when it's seen in many mirrors, multiplies itself.

Ibn Arabi

Foreword

Sabah Ghandour

Hayden White differentiates between two types of discourse. The first is a discourse that narrates: "It adopts openly a perspective on the world and reports it." The second is a discourse that narrativizes: "It feigns to make the world speak itself ... as a story." Elias Khoury's The Journey of Little Gandhi "feigns" to make its fictional world speak for itself; it narrates itself as a "story." By situating himself inside his narrative, the narrator-author accomplishes two goals: first, to dismiss the idea of the godlike author who knows everything; second, to invite us, the readers, to participate in the act of reading/writing, in the discovery of Gandhi's and other embedded "journeys." The Journey of Little Gandhi could be characterized as an "open text" as defined by Kamal Abu Deeb: "It is an unmolded text. By its refusal to be molded, the text rejects becoming a rite for authority's practice." More than any of Khoury's other works, this novel explicitly draws our attention to the act of narrating and to that of writing.3 Little Gandhi's "journey" is a metaphor for writing, exploration, and discovery.

The Journey of Little Gandhi differs from other nov-

els written on the Lebanese civil war by its method of narration. This departure from the traditional narrative mode leads to a change in the narrative structure of the novel.⁴ Little Gandhi consists of seven chapters of various lengths. The first chapter is five pages long; the second chapter is slightly more than double that at eleven pages; the third chapter is twenty-four pages long; and so on.⁵ Then the chapters begin to shrink till we reach the last one, which is only two pages long. This structure is inextricably intertwined with the contents of the novel. The beginning and ending of the novel telling of the death of Little Gandhi require not an enormous space but rather an abridged one. The "journey" of Little Gandhi, which constitutes the bulk of the narrative, from his birth in Mashta Hasan to his death during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, requires a more substantive space to contain the various incidents and events. As we plunge deeper in the narrative, we encounter numerous stories and surprises as if we were opening a Pandora's box or a Russian nesting doll.

We read on the first page of the novel, "I'm telling the story and it hasn't even ended yet. And the story is nothing but names. When I found out their names, I found out the story." Are the many stories narrated in *Little Gandhi* connected by proper nouns? We move from one story to another, from one incident to another by merely mentioning names and associations. The narrator-author asks and investigates but he keeps "finding holes in the story." In the narrator's attempt to relate Little Gandhi's journey, we also find out that the real story is that of life and death because the story is "about those who couldn't escape" from the atrocities of the civil war and the Israeli invasion. It is the story of Gandhi, Alice, the narrator, and many others who are obliged to live in the midst of war; they either survive or perish. So we have an equation: the story equals life

with all its beautiful and horrifying surprises, with its expected and unexpected events, with its sweetness and bitterness.

Are we then reading stories similar in their form and the delineation of incidents to the stories told by Sheherazade to King Shariar in A Thousand and One Nights? What is the frame-story the novel presents? Does this comparison between A Thousand and One Nights and Little Gandhi end with the structure of the novel or does it go beyond that? Sheherazade tells stories to save herself from death and to give the tyrant another chance to reconsider his verdict. Who buys life in Little Gandhi when we know that most of the characters in this novel die or disappear? Does life within this context equal writing and creativity? Why has Elias Khoury chosen this narrative structure for his novel?

The first principal frame for this novel is the Lebanese civil war and the invasion of Lebanon by Israel, specifically its invasion of Beirut. This war atmosphere presents the main backdrop of this novel, for it grants or denies the characters life and death. Little Gandhi was killed when the Israelis reached Beirut on September 15, 1982. Alice, the prostitute, disappeared during the 1984 events in Beirut. The development of these historical events is contained within this frame. Invasion in this context equals death, and writing after the nightmare of invasion provides life and re-creates the memory of individuals and groups. The second frame, which is equally important, represents the narrator-author as a character in the novel. This frame intertwines with the third frame represented by Alice, who tells the stories to the narrator till she disappears during the events of 1984.

Many incidents spring from or converge in the last two frames. The narrator looks for Alice so that she can tell him about Little Gandhi's "journeys," for Little Gandhi met Alice by chance and had told her his stories. And through Little Gandhi via Alice we know the story of his son Husn, his work as a hairdresser and his relationships with women, and many other stories. Thus we move from one story to another, from one incident to another, as if they have no logical or chronological connection except for being connected by names. This distinction in narration, which resembles that of A Thousand and One Nights, captures the daily lived experiences manifested by the languages of the characters. The different languages employed in the novel go beyond the classical distinction between modern standard and colloquial Arabic. The many-leveled languages—the written memory, the forgotten memory, the church, the orientalist, the macho, and other languages, which go along with the "tricks" of narrationgive us one of the avenues for reading the text.⁷

