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Who Killed the Law? An Analysis of the Syrian Drama Series Ahmar

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DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Le crime à l'écran dans le monde arabe

WHO KILLED THE LAW?

An Analysis of the Syrian Drama Series *Aḥmar*

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Abstract | La série télévisée syrienne *Aḥmar* de 2016, réalisée par Jūd Saʿīd et écrite par Yāmin Ḥajalī et ʿAlī Wajīh, est un drame policier intelligemment construit, imprégné de critique politique et sociale. Cet article utilise les études médiatiques et les théories du drame policier pour analyser l'intrigue et la narration de la série. Dans le premier épisode, le juge Khālīd est brutalement assassiné, ce qui déclenche trois enquêtes distinctes sur sa mort. La première est menée par son ami d'enfance, qui travaille dans la police ; la deuxième par une journaliste de radio ; et la troisième par un vieil ami du juge, qui est enseignant. Bien que leurs chemins se croisent fréquemment, les trois enquêtes révèlent différentes versions de la vie de Khālīd et, simultanément, des aspects de la société syrienne contemporaine. La série télévisée est présentée comme un drame policier et exhibe les traits traditionnels du genre, y compris de multiples suspects, des secrets cachés, des faits changeants, des méchants brutaux et des enquêteurs diligents. Les diverses stratégies narratives empruntées au genre facilitent la découverte des faits à plusieurs niveaux. La progression graduelle vers l'appréhension du meurtrier sert de dispositif pour exposer ce qui est dépeint comme un pays sans loi, où l'argent et les relations sont les seuls moyens d'avancer. Ainsi, la série télévisée peut être vue à la fois comme un drame policier et comme un commentaire politique sur des segments de la société syrienne en 2016.

Mots-clés | séries dramatiques syriennes, drame policier syrien, enquête sur un meurtre, réalisme social, critique politique.

Abstract | The 2016 Syrian TV series *Aḥmar*, directed by Jūd Saʿīd and written by Yāmin Ḥajalī and ʿAlī Wajīh, is an intelligently constructed detective drama infused with political and social critique. This article employs media studies and theories of detective drama to analyse the plot and narrative of the series. In the first episode, the well-known judge Khālīd is brutally murdered, prompting

three separate investigations into his death. The first is conducted by his childhood friend, who works in the police force; the second by a radio journalist; and the third by an old friend of the judge, who is a teacher. Although their paths frequently intersect, the three investigations reveal different versions of Khālid's life and, concurrently, aspects of contemporary Syrian society. The TV series is presented as a detective drama and exhibits the traditional traits of the genre, including multiple suspects, hidden secrets, shifting facts, brutal villains, and diligent investigators. The diverse narrative strategies borrowed from the genre facilitate the uncovering of facts on multiple levels. The gradual progression towards the apprehension of the killer serves as a device to expose what is depicted as a lawless country, where money and connections are the primary means of advancement. Thus, the TV series can be viewed both as a detective drama and as a political commentary on segments of Syrian society in 2016.

Keywords | Syrian drama series, Syrian detective drama, murder investigation, social realism, political criticism.

Introduction

In the first few seconds of *Aḥmar* [Red] (2016) the viewer is told that: “bi-l-mawt bad’at al-ḥikāyya” [the story started by death]. The character speaking goes on to say that she witnessed the events unfold, day by day and then she introduces what she calls “the story *Aḥmar*.” The scene changes and the viewer is shown a dark alley where an older man is being followed and subsequently killed - the story has begun.

As in most detective narratives, whether in books or TV series, the chain of events in *Aḥmar* is reconstructed retrospectively. Through the narrator’s introduction the viewer knows that the murder case has been solved, but not how, and the murder shown in the first episode starts a search for a killer that runs through the 30 instalments of the series. This is of course the expected plot of the genre and, as Claire Chambers notes, detective fiction tends to revolve around a quest for the truth.³ However, the female narrator at the beginning of the series takes this a step further and asserts that “to know is to have power”.⁴ This statement can be interpreted as the principal premise for the murder investigation portrayed in the series. However, it also underscores the significance of other forms of knowledge, all of which are explored within the series, such as information regarding corrupt officials and police officers, the dissemination of fake news, large-scale fraud, and private militias that do not hesitate to kill.

