Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge

"Click on the ribs of revelation": Cross-cultural digital literary innovation in Deena Larsen's "Carving in Possibilities" and Mushtaq Ma'an's "Tabarih Raqamiyya Li-sira Ba'duha Azraq"

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[1] The growing body of electronic literature poses new challenges for literary studies. As "world literature," in particular, electronic literature is forcing us to expand interpretive methods (Tabbi 2010: p.9). Consequently, the international literary map is being redrawn. This is especially true where electronic literature intersects with language and difference. For example, electronic literature from the Arab world is a fusion and confusion of cultures, histories, and languages. Cross-cultural literary studies informed by electronic literature potentially connect different cultures that is likely to require a more holistic approach or interdisciplinary paradigm to come to terms with its innovations.

[2] This paper explores two digital texts as cross-cultural and cross-linguistic explorations, and as potential first steps for developing a world digital critical approach, namely: Deena Larsen's "Carving in Possibilities," which presents an exemplary instance of the electronic literature as it has developed in the West; and "Tabarih Raqamiyya Li-sira Ba'duha Azraq" ("Digital Agonies of a Biography Part of Which is Blue") by the Iraqi poet Mushtaq Abbas Ma'an, who is considered the pioneer of electronic Arabic poetry. I argue that while each culture and linguistic sphere brings its own premises, the influence of digital media upon a given sphere invariably produces many intermixings and convergences. In the following, I first set out the context of e-lit in the Arabic world; secondly, the transformation of literary criticism as it engages with e-lit; and then I proceed to read and analyze the works by Larsen and Ma'an in the light of repurposed poetics.

[3] Deena Larsen is a leading writer of hypertext fiction, poetry and criticism. She has organized many conferences, workshops and events related to electronic literature and hypermedia. She experiments with new devices and styles of media writing. Her first interactive hypertext poetry collection was entitled "Marble Springs", Eastgate Systems, 1993, and it was considered one of the pioneering works of e-lit. Through the body of her work, Larsen has tried to explore the potentials of hypermedia in dealing with different topics. Larsen's text "Carving in Possibilities" (2001), is deep and unusual type of e-lit where many musings on the story of David and Goliath are reflected by carving the head of Michelangelo's statue of David. By hovering over the blurred picture of David's statue using the mouse, speculations are heard with sounds and the statue becomes clearer.

[4] The Iraqi poet and critic Mushtaq Abbas Ma'an is one of the pioneers in the Arabic e-lit. He is the first

poet to explore the Arabic interactive poem. He has four volumes of printed poetry and many books in linguistics and criticism. His e-poem "Tabarih Raqamiyya Li-sira Ba'duha Azraq" ("Digital Agonies of a Biography Part of Which is Blue") is a landmark in the field of Arabic e- poetry. He was awarded many Arabic prizes for his distinguished style of writing. In his text, Ma'an employs a picture of statue, world paintings, local and world music and motion to reflect on the current state of Arabs.

[5] It is important in this context to present the Arabic contribution in the world map of e-lit. The first Arabic foundation that concerned itself with e-lit was the committee of Internet in the Writers' Union of Egypt which was established in 2001. After that, the Arab Union for Internet Writers was established in 2005 with the presidency of the writer Mohamed Sanajlah, and a headquarters in Jordan. The first Arabic conference for digital culture was held in Libya in March, 2007.[1] Many Arab critics and writers who are interested in digital literature participated in this conference. Such a conference has directed the Arab critics to consider the nature of this emerging type of writing. It has become the job of digital criticism to put the criteria used in evaluating digital works and to draw their characteristic frames (Neigm, 2007). Digital criticism is concerned with helping the reader to get accustomed to the computer programs, and defining the best ways that literature can benefit from the screen-based media and the system of archiving information.

[6] The next Arabic conference was "The Alexanderia First Conference for Digital Culture" which was held in 2009 with the presidency of the writer Ahmed Fadl Shablool. This conference discussed edgy ideas in the field of e-lit like the digital cinema and theater. The Arabic digital literary scene has many creative writers whose pioneering body of work has initiated new poetics and perspectives. Mushtaq Abbas Ma'an, Mon'em Al-Azrak, Mohamed Sanajlah, Abdelkader Amiche, Mohamed Chouika, Smail El Bouyahyaoui and Abdelouahid Stitou are among the leading figures who experimented digital writing in poetry and fiction. Their digital works opened the door for many critics such as Zohor Gourram, Labeba Al-Khemar, Said Yaktine, Ibrahim Mlhem, Eman Younis, Mohamed Aslim, Sayed Negm, Mohamed Hussein Habib and Ahmed Fadl Shablool to explore the theory and practice of digital writing.

