

Narrating Resistance: The Backdrop of Arab Spring in Mansour Bushnaf's *Chewing Gum*

Faisal Pandikasala, M.A., M.Phil.

Assistant Professor of English

PTM Government College, Perintalmanna

Kerala

faisalpahmed@gmail.com

Abstract

The political shifts in the Middle Eastern and North African countries from 2010, generally referred to as Arab Spring, can be seen as resulting from a long drawn presence of resentment among the people, and it was triggered by, alongside other aspects, a consistent flow of cultural artefacts. That is, fiction, poems, memoirs, cartoons, graffiti, media campaigns arts, banners, posters, Facebook and Twitter hashtags acted as vehicles as well as locations of resistance providing the necessary impetus to the flowering of the revolution. Among the novels that attempted to capture the different shades of resentment of Arabs, *Chewing Gum* written by Mansour Bushnaf arguably stands out distinctly as a novel that exploits the convenience of fiction to articulate dissidence. This paper attempts to analyse how *Chewing Gum* can be read as a ‘resistance narrative’ that attempts to critique, dissent and probably destabilise in a covert way the hegemonic regime of Gaddafi, thereby contributing to the factors that led to the Arab Spring in Libya.

Keywords: Mansour Bushnaf, Chewing Gum, Arab Spring, Middle East, Cultural artefact, Resistance narrative

Revolutions in general that have brought about dramatic shifts in human history are the culmination of long simmering discontent of the people in their respective territories. They often spring from small acts of defiance and expressions of dissent in different ways. The seismic shifts in the Middle Eastern and North African countries from 2010, generally referred to as Arab Spring, is to be looked at as resulting from a long drawn presence of resentment among its people, and it was apparently triggered by, alongside other aspects, a consistent flow of cultural artefacts. That is, fiction, poems, memoirs, cartoons, graffiti, media campaigns arts, banners, posters, Facebook and Twitter hashtags acted as vehicles as well as locations of resistance providing the necessary impetus to the flowering of the revolution.

Among the novels that attempted to capture the different shades of resentment of Arabs, *Chewing Gum* written by Mansour Bushnaf arguably stands out distinctly as a novel that exploits the convenience of fiction in articulating dissidence effectively. As a cultural artefact, this novel depicts

the gruesome backdrop of the repressive regime of Gaddafi. *Chewing Gum* can thus be read as a typical example of a ‘resistance narrative’ that attempts to critique, dissent and probably destabilise in a covert way the hegemonic regime of Gaddafi, thereby contributing to the factors that led to the “Arab Spring” in Libya.

The tradition of resistance was not seemingly present in literatures emerging from Middle East and East African countries. But as Stanford scholar, Alexander Key argues, the rebellion was central in literature leading up to the Arab Spring and unrest could be glimpsed in its pages before uprising. The seeds of revolution were evident in creative works-from literature to rap music- before the Arab Spring unfolded. Hence, he says that the lyrics of Tunisian rap song *RaisLebled* (Mr President) addressing the anger felt by the disenfranchised Tunisian population became an emblem of Arab Spring uprising and the Tunisian rapper was imprisoned a few weeks before the protest began in Tunisia (Key).

Exploring the genealogy of resistance and its potential, Charles Tripp in his book titled *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* says that the stories, poems, songs, and a wide array of local acts of defiance and resistance, unseen by the authorities and observers have helped in slowly dispelling the fear from the minds of people thereby preparing the ground for a popular uprising.

One of the common themes repeated by participants in the dramatic events of 2011 across the Arab world was the spectacular impact on them and their friends of the evaporation of fear. One of the chants in the streets of Dar`awas ‘There is no fear, there is no fear, after today there is no fear’ (Tripp 5).

Chewing Gum takes a journey to the psyche of Libyan society that has witnessed various ups and downs in history. First published in Arabic in the year 2008 in Cairo, the novel was banned by Gaddafi regime in Libya and the author was imprisoned for ten years. Though immediately located in Gaddafi’s rule in Libya, the novel traces a long trajectory of the nation’s history by shuttling back and forth in time.

