AGEING IN THE MODERN ARABIC NOVEL

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Note on Translation and Transliteration

I have used English translations for the fictional works in question. In the absence of known English translations, I have used my own translation and indicated that both in the text and the notes. All translations of primary critical texts are mine unless stated otherwise.

I have chosen the most commonly used transliteration in English. I have represented the ‘ayn (‘) and the hamza (‘) by their conventional symbols.
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Introduction

According to a UNDP report (2011), the number of citizens aged over 65 in the Arab region is expected to rise to 17 per cent by 2050. As a result of ‘high fertility rates in earlier periods’, ‘population ageing’ is ‘expected to increase more rapidly in the coming decades, with the number of older people more than quadrupling by 2050 (from 22 to 103 million) and the percentage of older persons exceeding 15% in over 13 of the 22 Arab region countries’. Despite such expectations, a general complacency, denial and silence persist, which explains the dearth of works devoted to the old in Arab/Islamic culture, and why, up until recent years, one can readily think of only a few fictional works in which the focus is primarily on older individuals.

The paucity of literature related to ageing in the Arab world can be attributed to the demographic domination of youth and to a general sense that age is a liminal stage between life and death, carrying traces of degeneration and decay. If traditional autobiography is normally linked with older male individuals who centre on activities and achievements in earlier life stages, the immediate personal concerns of the older person are absent, particularly the fact that male individuals are measured solely by achievement in the public sphere. Studies on ageing are lacking in modern Arabic literature, except for a few on disability and on relations between the old and the young. Among such works are Abir Hamdar’s The Female Suffering Body (2014); Nawar al-Hassan Golley’s Reading Arab Women’s Autobiographies (2003); Dayla Cohen-Mor’s Fathers and Sons in the Arab Middle East (2013); Valerie Anishchenkova’s Autobiographical Identities in Contemporary Arab Culture (2014); Robin Ostle, Ed de Moor and Stefan Wilde’s Writing the Self (1998); and Suad Joseph’s Intimate Selving in Arab Families (1999).

This study utilises biological and cultural theories of ageing that shed
light on the representation of ageing in the contemporary Arabic novel. The essentialist model regards ageing as biologically determined and views older individuals as an undifferentiated, homogeneous group with identical needs and interests. It considers age as a fixed and ahistorical category leading to inevitable decline and reduced to a pathological problem tied to medico-social discourses on ageing, all of which fail to address the idiosyncratic nature of individuals with multiple facets to their personalities and identities.

Since the first visible signs of deterioration are reflected on the surface of the body, the latter is perceived as the prime signifier of age. The meanings attached to an ageing identity combine an awareness of a changing body with a consciousness of the restrictions imposed upon it by the prevailing cultural norms, which consider ageing as a period of discontinuity from earlier life stages, fully separated from the activities of daily life. According to Margaret Morganroth Gullette, human beings are ‘aged by culture’, or by ‘Age ideology’, as she refers to it. The ageing body, assumed to be natural and immutable, is always associated with decline no matter how fit and energetic it might be, since, as Leslie Fiedler puts it, to ‘be properly old’ one is expected ‘to withdraw from sexual competition and prepare for death’. According to this model, ageing is seen as a stable category within a static system that regulates all, transcends time, location, class, religion and cultural background, and views ageing individuals as identical and ‘distinct from ordinary [younger] human beings’. Elizabeth Grosz refers to this rigidifying category as ‘the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions that limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganization’ and that turn the old into unproductive individuals facing degeneration and death. Such forced disengagement centres on submission and closure in the ‘mutual withdrawal of the individual and society from each other with advancing age’, thus confirming the depletion of the ageing individual’s role in society, and the irrelevance associated with old age.

This perspective of ageing tends to blur the line between men and women and view them as a static and insulated category where ‘rigid role divisions dissolve and men and women become more alike, taking on the characteristics of their gender opposite’. The prevailing view is that, as men and women age, the gendered gap between them narrows, reducing them to an undifferentiated group of de-gendered neuters whereby the dualistic structure of old
and young remains prevalent and youth and age are hierarchically arranged to the detriment of the latter.