[7] Despite its promising potentials, the Arabic new media theory is still stuck in the labyrinth of ontological questions about the future of the paper book, authorship and paper-based versus digital literary texts. Asleem (2007) proposes that the digital milieu of digital literature obliges a kind of integration between the author of the literary work and the technician who is professional in the computer programs. Interestingly, some Arab e-lit writers accomplish their digital texts without cooperating with programmers. Of course, Arabic e-lit is a rapidly-changing field and only time will tell whether this trend continues. Negm (2007) argues that digital criticism enables the paper- based reader to explore the techniques and devices used in digital literature. Technically, this goal isn't achieved till now in the Arabic digital poetics. Gharkan (2010) studies in his book, *The Interactive Poem in the Arabic Poetics: Theory and Practice,* the components of both the interactive paper-based poem and digital-based poem. By the time, especially with the appearance of a new generation of young scholars interested in this field, the Arabic new media theory has traversed many steps and genres. A promising work is that of the Iraqi critic and theatrical director Mohamed Hussein Habib who developed a perspective on digital theater in

2005.

[8] The latest efforts in the Arabic e-lit field is the Arabic E-Lit (AEL) network. This project is under the supervision of Sandy Baldwin, the ELO vice president and professor of e-lit at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), New York, and directed by the author of this paper during a research fellowship at RIT, lecturer in Minia University, Egypt, and member of Writers' Union of Egypt. The project (AEL) includes many axes; firstly, launching a website in English entitled "arabicelit" in Sept. 2015, to globalize Arabic e-lit and discuss the related issues. Secondly, uploading the data of Arabic e-lit writers and their works upon the world databases of ELMCIP. We finished the first stage in October 17, 2015, by uploading the personal data of Arabic e-lit writers. The second stage will include uploading data about the creative works. Thirdly, we are considering holding two multi-day conferences about Arabic e-lit; the first will be at RIT Dubai to be held late in 2017. The followup conference will take place a year later at the RIT Rochester campus. Many Arab and international writers who are interested in Arabic e-lit will be invited. Fourthly, creating academic programs and workshops, publishing researches about Arabic e-lit works and making comparisons with world works to define the place of Arabic e-lit on the world map of e-lit.

[9] In order to understand the cross-cultural differences in the development of e-lit, it is important to understand the transformations in literary criticism occurring alongside the emergence of e-lit.

[10] Many people argue that electronic literature challenges the existence of traditional literature. After the prevalence of digital media and its embedding in the processes of creating and consuming literary texts, some critics have argued that the currency of the printed book is coming to an end. Hayles (2002: p. 33) thinks that this is a mistaken idea because new digital media provides new ways of experiencing the printed book and reevaluating it. The printed book will not become extinct like a "dinosaur", but will continue developing and mutating like the "human". This state of co-existence imposed by the long history of printing press and the materiality of the new digital media is the cornerstone of the way of putting new poetics for e-lit.

[11] Keeping the previous premises in mind, I will discuss the challenges of paper-based poetics and take it as a starting point and a useful heuristic step in approaching my two case studies; in short, I am describing a kind of remediating or repurposing of traditional poetics. Although born-digital theories such as code studies, platform studies, media specific analysis have appeared in response to the materiality of the new media literature, my argument will deal with this materiality as a part in a whole. We lose aspects of the text when considering the medium as the only characteristic to be evaluated in the literary text. I believe in making convergences between paper-based and digital poetics. I propose a third poetics between the two, where every text directs the critic towards a point between digital and traditional poetics depending on its disposition towards digital or traditional contexts. In doing so, I maintain the interpretive insights of paper-based poetics while adding an understanding of contemporary media-based texts.