This article explores how the Syrian drama series *Aḥmar* employs narrative structures characteristic of the detective genre to discuss themes of importance for Syrian society of 2016. It contends that by juxtaposing various types of detection and introducing multiple ‘detectives’, the series both adheres to and diverges from the detective genre to denounce corrupt practices in the fictional Syria portrayed in the drama. The quest for truth, a hallmark of the genre, is utilised here to uncover truths about society as well as the crime committed. The article draws upon media studies centred on contemporary Syrian drama, as well as literary and cultural studies focused on detective narratives. The reception of the TV series among viewers, and their perceptions of the ‘truths’ conveyed, are of significant interest but fall outside the scope of this article.

Contemporary Syrian Drama

Whereas the genre of detective drama is an international phenomenon, Marieke Jenner argues that it is shaped by the political and industrial discourses in

1- *Aḥmar*, produced by SAPI (Samā al-Fann al-Duwaliyya lil-Intāḥ), directed by SA’ĪD Jūd, written by AL-ḤAJALĪ Yāmin and WAJĪH ‘Alī, Syria, 2016.

2- *Aḥmar*, *op. cit.*, episode 1.

3- CHAMBERS Claire, «Postcolonial Noir: Vikram Chandra’s “Kama” », in Nels PEARSON and Marc SINGER (dir.), *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World*, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2009, p. 31.

4- *Aḥmar*, *op. cit.*, episode 1.

the countries of production.⁵ *Aḥmar* follows in many ways the style of social realism that Syrian directors frequently favour. Rather than appearing as mere entertainment, the series is grounded in events after 2011 and attempts to offer a commentary on Syrian society during the Asad regime. This is not uncommon in Syrian drama series, and Rebecca Joubin points out that the Syrian entertainment industry, both before and during the uprisings, have provided powerful insights into the political and social climate of the country.⁶ Christa Salamandra agrees with this view and suggests that although historical dramas, notably in an old Damascene setting, are blockbusters, the focus in Syrian series is still very much socio-political satire with an underlying ideology of enlightenment – *tanwīr*.⁷ Salamandra continues that Syrian drama offers deep moral ambiguity and reflects the dilemmas facing those who live amid authoritarian repression, rigid class hierarchy and an entrenched patriarchy.⁸

In *Aḥmar* this can be seen in the contrasting of the superrich and the very poor, the varying treatment of women but also female empowerment, the corruptness of the security apparatus and the court system, as well as comments on fake news and a state fabricated history. Whereas the topics seem – and are – brave and controversial, the frank tone and political criticism that can be seen in *Aḥmar* and other series are often labelled as ‘*tanfis*’, outlet or airing,⁹ or sometimes ‘*tanaffus*’ – breathing¹⁰. Both ‘*tanfis*’ and ‘*tanaffus*’ imply a form of commissioned criticism. miriam cooke sees ‘*tanaffus*’ as the artists’ possibility to debounce the system but not the leader¹¹ others, like Lisa Wedeen, understand it as a more complex system where on one hand the series form a space where “allowed” criticism can be aired, and on the other hand they function as a shared space where an alternative reality can be created.¹²

Another researcher of Syrian drama series, Donatella Della Ratta argues instead that the ties between producers and the regime were so tight that drama series regularly functioned as mouth pieces, well-placed whispers from the Asad regime conveying what was acceptable and what was not, or planting messages to the public.¹³ She gives examples of several series where a topic discussed fitted the Asad state agenda (such as an interest in disabilities or work against honour killings) and other examples where directors had briefing sessions with

5- JENNER Mareike, *American TV Detective Dramas: Serial Investigations*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

6- JOUBIN Rebecca, *The Politics of Love – Sexuality, Gender and Marriage in Syrian Television Drama*, Lanham. Lexington Books, 2013.

7- SALAMANDRA Christa, “Syria’s Drama Outpouring”, in SALAMANDRA Christa, STENBERG Leif (dir.). *Syria from Reform to revolt*, vol. 2. Culture, Society and Religion, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2015.

8- SALAMANDRA Christa, “Past Continuous: The Chronopolitics of Representation in Syrian Television Drama”, *Middle East Critique*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2019, pp. 121–141.

9- DELLA RATTA Donatella, «The Whispering Strategy», in SALAMANDRA Christa, STENBERG Leif (dir.), *Syria from Reform to revolt*, vol. 2. Culture, Society and Religion. Syracuse University Press, 2015.

10- COOKE Miriam, *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2007.

11- *Ibid*.

