Al Bahith Journal for Social Sciences
Homepage: https://journals.uokerbala.edu.iq/index.php/bjh

When Structure Mirrors Identity: Reading Noor Naga's *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English* as a Lyotardian Petit Récit

Arkan Naser Hussain
The General Directorate of Education in Al-Qadisiyah Province, Ministry of Education, Iraq

Abstract in English

This paper explores Noor Naga's *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English* through the lens of Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the *petit récit*, or "little narrative." Instead of offering a tidy, overarching story, Naga's novel breaks with conventional narrative expectations. It leans into fragmentation, using shifting voices, nonlinear time, metafiction, koans and footnotes. These formal choices do more than challenge aesthetic norms; they mirror the unstable, often contradictory nature of postcolonial identity itself. Rather than tying up its contradictions neatly, the novel embraces them, highlighting miscommunication, cultural dissonance, and unresolved tension. In doing so, it reflects Lyotard's vision of postmodern ethics: storytelling that resists closure and values multiplicity. Here, fragmentation becomes not a flaw to be corrected, but a necessary and honest reflection of a fractured world.

Paper Info

Received: - -2025
Accepted: 20-7-2025
Published: 28-7-2025

Keywords

identity, structure, power, Naga, Lyotard, petit récit

doi: https://doi.org/10.63797/bjh.

1. Introduction

Noor Naga (1992-) is an Egyptian-Canadian novelist and poet who was born in Philadelphia, USA, raised in Dubai, UAE, studied in Toronto, Canada, now lives in Alexandria, Egypt, and teaches at the American University in Cairo (Willie-Okafor, 2022). She has been characterized as a "gifted" writer and praised for her "creative intelligence" (Quayson, 2021, p.264).

Naga has received the Arab American Book Award and the Pat Lowther Memorial Award for her verse-novel *Washes, Prays* (2020). She has also won the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize and the Graywolf Press Africa Prize for her debut novel *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English* (2022) (henceforth *If*), which has been shortlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize and positively reviewed by the *Chicago Review of Books*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Guernica*, the *CBC*, *The New York Times* and *Kirkus* (Quayson & Watson, 2023).

Set six years after the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, or the Arab Spring in Egypt, which toppled the regime of President Hosni Mubarak, *If* follows along a romantic yet

catastrophic affair between an American-Egyptian girl and an Egyptian boy. Being a daughter of Egyptian wealthy immigrants who live in the States, the American girl (*henceforth* the girl), whose name is Noor as it turns out eventually, returns from New York to live in Cairo, a place which she has never been to before, to be reconnected to her roots. She lives in a rented luxurious flat with balconies on all sides and teaches English at the British Council in Cairo. As for the boy from Shobrakheit (*henceforth* the boy), who remains unnamed, he comes from a poverty-stricken family from Shobrakheit, a village in Beheira Governorate in Egypt. After his benefactor grandmother commits suicide, he leaves his village and works in Cairo as a photographer living in a rooftop shack. He commences his career by photographing commercials and pornography. During the revolution, he resonates as the uprising photographer. News agencies such as BBC, CNN and Reuters buy from him photos of Tahrir Square. However, after President Al-Sisi confiscates the revolution in 2014 and the state arrests activists and revolution photographers, the boy finds himself unemployed and eventually addicted to cocaine. His expectations in the revolution to rescue him from poverty have gone with the wind.

The girl and the boy first meet in Café Riche in Cairo. Then they fall in love and he moves to live with her. At this time, he resists his addiction and becomes clean. But soon their relationship takes a violent twist. Because they come from different cultural backgrounds, they do not understand each other. As such, the boy starts to behave violently which leads to their separation. Having nowhere to stay in, the boy turns homeless, sleeping in the streets or a nearby mosque. As for the girl, she moves on to enter into a new affair with William, a British teacher who works with her, who afterward moves in. Raged at her new relationship and now drugged, the boy comes to her flat aiming to kill William. However, he suffers an immediate death. Naga has never disclosed who the villain or the hero of the novel is. She only situates her two main characters in a context of violence and desire, and leaves it for readers to decide. However, when power inflects relationships, only one side will ultimately survive (Sultan, 2022).

If has an innovative structure. As to its themes, it scrutinizes the nuances of culture, class and their impacts on identity. It also highlights the subjects of language as a cultural barrier, the horrors of alienation, the prisons of poverty and the prosperity of the privileged (Sultan, 2022). Accordingly, the nature of the novel's structure and the locality of its themes provide an opportunity to read it as a Lyotardian petit récit which challenges and resists the formality and universality of grand narratives.

2. Literature Review

Many writers praised *If*. In the *Chicago Review of Books*, Hansen (2022) hails its experimental rarity and describes it "sharp, switched-on, and self-interrogating." "This work," says Singleton (2022), in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, "is humbling because it requires an admission of ignorance, requiring one to ask questions, to be curious and open." In *Guernica*, Jamshed (2022) describes it "deceptively simple" and Elliott (2022) depicts it in the *CBC* as a "structurally inventive, morally complex novel." Owusu (2022), in *The New York Times* defines it as a "propulsive and philosophical novel." In the *Kirkus Reviews*, it is described as "a fascinating novel about class and abuse" (2022).

There are some studies which apply the Lyotardian concept of petit récit to works of literature and cinema. Fonsalido (2019) studies the literary works of Spanish writer Francisco de Quevedo and Argentinian writer Juan José Saer as petit récits. Joy (2019) applies petit récit to James Cameron's *Titanic*. As for Zameer (2021), he reads the ancient Indian Sanskrit epic, *the Mahabharata*, and three of its contemporary adaptations in fiction in the light of Lyotardian Petit Récits.

This study hypothesizes that there has not been a properly comprehensive and focused study that read Naga's *If* as a Lyotardian petit récit in which the prerequisites of grand narratives are challenged structurally and thematically. Therefore, it tries to fill up this gap.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984), which is originally written in French in 1979, Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) defines postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (1984, p.xxiv). By metanarratives Lyotard means the grand narratives of beliefs, notions, concepts, or ideas which can operate to legitimate certain practices and actions (Buchanan, 2010) such as Hegeliansim (dialectics of Spirit), phenomenology (hermeneutics of meaning), liberalism and Marxism (the emancipation of the rational or working subject), and capitalism (the creation of wealth). These ideologies and theories are presumed to offer comprehensive accounts of human experience, societal construction, and historical events (Lyotard, 1984).

The logic of skepticism Lyotard contends in his critical defiance, which led to the propagation of the "petit récit," or the little narrative, is a confirmation of what philosophers before him had presupposed and an accurate legislation of postmodernism as being a cultural tendency initiated by the detachment and disintegration from the previous grand narratives which can be encountered in social, political, religious, and cultural structures. In this way, the little narrative serves as a challenge and an alternative to the knowledge given in grand narratives (Purvis, 2011), which are "universalized" (Lyotard, 1984, p.21), "unified" and "totalized" (Lyotard, 1984, p.36). Confirming this tenet, Lyotard argues:

> The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses […]. The decline of narrative can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means (1984, p.37).