[12] The existing traditional schools of criticism have been developed based on paper-based literary works. Some critics have argued that all these schools can be classified under four main approaches of interpretation. "Depending on the main focus of these major methodologies, one can distinguish between

text –, author –, reader –, and context – oriented approaches (Klarar, 1999, p. 77). Of course, these are not the only approaches for analyzing literary texts, but I will depend upon this assumption as a way of developing my argument about the traditional and digital theory.[2]

[13] The first, **text-oriented** approach deals with the text as the most important element in the process of creativity. I mean by text here the content of any work. This approach concerns itself with what is said and how it is said. It concentrates on just the text and its linguistic features, and interpretation regardless of any external resources – that is, it ignores factors such as the reader, the author of this text and her/his autobiography, and the cultural context related to this text. Many critical schools that are concerned with analyzing the text adopt this approach (e.g. Formalism, Structuralism, Deconstruction, and New Criticism).

[14] The text-oriented approach assumes a stable, singular, and material text, which may not be the case in dealing with digital writing. The linearity of paper-based text reinforces this assumption and proposes one type of reading, from the beginning to the end. Of course, this "typical print reading" differs from "hyper reading" that permits many options for reading hypertext and "stimulates different brain functions than print reading" (Hayles 2012: p.61). While the traditional text proposes one end to its static content, the dynamic digital text has many endings depending on the choice of the reader.

[15] The second, **author-oriented** approach deals with the author of the literary text as its starting point. Instead of considering the linguistic items as is the case with the first approach, this approach interprets the literary work in the light of its author and her/his autobiography. How the life of the author can be reflected in the literary work is one of the most important questions in this context. Many literary schools are related to this approach such as Biographical Criticism and Psychoanalytic Criticism.

[16] As is the case with the text-oriented approach, the author-oriented approach concerns itself with one side of the process of creativity. While the paper-based text is written by one author, the digital text may be a collaborative text. The technician, who is an expert in the computer software, may collaborate with the author in writing the digital text. The idea of authorship under these circumstances will be a contested ground. Sometimes, Artists may also help in adding artistic features to the literary work. In the interactive texts, many readers can share the original author completing the text. Should we attribute the reflected biography in the literary work to the writer or to the other participants is a pivotal question.

[17] The third approach shifts the concern from the text and the author to the **reader** who is considered the primary aim of the process of interpretation. The literary text is evaluated in relation to its impact on the reader. How does the reader receive the literary work and what are her/his reactions to it? Reception theory and reader-response criticism are among the famous critical schools related to this approach.

[18] Considering the reader as the main focus of criticism adopted by this approach is recognized as a genuine shift in the literary theory, but the reader of traditional texts is still a passive recipient. S/he has no choices concerning the process of reading and interacting with the text. Although some digital texts do not depend on the interactivity of the reader in their consuming, interactivity is conceived as a peculiar characteristic of the digital text which requires a positive reader.

[19] The fourth, **context-oriented** approach celebrates the cultural and social contexts that the literary work appears within. Marxist Literary Theory, for example, analyzes the literary text from the economic angle and its impact on the classes of society. Feminist Literary Theory interests itself with woman and her intersection with many social and cultural axes.

[20] The context of the digital text is totally different from that of the traditional text. The technological milieu is peculiar to the digital text than the traditional one. Other contextual differences are related to authorship and readership. New dimensions are continuously added to the concepts of author and reader with the development of the new media poetics.

[21] With the appearance of the new media literature, a fifth approach can be added to the previous approaches. I can name it **medium-oriented** approach to include born-digital theories such as algorithmic criticism, code studies, platform studies and media specific analysis. Although these theories present a reasonable understanding of the media used in composing the digital text, most of them emphasize the medium/platform rather than the other axes of the digital text such as the reader, author or text.

[22] For a holistic theory in analyzing digital texts, a convergence of all or some of the previous approaches can be achieved. I cannot depend on just the text, reader, author, context or medium to be the only component of the digital text. In fact, the digital text is a mix of most of these axes. In discussing the following digital texts, I cannot discuss the used media and ignore the response of the reader, the cultural context or the language and its references.