12- WEDEEN Lisa, *Ambiguities of Domination - Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015.

13- DELLA RATTA Donatella, «The Whispering Strategy», *op. cit*.

‘the palace’.¹⁴ Seen in this way, Syrian TV series produced within the country can be understood as soft power tools used by the former regime. This is further illustrated by Christine Crone in her analysis of the TV series *Ḥārīs al-Quds*, which she argues is endorsed by the regime to demonstrate a continuity of values. She further suggests that TV dramas provide an opportunity to readapt core concepts of Ba’thist ideology to the reality of 2020.¹⁵ Journalists Yamen Moghrabi and Hussam al-Mahmoud affirm this perspective and additionally observe that oppositional groups, for different reasons, have preferred documentaries as a means of highlighting the atrocities committed within the country.¹⁶

Situated within a broader historical context, the former regime’s use of TV series is not strange since cultural matters such as films, novels and theatre plays had a central role in the attempts by the Ba’th party to shape society according to their political views.¹⁷ The former regime’s acknowledgment of the power of artistic expressions put cultural producers in an uneasy position where they were simultaneously able to influence society and strictly tied to a state narrative. This position has been handled differently throughout the years and by different writers and directors. As for the new generation of cultural producers, they are according to Della Ratta, both stakeholders and co-investors in a political project where they concur in defining what is good and advisable for Syrian society.¹⁸

Joubin, however, contends that it is unjust to suggest that directors were guided by the authorities and asserts that many directors and writers have succeeded in crossing red lines and even challenging the foundations of the regime in their dramas without facing censorship.¹⁹ Max Weiss describes the situation as the former Syrian regime wanting artists to ‘speak for’ it and ‘to’ the public whereas artists in many cases instead attempted to ‘speak against’ and ‘with’ both the state and the public.²⁰ He further states that “this tension between an aesthetics of power [...] and an aesthetics of solidarity and an aesthetics of resistance continues to shape the cultural field in contemporary Syria.”²¹

Whether *Ahmar* is a scene where this tension is played out, a whisper from the former regime or a voice critical of the foundations of the state is difficult to say – what is clear is that the series includes social and political criticism offered through the plot of a drawn-out murder mystery.

14- *Ibid.*

15- CRONE Christine, “Re-Narrating the Past, Producing the Present and Unlocking the Future: *Haris al-Quds*, a TV-Dramatization of ‘Post-war’ Syria”, *Middle East Critique*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2023, pp. 305–321.

16- MOGHRABI Yamen, AL-MAHMOUD Hussam, “Regime Wins in Regard of Capabilities: Syrian Soap Operas at Politics’ Disposal”, *Enab Baladi*, 10 May 2023.

17- WEISS Max, *Revolutions Aesthetics: a Cultural History of Ba’thist Syria*. Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2022.

18- DELLA RATTA Donatella, *Shooting a Revolution: Visual Media and Warfare in Syria*. London, Pluto Press, 2018, p. 64.

19- JOUBIN Rebecca, *The Politics of Love*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

20- WEISS Max, *Revolutions Aesthetics*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

21- *Ibid.*, p. 329.

Aḥmar – The Series and the Plot

The director of *Aḥmar*, Jūd Saʿīd, has directed and written films and series²² that deal with everyday life in Syria since 2011 and although not working directly with this theme in *Aḥmar*, the series is set in contemporary Syria and the political situation is referred to, although not openly.

Aḥmar is marketed as a crime drama and the main narrative strand is the murder of the well-known judge Khālīd ‘Abdu-lah (‘Abbās Nūrī) and the subsequent investigation into his killing. Jūd Saʿīd, the director of *Aḥmar*, has both directed and written films and series that explore everyday life in Syria.²³ Through the investigation and a closer examination of Khālīd’s life, his family, and acquaintances, several narrative strands emerge, encompassing everything from petty crimes and minor scams to fraud and illegal trade on a national scale. In the first episode, Khālīd is depicted running through the narrow lanes of old Damascus, appearing stressed and clearly pursued by someone. He collides with his friend ‘Abbās (Najāḥ Safkūnī), causing him to drop all the papers he is carrying. The next morning, Khālīd is found dead, shot just outside the old city. Shortly afterwards the police officer first on the place is murdered as well as the doctor conducting the postmortem and the official registering the death certificate. The deaths are obviously connected and Ḥalīm (Rafīq ‘Alī Aḥmad), a high-ranking detective within the police, but also an old friend of Khālīd, calls in some favours from colleagues and is handed the investigation. At the same time, Samāḥ (Sulāf Fawākhīrī), an investigative radio journalist who has grown up in the same quarter as Khālīd, and has interviewed him previously, feels that something is not right with his death and begins to contact his family, friends and colleagues to see what she can find.

