

## Preface

Having traced thousands of modern minimalist stories for about twenty years, I can say beyond any shadow of doubt that this genre has been gaining a foremost position in the very centre of modern Arabic fiction. It has reached an irreversible degree of accomplished generic identity, ending in a speedy process of canonization. Like all other genres and sub-genres of all three literary domains—poetry, drama and narrative fiction—the minimalist story was accompanied in its initial stages with scepticism, hesitation, denial, rejection and reservations. Four decades later, after minimalism burst into Arabic fiction in the early 1970s, the genre has succeeded in becoming widely recognized among writers and readers.

The minimalist story is one of the most salient literary phenomena to affirm that contradictory literary theories can cohabit peacefully and harmoniously: views recognized as realistic and views recognized as aesthetic; those emphasizing the role of the author himself or herself in any literary process of interpretation, particularly offered by E.D. Hirsch, and those emphasizing the role of the reader, particularly offered by W. Iser and R. Barthes. Since the minimalist story is by definition tightly restricted on the level of textual data, the reader has enough room for all of these views and theories. In cases of texts that provide the reader restricted data, he or she has no other option but to get help from any available details from the author, and equally from her or his own experience as a reader and human being. Beside their own resources, readers refer to the author as a legitimate resource for them to conduct their process of interpretation. However, the author's biography and the general context in which the text is published seem mostly of great significance for gathering elementary information to complete the fragmented picture of the plot, while the reader's experience and knowledge are notably needed to translate the gathered information into meaning/s. This compromising attitude enables the reader of the minimalist story to play a key role in both the reading and in the interpretation process. In the former process, the reader has initially to complete the text with basic missing data. But in the process of interpretation he or she must fill in the gaps left in the text as the very outcome of the missing information. So minimalist texts "suffer", so to speak, from two types of absence and lack; the first refers to data related to the plot, the second to the explanations of what already exist in the text. To my mind, this is one of the typical measures of the minimalist fiction, namely the absence of fundamental data on the plot, besides the absence of the explanations needed to interpret the text. Unlike the minimalist story, in the short story *most* of the fundamental data regarding the plot (fabula) are present, in one way or another, in the text itself. In other words, while the absent data in the short story mostly centre on the process of interpretation, in the minimalist story the absent data concern both processes—*reading* and *interpretation* alike. These absent data

in the minimalist story, as illustrated in the following discussion, refer to the fundamental questions when, where, who, what, how and why. This double system of absence and lack is what makes the reader's role much more difficult and complicated, but ironically much more interesting and productive too.

Literature in general is the art of dealing with human beings who simultaneously are the core and objectives of texts and as such, all other textual data should be examined on the light of this fact. In other words, time and space, for instance, should be treated as attached or associated to characters not as independent aspects. Characters in the minimalist story are by definition representative and illustrative. All textual components in a narrative text are there to serve the characters, which are meant to represent real people or illustrate extra-literary concerns related to actual people. The characters themselves, whoever or whatever they are in the narrative texts in particular and in literature in general, are not the final objective of the literary work, but provisional phases needed to represent the wide reality of the human being. In addition to language, the fundamental material of any literary text, the five major components of the plot of any narrative text—time, place, character, event and narrator—that shape the plot of the text will be the focus of this examination of the minimalist approach and its impact on these components.

The study is divided into four major chapters. The first is introductory, giving the background against which I attempt to elicit the socio-political atmosphere in the Arab world and its impact on the accelerating emergence and development of the Arabic minimalist story. The second chapter considers the concept of worldwide minimalism and its generic measures as reflected in the minimalist story. The applied chapters, three and four, concern content and form, namely thematic and aesthetic facets in representative texts, from almost all Arab countries. In both applied chapters the reader is deeply involved in completing the texts and plays a key role in interpreting them. Since the reader is an extra-textual authority, his/her active role is not an integral aspect of the minimal stories themselves, but one of the evident outcomes of their minimalism. The study does not dedicate an independent chapter to the practical conduct of the reader; this will be integrated in both these chapters. The study does not aim at analysing the techniques typical of the minimalist story but the way it operates and functions while implementing these techniques. In other words, the study is not interested in showing how these literary tools work, one by one, but how texts of the minimalist story benefit from them. The objective of the study is to examine texts, not tools. Tools are means and texts are the goal.

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*Studies and Applied Semiotics/Sémiotique Appliquée (AS/SA)*, and I take the opportunity to thank the editors and the publishers of these journals for permission to re-use them. Many texts investigated in the book were originally discussed with my former students over the years at the University of Haifa. A few were discussed with my students at Uppsala University in the fall of 2004, and at the University of Heidelberg in the second semester of 2007. I thank them all for their kind help and challenging comments.

