

Life from the Prism of Death: Life Narratives by the Elderly in Three Novels

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Introduction

This paper deals with three novels that present life narrative in the face of death. The main character in the three novels is a man in his seventies facing different forms of death, while his own approaching death is looming, leading to a kind of reassessment of his whole life. It is an intense dramatically loaded moment in life that has been artistically used for its power to provide a distinct point of view on the life narrative of the protagonist. It is a moment of reevaluation that possibly changes much of one's revered and established values. The looming death changes the values and perspectives in the present and in memory leading to the telling of a different story. Although one would not classify these narratives as a distinctive and independent sub-genre within life writings, yet they do share distinctive traits that makes studying them as a corpus of works productive.

The three novels studied here are: Philip Roth's *The Dying Animal* (2002), Andre Brink's *Before I Forget* (2005), and Adel Esmat's *The Commandments* (2018) (in Arabic). *The Dying Animal* is a record of a conversation between two friends of which we hear only the narrator, the seventy years old Professor of criticism, relating his involvement with a 24-year-old student eight years before the present conversation. The relationship ended a year and a half later, and at the present she has contacted him with the news of her suffering of a life-threatening case of breast cancer needing his support. *Before I forget* is a narrative of all the relationships and love stories lived by the narrator since his early childhood in an attempt to overcome the grief and shock of the death of his young friend Rachel whose death opens the novel. *The Commandments* is a three generations novel about the demise of traditional life of rural Egypt. The grandfather on his deathbed tells his life story to the grandson who thirty years later reconstructs it in a narrative of his own with long quotations by the grandfather. The three narratives have the protagonist contemplate his own looming death against the death of younger loved ones, emphasizing the unpredictability of life, and the fact that the writing of an account of life as it approaches its end cannot be but a tentative project, subject to further reevaluations as long as there is life.

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In the three novels there are common points shedding light on that experience of narrating life from the prism of death. All three novels belong to what Irene Kacandes calls “talk fiction,” or “secondary orality” (Kacandes 2001, 1). The three novels have different methods of narration, yet they all share the fact that large parts of the narrative, if not the entire narrative, are written in the second person, as though directing the narrative to someone is absolutely important at this stage in life. The addressee in each novel is very significant giving the narrative an added meaning as will be seen in the analysis of each novel. All three narratives are interested in relating contemplations on death, old age and life in general. Some sort of a wisdom discourse is evident in all three novels. The fact that all three novels are narrated by men makes them share particularly male preoccupations and sometimes even struggles with different levels of patriarchal discourses and ideology. The desire to connect one’s story to a grand narrative encompassing a whole generation or even country is evident in the three novels, in spite of the fact that this is less common in twentieth century European and American fiction.

Fictions of Memory

In order to highlight all these shared traits, this paper will analyze the three novels as instances of what Brigit Neuman terms “fictions of memory” referring to the intentional reworking of the narrative to tell oneself a story to live by. Two important aspects of fictions of memory are highlighted by Neumann and evident in the three novels. The first aspect is the importance of the present of the narrator and his conflicts in comparison to the story he is telling about the past.

Fictions of memory ... highlight that our memories are highly selective, and that the rendering of memories potentially tells us more about the rememberer’s present, his or her desire and denial, than about past event. (Neumann 2010, 333)

Accordingly, these narratives are to be approached with the understanding that the present conflicts and struggles of the narrator are reflected and projected on the past narratives. It is indeed the present of the narrator that dictates all the features I have listed as common traits in the three novels: the present of the elderly man preoccupied with death dictates his need to talk to someone and be listened to; the preoccupation with death; and the desire to put his story within a bigger context, hence the grand narrative. During a different phase of life, the story would have been narrated differently.

Following such rearrangement of priorities whereby the present of the narrator is more important than the past story he is telling, the second aspect of fictions of memory emerges, namely the lack of chronological order. In order for the narrator to superimpose the present conflicts and struggles on the narrated past, chronology is discarded: “chronological order is dissolved at the expense of the subjective experience of time” (Neumann 2010, 336) .

This is clearly evident in the three novels studied. None of the three novels is a Joycean or Proust narrative in terms of time structure, and yet all three oscillate systematically between different times in order to narrate their stories. It is quite

evident that the concerns of the present are predominate and the reference to the past events, though they constitute the bulk of the narrative in the three novels, are there to tell the story of the present.