The third investigation is led by ‘Abbās, the old friend whom Khālīd accidentally knocked down the night before he was killed. ‘Abbās mourns his friend deeply and also laments the state of the country, where someone can be killed openly on the street like his friend. When he finally returns to work and examines the papers he was carrying when Khālīd bumped into him, he discovers some of Khālīd’s papers within the pile. The papers appear suspicious, and he begins to wonder if he holds the key to identifying his friend’s killer. Soon, ‘Abbās and Samāḥ, who know each other from before, realise that they are both working on solving the murder and decide to collaborate. When their investigation spirals out of control and they are threatened and nearly run over by a car, they take their findings to Ḥalīm, who is also ‘Abbās’ friend, and the three ‘detectives’ unite.

Through their investigations, a new picture of Khālīd emerges. Initially, the viewer understands that he was among a group of judges appointed to combat

22- Jūd Saʿīd has among other things written the scenario for the two films *Maṭar Ḥimṣ* (2014) and *Darb al-samā* (2017) and directed the TV series *Kharīf al-‘ushāq* (2021).

23- I have not been able to establish the exact viewership. It was first aired during Ramadan 2016 and the possibility of many viewers hence exist since a Ramadan slot grants visibility. The series has later been published on various online sites, including YouTube, and thus been available for free watching.

corruption, and ‘Abbās describes him as a faithful friend who was always ready to help. However, as events unfold, the viewer learns that Khālīd only cared about himself. He used threats and bribes to attain his position, manipulated his fellow judges to ensure an inheritance case was settled in his favour, thereby stripping his cousin of all his land. He not only repeatedly cheated on his wife but also secretly married a second woman. Furthermore, Khālīd was involved in illegal trade arrangements with Rām (Moḥammad al-Aḥmad), a cynical and powerful businessman whose girlfriend Rasha (Dīmā Qandalift) was blackmailed by Khālīd into spying on Rām for him. In addition to these characters, there are many more individuals with whom Khālīd crossed paths during his life, and whose stories are developed in the series. Consequently, there is no shortage of possible killers.

Despite this, the investigation does not progress as each possible suspect appears to have an alibi. The final episode begins with the news that the investigation has been closed, a development reported on the radio, in newspapers, and on the internet. However, the viewer soon realises that this is a trap when Ḥalīm is shown sitting in a graveyard and Khālīd suddenly approaches from behind, alive and well. Ḥalīm begins to explain to Khālīd how he deduced that he was not actually dead but had staged his own death, and he prompts Khālīd to reveal all the details. Khālīd, feeling proud of having deceived everyone and confident now that the investigation is officially closed, recounts the entire plan. Through his story, the viewer receives the detailed explanation expected at the conclusion of a detective narrative. Among the details he provides, he confesses to the murders of the other three victims. What Khālīd does not anticipate is that Ḥalīm, above all, sees himself as a police officer and therefore secretly records Khālīd’s confession of staging his own death and committing three murders. Once he has the evidence he needs, he summons his men, who then arrest Khālīd.

Aḥmar as a Detective Story

Even though the investigation into Khālīd’s death serves as the point of connection between the several subplots, it is important to note that the series is far from a classical detective story by Agatha Christie or a modern police procedural where ‘the chase’ is the main factor driving the plot forward. Here, the common traits of the Syrian social realist drama as described above take the upper hand and like Katia Ghosn and Benoît Tadié have noted in regard to detective novels – the focus is still on violence, injustice and the absurdity of life rather than the triumphant apprehension of a clever murderer.²⁴ Like a number of other Syrian series do, *Aḥmar* tries to remedy societal troubles through its plot,²⁵ not unlike many authors’ of crime novels in the 1960s and 70s who believed that this genre

24- GHOSN Katia, TADIÉ Benoît (eds.), *Le Récit Criminel Arabe / Arabic Crime Fiction*, Wiesbaden, Harrasowitz Verlag, 2021, p. 4.

