

"Abdel Aziz is redefining
Arabic women's literature."
—ESSAM ZAKARIA, *El-Fagr*

THE QUEUE

a novel

BASMA ABDEL AZIZ

DISCOVERING Dystopian Middle Eastern Fiction

with Jordan Williams

How did I learn about this novel?

What is dystopian fiction?



dystopia noun

dys·to·pia | \ (,)dis-'tō-pē-

1: an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, fearful lives

2: anti-utopia

utopia: a place of ideal perfection especially in laws, government, and social conditions



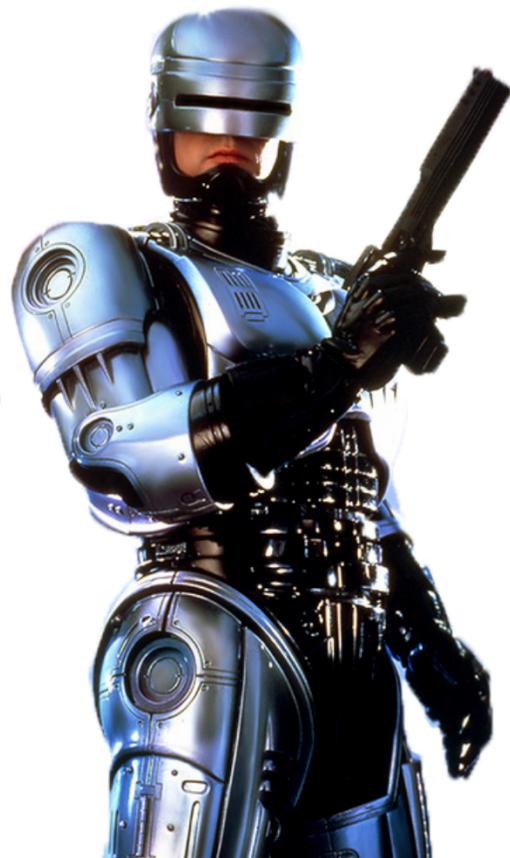
HOW TO RECOGNIZE A DYSTOPIA

TEDEd

<https://youtu.be/6a6kbU88wu>

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**Let's name some other examples
of dystopian fiction.**



Basma Abdel Aziz

 **PSYCHIATRIST & AUTHOR**

AL NADEEM CENTER FOR REHABILITATION OF VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

"I have seen with my own eyes how major psychological trauma can change people. I have witnessed how continuous repression and humiliation can drive them to become no more than shadows of themselves, not venturing beyond the lines their oppressor has drawn for them."



Political Context

- President Hosni Mubarak resigned in 2011 amid growing protests.
- Mohamed Morsi was elected and sworn in as President in June 2012 and overthrown in July 2013.
- Morsi was replaced by interim President Adly Mansour, who served for nearly a year.
- Abdel Aziz began writing the novel in September 2012.
- *The Queue* was published in Arabic in 2013.



Inspiration

In 2012, Abdel Aziz came across a queue of people waiting in front of a closed government building in downtown Cairo.

"I was primarily interested in what all these different people in this strange queue had in common; there didn't seem to be any connection between them. Some seemed financially comfortable, while others looked poor, there were women and men, elderly and young people, and even children playing nearby.

I wondered why they stood there so long in vain. Why didn't any of them speak up in protest or frustration about the delay; why didn't anyone suggest they all leave?"



Why write fiction?