[23] For purposes of this essay, I will discuss the possibility of providing a cross-cultural digital approach of criticism which interests itself with many axes of analysis not just one. This approach will discuss the process of creativity as a whole, not to ignore some of its components to the favor of others. Reflecting on this idea, I will develop the static role played by the reader of traditional criticism to come up with his new dynamic digital role, the cultural differences and similarities of the two authors reflected in the two texts, the media used and its role in developing the main ideas of texts and, finally, the construction of the two texts. Also, for purposes of this essay, I will not focus as much on context-based criticism, but this approach is also productive and I will develop it at greater length elsewhere.

The Reader

[24] A well-equipped reader is needed to decipher the codes of the digital text. S/he shares writing the digital text with the author by filling the gaps, anticipating the possible intentions of the author when composing the text, and stirring new possibilities. The digital reader's response extends from interacting with the software to exploring new technical and abstract experiences. The process of reading will proceed depending on the reader's choices and interactions.

[25] Reading a creative text, whether traditional or digital, leaves its impact on the perception of the reader. S/he feels moved by the different lives and concepts experienced through the text, and different before and after reading. I believe that this transformation is cognitively more vigorous in the case of

digital text than the traditional one. Digital reading employs more senses and requires more mental processes than traditional reading as Hayles (2012: p.61) believes. Through the process of reading, readers develop their own conceptions about life in general. New insights replace old ones, and new attitudes are required (Iser 1972: p. 296).

The reader as the concern of modern literary theory

[26] As explained by Terry Eagleton (1996), the reader is the recent concern of modern literary theory through its history after its previous interest in the author and the text (p. 64). Figuring out a theory for evaluating e-lit should draw on the reader as one of its central axes.

Figure 1.

[27] In her text "Carving in Possibilities" figure 1, Larsen depends basically on the reader in producing a challenging electronic work. This "short flash piece" as the author describes it on the Electronic Literature Collection website, Volume 1, asks readers, when the text loads to create their own character and existence: "Mouse slowly to carve out your existence." It is a clear invitation to readers to be positive and to practice their destined role that they lost in traditional literary works. In the same interface, another instruction is directed to readers, "click here to start". At this point, readers begin the journey of restoring their missed role by carving the possibilities of their existence.

[28] The same invitation to the reader is directed by the Iraqi electronic poet Mushtaq Abbas Ma'an in his e-poem "Tabarih Raqamiyya Li-sira Ba'duha Azraq" ("Digital Agonies of a Biography Part of Which is Blue") figure 2.
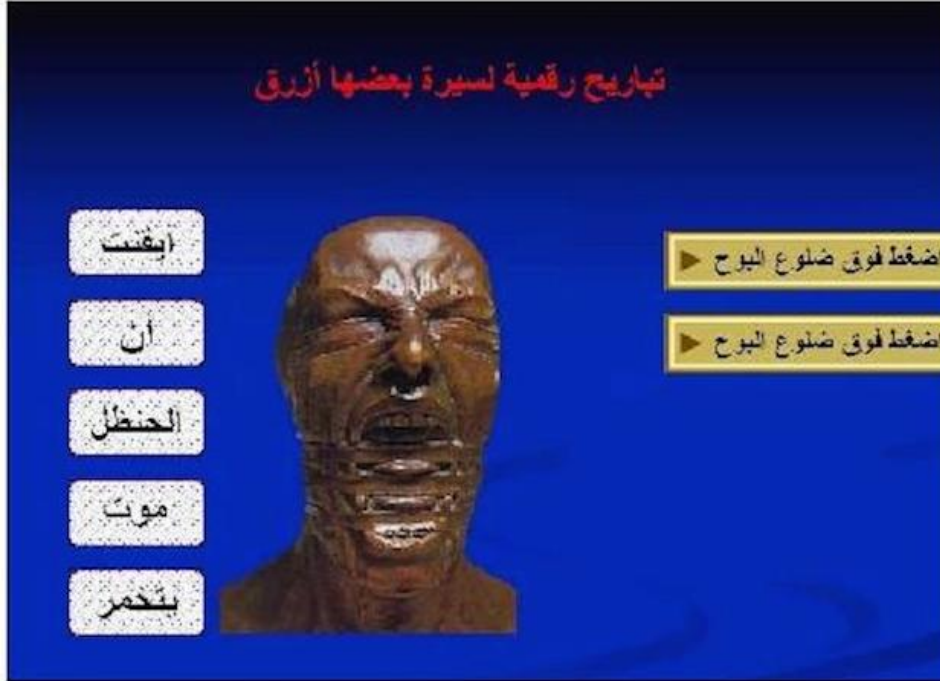
Figure 2.