Complying with the narrative strategies of a historiographic metafiction, the novel does not offer a well-made plot. The story treads the thin line between the real and the fictional, actual and the delusional which, in fact, helps the author to unravel the long and chequered history of Libya for centuries. Thus, the author succinctly briefs the story in the middle of the book as follows:

Mukhtar, the son of a former Royal Police officer, meets Fatma, the daughter of an employee in the Ministry of Religious Affairs. After a brief love affair, she leaves him, and he waits for her in the park where they first met. Fatma leaves in search of money and a different life, before turning to prostitution at a time when the country is experiencing the chewing gum craze. Turkey becomes the primary exporter of gum,

using carpetbaggers as couriers. This is the story, everything else is peripheral. (Bushnaf73)

Around the characters in the novel, Bushnaf weaves a network of images like a litter-strewn park, a bewitching Italian statue and a fluttering scarf. Mukhtar, frozen in time, is fated to bear witness to the degradation-political, cultural and economic- that sets in the country. In the midst of this retrograde movement, the whole people get obsessed with chewing gum which in turn helps them escape the horrendous realities of the present, haunting past and perhaps, a dystopian future.

The author recreates the history of Libya which is an amalgamation of various hybrid cultures and traditions through some interesting metafictional techniques. He employs a rich tapestry of symbols and images in order to make a veiled attack on the surveillance of the sinister government. The predominant image in the novel is the park in the capital city of Tripoli where the whole story is set and where the hero is bizarrely trapped frozen under the shades of Dakheliya Arches. The park can be considered as a metaphor for Libya and so it is “representative of the many historical eras that Tripoli had witnessed” (23). Traversing through various epochs in the history of occupation by Europeans, Africans, Italians, Turks and others, the country is reduced to “a rubbish heap, its pathways blocked by litter” (87).

The park was overhauled many times, destroyed by revolutions, Bedouins and European naval assaults on Tripoli. The sea submerged it five times as did countless rainstorms. These calamities claimed their share of victims: drummers, musicians, charlatans, dancers, whores, soldiers, government workers, tribal sheikhs and even Pashas. (24)

The novel poignantly depicts how Libya carries the bruises of various occupations and how it had devastated the people and the place. “The park witnessed the relentless moaning of slave girls and bodies of whom were seen hanging from the trees where they had ended their lives after being violated by Turkish soldiers” (24). The geographical integrity of Libya was also shattered by the invaders and the resistance from the natives was met with force. After quelling the resistance, the Italians, as the latest wave of occupiers began dividing Tripoli into zones as though it were an Italian city. The novel shows how the country lost its cultural and geographical identity due to occupation. The park became “genuinely an Italian space except for a few palm trees, a scattering of Libyan workers and the New Libyans. Otherwise a visitor would have thought he was standing in a park in Italy(26). Towards the end of the novel, a local environmental organisation was formed to clean up the park which included on its board a Professor of Economics, a Professor of Archaeology, a Theatre Director and many shading businessmen and several security officers (88).

Unfortunately, it did not work due to lack of consensus among the members. It can be argued that the novelist makes a scathing attack on the so-called intellectuals and social activists who actually are driven by their personal motives more than the welfare of the nation. Towards the end, the natives betrayed their own country join hands with the settlers who are sarcastically referred to in

the novel as ‘New Libyans’. They “were poets, sons of traders, and employees of the occupying government both those with political aspirations and informants working for the secret service” (26).

Mukhtar, fixated in the park with an obsessive amour for Fatma, appears to be inextricably handcuffed to the history of his nation. While Mukhtar was tragically immobilised for 10 years, “with his hair and beard growing longer in his tattered clothes surrounded by the kaleidoscopic litter of discarded wrappers” (47), Fatma and Mukhtar’s father take dangerous diversions in their lives. In fact, the tragic lives of all these characters, not excluding Mukhtar, happen in the climate of the politically dwindling Libya and thus they represent their nation’s degeneration. Mukhtar becomes a subject of interest to professors, theatre directors and others who examined him as he was standing in the midst of “a litter of chewing gum wrappers in a dangerous transitional period of Libyan history” (50). Mukhtar was suffering from a stuttering which was found by the professor of psychology to be the result of “the struggle between the id and the super ego, with id screaming and the superego squashing underfoot” and “he kept repeating that stuttering was not shameful, but the result of social repression” (123). The stuttering Mukhtar, thus, stands for the repressed subject in the despotic and authoritarian regime of Gadhafi.