This means that grand narratives cannot operate as a basis of legitimation or validation in a postmodern context. The emphasis is now thrown upon the small rather than the large, and this move results in a shift from singularity to the plurality and diversity of perspectives. In other words, there are many stories now to be narrated by various voices. These different stories and narrators indicate a new culture constructed from multiple things such as a decentralized, fragmented and plural political, social, and cultural body of literature, with every and each little narrative potentially claiming its own value and identity without being merged into a grand totality. Put differently, each

little narrative makes its own significance, place, and legitimacy under the umbrella of postmodernism (Gloag, 2012).

After speaking approvingly of a "delegitimation" of grand narratives in the postmodern era, Lyotard hails little narratives and states:

> We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives–we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse. But as we have just seen, the little narrative [*petit récit*] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention (1984, p.60).

Thus, Lyotard presumes that this delegitimation pushes writers into an open-ended and localized route of narratology, whereas every one of them can use his brilliance and imagination as he goes along without being restrained by any predetermined conclusion or pattern as grand narrative implements. This means that the teleological commitments of grand narrative are removed to clear the stage for individual initiatives (Sim, 1986). Concerning the difference that characterizes the aesthetics of postmodernism, Lyotard avers:

> The postmodern … puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will *have been done* (1984, p.81).

As a result, little narratives are produced disjointed or fragmented in the sense that they are not built on stultifying or accepted rules of argument but look for vernacular and local arrangements that could be characterized by literary eclecticism (Purvis, 2011).

Lyotard believes that an intolerance of difference is initiated by the blind faith put in the singularity of the grand narratives of modernity. As a result, considering the grand narratives as providing the ultimate truth leads to the consequence that any deviation is to be viewed as a threat and to persecute any attempt to introduce alternative perspectives. To abolish this intolerance, the multiplicity of theoretical viewpoints must be embraced so that the heterogeneity of human experiences is appreciated. Hence, little narratives can be employed to enable a more suitable comprehension and a better interaction with temporary, contingent and local circumstances (Cuddon, 2013).

The present study manipulates a descriptive-analytical approach. It depends on Lyotard's concept of petit récit as an instrument for its argument. Thus, it eventually attempts to read Naga's *If* as a Lyotardian petit récit.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Form and Fragmentation

To simplify the intricate structure of *If*, it is worth explaining that its authorial voice, namely the girl or Noor, drafts her three-part memoir about her experience in Cairo and presents it a year after she left Egypt for a creative writing class in the States to be workshopped. Readers read the first two parts and in the third part they find a two-page excerpt from the supposed third part and a discussion about the three parts, and this is actually Naga's master plan to cross-examine the very narrative she has created (Hansen, 2022).

Thus, *If* is a three-part experimental novel in which italicization is used instead of quotation marks. Its first part falls into forty-eight micro-chapters narrated by the girl and the boy alternatively, which makes it a collection of fragments with alternating perspectives shifting between the boy and the girl, i.e., one micro-chapter for the boy and another for the girl and so forth. Interestingly enough, each micro-chapter consists of a question and, in most cases, unrelated answer. The question is a koan-riddle.

Originated in different schools of Zen Buddhism to enlighten practitioners, a koan can be a complex narrative, a brief story, an insightful saying or a question which is perplexing, pithy, and sometimes paradoxical. Koans are used to recognize and eradicate the reasons of ignorance and to acquire insight into the right nature of reality beyond ordinary language or logic. When they are concise as in questions, they demand an attentive reading between the lines to deduce their significance (Heine, 2014). Here is an example of Naga's koan-riddles: "Question: If you are competing to lose, what do you win if you win?" (Naga, 2022, p.37). Since *If* is written in fragments, koan riddles can function as brain teasing devices which can bring pieces or bits of the story together. Put differently, they foreshadow events of the whole story (Edoro, 2022).

The koans truly capture how the novel reflects contradiction and unsettling feelings that pull the thread until logic comes undone. Because the logic of binary oppositions is also a logic of subordination and domination, the novel refuses the usual binaries like victory versus defeat or success versus failure. In this sense, the koans become a kind of metaphor for postcolonial identity which is constantly shifting, messy, and uncertain. In this space, actions do not tie up neatly into consequences. Everything feels slightly off-balance. This mirrors Lyotard's idea of the petit récit, where truth is not whole or stable, and any attempt at a final answer feels not only misleading but maybe even ethically suspect. Instead of closure, the koans make the reader engaged in a state of uncertainty and open a door to deeper questions about what it means to act, to resist, or to locate oneself in a world where the old rules of meaning, of cause and effect just do not seem to hold anymore. (Benhabib, 1992).

The use of koans, especially ones that are rooted in a particular moment or context is a quiet, deliberate act of resistance against the dominant traditions of reason, rationality, and linear progress that have long shaped Western thought. These koans, in addition to disrupting narrative frameworks, carve out space for what usually slips

through the cracks of language and give shape to the unsayable, even if only through suggestion or paradox. They do not explain or clarify. Instead, they emphasize deeper truths that logic alone cannot quite touch (Cleary, 1992, p. 9). Lyotard's idea of petit récits welcomes fragmentation, contradiction, and the messiness of multiple perspectives. Therefore, the koans here embody fragmented spirit and they are deeply tied to a specific cultural and spiritual tradition. Yet, it is difficult to force them into neat and rational explanations. What makes them powerful is not how they make sense on paper, it is how they are felt, how they linger in the mind. Lyotard reminds the reader that in a postmodern world, truth is not a single and solid thing. It is scattered across different voices and ways of speaking, each one presenting its own fractional and fleeting indication of truth (Toit, 2011).

After the separation of the boy and the girl at the close of the first part, the second part takes a new storytelling style. It falls into thirty-six micro-chapters narrated by the girl and the boy alternatively, i.e., one micro-chapter for the boy and another for the girl and so forth. However, the questions, or the koan-riddles, disappear to be substituted with footnotes that elucidate sides of Egyptian culture, food, and history obviously for a Western audience. These notes are recounted to the girl by the boy and, thus, most of them, as Egyptian readers can easily spot, are blatantly inaccurate (Abdel-Halim, 2023). Naga clarifies that she has used footnotes in the second part as a structural substitute for the questions of the first part. She says that they are also "a way of privileging the Egyptian reader" because he will "immediately begin to feel that something's wrong" (El-Rifae, 2022, n.p.). "Permitting the characters to narrate in tandem from their separate points of view," says Hansen, "allows Naga to gradually reveal their divergent identities, backstories, and preoccupations, giving us valuable insight into the evolution and destruction of their relationship as it is understood by two people from very different worlds" (2022, n.p.).

At first sight, the footnotes appear to be helpful for readers who might not be familiar with Egyptian culture. Some of them list different kinds of mangoes or describe local dishes like foul, that simple fava bean meal so many Egyptians used to have. However, for Egyptian readers, the details do not always quite fit. One of the footnotes refers to a Nubian writer named Sayed Dhaif (Naga, 2022, p.144). What comes to be shocking is that this person does not exist and no one has ever heard of him. Later on, Naga herself admitted that she made him up and he was not the only invention presented in her text. As a result, the assumed "facts" scattered throughout these footnotes are mostly fictional. What Naga does here is that she provides a deeper narrative strategy that sets quiet traps for readers who expect literature to be a tidy reflection of the real world. It is true that the footnotes mislead, but the critical point is that they mirror the disorientation that the American girl feels. Noor continues to misread the culture around her and she is unable to grasp the full picture (Naji, 2022).