[29] Not once but twice, the reader is asked to "click on the ribs of revelation." Every click leads to different hyperlinked texts. While Ma'an repeats the same request two times in the two yellow rectangles as shown in the previous interface, Larsen demands two different requests in two different places in the interface, firstly, "Mouse slowly to carve out your existence", and secondly, "click here to start." The two e-poets are aware of the role of readers in exploring the electronic text, so they ask them directly to start interacting with the electronic text. Both writers give the same order of "clicking" to the reader. This is one of the most peculiar characteristic of e-lit that the author is aware of the role played by the reader in completing the intended meaning. Interactivity is proven to be the main potential of hypermedia writings. It also speaks to the newness of the genre and the uniqueness of each interface.

[30] The two statues of the two texts in the first interface may be a reference to the status of the reader in the traditional literature, whether he is chained-mouth and disabled in Ma'an's text, or has no features as in Larsen's text.

The digital reader as a sculptor

[31] As soon as the reader puts the mouse on the instruction "click here to start," in Larsen's digital text, a new phrase appears, "And remember where you put your ghosts", as if the author will not remind readers with their ghosts unless they take the initiative, she stirs them to advance and take part. Every movement of the mouse launches a sound and a part of the face of Michelangelo's statue of David appears. Moreover, different "speculations" about David and his war with Goliath appear. Every different direction

of sculpture produces different speculations. Every new speculation builds a new part of the statue in the mind of the reader before its appearance on the screen. As the reader proceeds in clicking, new speculations appear and the features of the statue begin to be formulated. The curiosity of the reader accelerates and s/he goes quickly to discover the final shape while staccato sounds are heard. With the end of speculations, the statue of David becomes apparent. An icon appears inviting the reader to try another reality; "sculpt again for another reality," figure 3. If the reader clicks this icon, s/he will start again with different speculations on the same topic. When the mouse goes to the icon "exit here", the phrase "leaving all the other ghosts behind" appears.

[32] The convergences of the readers' expectations and the premises of the text don't achieve the required pleasure from the process of reading. Pleasure is really received from the paradox between the readers' preconceptions and the texts' significances (Iser 1972: p.286). Every reading of "Carving in Possibilities" results in different speculations and realities. The reader is required to keep an eye on the syntactic and the visual elements at the same time. Additionally, music keeps the reader going on reading with curiosity. The reading of this text will be interesting when the intended significance bursts into the mind of the reader at the moment that the statue appears with all its features.

Figure 3.

The Cultural Context

[33] The two digital texts of this study reflect the two cultures of the authors and require certain cultural interaction from the reader. The digital reader's response to any text draws greatly on his cultural

background. When a reader confronts the interface of Larsen's text for the first time, the picture of the head of Michelangelo's statue and the name of David in "How many Davids ran from you in terror" (figure 4) ring a bell.
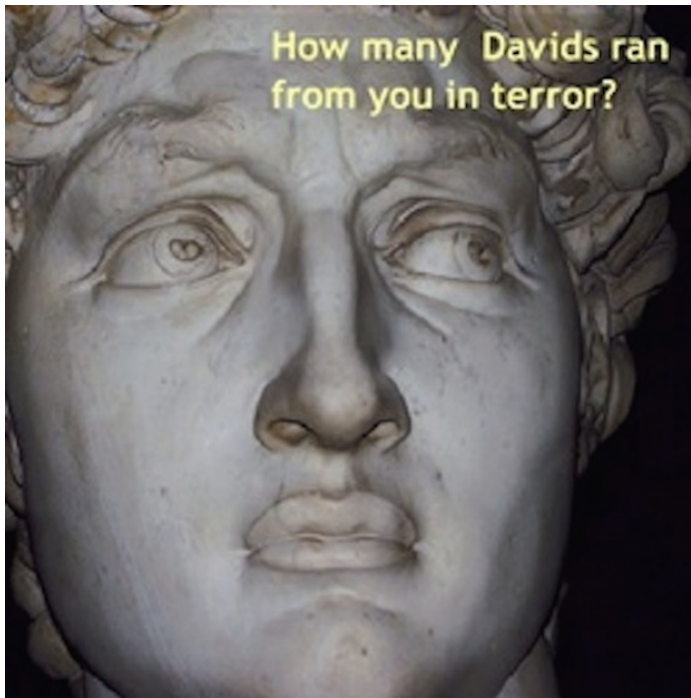

Figure 4.