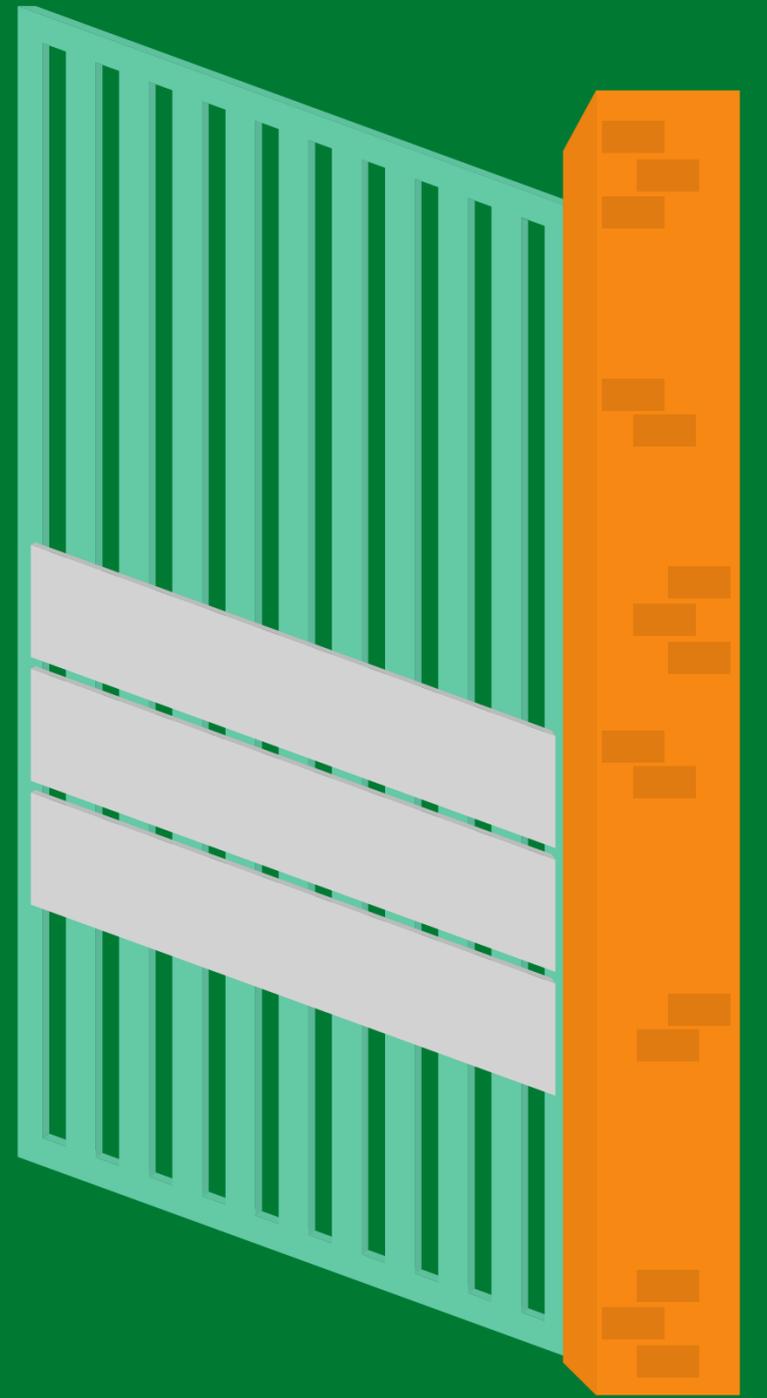
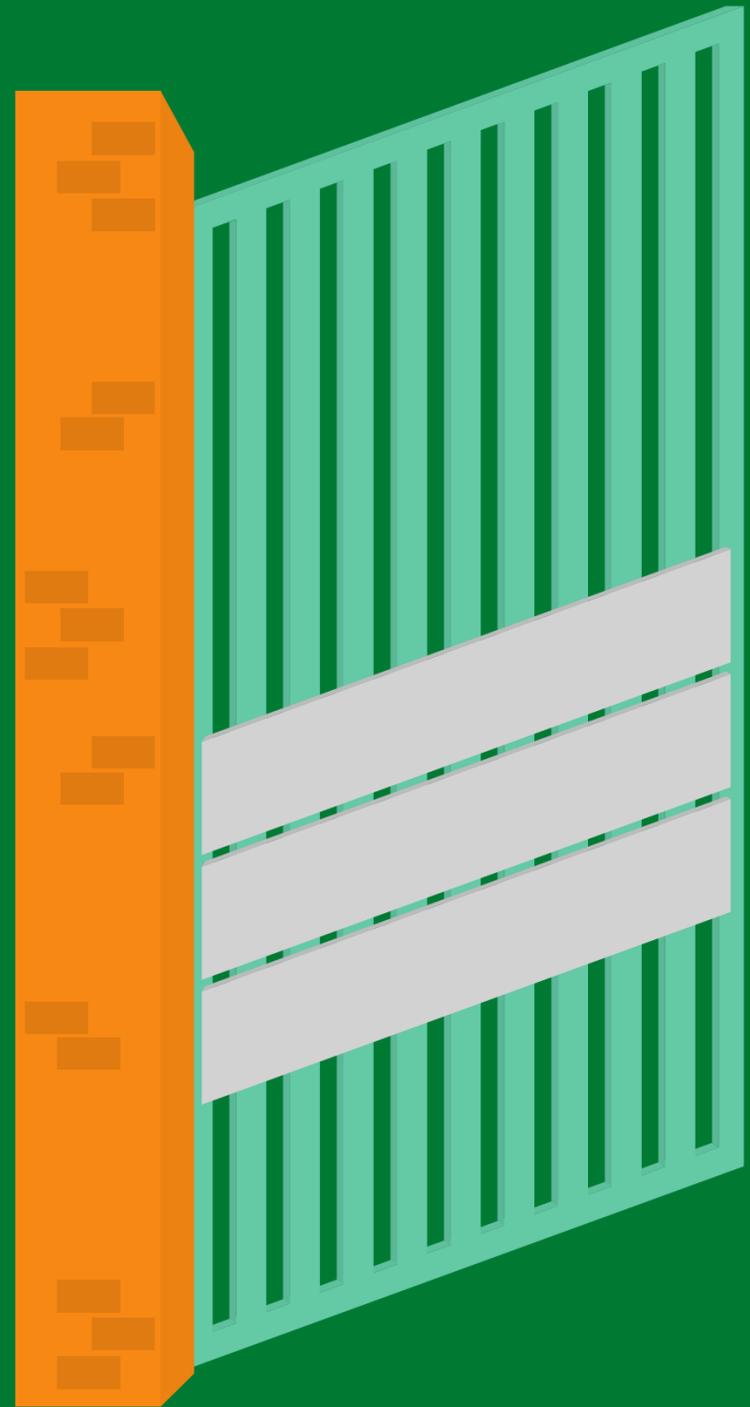