The novel here introduces a prominent example of what is called *historiographic metafiction*. The reader is presented with a form that gives the tone and structure of academic writing, such as footnotes and references. Nevertheless, the novel, unexpectedly, reveals that those passages are not in service of truth. Instead, they appear to be just wisely crafted performances that are ideological, intentional, and far from being neutral. Instead of offering factual information, they enter into a world of

misdirection beneath the surface. In postmodern fashion, the novel does not only use the familiar conventions of scholarship, but also destabilizes them as it goes on. At this point, it is evident that postmodernism is a space where "the conventions of fiction are simultaneously used and abused, installed and subverted, asserted and denied." This tension makes the reader notice how the work is supposed to be read it in the first place (Schneider, 2008, p. 1).

4.2. Identity, Barriers and Power

In their endeavor to find an identity, the girl and the boy face numerous obstacles which have hampered their efforts. The girl collides with Cairo, Cairenes, culture, class, Arabic and the boy she loves as he attempts to impose his power upon her. As the boy moves through Cairo, he carries a heavy sense of disappointment in the aftermath of the revolution, struggling to figure out what the reason behind the awful state of his world is. He becomes confused as he discovers that the future he once imagined is out of reach. Another obstacle is the girl and her different heritage. Being with her constantly reminds the boy of the gap between them, not just emotionally but socially. Their relationship turns out as uneasy space, always shadowed by the cultural and class differences they are unable to bridge.

In the first part, the girl presents herself as "an Egyptian girl with a shaved head" (Naga, 2022, p.4) who speaks "lilting, infantile Arabic" (Naga, 2022, p.21). Her father is a distinguished dentist who has deserted her mother. After she graduates from Columbia University, she leaves New York for Cairo to search for an identity. In Cairo, she befriends two Coptic Egyptians, Sami, a half-British, and Reem, a lesbian. She begins to see them in Café Riche which is owned by Sami's father. As to the boy, he presents himself as a tall Egyptian youth with remarkable hair which makes people in Cairo mistake him for a foreigner. He reflects, "Wherever I went people asked me—sometimes in English because of the hair—*Where you from?*" (Naga, 2022, p.7).

When the girl is described as "an Egyptian girl with a shaved head," and the boy, though he is Egyptian, appears like a foreigner in his own country, the novel taps into Lyotard's idea of language games. Their appearance is part of overlapping systems. What is so captivating is how neither character fits into any fixed category. Actually, their selves are built from cultural signals that do not always make sense outside their immediate context. The girl's shaved head, for instance, signals that she is not playing by the usual rules. As to the boy, he moves with a kind of dislocation, and he is somehow misaligned with his own surroundings. So, there is no common ground as these contrasting self-images reveal just how unstable identity can be. In Lyotard's view, every attempt they make to define themselves is just another move in a fractured space, where meaning is slippery, and where the comfort of consensus disappears (Sim, 2011).

In his birth place, the village of Shobrakheit, the boy lives harshly with his grandmother, his mute father, who worked as a mechanic, and his wicked mother. They live in abject poverty that makes his grandmother commit suicide by climbing a stove.

He turns helpless as she used to be the guardian who played his parents' role emotionally and financially. Thus, he embarks on a journey to Cairo to prove his independent identity with "torn pockets" and "a corn bag" for his clothes (Naga, 2022, p.6). The first years in Cairo he depends on money from his grandmother, which she earned from embroidery and making paper lotuses and cranes. Then he depends on photography in providing money for his living and studying in Cairo University. When he meets the girl, he is a jobless addict because of the confiscation of the Egyptian Revolution by President Al-Sisi.

The boy narrates the same story phases and incidents which the girl narrated about their affair but from his own perspective and vice versa. He loathes Reem calling her "the lesbian" (Naga, 2022, p.22) and despises Sami calling him "blubber-tub" (Naga, 2022, p.25). However, he expresses his infatuation with the girl and recognizes her as an "American" with "petite, expensive-looking clothes, and hair shaved close to the scalp like a sniper's" (Naga, 2022, p.22). Using sexual fantasies, he adds, "I [...] could […] see from the peach-plump wetness of her lips how the skin of her other, lower lips would look. Her Arabic was cute, barely there […]. She was hairless, I believed, all over" (Naga, 2022, p.29). For him, she is "clean" and "*Clean* being code for more than just money; a coveted un-Egyptianness, a combination of first world contact and old-world etiquette" (Naga, 2022, p.20).

Though the boy is clearly below her class, the girl loves him because he looks like her father, protects her in Cairo and teaches her about Cairo and Egyptians which makes her feel less foreign and renders him more dominant (Owusu, 2022). She describes him as old-fashioned and tall who lives in a shack and wears ragged clothes with an old camera hanging from his neck. He loves her too. Yet, he resents her access and privilege (El-Rifae, 2022).

After moving to her flat, the boy tries to wield power over her by bragging about his contribution to the revolution, giving her false information about Egypt, talking about pornography he watched when he was younger and taking the virginity of an 11-year-old female cousin when he was twelve (El-Rifae, 2022). For her side, she also desires to westernize him. First, she lets him take nudes for her. Then, she takes him to an art gallery. However, he leaves the moment he enters. She attempts to blend him in her world but he does not seem to collaborate. She clarifies that he has seen the "outside" world through her and she is like "a fish-eye peephole" for him (Naga, 2022, p.125). Day after day, while she does her job and domestic labor, he stays in her flat watching YouTube videos. As such, she maintains a factor of control as she leaves him locked inside without a key for him (El-Rifae, 2022). In fact, the boy has power over the girl because he is a man and knows Cairo well and she has power over him because she is wealthy and American. This shifting power will crack their love and situate them in a complex maze of powerlessness and inadequacy (Ahmed, 2022).

When they are together, the girl provides the boy with residence, money and sex, which represent her tools of power. However, he loves to see her vulnerable so as to exert more power upon her. He clarifies, "I love when she cries, how the kohl streaks down like two braids on either side of her mouth, that genital mouth of hers. Then I can comfort her, make her laugh" (Naga, 2022, p.62). Meanwhile, he does not love her

strong charisma and looks at her as a colonist. He clarifies, "It's her American showing: rolling into my village in a military tank, tossing at my mother's feet three-quarters of an apple she has only peeled with her teeth […] like some kind of authority" (Naga, 2022, p.62). Moreover, he continues comparing her rich living to his poverty. Accordingly, the relationship between them deteriorates for the very motives that they are initially love each other. He desires her wealth with all its privileges but feels bitter toward her for possessing it. She desires his authenticity but despises the way he manipulates it to assert dominance over her (Ahmed, 2022). The mutual struggle continues as power dynamics shift between the boy and the girl in which neither one constantly holds control over the other. What really stands out is those moments when language itself falls short as each of them is unable to voice the pain in a way the other can actually grasp. The power dynamic scene reflects the deplorable state of both characters because they seem to live inside their own version of truth, shaped by historical and ideological differences. Lyotard speaks to this kind of tension, where conflicting realities cannot always be folded neatly into one shared framework (Lyotard, 1984).