[34] The knowledgeable reader will recall the account of the prophet David and how he defeated the giant Goliath. The effect that the reader will experience can be understood like the "stream of consciousness" as a "continuous flow of a character's mental process, in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts, memories, expectations, feelings, and random associations" (Abrams 2009: p.345).

[35] Different quick pictures will burst into the mind of the reader: such as Michelangelo, David's full statue, Goliath, Saul, Richard Geer, Florence, Renaissance and Israel depending on the different experience of every reader. The reader fills gaps or does what Aarseth (1997) calls aporia (91). As a reader, I recalled every account separately with every different speculation. "I saw precisely what the stone was meant to be"; this speculation draws a picture for the slingshots and stones of David, his weak weapons in defeating the fully-equipped Goliath. The rest scenes of the war between the Philistines and Israeli people show up in the mind of the knowledgeable reader. I imagine that the mind of the reader will visualize pictures from the American movie about the second king of Israel "king David" starred by Richard Geer, and directed by Bruce Beresford in 1985, figure 5. The movie was an adaptation of the story of David and the Goliath. "I wanted all of you to guard my Florence"; such a sentence will direct the stream of pictures to Italy and specifically Florence, where the statue of David is placed. Florence was

also the beloved city of Michelangelo who was the prominent Renaissance sculptor of the male nude statue of David. At this moment, the reader will ask: why did Larsen use just the face of the statue not all the male nude picture of it? The reader may find an answer, and may not.

Figure 5.

[36] In The Iraqi poet Mushtaq Abbas Ma'an's e-poem "Tabarih Raqamiyya Li-sira Ba'duha Azraq" ("Digital Agonies of a Biography Part of Which is Blue"), figure 6, the reader faces an interface that has many connotations that the reader should infer.
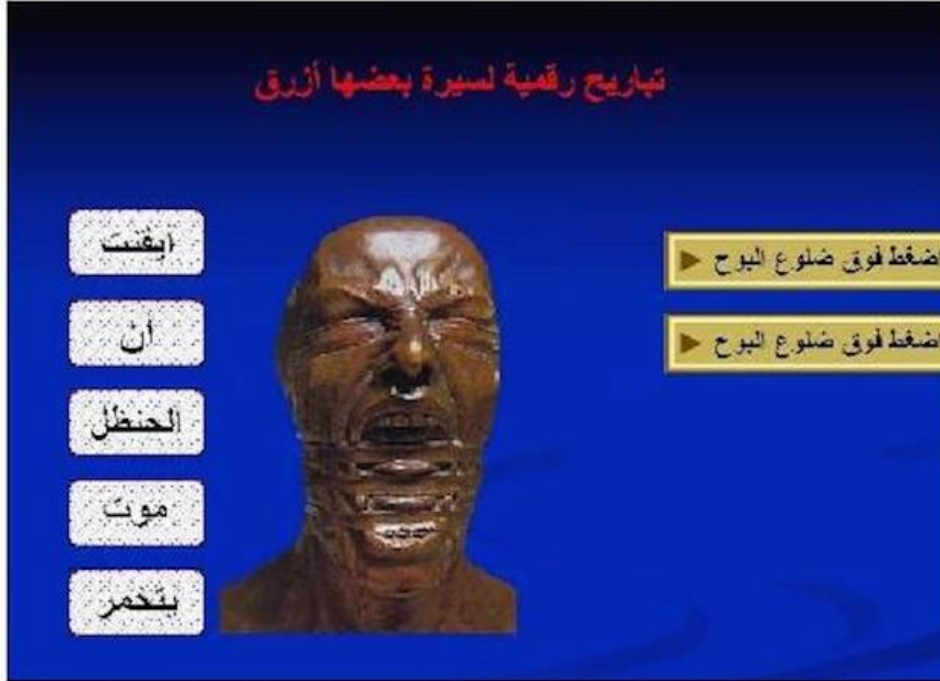
Figure 6).