"After Mr. Mubarak's fall, writing a factual account felt like an inadequate way to capture the **surreal experience** of ordinary Egyptians who lived through the uprisings and subsequent crackdowns, [Abdel Aziz] said.

Instead, she aimed to write a universal story that reflected what was unfolding around her but transcended geography and current events."

-New York Times article, 2016

THE GATE



The "First Storm"

- After nearly being overthrown by this popular uprising, "the ruler" and his regime regroup.
- One night, the ruler gives a speech about "the necessity of reining in the situation."
- The next day, the **Main Gate of the Northern Building** appears.



"As the ruler faded from the public eye, it was the Gate that increasingly began to regulate procedures, imposing rules and regulations necessary to set various affairs in motion. Then one day the Gate issued an official statement detailing its jurisdiction, which extended over just about everything anyone could think of. This was the last document to bear the ruler's seal and signature."

- *The Queue*, pg. 31

Rise of the Bureaucracy



- Permits for practically all human activity must be acquired from the Gate.
- Fees are charged by the Gate for activities as insignificant as "window shopping."
- Every citizen's salary is docked to help cover the Gate's document printing fees.
- Companies are conscripted into serving the government's needs, and are forced to switch industries as dictated by the Gate.

Rise of the Police State

- Security forces with very unambiguous names (Quell Force, Deterrence Force, Concealment Force, etc.) are created to maintain order.



The Disgraceful Events

- Frustrated by all of the fees and restrictions being enforced by the Gate, people once again rise up. The uprising is violently crushed and the Gate closes.
- A queue of people forms outside the gate, waiting for permission to resume their lives.
- At the beginning of the novel, the queue is estimated to be about 1.25 miles long.
- So many people spend their days waiting in the queue that shops are forced to close.



"It hadn't opened since, nor had it attended to a single citizen's needs, yet it also hadn't stopped issuing laws and decrees. It had to open, Yehya figured. What reason did it have to remain closed? The Disgraceful Events had ended by affirming the Gate's hold on power and its growing omnipotence. Closing indefinitely made no sense, unless it was simply dealing out another form of punishment."