Living for months in Cairo triggers in the girl a bad impression about the city. She reflects, "Cairo is not what I expected, but the shock is one of scale rather than content. I expected traffic and poverty and pollution, but not like this. It's a city dialed up to its extreme" (Naga, 2022, p.17). She adds, "It's as though the city were deliberately designed to resist comprehension and to discipline those who left for daring to return. You have either lived here and you know, or you never have and never will" (Naga, 2022, p.42). She then realizes that Cairo is not suitable for her:

> I am outside of my context, confused about where the margins and the pressure points are. Who has the power? Where is the center? I haven't seen a woman's knees since I got here, and no one has seen my knees either. There is Quran playing everywhere, and people drag God's name into every conversation. Every time I get into a cab, I am given a sermon by the driver about the wrongness of women looking like men, and why don't I cover up my head, seeing as I don't have hair anyway? (Naga, 2022, p.31).

As such, she starts to regret coming to Cairo because living there is tiring for her. Though she attempts to blend in, she fails as she feels like a stranger alienated amid the Cairenes. She clarifies,

> Even when I wear the swathing, swaddling fabrics my mother packed for me, I can't blend in. I'm recognized as an outsider and keep getting asked by complete strangers where I'm from. To my answer *Here*, I'm smiled at magnanimously, as in *Of course you are* (Naga, 2022, p.50).

She suffers from Egyptians as it comes to her hair.

> When it was that short, strangers on the street were always calling out *salamtek* because they thought I had cancer. A beggar once even refused my change, saying, *You need it more than I do.* When my hair was a little longer, I got called other things: *whore-boy, sissy-boy, faggot, biscuit, bicycle-rider* . . . Even with

> my hair at its longest, I got misgendered if I was wearing pants (Naga, 2022, pp.53-4).

Egyptians ridicule her look. She clarifies, "On the street, my shaved head made me an easy target. Everyone had something to say. Women giggled. Men shouted from the backs of motorcycles and the interiors of cars" (Naga, 2022, p.20). The girl keeps wondering why Egypt is the way it is. The reality she lived is a shock to the fantasies she had in her imagination, a responsive reaction against white supremacy and a manifestation for the necessity of belonging which proves to be more intricate than the individuality of an identity proclaimed in the States (Sultan, 2022).

In New York, she is a "more convincing Egyptian" (Naga, 2022, p.41). In Cairo, none believes she's Egyptian. She explains, "I keep saying I'm Egyptian and no one believes me. I'm the other kind of other, someone come from abroad who could just as easily return there" (Naga, 2022, p.41). The girl senses that her identity thirst is not easily quenched because she is identified as an Egyptian in the States and as an American in Egypt (Sultan, 2022). When she uses Arabic, she messes things: "In Arabic, I keep using the wrong verb tenses or mixing up the feminine and the masculine, and they pick me out immediately. It helps to stay quiet. I keep nodding, pretending I understand" (Naga, 2022, p.41). Her little Arabic makes her experience in Cairo more painful:

> I keep my mouth closed, I can almost pass for a Cairene. People look me up and down, they talk to me in Arabic and I feel I've won something. When I start asking questions, they switch immediately to English, as though correcting themselves (Naga, 2022, p.17).

On the other hand, she suffers from disconnection with the boy as he speaks no English and she speaks little Arabic. She tells him, "*I will be misunderstood. I am trying to express myself with the vocabulary I have in Arabic*" (Naga, 2022, p.75). She adds, "I am stupid in this Arabic" (Naga, 2022, p.75). Language for her is a cultural barrier that makes it difficult for her to express herself properly. She clarifies, "How to say *passive-aggressive* in Arabic? *Guilt trip*? *Victim complex*? How to say *emotional blackmail*? What is unforgivable in English, in Arabic has no name I know" (Naga, 2022, p.80).

Noor's plight with Arabic does not shed light on the struggle with language only. Rather, it points out that the girl is trapped into a painful and long history of colonial impact, where language has been shaped by power. After centuries of dominance by colonialism and politics of translation, the girl's trauma proves that she speaks a tongue that has been put in a position of inadequacy. Translation under colonial rule was never a neutral act because it moved almost entirely in one direction. Texts were reshaped and filtered to fit only what Western society prefers. The stories that were worthy of being told and the manner of narrating them were decided by European literary norms. So, it is the entire weight of legacy that forces Noor to hesitate and question the use of Arabic (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999).

The boy also expresses his communication difficulties with her:

> Pain, it's pain. I am careful to simplify my language when I talk to her, but not too much. Her range is odd, at times jejune and grandmotherly, at others formal, obsolete. She uses words like *naughtiness* and *tummy* but *beg pardon* when she means to say what (Naga, 2022, p.72).

He also criticizes Cairo for privileging her over him because it is good with the foreigners only: "This city punishes the poor every chance it gets. There is hardly a public bench left that doesn't require payment, but I once saw the American girl sit in Cilantro for two hours and leave without ordering a thing" (Naga, 2022, p.110).

Problems with the boy's temper start to float on the surface and he begins to criticize the girl's Western lifestyle, which cracks their love and makes it fragile. One day, he becomes enraged and throws a glass against the wall because he glances at a hidden-behind-a-wall servants' staircase. He shouts, "*How can you live in a building that used to have a servants' staircase? Don't you know anything? Don't you have principles?*" (Naga, 2022, p.66). To this verbal abuse, she responds:

> I would never tolerate this dynamic in New York, but here, somehow, it is harder to speak to. He is punishing me for something, and I am letting him. He is weaponizing all his losses against me, and I am wanting the abuse, or, at the very least, accepting it as mine. After years of claiming Arabness as an excuse for what I am—hairy, hard-boned and dirt-skinned, sensual, impulsive, superstitious, nostalgic, full of body-shame and estrangement—I feel I'm earning it at last (Naga, 2022, p.67).

As the events move, the dynamics of power changes constantly from one side to another. Though she has a Western understanding of racism and sexism, she thinks misogyny is a prerequisite for being Egyptian. As such, she believes that her Arabness is status that she must earn throughout this sexist and toxic affair (Elliott, 2022).

The tension is intensified as she feels unsafe with him. Trying to control her, he keeps her from her friends, Reem and Sami. When clashes accelerate, he addresses her, "*Do you realize all your friends are straight guys or gay girls?*" (Naga, 2022, p.75). To which she responds, "*Are you calling me a slut?*" (Naga, 2022, p.75). Afterward, he turns crazy and smashes a side table. She reflects, "What once was peculiar in him, charming, even, is now terrorizing beyond words" (Naga, 2022, p.80). When the boy lashes out, the girl accepts it though she knows it is wrong. In her mind, she is Egyptian at last (Sultan, 2022). Despite the economic power she has over him, or perhaps because of this power, he flares up in violently, reassuring to her that he always has the physical advantage over her. After all, he is still a man and she is still a woman (Elliott, 2022).

The next day, after the boy leaves her flat, the girl speaks of the disappearance of her mother's pearls but stops at this point. However, she comments, "He has spared me the messy job of getting rid of him (Naga, 2022, p.83). He becomes homeless living on alms and returns to his drug addiction. Nevertheless, he expresses relief from her authority after the break-up. He clarifies, "Living with a woman whose Arabic is stunted, I never noticed how much I was mirroring her: walking on my knees so as to seem shorter. Now it is so good to be back to my full height" (Naga, 2022, p.89). As

the first part closes, it is excruciatingly clear that the conditions of their birth, the shocking inequity of their privileges, and the barrier of language and violence make it impossible for them to have a successful connection in which every side has a well-respected identity (Hansen, 2022).