The constructionist social model extricates itself from biological reductionism, which constrains age within ‘a universal wholly biological process’ and views the ageing body as interactive, socially determined and ‘inscribed and reinscribed with cultural meanings’. Judith Butler’s performativity theory centres on the constructed nature of identity and, more importantly, on identity as performance: ‘the reiterative practice of regulatory norms that produces and stabilises the embodied identity they name’, a repeated set of actions that necessitate the possibility of versatility and change. As a result, identity becomes meaningful only in relation to the norms constructed by society and other institutional processes. In other words, identities reflect what people do rather than what they are supposed to represent. Identity is also a manifestation of underlying power relations and changing social configurations that give way to varied experiences and intersect with age, class, gender, religion, history and location, allowing for ‘more diversity than unity, more paradox than consistency, more ambiguity than certainty’. As a result, the elderly individual is ‘as much entangled as anyone in the becoming of the world’, suggesting that old age is a cultural construct whose boundaries shift with changing times and localities, producing a variety of lifestyles where the elderly individual defies the essentialist model by being active, and functional.

Instead of ‘adhering to absolute and objective truth’, the focus is on ‘fragmentation rather than universalism . . . pushing away from the general and encompassing toward the particular’. According to this social model, the ageing process is one of ‘continuity’ with the earlier phases of life, a time of ‘ongoing personhood’ that affirms diversity rather than uniformity where the individual’s present actions and behaviour are consistent with ‘earlier habits, ideas, and practices’. Accordingly, ageing is not ‘a clear coherently defined subject amenable to analysis in precise terms’, it is interactive, dynamic, fluid and unpredictable, providing opportunities for change and ‘continued human development’ so that the lives individuals lead in the present are ‘a direct outgrowth of the whole of their lives’.

My approach acknowledges ageing as a process that integrates organic and socially inscribed processes. I adopt what Sally Chivers refers to as a
‘Janus-faced old age’ which presents deterioration and decline as well as activity and well-being, uncovering an ‘emerging interest in the lives of fit and active older people’ without disregarding the biological factor.

Instead of viewing the biological and discursive body in dualistic terms, the study concentrates on the inextricable link between them, creating an alternative configuration, an ‘undisciplined’ old age ‘where knowledge relations disassemble and disrupt dominant truth-making practices’ and fuse the biological with the social, making the ageing process multiple and plural. Situated at the intersection of biological experience and discourse, the ageing body is not solely static and predictable, leading to physical and mental decline, but is also rooted in everyday practices, shaped by social and cultural meanings, and mediated by underlying relations of power that intersect ‘with biological, biographical, socio-historical and diachronic/synchronic time.

The study also focuses on the disparity between the ageing individual’s external physique, which is visible to the world, and the invisible inner self, which is irreconcilable with the external markers of age. Simone de Beauvoir observes: ‘Old age is more apparent to others than to the subject himself’, and owing to the internalisation of the social norms of ageing, she declares: ‘Within me it is the other – that is to say the person I am for the outsider – who is old: and that Other is myself.’

In a similar vein, Kathleen Woodward speaks of the ‘specular body’ which is ‘anchored in visuality’ and which mirrors degeneracy and decline. Featherstone and Hepworth refer to the ‘mask of ageing’ whereby the older person feels essentially unchanged although the biological body tells another story. Pamela H. Gravagne describes it as ‘the looping effect between the idea of old people and old people’s idea of themselves’, where the outer physique is a rigid alien structure of confinement which can mask the possibilities of expressing the self within, a self that feels young and bouncing.

Keeping in mind the scarcity of works on ageing in the Arab/Islamic world, this study attempts to fill a void and shed light on a forgotten segment of Arab society. The focus of the study on the daily, mundane experiences of ageing characters in a variety of fictional works will, to use the words of Trevor Le Gassick, offer a ‘revealing window into the closet workings of a society’s values and orientations’. This is one way to break the silence about ageing, since the novels are valuable sources through which to understand
the quotidian experience of ageing. In the study, I examine works whose perspectives on ageing include biological and mental decline, fears and uncertainties, as well as gratifications, indulgences, possibilities and successes. For instance, in Randa Khalidy’s semi-autobiographical novel titled ‘An Unheroic Autobiography’, the eighty-year-old female protagonist, who has had a long history of suffering at the hands of her domineering husband, as well as of marginalisation (despite her Ph.D. from Oxford University), manifests a vibrant spirit and a desire to write herself into history through her autobiography. As Kathleen Woodward puts it, ‘[t]o have a life means to possess its narrative’. In her life story, the authorial narrator uncovers intimate details of her life, and liberates age from the constraints of compliance, stoicism and erasure normally associated with other ageing women such as the old woman in Alia Mamdouh’s Mothballs. The narrator of Khalidy’s work embraces an assertive, forceful and scandalous self that is not intimidated by social rules and restrictions or ‘prescribe[ed] behaviors and obligations’, underscoring the basic instability and diversity of the ageing experience.