Consequently, the stated reason for narration is an issue throughout the three novels, and is actually discussed and changed as the narrative proceeds. The narration moves from the concern with the past to focus on the relevance to the present. Brink who starts stating that his reason to tell the story is in order not to forget, ends with realizing that he tells the story in order to let go. The stated reason for the narration is the preservation of the past, but as it turns out by the end of the narration it is the present that really matters, it is living and surviving loss and continuing life that is at the heart of the project of narration. The narrator of Adel Esmat never tells his readers his reason for narrating the story now, thirty years after the death of the grandfather, but the reason the grandfather gives for narrating to start with is leaving the grandson with the necessary commandments for living, leaving his legacy to the one grandson he has chosen. By the end of the novel, we are presented with the reason the grandson is narrating the story: his own midlife crisis and his desire to finally face the trauma that he was put into by the dying grandfather. We suddenly remember this listener, the narrator of the story, and start looking at his conflicts and suffering. It is actually this that gives the whole act of narration its meaning. Finally in *The Dying Animal*, eight years into his relationship with, and break up with Consuela, David Kepesh, narrates the story: it is not the desire, the jealousy, the breakup, that have caused the present narration, but the necessary decision to be with Consuela as she has her breast surgery that is the motive for the narration/talk to the friend. In the following pages I will present an analysis of the structure of the three novels, particularly the two aspects named by Neuman as constituting fictions of memory, namely the focus on and the relevance to the present of the narrator and the manipulation of time disregarding chronology in a structure that reflects the conflicts of the narrator in the present.

Andre Brink's *Before I Forget*:

"We do not write to hold on but to let go." (Brink 2005, 306)

In Andre Brink's *Before I Forget* the narrator, an established novelist, Chris, suffering from a writer's block, writes what he calls "notes" (237). These notes are addressed in a second person narration to his young friend Rachel whose death opens the novel: "You died at seventeen minutes to ten this morning" (1). In other words, the narrative is addressed to a non-existent person in an act of defiance to her death. In addition to the death of the young friend and the writer's block, the opening pages of the novel tell of Chris' suffering as he sees his mother's mental powers go away as a result of dementia. His visits to her in the home where she stays break his heart over her fate as well as fill his heart with fears over his own years of old age. The novel is thus divided between three different times and narratives: First the relationship with Rachel that is related in a flash back that leads to the details of the accident causing her death that opens the narrative; this narrative line covers a year

and half ending in the present time. The second narrative line is the present time of writing “the notes” and this line is dominated by the news of the time most importantly the war on Iraq, and the visits to the mother up to the moment of her death towards the end of the narrative. This line covers three months from the declaration of war on Iraq in March to the declaration of victory by Bush in May 2003. The third line constituting the bulk of the narrative is comprised of all the love stories and relationships that Chris has lived. The three narrative lines interact in an attempt to fathom the nature of the relationship with Rachel and grapple with her loss. Consistent with Neuman’s definition of fictions of memory, it is the present conflicts of the narrator that are the driving force directing the narration. Chris in his seventies mourning Rachel while being obsessed with the fate of the demented mother is writing his life. The writing that he produces is directly connected to his current conflicts in many ways.

“The notes” are by no means a chronological narrative but they are rather the expression of the struggles of the writer in his seventies and his attempts to survive the myriad forms of death he is facing. The flashback on the story of Rachel covering their 18 months relationship is systematically interrupted by the other love stories that cover the life of the narrator. These stories work as a distraction that delays the inevitable ending relating Rachel’s accident leading to her death. It is as though the narrator is deliberately stalling, gaining time, in order not to have to put into words the accident that killed Rachel. The narrator is indeed imitating the narrative technique of the stories of Scheherazade in *One Thousand and One Nights*, “the patron saint of us writers” (19), for his embedded stories, like those of Scheherazade, push back and postpone death. In Chris’ case it is the death of Rachel and the pain of admitting it in writing that are being avoided and postponed with each embedded story. “...writing, writing, writing, unable to stop. For it is in the gaps and silences in between that you insinuate yourself. You. Rachel” (7).