25- JOUBIN Rebecca, *The Politics of Love*, op. cit., p. 3.

had the capacity to confront the ills of the system.²⁶ However, in this series the focus seems to be on the exposure of problems rather than the solution.

The more information the detectives reveal about Khālid's life, the more corruption and crimes the viewer is exposed to. And even though the series incorporates many trademarks of the classical detective story it aligns with what Alessandro Buontempo has noted with regards to Arabic crime or noir fiction, namely that the "environmental question" (why? in what power configuration? for what reasons?)²⁷ are of centre stage, directing the spotlight towards the corrupt members of the fictional society.

Similar to what is often found in American detective series, *Aḥmar* employs complex narrative structures to explore the social contexts of the various crimes depicted. In addition to the numerous sub-narratives that suddenly interconnect, the series features flashbacks, recaps, and retakes of scenes that align with the progression of the investigation. These narrative elements present events from different angles or perspectives, often contrasting with the viewer's initial understanding. Furthermore, Samāḥ serves as a narrator in the series. She appears in the first episode before 'the story' begins and intermittently returns in this role throughout the series, providing explanations of her character's actions and those of others from an omniscient retrospective viewpoint. This narrative choice aids the viewer in navigating the different crimes and allows for the inclusion of additional information without the need to depict it in a specific scene. It also emphasises that the crime is solved and that the viewer will soon know all the details. The series' combination of narrative structures and trademarks from the detective genre and the socialist realist style of Syrian TV drama enables it to engage in socio-political changes, something that can be seen as an emerging trend in postcolonial and transnational crime fiction.²⁸ Nevertheless, the largest socio-political change in Syria since 2011, the uprising against the Asad regime, is not explicitly mentioned. There are references to increasing costs of living, a lack of housing and of safety problems when leaving the capital, but otherwise the series seems to take place in a fictional Damascus. At the same time, some of the questions the series brings up utilises the "genres ideological tensions, its ability to challenge established conventions and norms and to ask questions about the larger conditions of the society, its values and systems of authority."²⁹

Two of the foundational questions that the series deals with are political idealism on one hand and how a hunger for power can lead one to betray one's

26- PEPPER Andrew, SCHMID David (eds.), *Globalization and the State in Contemporary Crime Fiction: A World of Crime*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 5.

27- BUONTEMPO Alessandro, «Scanning Violence Untold: The Detectives Voice in Arabic Crime Fiction», in GHOSN Katia, TADIÉ Benoît (dir.), *Le Récit Criminel Arabe / Arabic Crime Fiction*, Wiesbaden, Harrasowitz Verlag, 2021, p. 134.

28- PEARSON Nels, SINGER Marc (dir.), *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World*, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2009, p. 5; Maarit PIIPPONEN, Helen MÄNTYMÄKI and Marinella RODIRISBERG (dir.), *Transnational Crime Fiction: Mobility, Borders and Detection*, Cham, Springer International Publishing, 2020, p. 1.

29- MESSENT Peter, *The Crime Fiction Handbook*. Chichester, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2013.

ideals on the other. Another is the definition of authority in the series, which fluctuates between the ability to be ruthless and the ability to buy off others. The Syria presented in the series is thus a Syria where state law is irrelevant for most people, who instead live by the laws established by whoever is the most powerful in a specific circle at a given time. Although this is prevalent across all social strata portrayed, the characters that most personify this are Rām, the aforementioned businessman, and his sister Yamām (Ṣafā' Sultān). Both characters are hard-hearted in their pursuit of power. Rām leads a militia group, launders money, and deals in drugs and weapons. At the same time, he is very careful to maintain appearances, setting up businesses and charity organisations that serve as covers for his illegal activities.

Rām and Yamām are further portrayed as politically active. Not like 'Abbās, who believes in political change through discussions and elections, instead in a business way. Yamām decides to start a political party for financial gains and engages in an elaborate signature fraud in order to show that she has enough members. Rām instead gathers the press to announce that he will nominate himself as a candidate for parliament in the next election. Despite his very eloquent speech on bettering society, it is clear that his main goal is to secure a more powerful position for himself.