Chewing gum is understandably the most poignant image employed in the novel. It primarily represents the way people negotiated the odd realities of their life during the years of the authoritarian rule of Gaddafi. That is, through a mechanical process of mastication people engaged in a mindless activity without any profound personal or philosophic insight except the resultant distraction from engaging with their immediate social environment. In other words, chewing gum helps the people of Libya to stay glued to their existence and make an escapist flight from taunting present at the same time.

During the years of Muktar’s fruitless long waiting in the park, Libyans fell under grip of chewing gum. Fatma, the heroine, parts with her family, education and career and resorts to prostitution; even Muktar’s father Omar Effendi gets involved with her. In fact, “Fatma doesn’t really enjoy being with men. What she really loved were those moments of highly charged, expansive chewing... Gum is the only thing that allowed her to feel her femininity (43) and “she alternated libidinously between lemon, mint, apple, and any of the new flavours that came onto the market. The act of mastication affirmed her femininity and offered her an intense sense of fulfilment (6). Like Fatma, every individual engages in some sort of chewing process.

The novel offers a few critical observations as well on the implications of the chewing gum mania. The professor of philosophy in the novel, for instance, called the chewing gum craze “a mania for existential gum” (4). Leftists believe “that teeth were a metaphor for the human race while the gum represented time and the pessimistic rightists upheld the view that gum stood for human existence while the teeth were eternity and the act of mastication a motion that would continue ad infinitum” (4).

The narrative techniques used in the novel reminds one of the European existentialist literatures in the modern period. Thus viewed, chewing gum represents a kind of existential escapism for many characters in the novel, particularly the heroine, Fatma. While referring to the implications of the chewing gum mania the novelist notes that “Our heroine would have read it had it not been for its title, Existence: Gum... It was the gum that allowed our heroine to regain some rhythm ,some part of the feminine identity she thought she had lost”(60).Thus, it is this gum that helped people survive through decades long authoritarian rule that curtailed their individual freedom and civil liberties.

Alongside calling into question the predicament of the Libyan people through the central image of chewing gum, the author makes a series of comments throughout the novel on the role of intellectuals who actually represent the academic, cultural and artistic potential of a country. In fact, it was a France-returned professor of philosophy who gave the chewing gum a philosophical dimension. Later intellectuals as a whole became chief importers and propagators of chewing gum. The professor gradually lost his academic fervour and got enamoured, apart from chewing gum, with such things as plastic roses that were imported from foreign countries and sold in some capitalists' shops.

The Professor of Philosophy was attracted to blooming roses but felt disdain for the crowds queuing up for gum in the candy section. This was when he saw Rahma, a blooming rose from a beautiful past that had been nurtured under the right temperature and climate. He knew the roses were not real. In his philosophical optimism, however, they represented a way of creating beauty out of ugliness, of having flowers bloom from oil (112).

Here, the novelist appears to present the degradation of the intellectuals, by presenting the process through which the intellectual community was rendered impotent under an ever-present state surveillance and the sinister government.

To sum up, *Chewing Gum*, as a ‘resistance narrative’ critiques the hegemonic regime of Gaddafi, and thus it presents the backdrop of the revolutionary events that culminated in the overthrowing of Gaddafi from power. The novel portrays the way individual freedom and civil liberties were brutally curtailed during the autocratic regime of Gaddafi. Through this novel, the novelist underscores the role of the intellectuals in resisting oppression and the necessity to awaken the intellectuals off their anaesthetised state. In that way, *Chewing Gum*, like other resistance narratives, arguably presents the backdrop of Arab Spring in Libya through its veiled pleas for such slogans of Arab Spring as freedom, human dignity and a democratic rule.

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Faisal Pandikasala, M.A., M.Phil.
Assistant Professor of English
PTM Government College, Perintalmanna
Kerala
faisalpahmed@gmail.com