Scheherazade’s embedded stories had other functions in addition to distraction - they worked on educating and changing the king - and so do Chris’ stories, they do more than postpone relating Rachel’s death Chris’ stories relate to the present in a deeper meaning than functioning as a pretext to postpone relating Rachel’s death. His desire to remember all the loves of his life is partly dictated by the fact that he feels his own death looming and would like to “hold on” to the memory, “Before it slips away. Before I forget ...” (7), fearing the fate of the mother who has come to forget the identity of her son. Most importantly the stories are a study in the meaning and value of love in an attempt to understand the relationship with Rachel.

Chronology becomes unimportant to this project. Chris scoffs at chronology as “boring at best” (20). By placing his different stories in a non-chronological narrative, Chris turns these stories into building blocks of his story with Rachel, starting and ending each story with some sort of connection with Rachel. He tells the story of his love to Rachel through all the other stories. Chris actually connects Rachel to each and every story he relates, as if he is reliving his life in the presence of Rachel. Rachel thus becomes, fictionally, through narration a lifelong companion rather than “the last love of my life” (1).

Psychoanalysts believe that among the functions of grief over a lost object of love, people have to disassociate themselves from the loved lost object. Freud sees that the absence of an object of love upon which a person has invested emotionally puts the person in a conflict between the fact of this emotional investment and the reality of the absence that makes such an investment a redundancy. This conflict can only be resolved through the painful and lengthy process of mourning. It is a process that entails, to put it in Freud's psychological terms, "that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that [lost] object" (Freud 1917, 244). This process becomes particularly difficult if the bereaved is reluctant to admit to the reality of the loss. However, even a person willing to go all the way to resolve this conflict between invested emotional energy and the reality of absence will have to walk the long road of withdrawing attachment to the lost loved object detail by detail. In the process "each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-catheted, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it" (Freud 1917, 245).

Now Chris's method is the opposite of "grief work": rather than withdrawing every attachment from Rachel he actually connects her to his life, even in the parts of his life which she did not share with him, that is the bulk of his life. His method is consistent with his situation. Relating past stories from the point of view of the present, in this case the grieving old writer, does not just mean seeing things from a more mature perspective, or a more tolerant heart, but the fact that he lives through the narration of these stories his relationship with "the last love of his life", faces her loss, investigates the meaning of love for himself, and what can possibly give him the power to survive and carry on.

One of the early love stories of Chris's life is the episode with Driekie, Chris's first knowledge of love and of a feminine body. With Driekie, who was a cousin of Chris's, both youngsters discover love hiding from everybody else in a tree in their garden. The story is narrated by Chris on the first night he spends with both Rachel and her husband George. George then shares the story of his own Driekie: "I once took a photo of Driekie" George announces unexpectedly. "...Well, perhaps not your Driekie," he says. "But a little girl in a tree, peering through the leaves" (Brink 2005, 36). By the end of the night Chris's first love story and the work and character of George become interwoven bringing Chris to the conclusion "All I knew, and that at least came to me like an illumination, was that I had gone to Camps Bay to visit a woman with whom I had fallen in love on New Year's Eve; but when I came home I left behind two very dear friends" (43). Chris's first knowledge of love becomes part of George's photography and the friendship between Chris and young couple.

This pattern of interweaving the narrated stories and the relation with Rachel is recurrent throughout, even if it is only the opening sentence of the episode or a digressive sentence. In telling the story of Daphne, for example, the dancer who would torture herself with a rope tied around her waist so that she would remind herself of the misery and pain in her country which, as a white South African, she has escaped, Chris wonders, contemplating his method of arranging the different

episodes and the various kinds of relationships: "... I am wary of distinctions: one-night stands, lifelong loves. Where's the difference? Which of these is Daphne? (Which of these, Rachel, is you?)" (21). Or an episode ending in Rachel sleeping and Chris tiptoeing in order not to wake her begins the narration of an episode with a lover who enjoyed waking up on kisses and caresses. Or the episode on Maïke, another sculptor like Rachel reminding him of her. Or a sentence dropped in when telling the story of Lindiwe, Chris's assistant or "Girl Friday": "Married. Like you, Rachel. What a loss" (65). Rachel is even remembered when Chris is writing about Dostoevsky's heroine: "a foot like yours" (75).