The language of a novel is the system of its "languages," as Bakhtin observes. 8 In Little Gandhi, we do not find a language that tells mere facts as do the ones we get in traditional novels. Even when the narrator reports a certain incident, his language is filled with questionings and ambiguities: "I met Abd al-Karim by coincidence, but her, I don't know how I met her. Abd al-Karim, nicknamed Little Gandhi, was a shoe shiner. He never shined my shoes, but everyone had told me about him. I ran into him once and we talked for a long time. But her, I don't know, maybe another coincidence." In the new novel, as Sabry Hafez puts it, "Language has abandoned its declamatory phrases."9 Moreover, Little Gandhi does not employ the various languages randomly; each language has its own function, which is related to the social status of the speaker and the related topic. What is important about these languages is their being "dialogical," and within this dialogue

we can determine the nexus, the relation between these languages and the lived experiences. We have, for example, the story of Mr. Davis, the American philosophy professor at the American University of Beirut, and his dog, which was struck and killed by a car. After the car's driver spat on the dog saying, "It's only a dog," Mr. Davis felt that "the East is barbaric. If not for India and the real Gandhi, the East would've remained barbaric." Mr. Davis had lived for a long time in Lebanon and tried to speak Arabic with a Beiruti accent. He loved the East, its "spices," and the Arabs, but he was not able to understand the behavior of the car driver, nor could he comprehend the "other's" point of view. This failure to understand the "other" in the midst of this "other" immediate environment drove Mr. Davis to use stereotypical phrases about the East, instead of questioning the failure of his project in this East that he had "oriented," as Edward Said says. The East became to him anecdotes about spices and the Arabs. This incident implicates the generalized language about the Arabs and demonstrates the failure of those who adopt such a language.

The dialogue that took place between Little Gandhi and the Reverend Amin is another example that proves language is not transparent; it is unable to convey the intended meaning:

[&]quot;Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

^{&#}x27;What do you mean by blessed, Reverend?'' Gandhi asked.

[&]quot;Blessed means how lucky they are. How lucky you are, Gandhi, because you saw the green horse. No one but John the Baptist has ever seen that horse."

"Send my best to John the Baptist, Your Highness."

Little Gandhi's answer demonstrates his inability to understand the Reverend Amin's rhetorical language. Despite the Reverend's attempt to use standard modern Arabic and the colloquial in this dialogue, he was not able to explain to Gandhi the religious beliefs in a simplified accessible vocabulary. Language, instead of being a means of communication and understanding, becomes an obstacle and a hindrance for its intended purpose. Here discourse does not reflect a certain situation, for it is in itself a situation.¹⁰ Whereas Mr. Davis understands the world from a cultural angle, the Reverend Amin understands it from a religious and class perspective. The Reverend, who believes that "America [is] the model of this new world that Christ had saved," hates the simple life the Americans advocate. Little Gandhi feels that he cannot understand his own language, especially when the young bearded American youth, who "discovered the simple life through Gandhi," speaks Arabic:

"God grant you a long life, Reverend. You all speak English. I don't understand a word. What's-his-name starts speaking Arabic like he's speaking English. I don't understand a word. I..."

While Gandhi feels alienated from his language, Rima, his son's girlfriend, does not. She speaks as if "putting spaces between her words." Rima uses three languages each day. She speaks German with her German mother, French at work, and Arabic with her friends. Rima does not question her use of these three languages. Put differently, these languages do not lead Rima to be aware of her situation. For

her character or her identity is constituted among these languages, and thus her subjectivity challenges the unitary understanding of the term. In fact, Rima's subjectivity shows that the distinction between the language expressing that subjectivity and the lived situation is indeed blurred and unclear. Does the text tell us that the identity is disintegrating or incomplete because Beirut, the city in which all the characters lived, is the one that travels from "the Switzerland of the East to Hong Kong, to Saigon, to Calcutta, to Sri Lanka[?] It's as if we circled the world in ten or twenty years. We stayed where we were and the world circled around us." Beirut is not only a place where the novel's events take place; Beirut is, in fact, the major character in the novel—its importance supersedes that of Little Gandhi. As Kamal Abu Deeb notes, "Life itself is the heroine. The place and the people whom Elias Khoury lies to us about are the heroes because they survive." Moreover, the movement of Beirut from Switzerland to Sri Lanka is a parodic confusing of metropolis and national space, as well as that of the colony, that reveals all three to be figures of designation: they mark difference in time and not in geography.

Like the many-leveled languages we encounter in Little Gandhi, temporality is also fragmented into many times. The temporality of this novel is not chronological; it does not have a clear beginning and end. Rather, it points to "a time that does not acknowledge the historical traditional sequence" of events, for the past is constantly diffused into the present, and the present invariably reaches out for the past to interrogate it. One of the historical periods that this text problematizes is the one preceding the war going back to the beginning of this century: "The Turks left and then came the French, and under the French everything changed. The Jesuits took over everything and

we no longer knew in which country we were living. One minute the State of Beirut, the next Greater Lebanon, the next I don't know what." The second of these temporalities refers to the time of war itself and its development into many "Lebanese wars." While these different temporalities highlight the various ideological, political, and social issues, they also function as connectors and references to the various embedded stories.