I explore points of affirmation and resistance to normative conceptions of ageing and old age in the Arabic novel, and how individuals of certain ages are supposed to behave and how they are positioned and categorised. In addition to works that insist on old age as static and predictable, I also dwell upon other works that reveal the incongruities of the ageing process owing to rapid sociocultural, demographic and economic changes that have transformed family relations. I consider the historical and social moment and the situatedness of the ageing individual within gendered and cultural contexts, ‘community standards and beliefs, local culture, and kinship networks’, without underestimating the specificity and singularity of individual experience, what Calasanti refers to as ‘the experiences of particular groups on their own terms, rather than through the lens of unquestioned standards’.

**Cultural and Religious Norms**

In ‘Anthropological Approaches to the Arab Family’, Young and Shami assert that traditionally, the Arab family is ‘extended, patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal, endogamous, and occasionally polygamous’. Cultural and religious norms within the extended Arab/Islamic family have traditionally conferred respect and honour on the old, which is acknowledged as a natural and
taken-for-granted phenomenon. The old are viewed as a sacred obligation figured in the Bible and the Qur’an, establishing the strength of a stoic tradition of accepting divine will, retreating into religious life and resigning oneself from the world. Longevity, in accordance with the Bible, is the Lord’s reward for faithful service, and the fifth commandment demands respect for elders where the ‘hoary head’ is ‘a crown of glory’. Similarly, Raghib al-Isfahani maintains that in the Qur’an, and within Islamic law, Abraham is said to have been the first person to have grey hair. When he asks the Lord what it signifies, the Lord responds that it means ‘waqar’ (dignity), and Abraham beseeches God to ‘increase him in dignity’, a trait that has become directly linked with old age. As a result, shayb (grey hair), which was generally associated with age, was directly linked with restraint from objectionable behaviour. In many instances, age was measured not so much by the number of years one had lived as by the sheer appearance of white hair. In his Diwan, vol. 1, Abu Nuwas, whose hair was turning grey, mocks the concept of dignity associated with shayb – ‘but mine, thank God, is free from dignity’ – since grey hair is irreconcilable with the youthful pleasures that Abu Nuwas was constantly in pursuit of.

The Qur’an instructs the believer ‘to be dutiful to your parents. If one or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of disrespect, nor shout at them but address them in terms of honour’ (Chapter 17, verse 23). Hasan Shuraydi maintains that filial piety, which ‘figures prominently in the Koran’, points to the respect and caring that children owe their parents in old age, and refers to the ‘Prophetic traditions’ that ‘give precedence to taking care of one’s parents over military jihad’. For instance, ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, following such prophetic traditions, had to recall a young man from an expedition to Iraq and order him to stick to his two old parents’. Similarly, when a young man consulted with the Prophet about joining a military campaign, the Prophet asked him if his mother was still living. When he affirmed that she was, the Prophet asked him to ‘stay with her and serve her, for Paradise is at her feet’.

The Traditional Family and the Male Patriarch

In Arab-Islamic culture the family is the pre-eminent institution, headed by the father who represents authority, which is closely bound up with patri-
archal power, what Yount and Sibai refer to as the ‘patriarchal bargain’, with the male as head of the household. Halim Barakat sees a close link between family and identity, where the individual’s ‘success or failure’ is inextricably bound up with ‘the family as a whole’. The position of strength, and wisdom attributed to the elder of the family, generated a mixed sense of love, awe and fear on the part of the other members, coupled with conformity and deference. Since the patriarch is viewed as a repository of wisdom and knowledge, demanding no further need for learning, the family must submit to the inevitable. One must add here that women are denied the growth in wisdom attributed to men, who are supposed to accumulate knowledge and experience. Since within Arab/Islamic societies all the norms governing marriage and the family are seen as ‘expressions of God’s will’, the images of God and the father have become analogous with the father’s position as ‘rabb al-usra’ or ‘lord of the family’. As Barakat puts it, ‘the father and God in Arab culture are a promise and a threat (wa’d and wa’id), grace and suffering (rahma wa ‘adhab)’, while punishment is described as (‘iqab al-rahma) or mercy punishment.

