

## **Power, Control, and Persuasion: A Discussion of *The Queue***

**Joanna Wickersham**

82-215 Arab Culture Through Film and Literature

*The Queue* by Egyptian novelist, Basma Abdel Aziz, is a beautiful and thought-provoking tale of the struggle to hold on to reality and personal truths under an autocratic regime, called “The Gate.” Yehya, the protagonist, is considered to have “an irrational belief that he can alter reality” (102), however the novel centers around a discussion of what reality actually is and who defines it. In this article, I will discuss various characters and their relative ability to dictate reality, the effects of the regime on personal development, and the ways religion is used as a tool for promoting ideas and furthering social pressure.

The Gate and his network are the most obvious examples of altering reality in the novel. An authoritarian government survives off of creating a sense of confusion, evading the truth, and convincing those who are weak and in need of answers of something invalid. The Gate protects itself in ways that are absurd to readers, such as by condemning those who “spread false allegations and therefore corruption” (133) via the High Sheik, despite doing this exact thing with the Disgraceful Events. By getting rid of all X-rays and torturing or arresting those who act against them, the Gate is able to maintain control. Many, including Amani, succumb to the message of the Gate because it removes a substantial pressure off of them. The methodologies of the Gate force everyone to “think the same way” and be “on equal ground” (90) in the queue. Simply by keeping people in the queue and therefore isolated from the rest of the world, the Gate is able to keep unrest contained. By controlling TV and news broadcasts, the only reality citizens are able to know is the one fed to them.

Yehya, more than any other character in the novel, is unable to alter reality. This is because the reality he is attempting to reveal, or at least protect, is the physical reality the bullet represents. “He was carrying a government bullet inside his body. He possessed tangible evidence of what had really happened during the Disgraceful Events and was perhaps the only person still alive who was willing to prove what the authorities had done” (116). Yehya cannot alter his reality because the bullet is literally inside of him, killing him a little bit every day with “no chance that his condition would stabilize” (198). He struggles with motivation to continue

with his goal and others around him succumb to the delusion the Gate is projecting. Giving in for Yehya would mean death. Holding on to his initial understanding of the Disgraceful Events is the only way for him to survive.

Shalaby attempts to alter his reality but has very limited resources with which to do so. Shalaby remains in the queue because he wishes to have his cousin's death warrant special recognition for his family. He wants to "put them on par with the landowner"(172) and therefore give his family some freedom and financial stability in their small town. In his many attempts to convince others of Mahfouz's honor, it becomes apparent through his desperation that Shalaby is trying to convince himself more than anyone else. He is dedicating so much time by waiting in the queue and all he has to hope for is that the Gate will listen. His family's future rests on his ability to alter the reality that his cousin murdered someone by confirming Mahfouz was a martyr and the victim a mere "troublemaker, a saboteur, out to frighten people and make their lives more difficult than they already were" (77).

The woman with the short hair has one apparent goal in the story: to expose reality. She is the only character to fully stick to an anti- Gate campaign without wavering. She uses Um Mabrouk's shop as a place to "recruit for the campaign"(168) she leads and collects, reads, and marks up news for other people to pay attention to. "Her presence among [the queue] irritated the man in the *galabeya*"(48), which in many ways was her exact goal: to refuse the Gate and its network from having the only voice.

Um Mabrouk is special in how she alters reality for a good cause. Um Mabrouk is in the queue to try and get her dying child the help she needs. She doesn't have the money on her own but is able to make a somewhat steady income by running her shop to serve other members in the queue. Beyond this, her spot becomes a gathering place and a source of comfort for others. People are able to have some stability and sense of community as they drink tea and listen to the radio, despite the hardships and absurdity of the queue. She had a "constant flow of customers" (168) and her "gathering place became the mouth of the river that filled the queue with news and rumors" (169). Simultaneously, Um Mabrouk alters the reality of her poverty by starting a business and the reality of others by creating a sense of normalcy.

Aziz utilizes the transformation of various characters throughout the novel to represent the effects a hierarchical power can have on behavior under regimes like the Gate. By tracing

different reactions, Aziz is able to discuss the relative chaos that societal standards and pressures can create not only among groups of people, but also within one's self.