It is impossible for the girl to elucidate for the boy the Western theories of abuse or identity as she speaks broken Arabic and he does not understand English (Elliott, 2022). On his side, the boy realizes that there is a cultural gap between them and his struggle to gain an identity through her is fruitless. He clarifies, "I find myself measuring for the first time how far America is from Cairo, let alone Shobrakheit. How to bridge this ocean? How to explain all I left behind to get even this far?" (Naga, 2022, p.79).

In his attempt to bridge the cultural and emotional distance between Shobrakheit, Cairo, and America, the boy reveals not just geographical displacement. More than this, his situation suggests that there is no coherent story about who he is and where he belongs. The voices restlessly shift between various and conflicting worlds. The sense of slipping between two spaces and the loss of narrative smoothness is connected with Lyotard's view of the self in postmodernism as being made up of incompatible ways of thinking, contradictions, and conflicting cultures. The self in this sense is not whole or unified. The idea that the self is structured like a language and therefore heterogeneous means that there is no single and true version of the self. This is why the novel offers localized systems of meaning rather than being dependent on a single arc of identity (Gearhart, 2006).

In the second part, when the girl is with William, she returns to speaking English and that makes her "feel instantly safe and indigenous" (Naga, 2022, p.100). She elaborates, "I return to English and even my breathing changes, little *oh-ohs* of ecstasy instead of *ah-ahs*. For too long I have been that other girl: weak, self-effacing—an obvious American in her fat-tongued, blubbering Arabic, and punished for it" (Naga, 2022, p.100). For her, Arabic is a space of poverty and abuse. She flees this space by sleeping with a white man whose mother tongue is English (El-Rifae, 2022).

Being a Western, William understands the girl and her culture. She clarifies, "When we talked, I didn't have to explain basic concepts like yoga or sushi. When I asked him, casually, as a joke, where he was when Michael Jackson died, he could answer" (Naga, 2022, p.103). Returning to her familiar setting with William, the girl easily falls back into her class privilege (Robson, 2022). "It is here," says Zonouzi, "when she realizes that even though she believed she was settling into her 'Arabness' while being with the 'boy from Shobrakheit,' she had been slowly losing herself in the crevices of language and cultural barriers" (2023, n.p.).

The girl drops a stereotyping comment on how Egyptians deal with dating comparing them to New Yorkers. For her, Egyptians are more ideal while New Yorkers are more strategic: "Maybe all Egyptians […] think dating is about love, when any New Yorker will tell you that dating is a martial art. It's basic offense and defense" (Naga, 2022, p.132). Having an eastern mindset, the boy wants to control her, a tactic that does not happen when she is with William. She clarifies,

> William, for example, walked into my body with the same tools I possess. We are in agreement about what is happening and what is not. We'll mess around with each other until one of us finds a better offer. Then we'll split. Easy (Naga, 2022, pp.132-3).

However, William is a miser, suspicious, liquor-lover, arrogant and a racist. With him, she has to defend her Egyptianness. While with the boy, none asks her where she is from because the boy defends her Egyptianness. The boy used to protect her in public. Now she is harassed while walking in the streets. However, when she has William as a sexual partner, she wants a white foreigner who easily distracts her from the heavy cultural weight of an Egyptian man (Sultan, 2022).

After their separation, resentment escalates between the girl and the boy. She looks at him as an Eastern man who wants a girl who is both Western and Eastern; she calls her "in-betweener" (Naga, 2022, p.124). While he looks at her as a Western woman who exposes herself for everybody to "take turns on her" (Naga, 2022, p.109). In their first sexual encounter, she turns shy which makes him accuse her of previous sexual relationships. He reflects, "The more fucking a girl has done, the shyer she pretends to be. It is a rule. But I will extract their names from her in time" (Naga, 2022, p.55). He describes her shyness as "sudden coyness, so uncharacteristic, perhaps the only Egyptian thing about her" (Naga, 2022, p.55). On other occasions, he questions her Egyptianness. He clarifies, "Had she been an Egyptian girl, she would never have left the shutters thrown open the way she does every day, but then again, an Egyptian girl would probably not live alone downtown" (Naga, 2022, p.92). He adds, "She is just as much a foreigner as the ridiculous Italians and Germans […]. What kind of an Egyptian would *do* that? Offer nudes to a man she'd known for two months? She could be all over the internet" (Naga, 2022, p.98). "It is never made clear," says El-Rifae, "how much of this is class, how much is a racialized and sexed mistrust toward her as a culturally white woman, and how much is his own trauma from a revolution that he saw as betrayed" (2022, n.p.).

After the break-up, the girl thinks she has been emancipated from the boy's power and starts to attend parties with Reem, Sami, William and others. Her turning to partying with friends is a coping mechanism (Sultan, 2022). On the other hand, the boy wants to fabricate a rescue from an assault so they can return to each other. However, one day as she is walking alone in the street, a drunken man attacks her. The boy, who has been stalking her, interferes and saves her. She then takes him to her flat. She lets him shower, dine and sleep. The next day she gives him money and lets him go. When he knows about her affairs with William, he comes back "like a murder-verb looking for its object" (Naga, 2022, p.152). He finds William sitting on the balcony. After wrestling, William manages to push him off the balcony. Hereby ends the second part violently registering the boy's failure to enter in the girl's world and to find an identity (Robson, 2022).

The boy and the girl are stark contrasts culturally and economically. What transcends this contrast is the fact that they are totally tied to their pasts, the boy's life in the rural Shobrakheit and the girl's in the urban New York. Naga highlights this bond to the past and shows how it has formed their identities at the present (Andrea, 2022).

"What's interesting to me," says Naga, "is that you can have clashes of people from different classes and cultures" (El-Rifae, 2022). Through these characters and their affair, Naga discloses the slippery and shifting forms of power and belonging under the umbrella of global capitalism. She elucidates what occurs when Egyptian and American concepts of identity collide within a city, within a person, and within a relationship, and whether the locals or the people for their interest the economy is designed belong to a place (Owusu, 2022).

4.3. Metafiction and Narrative Authority

As to the third part, it is constructed as a play script with stage directions and a metafictional nature. The play is set as a creative writing class with American instructor and seven students, Minnie, Alex, Laura, Tim, Jacques, Candice, and Noor, the girl herself or the memoir's author. Noor, now traumatized and in therapy, starts reading a two-page excerpt from the supposed third part in which she expresses her guilt for the boy's death, her resentment from the troubles, harassments and language difficulties she faced in Cairo, and her decision to return to the States, which she calls "home" (Naga, 2022, p.162). Afterward, the instructor opens the discussion and reminds Noor of the gag rule according to which she must not interfere until all the students finish giving their feedback about the copy of the memoir they have already received.

Minnie dislikes the ending and criticizes the structure of the first part:

> part 1 was structurally weird enough, what with no paragraphs and the perspective flipping back and forth . . . It was really hard to follow, plot-wise, and just left so many questions unanswered—literally—these questions that have nothing to do with the actual events . . . it just feels unnecessary. Like, I get it. She's trying to experiment with form. But you can't be swapping voices that frequently and jumping around temporally and then also have these koan-riddles at the top of every page (Naga, 2022, p.164).