The attempt to de-gender old age can be seen in family ‘relations of dominance and subordination’, such as the focus on the struggle between young and old like the one between father and son in Jordanian writer Taysir Subul’s Anta Mundhu al-Yawm (1968), and in Rashid al-Daif’s Dear Mr. Kawabata (Azizi al-Sayyid Kawabata, 1990). These novels, set in the 1960s and 1970s, focus on inter-generational conflicts, where old and young are placed in oppositional roles and where the younger generation feels the dire need to struggle against the father’s oppression. The younger members consider the knowledge disseminated by the older generation as obsolete at a time when Western cultural hegemony has started firmly establishing itself worldwide. In Taysir Subul’s Anta Mundhu al-Yawm, the protagonist, whose name is Arabi, lives in the shadow of political and familial oppression. He describes his father as vicious, aggressive, belligerent and abusive, with eyes like a hawk’, and sums up the latter’s relationship with Arabi’s mother as ‘angry, screaming, subservient and weepy’. The father, seen by his son as an obsolescent remnant of the past, insists on remaining a formidable stronghold of power, and proves his hardness by subjugating and battering his wives, whom he whips with a thick leather belt. His rigidity, arrogance and
unwillingness to admit vulnerability or emotional weakness turn him into a symbol of ruthless and absolute authority that the son has to contend with and displace. Arabi tells us that during Ramadan, his father viciously killed a cat and severed its head from its body for eating a piece of the meat that was reserved for the iftar. He rules over his family, expecting stern submission and reminding them that his power and influence are ‘grounded in punishment’. Expecting all members of the family to be subservient, he harasses and strikes his son Arabi in the same way that his neighbour beats his son Ali. When Arabi asks Aisha how old her brother Ali is, she tells him that he is 25, and Arabi responds sarcastically: ‘a very suitable age!’

Similarly, in al-Daif’s Dear Mr. Kawabata, the narrator views his native background as damaging to his agenda of achieving progress for his country and rejecting an insular, pre-modern world that is gradually becoming peripheral. He soon clashes with his own father, and is accused by the latter of betraying his own culture. His foreign ideas about secularism, socialism, individual freedom and scientific and technological progress grate on the ears of his father, who is angered by his son’s new Marxist ideology, which he views as an evil that threatens a stable order. His persistent use of the word ‘viper’, when it comes to his son, points to his father’s fear of being dragged out of an earthly paradise that he had considered eternal and unchangeable. To control his son and ensure his paternal and absolute will, he resorts to violence by scorching his son’s finger with ‘a red-hot iron rod’.

The exact age of the fathers in both novels remains unknown, in line with pre-modern societies that attach no importance to dates in contrast to industrial societies that are ‘haunted by numbers’. In line with Western colonial systems of retirement, the official age of retirement is 65 in most Arab countries, regardless of personal achievement or ongoing vitality and competence. However, for the majority of people who have no schooling, employment or retirement benefits, age remains a fluid category. In mainstream Arab/Islamic society, the ageing process is seen as ranging from the forties until the eighties, and in certain situations earlier than forty for women. Such a lengthy stretch of time justifies the haphazard lumping of the old into one predetermined lifestyle. This approach, that treats old age as a static phenomenon, leads to over-generalisation and an attempt to downgrade elderly people, place them within restrictive moulds, force them to withdraw from earlier activities, and
erase any subjective experiences. The chronological mode of ageing rejects continuing development after age 65 and endorses the sanctioned cultural notion that entry into old age demands disengagement from earlier commitments and actions. This perspective is ‘legitimised’ by the view that decline is a numerically ‘determined point of closure’, which explains why age in many of the novels under study is measured by chronology which emphasises similarities rather than differences among ageing individuals.\textsuperscript{51}

In multi-generational families, the old are viewed as a duty, which demands care, respect and differential treatment. The old man is valued for his wisdom and status within the extended family, and for the sense of history and rootedness that he inculcates within the family. The elderly mother, on the other hand, is supposed to receive the same care and protection from her children that she had received from the father in terms of economic support, in her role as housewife and her service inside the home space. In other words, older individuals are seen as a distinct category that demands special treatment; they are disconnected from the rest of the world, where their position falters and shifts from ‘integration to segregation, from involvement to disengagement’,\textsuperscript{52} and from caring to being cared for.