[37] The most obvious component of the interface is a statue of a crying man. The statue is "Al-Shalal wa Al-Mukawama" ("The Disability and Resistance"), a bronze statue by the Kuwaiti sculptor Sami Mohamed. The statue is a chained-mouth man to represent, as I understand, the conflict of the disabled man with other stronger forces, at the same time, the attempts of man to free himself by crying and repelling. The reader who has an Arabic cultural background will make connections between the reference of the statue and the status of the Arabic man, especially the Iraqi one, in 1980, the year when this statue was sculpted. The year 1980 witnessed the Iraqi-Iranian war that lasted eight years and many people were killed. Other Arabic countries faced the same fatal fate, such as Lebanon and its civil war (Mongy 2010: p. 57). The two texts by Larsen and Ma'an address the same theme of the physically weak man who is obliged to confront a stronger power.

Figure 7.

[38] While Larsen draws on the Italian plastic arts through her use of Michelangelo's statue, Ma'an recalls different paintings from different cultures especially the Surrealistic spirit of Spanish plastic arts. The aftermath of war is represented by "The Persistence of Memory", the most celebrated painting by the famous Spanish surrealist painter, Salvador Dali, figure 8.

Figure 8.

[39] The poet employed the technique of montage on the original painting, figure 9, to focus the attention of the reader on the dry tree, the yellow color of sands and the melting clocks.

Figure 9.

[40] The intelligent reader will trace the references of every picture and color to imply the intended incidents and meanings. Thus, the two texts reflect two cultural contexts which meet in some points and differ in others.

The Text

[41] The digital text is an "unreadable" or "writerly" text if I use the Barthesian concept (1974). This text doesn't lend itself to the reader directly. Such a text enters in a long conversation with the reader about the possible significances and references. Usually, the digital text is a fragmented one, full of gaps to stir the reader to fill these gaps. Such a dialogue between the text and the reader is not an equivalent process. The text directs the reader to certain significances when it imposes certain premises before the reader to interact with. The text creates its own gaps and spaces whom the reader should interact with. This domination is directed by the reader as soon as s/he begins to interact and fill the gaps by presenting several possibilities.

[42] In Larsen's example, recalling the story of David and Goliath, making links between words and their references and visualizing the full male nude statue of Michelangelo in the mind of the reader, are examples of filling the gaps of the text. The reader plays a positive role in experiencing such an unusual text of Larsen. The text will not proceed and unveil itself, unless the reader proceeds and starts carving. The features of the statue will be hidden till the reader gives them a new life. Every speculation meets a new appearing feature of the statue in the mind of the reader. The reader holds the responsibility of linking between the premises of the text and other previous texts. The pleasure of the text (Iser 1972: p.280) is attained when the reader discovers finally that he was doing a marvelous job by carving a very important and famous statue.

[43] Reflecting on the Bakhtinian concept of "dialogism" (1929), the then-nascent concept of "intertextuality" by Kristeva (1986), Larsen's text develops two kinds of dialogues. The interior dialogue starts inside the reader about the relation between the signs of the text, such as the statue and other semantic signs such as David and Florence, and the significance intended by the author. "Carving in Possibilities" starts also a dialogue with previous different texts. The present text recalls the story of David and the Goliath in different holy books such as the Holy Qur'an, the Bible and the Hebrew Bible. Every reader will remember the texts of the holy books and the differences among them in narrating the incidents between David and Goliath according to her/his level of knowledge. The dialogue proceeds to be with plastic arts, and the competence of Michelangelo in carving such a marvelous nude statue. Larsen's text is "constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva, 1986: p. 37). "Carving in Possibilities" is a mosaic text by employing not just words, but also colors, different types of fonts, music and image.