The fact that Part one is "structurally weird" clearly highlights the novel's rejection of traditional narrative form. The absence of paragraphs, the constant shifting between perspectives, and the chaotic timeline are choices used deliberately to throw the events into disorientation and resist the storytelling ways that offer clarity. This is because the novel process of "swapping voices" breaks any sense of narrative stability. Waugh (2003, pp.5–6) points out that "the language of fiction appears to spill over into, and merge with, the instabilities of the real world," and that fiction "rejoices in the impossibility of such a resolution."

Then Minnie says that she is not happy with giving the boy a voice:

> Why are we even getting his voice in your memoir? [*to NOOR*] How does that even make sense? You in the boy's head like that when the whole point is that you don't fully get each other, you're from different worlds, et cetera (Naga, 2022, p.164).

This quote, which speaks against the romantic idea that individuals from entirely different political and social worlds can share a single story, aligns with what Lyotard calls "incredulity toward metanarrative." It means that no story is "true" or more legitimate than the others. In a postmodern context, every narrative draws its meaning and weight from the specific community that embraces it. Therefore, the kind of the story presented has its own internal logic and includes a patchwork of different voices and experiences (Sire, 2004).

She also criticizes what she calls the "logistical obstacles and inconsistencies" (Naga, 2022, p.165) in the work. For example, she wonders, how Noor knows the boy was stalking her, returned to drugs and had "rape-fantasies" (Naga, 2022, p.165) about her.

In this moment, a kind of metafictional reckoning unfolds as the novel turns inward to cast a critical eye on Noor herself, the character and the author. It starts to question the legitimacy of the author's stepping into the mind of the boy to speak his experience. It is impossible here to ignore the tension between form and content. The reader, in a moment of self-awareness, can sense how uncomfortable it is that a memoir tries to imagine the inner life of someone from a different social and political world. It breaks the illusion of reality, something that has long been a defining trait of conventional realist fiction (Doughty, 2013).

The story begins to unsettle the sense of what one can actually trust when it introduces unreliable narrators and conflicting viewpoints, or starts reshaping the structure. This lies at the core of what Lyotard means by delegitimation or the breakdown in the systems a person once turned to for stable truths. In the postmodern moment, people no longer place blind faith in universal narratives or grand explanations. This is because knowledge does not feel fixed anymore. Metanarratives, especially in a postmodern time in which knowledge is unbalanced, often feel more like false assurances than actual answers. Such grand stories not only construct a misleading sense of certainty, but also demand a kind of "strenuous delegitimation" (Glass, 1993, p.2)

Noor has previously told them that the boy "made up things about Cairo and his family all the time just to mess with [her]" (Naga, 2022, p.165). Yet, she keeps reporting what he told her, especially in the information she reported in the footnotes of the second part. Minnie adds, "Everything is potentially tainted—especially when the footnotes come in. Obviously, I'm not trying to tell you about your own culture, but I googled a few of them" (Naga, 2022, p.165).

This moment echoes the concerns introduced by Gayatri Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* where she refers to the dangers of speaking for the marginalized, particularly when the speech comes from a place of power. After declaring that the information is taken from a Google search, the character shows discomfort with using footnotes as a means of explaining elements of another culture. This self-aware critique is a realization that the narrative does not try to resolve the discomfort. It acknowledges how ethically complicated it is to represent subaltern experience using the tools and language of dominant knowledge systems. As Ramsey-Kurz points out,

> Instead of thinking the subaltern as equipped with a voice that only needs to be heard, Spivak demands that the subaltern's silence be heard. For Spivak the subaltern's speechlessness is not an intellectual pose, a silence by choice, a deliberate gesture of denial, but an involuntary exclusion from dominant discourse, a straightforward inferiority or disadvantage (2007, p.98).

Minnie then blames Noor for grieving for the boy and feeling guilty for his death. She rails against certain confusions in the plot:

> why didn't his family come to claim the body? [. . .] There were just so many basic plot points that were unclear, and after enduring all the experimentation of parts 1 and 2, flipping backward and forward, I was really hoping all my acrobatics would pay off. But they didn't. They just didn't (Naga, 2022, p.166).

Rather than giving some totalizing pattern, that is, a clear, overarching logic that neatly ties everything together, the text refuses to offer clarity or cohesion in any conventional sense. The novel rejects those efforts to construct patterns which make sense of the world on a grand scale. Here, knowledge is messy, incomplete, and shaped through individual perspectives (Woods, 1999, p.21).

Alex hails the use of footnotes:

> But I just want to repeat that I'm Team Footnotes. Really glad you took our advice after the first workshop and added some stage whispers for us. If anything, they made me trust you even more. I didn't have the same skepticism thing as Minnie going on, just really enjoyed the intel on Middle Eastern culture (Naga, 2022, p.166).

However, he regrets the absence of sensory descriptions of Cairo: "I think you can afford to celebrate more of the little stuff that's *un*googleable, all those textures and kinks that make Cairo, Cairo. You're already using some of them in the footnotes, I just think there's room for more" (Naga, 2022, p.167). He also critiques leaving the boy unnamed.

After expressing her relief that the boy is now dead, as her colleagues have done, Laura says that his "chauvinism" killed him (Naga, 2022, p.169). She accuses him of raping her in the first romantic night they had, an accusation that Noor previously refuted. Then, she describes him as "a stalker" with "toxic masculinity" who is "so manipulative" and "leeching" (Naga, 2022, p.170). She also accuses him of blackmailing her with some nudes he previously took for her and stealing her mother's pearls.

Minnie interferes to specify "a problem *in the language*" as Noor fails to specifically name him as "a thief and a murderer" (Naga, 2022, p.171). Laura agrees with her. Firstly, she inculpates Noor because she "blames herself for the death of her depressive, possessive, extremely *violent* ex" (Naga, 2022, p.174). Then, she calls the boy a "psychotic stalker-rapist" (Naga, 2022, p.174) and critiques Noor for not naming

him as such, "It's like she suggests it, but then doesn't address it head-on" (Naga, 2022, p.174).

Tim is interested in Noor's friends, Reem and Sami, who "started a rumor that the balcony-death was a suicide" (Naga, 2022, p.175) and told the crowd who gathered around that the boy was "homeless" and "a junkie" (Naga, 2022, p.176). He opposes that. However, Alex tells him that they did so to save the lives of William and Noor. He adds,

> the police are totally useless, ready to arrest anyone . . . [*to NOOR*] Maybe we need more cultural context here? But I think it helps to remember that this is not Manhattan. It's downtown Cairo. Military state. There's political tension . . . It could turn into a bloodbath, easily (Naga, 2022, p.179, original ellipesis).

Tim insists that the rumor "was hurting the Shobrakheit boy more than he deserved to be hurt" (Naga, 2022, p.180). He hails Noor for cutting them off after she knew they circulated the rumor. He adds, "She doesn't feel responsible for the boy's death, she feels responsible for his character assassination [*glances at NOOR*], I think. Sammy and Reem, they made him out to be totally worthless" (Naga, 2022, p.180). Minnie blames William for the boy's death and Laura describes him as a "white, cis-het, British male, walking around like he owns everything" (Naga, 2022, p.182). She adds, "It's not clear what he's even doing in Cairo?" (Naga, 2022, p.182). "Colonial vibes, for sure," Alex responds (Naga, 2022, p.182).