**The Disruption of the Family Hierarchical Structure**

Since the family is the entity in charge of the elderly, the number of older people living in institutions in the Arab/Islamic world is low. However, it is gradually increasing owing to demographic, geographical and global factors, which have attracted the young to the cities, breaking down the hierarchical structure of the extended family in favour of the nuclear conjugal unit. The growth of mass education and literacy in the 1950s and 1960s began gradually erasing the ‘mystique of age’\textsuperscript{53} which gave older men power and cultural esteem, disrupting their time-honoured supremacy and respect within the family, thus eroding family support for them and gradually displacing communities structured on religious and social norms and based upon traditional hierarchy, and filial obligation.

The growing number and proportion of older people in the Arab/Islamic world can be attributed to a variety of factors such as urbanisation, modernisation, changes in fertility patterns and increased levels of longevity owing to medical advancement and changing lifestyles. Shifting attitudes to older
people are linked to the pressures of globalisation, information technology, the media, television, socio-economic and political factors and youth migrations, causing significant transformations in family structures and further denigration of old age. The greying of the villages is a consequence of modernisation, which encouraged a marked migration of young people from the rural to the urban areas to seek better opportunities outside their environment, thus destabilising the traditional household. Such changes have dealt a serious blow to the level of care normally accorded to elderly members by their families. In the Arab world, the situation accelerated in the 1960s when the new generation began embracing modernisation and secularisation that swept the area with the rise of Gamal Abdel-Nasser, who propagated a homogeneous pan-Arab secularised identity. Another factor was the rise of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian struggle against Israel, where the young *fidayeen* were idolised, turning the old into peripheral and virtually irrelevant beings. In Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s *In Search of Walid Massoud* (1978), the Palestinian intellectual and political activist Walid Massoud is devastated when he learns that his son wants him to limit his military operations against Israel to financial support. Walid bangs his head against the wall and sobs and moans because as an old man of fifty he is supposed to disengage himself, leaving the arena for his son.

While wisdom and physical power may have been effective weapons of control in the past, they no longer serve as useful standards with which to judge old age. As a result, older individuals are downgraded in a modern world that privileges youth over age, and ‘the patriarchal contract is beginning to erode’. In such an atmosphere it is not surprising to come upon novels that make no bones about describing the vicious massacre by young male fighters of old men and women, as seen in Elias Khoury’s *White Masks* (*al-Wujuh al-Bayda’*, 1986) in the gory massacring of an old man and the rape and murder of his old wife. In a similar vein, the old man stringing his way through the streets in René al-Hayek’s *Beirut 2002* (2003) is viewed by Raja, a young university student, as an obsolete image that is no more than a discordant sight. Watching elderly men eating and drinking in a traditional all-male café makes Raja feel all the more alienated and unable to understand an archaic culture that he thought had vanished forever. In Elias Khoury’s *The Journey of Little Gandhi* (*Rihlat Gandhi al-Saghir*, 1994), ageing is often
associated with a reduced ability to maintain homeostasis, as in the case of the Protestant minister who ended up wetting his pants.

**Women in Traditional Settings**

Despite the ungendered image attributed to older persons, ‘older people are not just old, they are either men or women’. As Barbara Myerhoff maintains, ‘aging, if it is to be adequately studied, must be understood as a gendered process’. The works reveal that men and women experience ageing differently, owing to a long history of gender differentiation where men’s sense of self-adequacy differs from that of women. Although the ageing individual is rooted in corporeality, where the body takes centre stage as the principal signifier of ageing, it is bad taste to display older bodies, particularly woman’s bodies. The female-authored works that focus on traditional societies highlight family support networks, rather than romantic or sexual relationships, while male writers tend to focus on sexuality and performance. These works reveal that older women de-prioritise physical appearance and place more value on non-somatic abilities such as moral, ethical and religious qualities, and upon women’s ‘emotional intelligence’, which makes them retain a sense of power and control within the household, and serve as protective shields against anxieties related to the body and physical appearance.