- *The Queue*, pg. 33

What would you do?

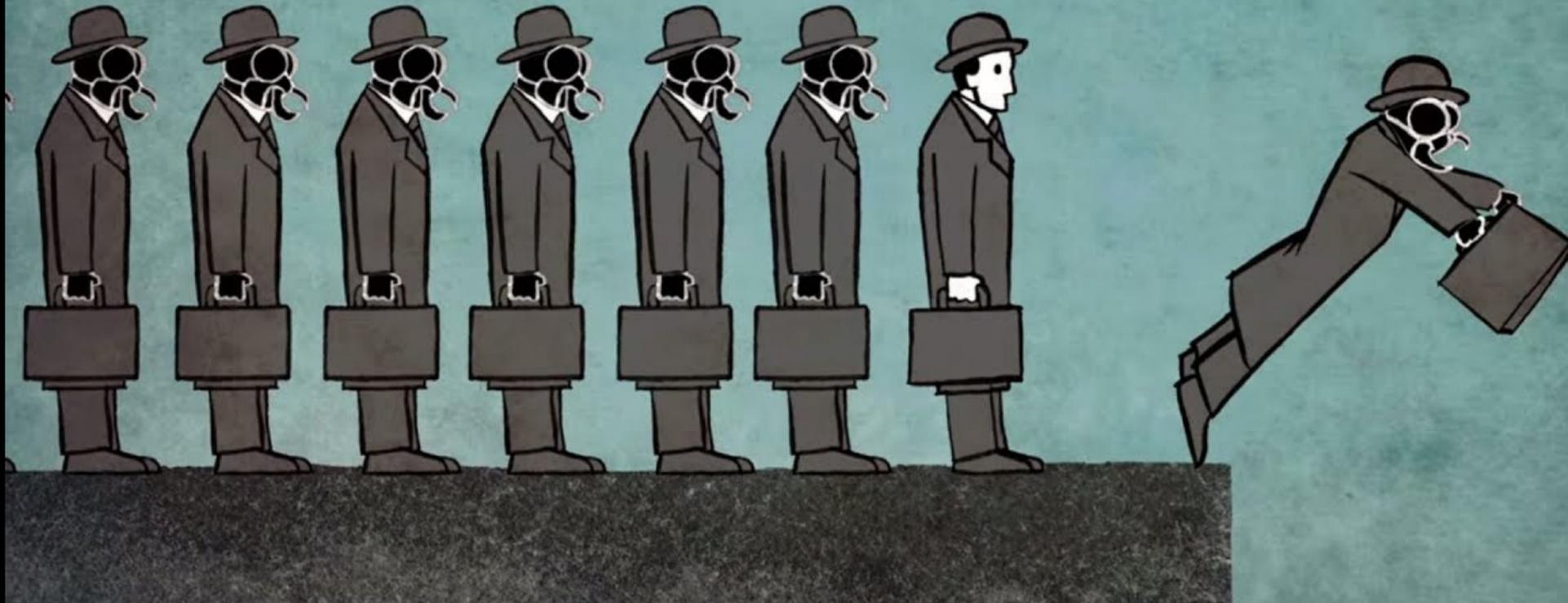
"If asked, [Tarek] would produce an opinion about how certain people — who were angry about being forced to follow the strict order the Gate had imposed soon after it appeared — had caused an unnecessary uproar. They'd rejected its new rules, and wanted to create a different, less authoritarian system, as Tarek had understood. They'd wanted a more lenient regime, one perhaps more tolerant, but, in Tarek's personal opinion, it was also **less stable.**"





To operate,
or not to operate?

WHAT MAKES SOMETHING “KAFKAESQUE”?



<https://youtu.be/wkPR4Rcf4ww>

How is this novel Kafkaesque?



Let's discuss examples of:

- Unnecessarily complicated and frustrating experiences.
- Pointlessness of success in the face of disorienting and illogical ordeals.
- Characters using circular reasoning in reaction to absurd bureaucracy.
- Humor rooted in nonsensical logic.
- Government/bureaucratic absurdity that reflects our own shortcomings.