Jacques throws his critique on the work's structure and genre, "I think paragraphs would be good. Why not? Some quotation marks, maybe? To make the dialogue easier to follow, because italicization—it is not always enough. The switching voices . . . […] sometimes clear, sometimes no (Naga, 2022, p.183, unbracketed ellipsis is original). He clarifies that the third part is unnecessary:

> It is very difficult to follow such a climax as the balcony-death. From the beginning it was like a thriller. We were, how you say, holding our breath. Why not end there? At the top? […] Then the subject is clear. It is not about Cairo, it is a deadly romance. *Like Giovanni's Room* (Naga, 2022, p.183-4).

Candice disagrees with Jacques and thinks that the third part is important as it resolves "Noor is finally safe" (Naga, 2022, p.184). For her side, Noor is uncomfortable with her colleagues' critique.

Noor's discomfort during the workshop is a kind of literary expression of postcolonial trauma. She receives surface-level critiques instead of thoughtful responses. She realizes that her authoritative voice becomes a site of tension and she begins to feel disconnected from this world. This moment echoes what Homi Bhabha calls the 'unhomely,' a term he borrows from Freud's idea of the uncanny. For Bhabha, when cultures intersect, they do not create harmony; they creates a strange, unsettling, and in-between space. In this regard, identity starts to be unstable and experience slips out of reach. It is not just a matter of being misunderstood, but a deeper, more haunting instability that unsettles even the foundations of selfhood (Wojcik, 2024).

What is more painful for Noor is that she cannot speak back since the workshop's so-called 'gag rule' forces her into silence. This kind of injustice is exactly what Lyotard means by the *differend*, a situation where the people involved are not just arguing, they are operating in entirely different conceptual languages. Noor's harm, which is invisible and unspoken, cannot be translated in a way that others recognize or take seriously. Lyotard sees this as an ethical and philosophical breakdown. As explains, Lyotard's *differend* opens up a radical way of thinking about the kind of fundamental and unresolved conflict (Browning, 2011).

The critiques prove themselves uncultured because they elevate the girl to pure good and reduce the boy to sheer evil (Zonouzi, 2022). Naga succeeds in turning the narrative gaze back on the reader because she shows how the American students in the workshop manipulate and misunderstand Noor's story to suit their own Western ideologies (Elliott, 2022). They only see Noor as the survivor of the boy's abuse and articulate absolutely nothing about the fact that she is the one who has survived between the two. Through the discussion, it turns out that the Egyptian police have never questioned Noor for the death of a boy who fell from her balcony because of the underlying class dynamics (El-Rifae, 2022).

5. Conclusion

In *If*, Naga presents the unpresentable in a work of fiction. She depends on experimentation and genre-blending whereas elements of romance, thriller, and drama are eclectically put together within an innovative three-part structure. She does not follow the pre-established conventions of narratology and adheres to the internal rules of her work where she manipulates micro-chapters, koan-riddles, footnotes and metafiction. The outcome is a novel with the multiplicity of voices and fragmentation of plot.

The use of footnotes and miscommunication reflects what Lyotard identifies as expressing "the unpresentable." Instead of offering tidy explanations or resolving confusion, Naga shows where language starts to fall apart. The characters' inability to truly connect becomes woven into the very structure of the narrative. On the other hand, the footnotes do not really clarify, but they often complicate things further. However, they quietly point to the cracks between cultures, systems of knowledge, and the experiences of individuals. What Naga does so skillfully here reveals how elusive truth can be. In this context, fragmentation and uncertainty are not flaws that need to be fixed. Instead, such strategy reminds the reader to observe that the world is too contradictory and too strange to be fully pinned down in language.

Naga tackles the subjective and multi-layered search for the identity of particular individuals and how their backstory, class, culture, language and disappointment hinder that search. Loaded with these obstacles, the girl and the boy collide with each other while questing a clear-cut identity, which results firstly in misunderstanding, abusiveness, mistrust and secondly in a tragedy and trauma.

Thus, *If* is produced with a disjointed and fragmented structure. Naga manages to reflect the disjointedness and fragmentation of her work on the disjointed and fragmented identities of the girl and the boy. The fragmentation in the novel is

purposeful and carries ethical weight. Noor enacts disunity rather than just reflecting it. The story breaks its own timeline, replacing clarity with tension and shifts between forms to create a layered and intentional disorder. The disjointed style serves the purpose of questioning how knowledge is created, passed on, and understood. The novel's disorder aligns with Lyotard's idea of the petit récit. Rather than offering a unified narrative, the novel presents something more grounded, fractured, and honest, creating a world in which truth resists to be simplified.

It can be concluded that *If* resists the formality, universality and singularity of grand narratives. Therefore, it can be read as a Lyotardian petit récit *par excellence*.

6. Limitation and Recommendations for Future Research

Although this study sheds light on how the novel represents identity structures through narrative form and postmodern techniques, there are aspects that have not yet received sufficient attention in previous studies. Prominent among these aspects is the complex relationship between identity construction and postcolonial class representation in the novel, as well as the interaction between spatial context (such as Cairo and New York) and cultural identity transformations. This study recommends future research that explores multiple critical approaches, such as feminist criticism, postcolonial theory, and discourse analysis which can also be utilized to gain a deeper understanding of identity construction in Noor Naga's works and their narrative and cultural contexts.

7. References

Abdel-Halim, A. (2023). Translating home: English-language novels by Egyptian authors. Egyptian Streets. Retrieved June 12, 2024, from https://egyptianstreets.com/2023/05/14/translating-home-english-language-novels-by-egyptian-authors/

Ahmed, M. (2022). A review of *if an Egyptian cannot speak English* by Noor Naga. *F(r)iction*. Retrieved September 6, 2024, from https://frictionlit.org/a-review-of-if-an-egyptian-cannot-speak-english-by-noor-naga/

Andrea, A. (2022). *If an Egyptian cannot speak English* by Noor Naga: A (confusing) review. *Medium*. Retrieved September 3, 2024, from https://medium.com/@letmeskrik/if-an-egyptian-cannot-speak-english-by-noor-naga-6e6baf58a90a

Bassnett, S. & Harish T. (1999). Introduction: of colonies, cannibals and vernaculars. In Susan B. & Harish T. (Eds.), *Post-colonial translation theory and practice*. (pp. 1-18). London: Routledge.

Benhabib, S. (1992). *Situating the self: Gender, community and postmodernism in contemporary ethics*. New York: Routledge.

Browning, G. (2011). Differend. In Sim S. (Ed.), *The Lyotard dictionary*. (pp. 51-53). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Buchanan, I. (2010). *A dictionary of critical theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cleary, J. C. (1992). *Meditating with koans.* California: Jain Publishing Company.

Cuddon, J. A. (2013). *A dictionary of literary terms and literary theory*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

Doughty, A. A. (2013). *"Throw the book away" Reading versus experience in children's fantasy*. Jefferson: McFarland.