The fact that Rām and Yamām, and their friends seem to view politics as a means of gaining personal power and benefits rather than as a way to work for society make them appear as caricatures of the political elite abusing the system and the unstable situation to enrich themselves. Although Samāḥ tries to expose both of them, the number of journalists in the series that are willing, or needing, to play along with the scenario they are presented with gives the series a possibility to critique the media as well. Just like politics, media is shown in the series to be a tool of power and authority, whether used by the state or individual characters. In different ways the series thus discuss law enforcement, politics and media, the cornerstones of the state. Peter Messent writes on the detective genre that: one of the most productive ways of thinking about the genre is its relationship to the dominant social system: to the hierarchies, norms, and assumptions of the particular area, country, and historical period it represents, and to the power and authority of the state that ultimately upholds that system.³⁰

Ahmar raises questions about society and exposes lies on a personal and national level. It focuses on white collar crime that uses businesses, wealth and politics to hide its criminal activities and gain influence. The hierarchies described are not built on merit or capability but rather on relations and favours and the view of the state's authority can as best be described as hypocritical. This leads to a shift in the description of the investigation into the crime(s), which turns into an enquiry into why the crimes have been committed, and the role of the state in this.

Andrew Pepper and David Schmid argue that every crime novel, and by extension crime series, can be understood as a synecdoche of the state, where the practical effects of the state's laws and criminal justice system are lived out, tested,

30- MESSENT Peter, *The Crime Fiction Handbook*, op. cit., p. 11.

and found wanting. In *Aḥmar*, the state prevails on an official level, as Rām is killed through police intervention, and Khālīd and Yamām are imprisoned. The conclusion of the series suggests that once the corrupt individuals are removed, killed, or incarcerated, the problem is resolved, and the critical voices are silenced. The narrative structures of the detective drama are employed here for conservative purposes, to find closure and to protect and sustain the dominant social order, an ending that recurs within the genre. Furthermore, it is an ending that aligns with the state-supported worldview that some argue the Syrian TV series adheres to.

However, despite this reassuring ending, it is Khālīd's final words to Ḥalīm as he is taken away to prison that resonate as the true meaning of the series. He turns around and shouts: "I will soon be out, with the help of the law I will soon be out." With this concluding line, Khālīd demonstrates that he has tested the state's judicial system before and is confident it will serve him again. The system has been put to the test, and in the eyes of average citizens, it must be seen as deficient, or perhaps merely as a tool for those who know how to manipulate it to their advantage. The series never reveals whether Khālīd succeeds in escaping from prison, but it does show Yamām attempting to control the outside world from her prison cell with some success, thereby highlighting the flaws in the justice system. At the same time, the characters are depicted as individuals rather than representatives of groups or professions. Thus, the series can be seen as portraying how a few corrupt individuals can undermine an otherwise well-functioning society through their actions. This narrative, especially regarding corruption, has become one of the favoured, and most accepted topics in Syrian TV series³¹ since it exposes problems but situates them as individual difficulties rather than structural mistakes of the state. What is interesting in this series is that also the 'good' characters, the three detectives, are individuals that work against their peers. This is especially true for Ḥalīm. It is him, the lone detective, rather than the state apparatus, that symbolizes lawfulness, accountability, and righteousness. Having seen the other police officers and their conduct in the series, the viewer does not have faith in the system but in the single character.

Different Types of Detectives

The lone detective often appears in hard-boiled detective fiction, and like Ḥalīm, he lives for his job, does his best but is at the same time aware that he cannot change society by himself, regardless of how hard he works.³² Ḥalīm has no family, he is in love with his best friend's wife and generally seems troubled. At the same time, he is righteous, helps his younger colleagues and those who need him and defends the law at all costs, even when it hurts those near him. It is also their view on the law, whether it is flexible as Khālīd says or fixed, as in Ḥalīm's mind, that separates the two friends.

31- DELLA RATTA Donatella, *Shooting a Revolution: Visual Media and Warfare in Syria*. Op. cit.

32- MESSENT Peter, *The Crime Fiction Handbook*, op. cit., p. 39.