[44] The dialogue in Mushtaq Abbas Ma'an's e-poem is with many different elements. Firstly, the reader is involved in a dialogue with the news ticker that appears at the top or at the bottom of the page. It is part of the poetic text, but it stirs inside the reader the feelings of tension and expectation that the real news ticker stirs inside all people. The poet uses many local and international paintings by famous and

anonymous persons and the reader is required to investigate the relationship between these paintings and the intended reference by the poet. As is the case with Larsen's text, "Tabarih Raqamiyya Li-sira Ba'duha Azraq" intertextuates with holy books. It recalls the story of Prophet Joseph and his blind father. The highly qualified reader will remember the attempt of Joseph's brothers to kill him. As is the case with Prophet David who fights Goliath in Larsen's text, Prophet Joseph fights his fears inside the well in Ma'an's text. Ma'an employs different styles of writing Arabic poetry like Al'moudi, free verse and prose poem.

[45] Apparently, Larsen's text celebrates fragmentation than Ma'an's; this can be attributed to the distracted colored sentences that appear with the movement of the cursor, in Larsen's text, to draw different images with every sentence using various points of views: "I wanted all of you to guard my Florence", "Echoes of waiting hordes", "Our fate was carved in the jagged shards of his stone". On the other hand, Ma'an uses many sentences in drawing one image as in figure (8).

The Digital Medium

[46] Larsen used the website as a type of digital publication for her piece which is available on Electronic Literature Collection website. This piece was designed using flash software. Picture, audio, color and language are the employed media in this piece. The digital reader hovers over the blurred image of David's statue by using the mouse. Every reading gives different speculations. The mouse is of a great importance for proceeding in reading this text.

[47] Ma'an published his piece on CD and it is not available on website at the time being. This can raise many questions about the preservation and archiving e-lit works in the Arab world. Like Larsen, Ma'an used picture, audio, color and language. The hypertext technique connects the parts of this piece. The reader goes back and forth through links in reading this text. By this meaning, there are several readings for the one text. The number of readings will differ according to the quality and quantity of readers. In other words, the different number of readers produce different number of readings. Additionally, the quality of reading will be determined by the knowledge of the reader by the digital software.

[48] Reading Ma'an's digital text starts from the interface that contains many hyperlinks to different linguistic and artistic pieces. Every poetic piece has a different international or local painting. The whole pieces are related by the theme of the weakness of man in the face of the deconstruction and oppression of the world.

[49] A number of significant points arise from considering the cross-cultural intersections of these two works in the digital medium.

[50] Before the digital medium, in print, these texts would not have intersected. It is the digital space that helped to circulate these texts internationally and put them together in one study such as the present one. The two texts of Larsen and Ma'an lose their digital aspects if received outside their digital context. Circulation of links and distribution of different digital media like picture and audio are lost in any print-based situation for the two texts.

[51] Now, with digital media, they exist in the same space. Although two different platforms are used, website and CD, both texts are (potentially) received within the same digital space.

[52] Furthermore, the digital medium leads to a common means of interaction and bodily engagement. The two texts are materially the same, requiring a common bodily way of engagement, whether hovering with the mouse or clicking on buttons. Putting this in mind, a universal digital language can be developed depending on materiality of digitization.

[53] On the other hand, the digital medium has its limits, one of them is to be outdated, e.g. the Ma'an's CD. Where are CD players today? Most recent computers have no CD players. Another limit is the need for a constant source of power, otherwise, the digital medium stops working.

[54] Discussing the materiality of these two texts can be compared to the assumptions used by Hayles in her discussion of media-specific analysis theory, "materiality should be understood as existing in complex dynamic interplay with content, coming into focus or fading into the background, depending on what performances the work enacts." (Hayles 2004: p. 71) At the same time, my approach places greater emphasis on a synthesis of print-based literary criticism and digital criticism.

[55] Finally, a pragmatic and holistic cross-cultural approach for digital poetics was developed by approaching two culturally-different digital texts. Instead of considering one element of the components of the creativity process, many axes were discussed such as reader, text, cultural context and medium. Certainly, challenges can be faced in the path of reading cross-cultural digital texts. Differences of language and culture are among the challenges that can be confronted in reading the American and Arabic digital texts as clarified in the two examples of Larsen and Ma'an. However, similarities can be detected such as using the same techniques and inspiring the same ideas.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. According to many Arab elit writers, the first Arabic conference for digital culture was held in Tunisia in 2005. As long as there are no resources to document that, I depended on Libya's conference in 2007 as the first Arabic conference for digital culture.
2. Since there are many existing bibliographies and anthologies of literary criticism, I will not list specific examples in the discussion that follows.

Cite this Article