Tarek

Page 5: "No questions, no problems – life passed him by both predictably and monotonously, just as he liked it."

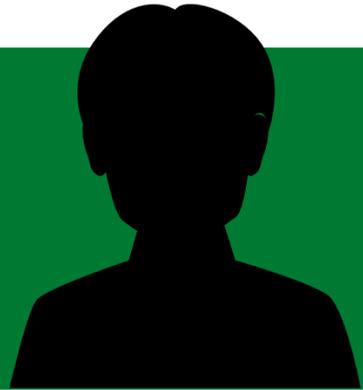
Page 57, To Yehya and Amani: "It's impossible to act against the official instructions we receive from the Gate."

Page 59: "Tarek didn't want to end the matter so much as he wanted to find a solution whereby no one would get hurt."

Page 58-59: "He may have been weak and a coward, but he wasn't a liar." ... "Tarek (who for his part had strived to put in a believable performance) appeared just as surprised as they did. He let out an apologetic sigh and mustered an expression he hoped conveyed disappointment."

Page 104: "He found that he too was on the same path as Yehya, and one of these days he might merit a document just like this one."

Page 142: "Everything in his world was determined by the Gate, bound to its decisions. ...They said the Gate was going to make everything easier, that it would bring peace, joy, and security to each and every citizen. He was a citizen, a dutiful one too, but now it was clear these promises had been empty."



Yehya

Rebel or Conformist?

Page 33: "[Yehya] was skeptical that an uprising would be possible under the Gate's reign, but all the same he excused himself from work and left at the agreed-upon time, deciding to watch from afar."

Page 179, according to Nagy: "Yehya would never admit that he was just a single, powerless man in a society where rules and restrictions were stronger than everything else, stronger than the ruler himself, stronger than the Booth and even the Gate."



Amani

- Initially, she is motivated by her love for Yehya and is seemingly fearless in her pursuit of his medical records.
- She is captured trying to steal Yehya's X-Ray and undergoes a mysterious form of torture, after which she becomes a shell of her former self.

Page 180, according to Nagy: "[Amani] could never be convinced that the independence she believed she possessed was in truth no more than an accepted illusion, part of a web of relations and contradictions."

Page 155: "She wished they would beat her, she said she was ready to be tortured. She slapped her face with her hands until her cheekbones went numb and bit her lips to feel her own blood inside her mouth but she tasted nothing. Nothing, again. Maybe she really was nothing, had never existed. Or maybe she would disintegrate here, slowly dissolving until she became nothingness...became nothing. She was already beginning to disappear: her tears were the first part of her to vanish."



Nagy

- Studied Philosophy in college, detained by Deterrence Force as a student for writing and distributing political pamphlets.
- Lectured in the Philosophy Department, while under surveillance, eventually resigned in the face of mounting pressure from administration and students.
- Detained a second time for distributing political literature.
- Unemployed and Yehya's consistent companion.

Page 180: "Nagy was always the odd one out, the one who paid little attention to life's minor details and often appeared lost among it all. He only saw the wider context, the systems that everything was governed by; he wasn't interested in the little pieces, he wanted to understand the broader picture, how it worked and what it meant."



Um Mabrouk

- An enterprising mother who initially works in the office with Yehya and Amani while also cleaning houses. She eventually starts her own business in the Queue.
- Her husband is an abusive, unemployed drug addict.
- She waits in the Queue because she is too poor to acquire life-saving treatment for her ailing children.
- While waiting in the Queue, she becomes a central figure in the Boycott Campaign.

Page 20: "She was forever cursed with bad luck, and there was no end to her problems, no matter how much she tried to set things right."



Ehab

- **An activist turned journalist who is desperate to expose government lies and wrongdoing.**
- **He assists the protagonists in the novel as they seek the documentation they need to present to the Gate, though his motives are to break major news stories, not necessarily see them get the help they need.**
- **Although he is initially allowed some leeway, his editors eventually start censoring his stories or rejecting them outright.**

Who can you trust?

THE TRUTH

CONFIRMED:
No Shots Fired During
Disgraceful Events!