Edoro, A. (2022). Love, violence, and everything in between: Review of *if an Egyptian cannot speak English* by Noor Naga. *Brittle Paper*. Retrieved August 8, 2024, from https://brittlepaper.com/2022/06/love-violence-and-everything-in-between-review-of-if-an-egyptian-cannot-speak-english-by-noor-naga/

Elliott, A. (2022). Who does power truly belong to? This book digs into the layers of an abusive relationship to find out. *CBC*. Retrieved March 20, 2024, from https://www.cbc.ca/arts/alicia-elliott-noor-naga-if-an-egyptian-cannot-speak-english-1.6663065

El-Rifae, Y. (2022, October 20). Noor Naga, metafiction and the limits of self-knowledge. *Mada Masr*. Retrieved April 24, 2024, from https://www.madamasr.com/en/2022/10/20/feature/culture/noor-naga-metafiction-and-the-limits-of-self-knowledge/

Fonsalido, M. E. (2019). Rewriting the classic: The Quevedo/Feiling case. *El jardín de los poetas: Revista de teoría y crítica de poesía latinoamericana*, 8. 1-18. https://fh.mdp.edu.ar/revistas/index.php/eljardindelospoetas/article/view/3678/3655

Gearhart, S. (2006). "The dialectic and its aesthetic other: Hegel and Diderot." In Victor E. T. & Gregg L. (Eds.), *Jean-Francois Lyotard: Critical evaluations in cultural theory*. (pp. 157-167). London: Routledge.

Glass, J. M. (1993). *Shattered selves: Multiple personality in a postmodern world*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Gloag, K. (2010). *Cambridge introductions to music: Postmodernism in music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Hansen, D. (2022). Interrogating Expectations in *if an Egyptian cannot speak English*. *Chicago Review of Books*. Retrieved August 20, 2024, from https://chireviewofbooks.com/2022/04/06/if-an-egyptian-cannot-speak-english/

Heine, S. (2014). *Zen koans*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Jamshed, R. (2022). If an American cannot speak Arabic. *Guernica*. Retrieved May 5, 2024, from https://www.guernicamag.com/if-an-american-cannot-speak-arabic/

Joy, D. (2019). Paralogy of petit narratives: a Lyotardian reading of James Cameron's *titanic*. *Quest Journals: Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, *7*(4), 31-38. https://www.questjournals.org/jrhss/papers/vol7-issue4/G0704013138.pdf

Lyotard, J. F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Translated by G. Bennington & B. Massumi. Minnesota: University of Minnesota.

Naga, N. (2022). *If an Egyptian cannot speak English*. Minnesota: Graywolf Press.

Naji, A. (2022). Traps and shadows in Noor Naga's Egypt novel. *The Markaz Review*. Retrieved November 21, 2023, from https://themarkaz.org/traps-and-shadows-in-noor-nagas-egypt-novel

Owusu, N. (2022). Two strangers meet in a cafe in Cairo. What happens next is complicated. *The New York Time*. Retrieved February 27, 2024, from https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/12/books/review/if-an-egyptian-cannot-speak-english-noor-naga.html

Purvis, T. (2011). Little narrative. In S. Sim (Ed.), *The Lyotard dictionary*. (pp. 133-135). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Quayson, A. & Watson, J. K. (2023). The Cambridge companion to the city in world literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Quayson, A. (2021). *Tragedy and postcolonial literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ramsey-Kurz, H. (2007). *The non-literate other: Readings of illiteracy in twentieth-century novels in English*. New York: Rodopi.

Robson, A. (2022). *If an Egyptian cannot speak English*, by Noor Naga. *African Studies Center Leiden*. Retrieved September 1, 2024, from https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/library-highlights/if-egyptian-cannot-speak-english-noor-naga

Schneider, M. (2008). *Kurt Vonnegut's "slaughterhouse-five" as historiographic metafiction*. Norderstedt: Grin.

Sim, S. (1986). Lyotard and the politics of antifoundationalism. *Radical Philosophy 44*, 8-13. https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/issuefiles/rp44_article2_sim_lyotardantifoundationalism.pdf

Sim, S. (2011). Language games. In Sim S. (Ed.), *The Lyotard dictionary*. (pp. 120-122). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Singleton, I. R. (2022). The American girl and the boy from Shobrakheit: On Noor Naga's *if an Egyptian cannot speak English*. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Retrieved December 21, 2023, from https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-american-girl-and-the-boy-from-shobrakheit-on-noor-nagas-if-an-egyptian-cannot-speak-english/

Sire, J. W. (2004). *The universe next door*. Downers Grove, Il: InterVarsity Press.

Sultan, I. (2022). Power, identity and dark love: *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English*. Retrieved March 4, 2024, from https://www.newarab.com/features/powerful-and-powerless-if-egyptian-cannot-speak-english

Toit, A. D. (2011). Narrative. In Sim S. (Ed.), *The Lyotard dictionary*. (pp. 149-152). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Unknown. (2022). *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English*: In a word: Brilliant. *Kirkus Reviews*. Retrieved Jan 22, 2024, from https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/noor-naga/if-an-egyptian-cannot-speak-english/

Waugh, P. (2003). *Metafiction: The theory and practice of self-conscious fiction*. London: Routledge.

Willie-Okafor, P. (2022). Noor Naga's romance looks at Egyptian American identity post-Arab spring. *Open Country Mag*. Retrieved August 19, 2024, from https://opencountrymag.com/noor-nagas-romance-looks-at-egyptian-american-identity-post-arab-spring/

Wojcik, P. R. (2024). *Unhomed: cycles of mobility and placelessness in American cinema*. California: University of California Press.

Woods, T. (1999). *Beginning postmodernism*. New York: Manchester University Press.

Zameer, K. (2021). *Celebrating petit recits: A postmodernist perspective on the rewriting of the Vedic female self in contemporary Anglophone Indian fiction*. [Unpublished Master's Thesis]. National University of Modern Languages.

Zonouzi, L. (2023). A riveting journey to the homeland: Review of *if an Egyptian cannot speak English*. *Egypt Migrations*. Retrieved September 2, 2024, from https://egyptmigrations.com/2022/05/27/review-of-if-an-egyptian-cannot-speak-english/

Abstract in Arabic

عندما تعكس البنية الهوية: قراءة رواية نور نجا *إذا لم يستطع مصريٌ التحدث بالإنجليزية* كسرديات صغيرة ليوتارية

الخلاصة
يدرس هذا البحث رواية نور نجا "إذا لم يستطع المصري التحدث بالإنجليزية" من منظور مفهوم "السرديات الصغيرة" الذي بلوره جان فرانسوا ليوتار. فبدلاً من تقديم قصة منظمة وشاملة، تكسر رواية نجا الأنماط السردية التقليدية. فهي تميل إلى التشظي، مستخدمةً أصواتاً سرديةً متغيرة، وزمناً غير تقليدي، و ما وراء السرد، و كوانات وحواشي .هذه الاختيارات الشكلية لا تتحدى المعايير الجمالية فحسب بل تعكس الطبيعة غير المستقرة، والمتناقضة في كثير من الأحيان، لهوية ما بعد الاستعمار نفسها.تحتضن الرواية التناقضات بدلاً من تسويتها بدقة، مسلطةً الضوء على سوء الفهم، والتنافر الثقافي، والتوترات غير المحسومة. وبذلك، تعكس الرواية رؤية ليوتار لأخلاقيات ما بعد الحداثة: سرد قصصي يقاوم الاغلاق السردي ويُقدّر التعددية .هنا، لا يصبح التشظي عيباً يجب تصحيحه، بل انعكاساً ضرورياً وصادقاً لعالم ممزق.