Other traditional women, like the two grandmothers in Aliah Mamdouh’s *Mothballs* and Inaam Kachachi’s *The American Granddaughter*, engage in the liberating social role of mothering their grandchildren. As for less privileged women who have no children or occupation, they wind up either as servants in their father’s or brother’s home or as destitute and deprived. One example is the bag lady walking the warring city of Beirut in al-Daif’s novel ‘Tactics of Wretchedness’ (*Taqaniyyat al-Bu’s*, 1989); another is the prostitute in Mahfouz’s *Sugar Street*. The study also deals with Fuad al-Takarli’s *The Long Way Back*, a novel that centres on female ageing characters as marginal figures, and presents them within traditional precincts and normative ideals.

In Tayyib Saleh’s *Season of Migration to the North*, the old woman Bint Majzoub is well-known in the village, and her language is daring and licentious. As an old woman, she is sexually and reproductively irrelevant. She joins the group of old men who tell dirty jokes and obscene stories about women, enjoys the stories, and joins the other men in laughter. She is seen as
no different from men, especially when she asks Wad Rayyes: “What’s come over you? . . . For two years now you’ve contented yourself with a single wife. Has your prowess waned?” **59 Bint Majzoub serves only as a link between the village and the westernised narrator. She tells the latter that she is thankful to God that when abroad he did not marry an ‘uncircumcised’ woman and informs him of what goes on in the village. She has no power of her own, but simply follows the rules prescribed by a male-controlled society, and male-inscribed customs and traditions.

**The Menopausal Woman**

The trajectory for educated urban older women in Arab culture is different from that for men. Ignored by society when old, they achieve a measure of freedom and independence in old age, the kind of autonomy normally denied them during their years of fecundity. In these works, I explore the changes that surface at mid-life and anxious worries about deterioration, death and the finitude of all things mortal. As such, ageing is viewed by many of them as a perilous stage where traumas and anxieties are intensified owing to changing physical appearance, ailments and lethal maladies. In fact, women bear the brunt of ‘“the double jeopardy”’ or the ‘“double stigmata”’ of ageism and sexism, **60** which disadvantage them and make the ageing process all the more problematic, as seen in Sahar Khalifah’s *The Inheritance* (*al-Mirath*, 1997).

Although educated women tend to be more independent, self-sufficient and sexually active than traditional women, they are more conscious of the stakes involved in ageing, as in Haifa Bitar’s self-reflexive novel ‘*A Woman of Fifty*’. Feeling degraded in their relationships with men, they become more fixated upon beauty and physical appearance in an attempt to look younger and to attract men. Other menopausal women decide to free themselves from the tyranny of the body and from male sexual control associated with it. As a result, they make the decision to abandon men altogether and join older women’s groups that focus on the exchange of ideas, personal experiences, awareness campaigns, and other activities related to women.

Feeling disadvantaged by menopause incites some women to prioritise nurturance over physicality, and to create a buffer zone against corporeality, as seen in Haifa Bitar’s novel ‘*A Woman of Fifty*’. Others, like the fifty-year-old Nahleh in Khalifah’s *The Inheritance*, manifest an obsession with youthful-
ness and a dread of age, which spurs them with a strong sense of urgency and a desire to refurbish the body through cosmetic creams and other procedures. Unlike men, who are supposed to age much later and with far more freedom, women have to contend with stereotypes of sisterhood and menopause. As modern Western industrial societies and consumer culture associated with social transformations within modernity and late modernity are disseminated worldwide, the new technology that focuses on youth, health and beauty and degrades the ageing body pushes the female body into the limelight as an object of vision and revision.

**The Older Man**

In addition to the destabilising effect of globalisation, the modern Arab nation states have also contributed to the disruption of old family traditions where not only women are affected, but also older men are swamped by images of disengagement, unemployment, retirement, obsolescence, physical debilitation and a morbid sense of a dreary, repetitive and marginal existence. Far from the ‘teleological’ male narratives of the life cycle where achievement and success privilege men over women, modern fiction and autobiography are taking a different turn. Under the influence of consumer culture, the body is taking on increasing significance and the ‘traditional male immunity to middle age’ is being eroded as the gap between men and women begins to narrow. Wyatt-Brown and Rossen see the importance of looking at older men as gendered beings. They maintain that it is important that ageing men are analysed as well as ageing women in order not to further ‘the myth that men are exempt from the influence of aging’.