Ines represents the Gate's ideal transformation of a person. She represents a point of strength in the beginning, speaking out in favor of morality and against pure obedience to the Gate. When Ines feels watched, however, as suggested by the recording of her speech, she grows paranoid of being victim to the Gate's wrath, which would not only endanger her but the future of her entire family. She would be blamed "for everything she'd done, even though it hadn't been intentional" (131). Ines succumbs to the ideals the Gate and is suppressed, quiet, and obedient due to her fears. By attending the man in the *galabeya*'s meetings and dressing more conservatively, she feels that "her fear begins to fade" (187). The Gate offers a sense of protection for those are weak and fearful.

Amani represents what Ines fears and avoids. Amani does speak out by trying to find Yehya's X-ray and is caught. She is subjected to torture, the form of which is not fully revealed but extremely impactful. Amani loses her drive to prove the Gate wrong and slides into a sedentary lifestyle. She distances herself from her friends and eventually loses her job. Her life and personality are in many ways irreversibly damaged. "As life in the queue went on, Amani's life gradually broke down" (189). Her character represents what a lack of obedience can entail and sends a message to others who are witness to her a change (such as Ines) what their fate could be.

Tarek's character is very interesting. He suggests through his narrative that he is not necessarily in agreeance with the Gate and has been flagged as someone who isn't the most agreeable with the Gate's terms, but he is most focused on not getting too involved, presenting too strong an opinion, or "question[ing] the Gate's definitive and crushing triumph" (8). We see with his development what happens when personal morals begin to put stress on this choice of non-action. Tarek weighs the consequences of saving Yehya with the fear of being victim to the Gate. His position is one of relative power in society, being a doctor, yet his power is extremely limited, and this suppresses his ability to help while also makes him seem to Yehya like someone who can. Eventually, "the constant turmoil, and his own helplessness in controlling his thoughts and feelings" (201) encourage him to seek Yehya out and perform the surgery.

Aziz goes further with the novel to specifically outline the various ways religion can be used as a tool for fear, control and persuasion through multiple outlets: most notably within the self, among citizens, and across divisions of power.

Within the self, religion is used to allow and justify certain behaviors and actions. There are many different examples of this used throughout the book. Smaller examples include the man who takes Yehya's spot and claims he is able to because he must have been "fated for that spot (62). In a similar vein, Shalaby stands by his belief that his cousin is a martyr and not a murderer because "insubordination [is] a sin greater than any moral could bear" (78). Such personal religious beliefs can often become excuses for otherwise questionable behavior. The man in the *galabeya* also uses his dedication to scripture to assert himself as a moral role model for those in the queue. He judges and disgraces others for not following his exact beliefs, which eventually has a direct effect on characters such as Ines, who begins to dress more conservatively and attend his meetings.

Citizens who are a part of the Gate's network or are strong believers, such as the man in the *galabeya*, represent how someone with no realistic qualifications can become significant community members because of their obedience. Simply because the rhetoric he uses produces fear of being outcasted in the eyes of the Gate, the man in the *galabeya* attracts a following and is able to influence those around him. When his following becomes established, he is able to spread ideas under the premise of religion regarding how women should act by "praising... modestly dressed believers" (185). Other community members, like the Booth worker, use religion to pressure Um Mabrouk to give up with her attempt to help her family by "telling her there was no need to go around blaming other people for her own woes" (67) if she believes in God and his plan.

The Gate uses subtle but direct narrative to influence people via those in positions of power. Its messages often come from those of religious prowess that don't directly demand action of anyone but use language that suggests if a person chooses not to obey, they are evil. This causes the individual to be responsible for their own choices and weigh the apparent consequences themselves. For those who rely on religion, voluntarily choosing to act against the Gate might be extremely challenging. The main goal of the Gate is to project blame onto others and appear innocent and moral in what they do. Utilizing those in religious power to support their control is an extremely useful tactic for impressing their views upon others without having

to have their own overbearing voice. The author derides religion by expressing the absurdity of it being intertwined with politics when the High Sheikh suggests spreading false allegations is a sin and can be absolved “by making seven consecutive phone calls” (133). The absurdity of this statement lies in how the Gate’s exact tactics are to spread rumors and in how making phone calls is a ridiculous form of absolving sin.

This novel stands out because of its ability to pack so many important messages about the reality that many face under their government while still telling a literarily profound tale that is near impossible to put down. Its discussion of control via religion and delusion is far from fiction.

#### Works Cited

Aziz, Basma Abdel., and Elisabeth Jaquette. *The Queue*. Melville House, 2016.