The function of the embedded stories, as Todorov notes, is to allow the main story to reach its maximum development so that we can move to another event where a character becomes "a potential story that is the story of his life. Every new character signifies a new plot. We are in the realm of narrative-men." The embedded stories in Little Gandhi could stand as stories by themselves, and they mainly refer to life, death, birth, or destruction. We read the stories of the many names enumerated in the first page of the novel, and we move from one story to another by associations and the mentioning of names. Most of the stories in Little Gandhi originate in names, and they revolve around death and writing: "If Kamal al-Askary hadn't died, then Alice wouldn't have met up with Gandhi, and if she hadn't met Gandhi, then he wouldn't have told her his story. And if Gandhi hadn't died, Alice wouldn't have told me the story. And if Alice hadn't disappeared, or died, then I wouldn't be writing what I am writing now." Death allows the narrator to tell everything. Put differently, death allows him to mix the real with the imaginary, for "he has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back."14 The narrator-author who is "narrating and writing" discovers that he is "digging in a deep well," for writing, as I have indicated elsewhere, 15 is a discovery into the known and the unknown. Elias Khoury does not offer any definitive an-

swers for the dilemmas of life, war, and invasion. The novel's structure with its embedded stories parallels the "Lebanese war" with its seemingly unresolved events. Although the "journey" is tragic for most of the characters in this novel, the narrator, like Sheherazade, wards off death by his stories. Writing in this context provides life and continuation to the act of creativity in the midst of war and destruction. Moreover, writing becomes a game of names and naming as Little Gandhi tells us. When Abd Karim Husn al-Ahmadi al-Mughayiri was nicknamed Gandhi by an American professor, he resented the name at first. Then when the Reverend Amin added "Little," he accepted it, although he preferred to be called Abu Husn. 16 To give something or someone a name is to give that entity or person an identity. But then a serious question arises: who possesses the power to name things or individuals? to construct their identities?

Notes

- 1. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," Critical Inquiry 7 (Autumn 1980), 7.
- 2. Kamal Abu Deeb, "Al-hadatha, al-sulta, al-nass," Fusul 4 (1984), 46.
- 3. This issue is examined in my article on Gandhi in Mawakif 72 (Summer 1993).
- 4. See my foreword to Elias Khoury's Gates of the City (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xv-xvi.
- 5. The reference here is to the Arabic text, which the English translation generally matches.
- 6. The opposition forces reclaimed West Beirut, pushing out the forces loyal to President Amin al-Jumayyil.
- 7. Muhammad Barrada, "Al-Ta`dud al-Lughawi fi al-Riwaya al-`Arabiyya," Mawakif 69 (Autumn 1992), 173.
- 8. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 262.

- 9. Sabry Hafez, "Al-Riwaya wal-Waqi"," Al-Naqid 26 (August 1990), 39.
- 10. Michael Holquist, Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 63.
- 11. Kamal Abu Deeb, "Al-nass wal-haqiqah," Mawakif 69 (Autumn 1992), 158.
 - 12. Hafez, "Al-Riwaya wal-Wagi"," 37.
- 13. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), 70.
- 14. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, edited and with an intro. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 94.
 - 15. See my foreword to Gates of the City.
- 16. In most of the Arab countries, the fathers are usually called by the names of their eldest sons; Abu Husn means "the father of Husn."

But they're talking.

I see their images in front of me, fading away behind their eyes. Eyes that vanish, and water. Lots of water, covering everything. And distant voices; voices that seem to be distant. I summon the images before me and listen.

I don't know who's talking or who's listening. I'm talking. I'm the one who's been talking all along. But I'm not sure. Is it my voice or the images? Why are they like that? I see their images while they themselves dissipate like water. Water doesn't dissipate, water just takes you and goes. They're in the water, and they're all just like the water. I'm telling the story and it hasn't even ended yet. And the story is nothing but names. When I found out their names, I found out the story. Abd al-Karim, Alice, Suad, the Reverend Amin, the American Davis, the dog, the barber, Spiro with the hat, Salim Abu Ayoun, Doctor Atef, Doctor Naseeb, Abu Jamil the impresario, Lieutenant Tannous al-Zaim, the second dog, Madame Nuha Aoun, Husn, Ralph, Ghassan, Lillian Sabbagha, Constantine Mikhbat, Abu Saeed al-Munla, "The Leader," Fawziyya, Husn the son of Abd al-Karim, Abd al-Karim the son of Husn, the Assyrian Habib Malku, the Aitany boy, and al-