However, as stated above, there are three ‘detectives’ at work in the investigation even though Ḥalīm is the only one of the three officially assigned to solve the case. Ḥalīm’s investigative style is affected by his time in the Syrian police and involves a certain acceptance of violence and force. He can be seen as an example of what Nels Pearson and Marc Singer call those “figures whose investigative practices challenge presumptions of objective policing and deduction and legal and social orders”³³ and who can be found in postcolonial and transnational detective fiction. Although he is opposed to his colleagues’ brutal force and the use of bribes, torture and lies to solve crimes, he understands that he needs to play the system from within to reach his goals and to be respected by his coworkers. He accepts that the system is crooked and that he cannot change it, but he can use it to gain justice and bring criminals to court despite how others’ use the same system. Samāḥ and ‘Abbās, Ḥalīm’s two co-detectives, are more idealistic in their worldview and they act as if their view is the reality they live in. This affects their way of detection and how they deal with suspects and they, especially Samāḥ, use irrational-subjective methods of analytical detection. Through the three characters, the series combines features from different types of detective fiction. It borrows from the police procedural³⁴ since Ḥalīm’s and his team’s work is shown from inside the police station with the internal politics and schemes governing their workplace. It borrows traits from the Golden Age detective fiction, as exemplified through Agatha Christie’s novels, through the plot structure, Samāḥ’s detective style with analytical deductions and the role the viewer takes in collecting clues.³⁵ It is also influenced by the more contemporary hard-boiled fiction through the action and violence filled scenes where Ḥalīm sometimes, and his younger colleague ‘Aṣī (Yāmin Ḥajalī) always, decides to force a confession from a suspect rather than logically prove them wrong. The different styles are maybe a narrative necessary to allow for one murder to last 30 episodes, but the clash between the hard-boiled ‘hit first ask later’ approach and the more reflective analytical approach can also be seen as a deeper conflict in the series. One thing that Pepper and Schmid point at as a driving force in detective fiction is the question of the state’s legitimate use of violence to solve murders and punish killers.³⁶ Whereas Samāḥ and ‘Abbās do not believe in violence and the state’s right to use it against its citizens, Ḥalīm works for one of the state organizations that has the right to use force. Although Ḥalīm, as seen above, is in two minds about this, his colleague ‘Aṣī is in the series an example of the police brutality that many have witnessed about in Syrian prison literature with descriptions of poor treatment from the police and long sentences despite lack of evidence or unfair trials.³⁷

33- PEARSON Nels, SINGER Marc (dir.), *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World*, op. cit., p. 2.

34- MESSENT Peter, *The Crime Fiction Handbook*, op. cit.

35- *Ibid.*

36- PEPPER Andrew, SCHMID David (eds.), *Globalization and the State in Contemporary Crime Fiction: A World of Crime*, op. cit., p.6.

37- R. TALEGHANI Shareah, *Readings in Syrian Prison Literature: The Poetics of Human Rights*. Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2021.

‘Aṣī has worked as Ḥalīm’s assistant for a long time and Ḥalīm’s retirement is his chance to finally advance. When his boss returns for a final case ‘Aṣī’s only concern is to finish the case as quickly as possible. His first attempt is to fabricate the existence of a fake terrorist cell and then try to pin the killing on them. When Ḥalīm calls him out over this his next attempt is to pin the killing on a child with special needs who happens to be called the same as a name that comes up in the investigation. In addition to these attempts at ‘solving’ the case ‘Aṣī uses and exploits the men working for him, men who in turn do not see a problem with accepting bribes and abusing people they are interrogating. Whereas the viewer can be appalled at their behaviour, most of the characters seem to accept that as members of the police force, they have the right to act like this.

However, Samāḥ does not accept ‘Aṣī’s behaviour. When turns up at the radio station where she works to interrogate her about finding the body he is his usual arrogant and violent self. Once he leaves Samāḥ calls the police station to file an official complaint of his conduct. This can be seen as parody for those living under the rules of the Syrian police force, but the reaction from the other characters shows the viewer that both Samāḥ and they know that it is a reckless thing to do, and yet she does it, because she believes in her rights as a citizen. Through this action, and other things she does during the series, Samāḥ symbolizes a sort of soft challenge to the status quo of the described society and to the (il)legitimate use of force by the state through the police.

‘Abbās is not as outspoken or active as Samāḥ but he too stands for change. He has a political past and he has spent time in prison because of his views. He now works as a teacher; he is well-liked by the pupils but not so much by the parents and the schoolboard. ‘Abbās encourages his students to learn what is in their history books word by word so that they can write that in the exam, then he goes on to say that as they know, what is in the book is all wrong and he will instead teach them what ‘really happened’. The viewer is never told the ‘real version’ of events, but just the allegation that the state version is wrong is powerful enough. It is significant that the three detectives trying to uncover the truth in the series have the occupations they have. Samāḥ is a journalist who has made it her mission to broadcast reports on corruption, fraud and government misconduct, ‘Abbās a teacher who tells the unofficial version of the country’s history and Ḥalīm is a non-corrupt police detective working in an organization where half the members are shown to have close connections to the criminals they fight, and the other half are portrayed as simply stupid and brutal. Together, and one by one, the three characters can all be seen as the intellectual hero, for a long time the main character of the Arab cultural field as shown by Zeina G. Halabi.³⁸ They are open-minded, seem secular and with a strong pathos for what is right and wrong. Samāḥ and ‘Abbās can further be read as examples of cultural workers, trying to better society through education and information. They are both working long hours for a very small wage whereas the wealthy people in the series are all portrayed as being corrupt.