Because men’s sense of personhood has depended upon their physical power, dominance and sexual exploits, age robs many of them of their selfhood, as seen in Hassan Daoud’s brilliant novel titled *Ayyam Za’ida (Borrowed Time*, 1990) woven around the author’s old grandfather. The old man is subordinated especially in relation to his children and family and is ridiculed and ignored by them. Accordingly, he is isolated from family and friends, particularly because he is unable to maintain any friendship networks, rejecting the village friendships his children try to impose on him. When he joins a family gathering, his children and their friends stop talking, and view him as ‘other’, an intruder into their youthful circle. Because his sense of personhood
has always depended on dominance and physical power, he is seen as a threatening presence that needs to be neutralised and is left alone to clean his own dirty space, increasing his chances of occupying a feminine space.\footnote{64}

Gha’ib To’mi Faraman’s short novel titled ‘The Pains of Mr Ma’ruf’ (Alam al-Sayyid Ma’ruf, 1979) deals with a middle-aged man who is in the tumult of what Hepworth and Featherstone refer to as ‘the male menopause’,\footnote{65} defined as ‘a midlife crisis which in itself is less of a hormonal change of life than a change in life mostly related to work, status, cultural expectations, sexuality’.\footnote{66} Instead of reaping the rewards of past efforts and sacrifice, as in the case of traditional fiction on ageing, the protagonist has to contend with demotion, ridicule, corrupt exploitation, and young men’s mockery of an older eccentric man. Ma’ruf lives in a twilight world of dream and fantasy that he garners from watching the sunset every evening, which disconnects him from a dark empirical reality outside. He looks after a disabled mother and two spinster sisters, suffers from neurotic, psychosomatic and hypochondriacal complaints, and maintains that he would have ended up an alcoholic had the pain in his stomach allowed him to drink.

In a world where wisdom in old age is becoming irrelevant and where older men are beginning to occupy inferior positions in relation to younger men and women, I focus on works that trivialise the role of complacent knowledge in old age and reveal anger, frustration and dissatisfaction, as seen in al-Daif’s ‘O.K. Good-bye’. According to Woodward, ‘a moratorium on wisdom’ when it comes to ageing men allows for an ageing experience tinged with anger, which is ‘a sign of moral outrage at social injustice, at being denied the right to participate fully in society’.\footnote{67} Such a devastating sense of defeat has the tendency to make age ‘multidimensional’,\footnote{68} thus problematising the idea of what it means to be old, especially when it comes to men.

**Narrativising the Ageing Process**

Other works focus on ageing men and women who attempt to revive memory through writing, telling the past and the present, and contemplating the finitude of all things mortal. These individuals negotiate family relationships, engage in social activity, and acknowledge the need for agency, and for embodied presence in the outer sphere in a heightened artistic productivity often associated with ‘late style’,\footnote{69} as seen in Randa Khalidy’s ‘An Unheroic
Autobiography’, Nazik Yared’s *Improvisations on a Missing String* and Abbas Baydun’s ‘The Album of Defeat’. The investment in language that literary forms necessitate provides fertile ground for the revision of the strong cultural narratives that rigidify ageing. These writers link past and present, and scramble time and render it cyclical and spasmodic, through the use of digressive and fragmented narratives that correlate past and present and disrupt the linear pattern. The works make use of flashbacks and flash-forwards, offering a multi-directional pattern and a dialogic world that resists closure.

I also take into account works on ageing by older and younger writers. For instance, some of these authors, like al-Daif, Yared and Baydun, started writing at an early age and continue to work through their old age and depict their experiences with age. Other works are represented from a younger person’s perspective. The study makes a distinction between old-age writing and writing about old age by younger authors. These works represent age from a variety of perspectives, affirming the diversity of the ageing experience in fiction. In addition to themes related to ageing, literary and artistic merit is taken into consideration, including in works by established writers and others by lesser-known authors.