One of the interesting episodes though that can be read on more than one level is the story of Helena, Chris' wife who died in a car accident along with their son while Chris was driving and fighting with her. The story is narrated in conversation with Rachel, that is it is embedded in the narrative of Rachel rather than an interruption of that narrative. It is Rachel who asks the questions and urges the narration to go on when Chris is reluctant or finds it too painful or embarrassing to tell the details. The conversation does not only cover the story of Helena but is a discussion on love, fidelity, and long-term relationships. Therefore, the episode can be read as concerning Chris's marriage as much as concerning Rachel and George's marriage and their subsequent problems. The two lines, Chris's history, and his relation with Rachel intersect in the narration of this episode more than in any other.

Chris, thus, in his very special way, goes through the grief work over the loss of Rachel narrating all his love stories and connecting them to Rachel. These remembered love stories, however, though denying chronology, are arranged in a way that serves as an in-depth search for the meaning and value of love. Here I would like to refer to the process of overcoming loss as detailed by Peter Marris. Marris goes beyond the psychological concept of grief work based on Freud's work and developed by modern psychology. In his study *Loss and Change*, he suggests that in order to survive loss people need to have a line of continuity in their lives: that line ensures the meaning of life and therefore the predictability of life. Consequently, it is not just the work of dissociating emotional energy from the lost object of love that is required in mourning but further to extract from that object of love the value and meaning that can be carried and transplanted into the continuity of the life of the survivor. The function of mourning and grief is thus to reconnect the thread of continuity by extracting the value of the lost object of love while letting the object of love itself go: "A sense of continuity can, then, only be restored by detaching the familiar meanings of life from the relationship in which they were embodied, and re-establishing them independently of it. This is what happens in the working through of grief" (Marris 2016, 34). I would like to argue that the stories embedded and remembered in the narrative by Chris serve to extract that value from his experiences with the women he loved, including Rachel.

The relationships recounted are far from a list to brag of, warns us Chris at the very beginning: "not a record of victories and conquests, not that at all. God forbid" (Brink 2005, 8). Chris opposes himself to the image of Don Giovanni, described in the novel, by George, as a "compulsive seducer" who is driven by his loneliness as

Rachel interprets. Chris, however, does not move from one relationship to another to avoid loneliness nor does he come out empty looking for fulfillment in a new adventure. Chris's relationships always carried a value: sharing parenthood with Helena; sharing rebelliousness against racism with Bonnie Pieterse the coloured secretary at his father's office; sharing activism against the oppression of apartheid system with Aviva the photographer; sharing a love for writing with his mother. With the power of hindsight and the changing valorization that comes with getting old and approaching his own death what emerges as of utmost importance to Chris in all his relationships is the ability to share closeness, intimacy and support with another person, even if, like with Rachel and other of the recounted stories, there is no physical relationship. This value of love is what Chris believes gives meaning to his life and story. "When my time comes, I hope I'd be able to say ... 'I have loved well'" (20).

The value that Chris finds in his different stories of relationships is connected also to the value of his commitment and deep involvement with South African politics. The complexities of South African politics were a source of great conflicts for Andre Brink himself who as an Afrikaner was tolerated by the government for some time as a "member of the clan" but eventually banned, as a friend of Mandela in revolutionary South Africa but also a critic of subsequent ANC leaders (Tayler, 2010; Elnadi and Rifaat, 1993). To Chris, the story and conflicts of the country were part of his personal life. "What seems to me to make more sense is that every turning point of the country's history over the past three-quarters of a century, seems to be marked by a woman in my life. And others in between, to consolidate or divert, or reveal or affirm or entertain (Brink 2005, 20).

Each story therefore delves into what was valuable and precious in Chris's life, enabling him through memory and writing to face the coming years of his life. The endings of these relationships, however, seem to be a rehearsal for the separation with Rachel. All these small deaths as they were at the end of each story lead to narrating the death of Rachel. By that time, Chris realizes the end goal of his journey of mourning with all its circumventions:

In the beginning, and all my life, I think, I believed that I was writing to hold on, not to let go, not to lose it all forever. But through Mam's death - and through yours, which I am now approaching - I know that the opposite is true. We do not write to hold on, but to let go. I am learning to loosen my grip, to set memory free, to let myself be: myself and all the women who have allowed me to be what I am now - whatever that may be. (306)

The life writing of Chris has been dictated by the needs of his present, the desire to let go, the desire to move on while holding to the most valorized parts of his life. In this process Chris also manages to overcome his present writer's block that has disabled him for years.

