

Eroticism in the Works of Contemporary Egyptian and Levantine Female Novelists

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Abstract

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Literary and narrative discourses hold an inherent correspondence between themselves and the social, economic, national, and political issues that govern the atmosphere in which they emerge, including those concerning the war of the classes and of the sexes. Using the erotic as a parameter, this paper analyzes three novels by three contemporary women novelists from Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria: Nawāl el-Sa'dāwī, Ḥanān al-Shaykh, and Samar Yazbek, respectively. An analysis of the combination of language, culture, and space can lend itself to an examination of the relationships of power and social hierarchies that govern societies, in a fashion that follows the Foucauldian power/knowledge social theory. Adopting the Lacanian perspective of language as an inherently sexist utility, this paper examines the approaches found in these three novels to the objectification of the female body; the yearning to reclaim agency; and the success – and failure – in regaining and retaining autonomy.

Contents

Chapter One Introduction	4
Chapter Two Desire, Abjection, and Social Hierarchy Nawāl el-Sa'dāwī – Egypt.....	20
Chapter Three Autonomy, Intimacy, and the Chaos of War Ḥanān al-Shaykh – Lebanon.....	29
Chapter Four Death and Intimacy Samar Yazbek – Syria.....	38
Conclusion	45
Bibliography	49

Chapter One

Introduction

“[T]he search for love is intimately connected with the individual’s desire for freedom and fulfilment, while the frank affirmation of sexuality, of whatever kind, represents a challenge to a rigid and hypocritical social order. In both cases the act itself cannot be separated from its expression, and innovative attitudes to love and sexuality are bound up with literary renewal. Above all, the writer who takes up these issues knows that his or her handling of them is a social act, implicating the whole community. Much more than in most Western European literatures, discussions of love and sexuality in modern Arabic literature are intricately connected with ideas about society and the individual’s place in it. They are central to contemporary Arabic culture.”

~ Hilary Kilpatrick, *Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature*

Let me begin with a few remarks about the terms I included in the title of this thesis:

“eroticism” and “female novelists.” It is also worth saying something about the word “contemporary.”

What is “eroticism”? In a tautological definition, the Oxford English dictionary defines “eroticism” as “The quality or character of being erotic.” In the same vein, the Cambridge dictionary defines “eroticism” as “the quality of a picture, book, film, etc. being erotic.” Moving

a bit from lexical definitions, Georges Bataille¹, the French intellectual and philosopher, wrote in his introduction to *Eroticism* that it is “assenting life up to the point of death”². The maintenance and survival of eroticism throughout the history of humanity, according to Bataille, has depended on an essential idea, that is humans’ yearning for a sense of continuity and involvement with others – a primal yearning that, one may argue, is shared by the drive behind humans’ production of works of art, including literature – which, by definition, is a form of art that uses language as its medium.

Studying eroticism as it appears in literary works is enmeshed with multiple challenges. At the start, one faces the challenge of dismantling sexuality as a literary aspect, and distinguishing it from the biological, cultural, and personal literary manifestations. The challenge is amplified when attempting to decode the symbolic expressions of sexuality in a given text, taking into consideration that they could mirror the intense nature of the text, the author, or the persona (speaker) behind which the author may or may not be hiding.

In order to conceptualize the rise and development of erotic expression in the works of contemporary female Egyptian and Levantine novelists, I will begin by stating that much of my discussion follows the theoretical perspective of Michel Foucault, who, in *The History of*

¹ Georges Bataille (1897-1962) was a French essayist and novelist who wrote on an array of topics, with a special emphasis on eroticism, mysticism, and surrealism. Bataille’s book, *Eroticism*, is an influential study on the topic despite it being marginalized during his lifetime (he was overshadowed by other dominant figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre). Bataille’s work reflects the changes surrounding the perception of the erotic in modern French philosophy since the eighteenth century.

² Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (New York: Walker and Company, 1962), 11.