This monograph is a first critical attempt to look at fictional works written by Arab male and female writers through the lens of ageing. It centres on ageing as it is understood, practised and problematised in the modern Arabic novel. It counters the critical corpus that reads the modern Arabic novel as predominantly a political discourse and focuses on achievements made in youth and adulthood, while discounting any accomplishment in old age. Through close consideration of sixteen fictional works by sixteen different male and female writers, the study addresses an age span that covers mid-life, late middle years, and older individuals of both genders. Having struggled to find texts that feature ageing individuals as major protagonists, I can say that there is an increasing preoccupation with older individuals in the modern Arabic novel, and a gradual change of their role in society as more people live longer, and remain healthy in their old age. The first chapter considers ageing individuals within traditional societies. Chapter 2 explores the impact of urbanisation and change on older men and women. Chapter 3 examines menopause and how women respond to this biological phenomenon. Chapter 4 analyses the impact of ageing on men, and Chapter
5 considers the significance of autobiographical writings by older men and women. The study shows how individuals navigate old age, the stereotypes they encounter and the manner in which they subvert them. It also focuses on precariousness and transience, which represent major problems to ageing individuals who are confronted by an unstable identity that encroaches on a self always thought to be fixed and stable, demanding religious faith and surrender to the inevitable.

For many years, most novelists, poets and playwrights have not made older characters their central characters, since in a region where the young prevail such works do not attract many readers. The elderly have received little attention, because as creatures close to death they are relegated to the margins of society and their actions and thoughts are taken for granted. Focusing on characters in experiential relations, fictive creations are valuable sources with which to define, analyse and understand the experience of ageing in the modern and contemporary Arabic novel, and even to challenge the traditional, negative stereotypes and prejudices associated with it. Although the writers selected come from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Egypt, the inclusion of a novel from Tunisia aims to convey awareness of an overall devaluation of ageing male individuals by younger generations, and the gradual erosion of the controlling role of the male patriarch within Arab societies. The novels also reveal that practices within Arab societies differ not only from one Arab country to another but also internally, from city to village, and across family, nationality, religion, sect, class and geography. The texts reveal that there is no single model of old age and that in many cases ageing individuals are more differentiated. Even in works where people share local, religious, cultural and family paradigms, each individual’s experience is distinctly singular and private. Without falling into the trap of essentialism, my study demonstrates how men and women are physically and psychologically disadvantaged by age. In looking at ageing from a gendered perspective, I do not see each category as exclusively homogeneous, and focus instead on the idiosyncrasies of each experience within each category.

The study will show the gradual move from a traditional ideology of ageing into a more diverse and fluid representation of elderly individuals in their daily experiential lives. The selected works range from tropes of elderly men and women within paternalistic and hierarchical family struc-
tures which revere older individuals, to more open-ended models generated by social and demographic factors, leading to a more self-reflexive awareness of ageing. Male and female writers are gradually subverting the earlier tenets and inventing new modes of narratives of ageing to show that there is no standard female or male experience of senescence, and that the ageing process is multiple and inconsistent rather than homogeneous and uniform.

The texts cover physical and psychic pain, alienation from family and youthful society, self-doubt, feelings of uselessness, grief over the loss of friends, but also mental acuity and physical energy – all of which present the old in a position of power or powerlessness or both. The work deals with the realities of ageing as a stable, contextual, historical, contingent and subversive entity, with old people continually destabilising the meanings attached to the physical realities of ageing.

The study focuses on ageing as a biological and social formation. If it tells an individual story about ageing, it articulates simultaneously combined political, social and economic discourses, underlining the pivotal importance of history and location in the articulation of an ageing subjectivity. As Cole puts it, ageing and old age ‘are certainly real, but they do not exist in some natural realm, independently of the ideals, images and social practices that conceptualise and represent them’.\(^7\) Accordingly, the process of ageing can be viewed as ‘polysemic’\(^7\) in its capacity to reinforce traditional gender identities, but also to interact with the cultural forces outside it.

Notes
1. Sibai and Yamout, ‘Family-Based Old-Age Care in Arab Countries’, pp. 63–76.
3. Gullette, *Declining to Decline*, p. 3.
6. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 84.
34. Young and Shami, ‘Anthropological Approaches to the Arab Family’, p. 11.
38. Ibid., p. 9.
39. Ibid., p. 15.
40. Quoted in Sibai and Yamout, ‘Family-Based Old-Age Care in Arab Countries: Between Tradition and Modernity’, p. 65 n.
42. Barakat, *The Arab World*, p. 98.
43. Ibid., p. 131.
44. Ibid., pp. 132–3.
45. Millet, *Sexual Politics*, p. 3.
46. P. 10.
60. Quoted in Pearsall, ‘Introduction’ in *The Other Within Us*, p. 5.
69. Said, *On Late Style*.