Philip Roth's *The Dying Animal*:

"Thou shouldst not have been old til thou had been wise" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, I.v.)

Through his grief work, memory searching, restructuring of the meaning and value of love, Chris reaches some sort of harmony that puts all the stories he is telling into a meaningful direction helping him carry on the coming years of his life with faith trust and peace. This, however, is not the case with David Kepesh in *The Dying Animal*. The novel is similarly structured as *Before I Forget* in the sense that it encompasses three main categories of time: the present time of narration, the recent past encompassing the last relationship in which David was involved, and finally the embedded stories of past relationships including his marriage and his relationship with his son. Unlike Chris' narration, however, David's narration is not an act of restructuring or reinterpreting the past. The reader does not follow a process of reworking towards a resolution, but what is presented is a stubborn commitment to the hedonistic philosophy adopted by David which seems to be increasingly at odds with his advancing years and yet he is not prepared to reconsider. David Kepesh experience could be described in the terms used by Edward Said to define an alternative image of growing; Said speaks of experiencing "... lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction ..." (Said 2010, 6), an image that does not entail wisdom and maturity, but rather conflict and irreconcilability. A case that "involves a nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going against ..." (Said 2010, 7).

The novel is narrated as a conversation that lasts a couple of hours between David Kepesh and a younger listener whose voice the readers do not get to hear till the last few pages of the novel. In that conversation David tells the story of his relationship to Consuela Castillo which started eight years earlier when he was sixty two. Unlike Chris, David is not going through grief work and an attempt to survive the loss of his much younger "last love of [his] life," though David's young friend, Consuela, is indeed suffering a life-threatening illness which upsets and terrifies him. David's conflict, however, lies in his inability to carry on his Don Juanian life as he used to when he was younger. He details the story with Consuela marking all the change that is taking place in **him** while reliving the same story in search for desire. So, in narrating his life David focuses on this one last story, and sees his life through it through a different perspective, but for totally different reasons from Chris.

Since he has walked out on his wife and child seeking total emersion in the sexual freedom of the sixties, David has been committed to nothing but his desire. In spite of being a sophisticated intellectual, he is clear that all he is interested in when it comes to a relationship with a woman is sex:

It's nice that she's from Cuba, it's nice that her grandmother was this and her grandfather was that, it's nice that I play the piano and own a Kafka manuscript, but all this is merely a detour on the way to getting where we're

going. It's part of the enchantment, I suppose, but it's the part that if I could have none of, I'd feel much better. Sex is all the enchantment required. (16)

The changing rules of the eighties made David change his tactics not his commitments: "since, back in the mid-eighties, the phone number of the sexual harassment hotline was first posted outside my office door." (5). David pursues still his adventurous relationships with his female students except that he does not "any longer get in touch with them on a private basis until they've completed their final exam and received their grade and I am no longer officially in loco parentis." (5) Then he holds a party that ends with him alone with the one student he has chosen for the adventure.

Through the embedded stories that David relates while narrating his adventure with Consuela the reader can see that his hedonistic belief and total commitment to his own desires have cost him both his marriage and even more dearly a healthy relationship with his son: "I have a son of forty-two who hates me" (64). Kenny, David's son, identifies between his own father and the father in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. "A father who, you may remember, abandons his first child, ignores all his children, "for a child," Dostoyevsky writes, "would have gotten in the way of his debaucheries" (79). Kenny, believes that David has abandoned him and his mother to dedicate himself to his desires, and this has turned him into the opposite of the father, totally committed to his own family as husband and father in spite of the unhappiness this is causing him.

The relationship with Consuela, however, upsets the peace that David has made with his total dedication to his desires, not because it brings any moral or emotional scruples into the system of thought and conduct David has adopted, but precisely because his age changes the rules of the game. He is tormented with jealousy and with the need to check on Consuela all the time, a behaviour that he has dreaded in the women with whom he was involved. The role of the Don Juan turns to be unsustainable at the age of sixty:

Because of our ages, I have the pleasure but I never lose the longing. Had this never happened before? No. I was never sixty-two years old before. I was no longer in that phase of my life when I thought I could do everything. Yet I remember it clearly. (39)

As he narrates his sufferings and conflicts throughout the year and half of relationship with Consuela, his listener, and the readers can see the contradictions he is living on account of his advancing age:

A young man will find her and take her away. And from me, who fired up her senses ...