Yehya Has 'Silly Little Stomach Pain'

GATE TO OPEN SOON

LATEST
PHONE
WINNERS

- **The Narrator?**
- **The Media?**
- **The Government?**
- **The Characters?**

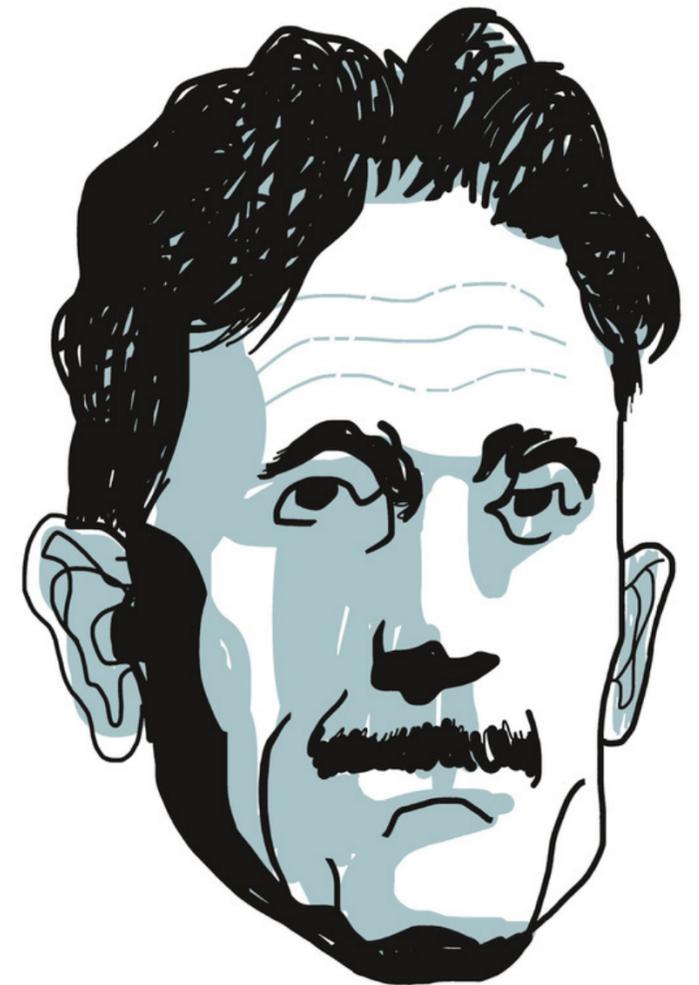


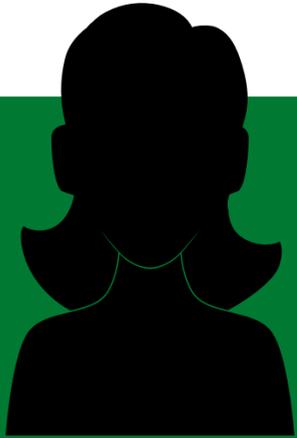
<https://youtu.be/oe64p-QzhNE>

How is this novel Orwellian?

Let's discuss examples of:

- **Doublespeak** - deliberate irony; words used not to convey meaning but to corrupt the very ideas they refer to.
- **Doublethink** - a hypnotic state of cognitive dissonance in which one is compelled to disregard their own perception in place of the officially dictated version of events.





Ines

- **A schoolteacher who tries to keep her political leanings to herself.**
- **She finally erupts at Shalaby, then learns that she was being observed at the time.**
- **She succumbs to paranoia, eventually agreeing to marry the man in the *galabeya* in an effort to become as devout as possible.**



Shalaby

- **Shalaby is fiercely protective of his cousin Mahfouz's reputation.**
- **He also seeks to leverage Mahfouz's martyrdom to save his family from financial ruin.**
- **The rage that he initially directs at Ines he eventually directs at the bureaucrat in the Booth who disrespects him.**

Dystopian by which definition?

Does the novel:

- **Depict an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, fearful lives?**
- **Reflect modern anxieties about inequalities & government power?**
- **Question utopian thinking?**
- **Take contemporary trends to extremes, exposing their underlying flaws?**
- **Tell a cautionary tale about the very idea that humanity can be molded into an ideal shape?**

**What's your theory about
the ending?**