38- G. HALABI Zeina, *The Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual: Prophecy, Exile and the Nation*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018.

Their occupations further correspond with Samāḥ's opening words for the series 'to know is to have power'. To spread knowledge about historical and contemporary events that do not fit the state narrative, and to solve crimes by finding the culprit, not just a scapegoat, are all actions that in the fictional society described in the series appear as acts that empower the general public and undermine the state. Like many other Syrian drama series that seem to advocate social justice and the importance of schooling, while simultaneously depicting the state's failure,³⁹ *Ahmar* does not offer solutions. Instead, the series shows the viewers several ways forward but with a shared foundation, namely that the truth must be uncovered.

Conclusion

As this article has shown, *Ahmar* is presented as a detective drama and exhibits the traditional traits of the genre. The uncovering of facts and the gradual progression towards apprehending the killer can be interpreted as tropes to reveal a lawless country where money and connections are the only means of advancement. In their quest for 'the truth', the three detectives uncover crimes and corruption at all levels of society. The series utilises the detective genre's capacity to investigate social and moral dilemmas, blending this with Syrian social realism, which provides a means of dissecting the fictional society portrayed. The different methods of detection employed by the three detectives to address the crimes suggest that the root of the social and political problems uncovered in the series lies in the deficient judicial system and the police's approach to enforcing the law and solving crimes. Consequently, the TV series can be viewed both as a detective drama and as a political and social critique of a fictional Syria in 2016.

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39- SALAMANDRA Christa, "Syria's Drama Outpouring", *op. cit.*

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ملخص | "أحمر" مسلسل تلفزيوني سوري ظهر في رمضان ٢٠١٦، من إخراج جود سعيد وتأليف يامن حجلي وعلي وجيه. المسلسل مصنف كمسلسل جريمة أو دراما بوليسية وحبكة المسلسل مبنية بذكاء ومشبعة بالنقد السياسي والاجتماعي. تحلل هذه المقالة المسلسل على أساس أنه دراما بوليسية وباستخدام دراسات الإعلام ونظريات أدبية عن الرواية البوليسية. في الحلقة الأولى، يُقتل القاضي المعروف خالد بوحشية، الجريمة تؤدي إلى فتح ثلاثة تحقيقات منفصلة في مقتله. التحقيق الأول يجريه صديقه منذ الطفولة الذي يعمل في الشرطة؛ والثاني تجريه صحفية إذاعية؛ والثالث يجريه صديق قديم للقاضي يعمل كمدرس. على الرغم من تقاطع مسارات المتحررين بشكل متكرر، تكشف التحقيقات نسخاً مختلفة من حياة خالد وأسراراً لم تخطر في بال أحد، وفي الوقت نفسه، تظهر التحقيقات جوانب متنوعة من المجتمع السوري المعاصر.

يجد المشاهد السمات التقليدية للدراما البوليسية أو روايات التحري في المسلسل، بما في ذلك العديد من المشتبه بهم، الأسرار المخفية، الحقائق المتغيرة، الأشرار المتوحشين، والمحققين المجتهدين. تسهل الاستراتيجيات السردية المتنوعة المشتقة من هذا النوع من الأفلام والأدب الكشف عن الحقائق على مستويين، الشخصي والاجتماعي. تستخدم الحبكة البحث التدريجي من أجل القبض على القاتل كأداة لكشف ما يُصور كبلد بلا قانون، حيث المال والعلاقات هما الوسيطان الرئيسيتان للتقدم في الحياة؛ وبالتالي، يمكن مشاهدة المسلسل كدراما بوليسية من جهة وكتعليق سياسي على المجتمع السوري في عام ٢٠١٦ من جهة أخرى.

كلمات مفتاحية | مسلسلات سورية: مسلسلات عن جريمة: تحقيق في قتل: نقد سياسي: واقعية اجتماعية.

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