How do I know a young man will take her away? Because I once was the young man who would have done it. (40)

Eventually, Consuela breaks up with him accusing him of not caring about her as he does not showing up at her graduation party. It takes David a great effort and suffering to be able to get over his attachment to Consuela. But as soon as she reconnects with him asking for his support on account of her sickness, he cannot prevent himself from falling. The novel ends with his friend advising him not to go to Consuela:

“Don’t”

What?

“Don’t go.”

But I must. Someone has to be with her.

“She’ll find someone.”

She is in terror. I am going.

“Think about it. Think. Because if you go, you’re finished.” (156)

Up till the point he is involved with Consuela, David has a solid belief in his hedonistic philosophy and Don Juanian morals. When he relates his beliefs and relations, especially vis a vis his committed son, he is full of confidence and conviction. The relationship with Consuela, however, upsets all of this and shows how the test of age exposes the macho philosophy of freedom and non-commitment in relationships.

Here I totally agree with Velichka Ivanova who argues that “Roth exposes, rather than reinforces, the misrepresentation of women.” She believes that “Roth’s allegedly misogynistic representations of women result entirely from his fictional method” in the sense that it is David the fictional character who is misogynistic rather than Roth. It is the point of view of the man in his seventies, and his experience with the young girl Consuela, that actually exposes the life-long hedonistic philosophy. The inability of “the dying animal” to pursue his dedication to desire as an old man, the conflicts he is put in on account of that, and the total lack of reevaluation or reconsideration of his values, result in the agony of the old man as we see it in this novel.

**Adel Esmat’s *The Commandments*: “The ultimate virtue is letting go”
(Commandment 10, 213)**

In a totally different mood and mindset from both the mature optimism of Chris Minnaar’s narrative and the angry non-reconciliatory narrative of David Kepesh, comes the narrative by and about Sheikh Abdel Rahman in a tone of deep sorrow in spite of total acceptance and surrendering. The structure of the novel and the place of the seventy-year-old character are also different from both *Before I Forget*, and *The Dying Animal*. The novel is made up of a frame story in which the grandson narrates his traumatic experience at the death bed of the grandfather, the death that took place thirty years before the present time of narration. A couple of days before his death, Sheikh Abdel Rahman called his grandson and made him the witness of

his recollected life story as well as the bearer of the commandments he wanted to leave to his posterity:

I walked into his room on that terrible day of December 1978 and got locked in ever since. I am not saying this metaphorically. My soul has been entangled in the webs of that encounter overwhelming as it was for a young boy of eighteen.” (9)

The long embedded narrative is the life story of Sheikh Abdel Rahman. This is the bulk of the novel before we return to the grandson and the frame story in the last part. The ten chapters within the frame story alternate between a discourse of wisdom represented in the ten commandments delivered by the seventy-year-old Sheikh Abdel Rahman in direct quotations on the one hand, and a narrative of the life of the Sheikh and the history of the family reconstructed by the grandson through the stories of the grandfather he has listened to. In the last part of the novel, we return to the grandson in the present.

We get the direct voice of Sheikh Abdel Rahman in the long quotations whether the commandments or the quotations within the third person narrative. This third person narrative is described by Adel Esmat as the voice of the collective memory of the family. In a keynote address, Esmat explains:

I like to use first-person narration in my novels, but it occurred to me that the collective memory of the family could be a third voice. I resorted to that solution and it helped me give each character its own flavour and human atmosphere as well as its own destiny. (Al-Ghazaly)

The collective memory is presented as the reconstruction made by the grandson whose first person narrative frames the story. He presents the stories of Sheikh Abdel Rahman as he heard it from him on his deathbed during those two traumatic days thirty years earlier, as well from the stories by other members of his family.

Thus, we do not get the recollected memories of the man in his seventies only from him. The other voice, however, that of the grandson, is presented as an image of the grandfather at a different age and different time. Throughout the novel, in both the frame story and the embedded narrative, there is a constant identification between the man in his seventies and this other central character who shares the narration, namely the grandson. The fact that the narrator is not named intensifies this identification between the grandson and the grandfather. This identification is not simply due to the fact that the grandfather has entrusted this one grandson with his life story prophesying that the grandson will recollect these stories later in life as his own narrative: “let my words work their way inside of you until one day you recollect them from oblivion believing they are your own words” (44). But the identification is further deepened because in his midlife crisis the grandson is reliving the conflicts and losses his grandfather suffered. In retelling his grandfather’s story, he is also

telling his own story from a different vantage point. Though this method does not restrict the narrative, like the two other novels, to the point of view of the old man in his seventies, yet the reiteration of the conflicts of the man in his seventies by the grandson in his late forties actually deepens the meanings and nuances of these conflicts. Both men are suffering not only the loss of loved ones, but more the death of the traditional rural community of Egypt.

On his deathbed, the grandfather foresaw the demise of this peasant family along with the kind of rural life connected to the land. For the grandson, this disintegration of the family, his own midlife crisis, and the death of the last daughter of Sheikh Abdel Rahman, the last family member living in the village, all triggered the writing of the narrative thirty years after the death of the Sheikh:

All gone! His portrait locked up in the guests's reception area of the house he built back in the 1970s. A family of peasants wiped out. He knew it on that day. He knew that his family will disintegrate into fragments. Was it his fear of death and his fear of the disintegration of this family dispersed all over the country that made him burden me with such unbearable weight? (16)

The narrative revives this life with all its vividness, conflicts, and maneuvers at survival, while conscious all the time of the eyes of the man in his seventies in his peaceful knowledge that all is gone, and the middle-aged man struggling to save whatever he can out of all of this.

From the vantage point of age Sheikh Abdel Rahman sees how the losses that have been incurred upon him at the start of his life have been changed through his striving and struggles. He can see this now from the perspective of someone who has survived losses, managed to overcome failures, achieved all that he has strived for and is now watching it all go away in a different way but this time he is leaving the fight to someone else with no bitterness.

The story of Sheikh Abdel Rahman opens with him mourning both his father and younger brother. The father died grieving the loss of his land in an unjust, though legal, agreement. The loss of the father and the brother broke the heart of the Sheikh, whereas the loss of the land shock the earth under his feet. Overnight he was responsible for a family whose livelihood was lost. He had to give up the study of theology he was pursuing in Cairo and relocate in his village. "Striving is the way for Salvation," says the first commandment introducing the life of the Sheikh as a young man. The narrative then details the kind of hard work the Sheikh had to do.

This striving is detailed with all the enthusiasm, dedication, and skill of the young man whom the Sheikh was at the time. Two other voices, and points of view, are heard in the background to that narrative: the voice of the grandson who listened and reconstructed these stories and saw forever a "larger than life image of him managing to overcome every hurdle rebuilding a home that had been destroyed."; and the voice of the grandfather looking death in the eye, aware that "Friday I will die;" and "that his family will disintegrate into fragments."

“[T]he rendering of memories potentially tells us more about the rememberer’s present ...” The midlife crisis of the grandson and the desire of the grandfather in his seventies to leave a legacy for his family is the present of both characters driving them to remember the life of Sheikh Abdel Rahman. Sheikh Abdel Rahman struggled in order to reach what Marris calls “extracting the value” in order to ensure the continuity of life despite loss and change. He started his life with this personal loss that threatened the continuity of the world as he knew it. In remembering his struggle to guard the value of land and to impart it to the younger generations, Sheikh Abdel Rahman relates his struggle but reveals sorrow over the end he is foreseeing. In the following I will trace the development of the recollected memories following two main stories: the relationship of Sheikh Abdel Rahman to the land, and his recollected memories on the love of his life, Kawthar.

The story of the great grandfather losing his land has been part of the family history and through it the grandson has learnt that stories change their meaning with time and the age of the teller and listener:

His eyes light as he tells how the land was lost ... we listened to the story at different times and in different ways. It has grown with us. As children it sounded like a fairy tale that never happened. As adolescents it seemed like an everyday story of conflicts over land like what we see happening every day. As adults the story lost its magic it was subjected to criticism and reinterpretations and even discredited as false. (22)

The relationship to the land and its value in rural Egyptian novel is a main theme that has been expressed philosophically, aesthetically, or politically (Rachid, 2011; Selim, 2004). *The Commandments* presents the human and intimate relation between the land and the people. In response to the loss of land that his father suffered in an unjust deal, Sheikh Abdel Rahman substitutes owning the land with knowledge of maps and surveys becoming the most reliable authority on the subject in the whole district. This knowledge guarantees a different relationship with the land, different from that his father and brother had, yet eventually capable of regaining the kind of relationship they had. He eventually managed to own land which he entrusts to his nephew for farming and later to one of his sons.

The political and social changes of decolonization and a nationally independent political system put the relation to the land in rural Egypt in a different context. Later the move from a socialist socio-economic system towards capitalism had its impact on the rural societies in Egypt. With all these changes Sheikh Abdel Rahman tried to maneuver his way graciously and courageously struggling to keep the land, his relation to it, and the kind of family life that has been built around it. With every change he tries to avoid loss and finds ways of keeping the house together, and the land farmed and thriving.

He struggles, for example, with his nephew who cannot comprehend the capitalist value of the land but only understands the sentimental and physical attachment and

knowledge of the land. Sheikh Abdel Rahman was aware of the value of the sentimental and physical attachment to the land that his nephew represented and believed that this is the value that they should hold on to for the continuity of life in the face of change, and yet he was aware also that without his own knowledge of the workings of the changing world they would never have had, as a family, any land for the nephew or anyone to develop a relationship with. The nephew is described as totally unaware of the value and meaning of land in the capitalist world. This is how he views the ultimate symbol of capitalism, money:

These notes appeared to him in their band of cloth as strangely capable of changing form to become vast areas of land. Everything he has lived for could simply be stored in this pack of banknotes. The reason for his uneasiness was that the land that was the most cherished value in his life and considered the most precious source of pride and joy, could shrink into money. Not only that but these banknotes were actually more expansive than the static land which is but one form of the myriad of forms money can take. (129-30)

Whereas the Sheikh, on the other hand, expresses knowledge of both, an emotional attachment to the value represented by the nephew, and an understanding that without his own realistic apprehension there will be no land in the first place:

The Sheikh said to himself that the presence of my nephew was what gave this home its strength, in spite of his firm belief that he himself was the one who gave the house life. The presence of Ali Selim was reassuring. His seriousness enhanced life in the house. His capacity to give support and to stand in the face of difficulties, along with his deep love and attachment to the land, made life possible and made it thrive. It is his way of life that should prevail (176).

By the time he is about to die Sheikh Abdel Rahman is aware that his endeavour to keep this peasant family a life in the village connected to the land has failed. They have all been each in his/her own way swallowed by the urban societies they have fled to for a better and different life. His dream of having at least part of the family guard the family's place in this rural society fails. By that time, however, he is at peace with all he has done, and leaves the rest gladly to posterity along with the Commandments.

The life story told to the grandson reveals a love that was hinted at, whispered about in the village but never acknowledged. In his seventies, however, the Sheikh is prepared to be finally open, in this very conservative and oppressive society, about the love of his life. He has been in love with the daughter of his Sheikh at al Azhar, but his friend was quick to propose and married her. By the time Sheikh Abdel Rahman realized that she, too, had feelings for him, it was too late. A conservative society, traditions, piety and loyalty to his friend put an end to any fulfilment of these feelings. The Sheikh manages to overcome the times of temptation when opportunities arose for him to fulfill the desire of his life. Sublimated into a deep life-long friendship, this unfulfilled love was "the light, that helped me carry the burden

of life” (167), as the Sheikh expressed it in his commandments to a grandson who saw in the whole story, at the time, “the delirium” of a dying man.

Conclusion

The three novels present different attitudes towards the recollection of memory a stage in life approaching death. The looming death affects the narrator’s method as well as representations of their life events. “Letting go,” through the act of narration, oral narration in the case of Sheikh Abdel Rahman, consistent with his traditional rural society, and written “notes,” in the case of the intellectual and novelist Chris Minnaar, guides both to a peaceful reconciliation with the life events recollected. David Kepesh, however, stands in agony of the irreconcilable recollected memories with the present of “the dying animal,” incapable of continuing life as it used to be, or accepting the change of “dying.”

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