*Sexuality*³, essentialized a discourse linking sex, knowledge, enlightenment, revolution, and pleasure. He viewed the available room for sexual discussion in a given society as a net force of the social, economic, and cultural settings in which it is embedded. Power, above all, determines scientific theories regarding sexuality and knowledge production/acquisition/circulation in a given society. Sexual repression, therefore, is manifest in the silencing of the discussions and expressions of sexuality and eroticism. The erasure of discourse, in other words, is the erasure of identity, be it sexual or otherwise. By the same dynamics, attempts to voice an unconventional public opinion on such matters become a form of revolt.

Literary and narrative discourses hold an inherent correspondence between themselves and the social, economic, national, and political issues that govern the atmosphere in which they emerge, including those concerning the war of the classes and of the sexes. In this sense, literary texts can supplement to a great deal our understanding of sexual repression and women's status in the society portrayed in the text. Furthermore, the language of a literary text is often expressed as a question of perspective: a question of identity. As we read a work of literature, we ask ourselves: Who's the speaker/narrator? When/where did they live? What is their predicament, their struggle, the story behind their story?

Reading Arabic literature, pre-Islamic and modern, one can gain access to the authors' reflections on many social and political issues in the Arab world, including thorny issues of national and sexual identity, and questions regarding socially-acceptable versus deviant

³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 6-13.

intimacies. As I am limiting my focus to the domain of women's modern literary expression in Egypt and the Levant, I will examine the ways in which contemporary female novelists give sexuality a language to articulate and express their social construct. This begs the question: What does it mean to be a "female" novelist? Why is it necessary to take gender into account when studying literary works of men and women, since they are most of the time oppressed by the same powers ruling their society?

Why, in other words, should we, while thinking about a literary text, turn to a particular identity – the identity of "woman" in this case – and use it as perspective?

As my research falls under what Elaine Showalter calls gynocriticism⁴, i.e., writing women into the literary canon, it takes it for granted that we do understand and differentiate between two different concepts: the concept of "man" – and all the connotations that come with it – as opposed to the idea of "woman." In the tradition of Judith Butler, as illustrated in her book *Gender Trouble*⁵, there is a suggestion that the best thing a feminist can do is to deny the very existence of such a thing as a woman, for it is merely the result of a play on culture and language – a play in the Derridean sense, one that he discusses at length in his essay "Structure, Sign, and Play."⁶ The man/woman binary opposition and the notion of a woman is a linguistic necessity by which the concept of a "man" can be clearly – and often with an air of superiority –

⁴ Elaine Showalter, "Towards a Feminist Poetics" in *Women Writing and Writing About Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (USA: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1979), 24.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278.

understood in fewer words. “In the beginning was the word. And the word created the divide between the sexes,” write Melanie Hackney and Aaron Emmitte in the introduction to *Sexuality, Eroticism, and Gender in French and Francophone Literature*⁷, summing up the Lacanian⁸ view on gender, “a view that posits the reason for which issues of gender and sexuality exist is because we speak.”⁹ There are many occasions in modern Arabic literature that point to the idea that a woman, the idea of a woman, began in the mind of a man. Consider these lines from a poem titled *Kalimāt* (Words) by Nizār Qabbānī (1923-1998), a renowned Syrian poet whose work was chiefly preoccupied with the affairs between men and women:

He tells me things that make me dizzy
 make me forget the dance and the steps
 words that overturn my history,
 make me a woman, within seconds.

The poem became popular across the Levant after being made into a song in 1991 by Lebanese soprano Mājīdah El Rūmī (b. 1956). The speaker in this poem is a frustrated woman – given a voice by a male poet – complaining about her lover’s inertia. After going through a list

⁷ Melanie Hackney and Aaron Emmitte, *Sexuality, Eroticism, and Gender in French and Francophone Literature*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), xiii.

⁸ Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) remains to be one of the most controversial psychoanalysts of the 20th century. By introducing the concept of a “structure”, i.e., that which functions like a language, he sees sexual identity as a concept learned through language and not based on biological gender. See: Jacques Lacan, “Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to any Subject Whatever,” in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1975), 187-188.

⁹ Hackney and Emmittee, (see footnote 7).

of great promises made to the female speaker, we learn about this all-bark-and-no-bite situation of a lover as we continue reading the poem to the end:

then I return to my table

carrying nothing, only words.

He makes her “dizzy,” makes her “forget the dance,” and finally makes her a “woman” before she returns to her table. The text leaves one wondering about the speaker’s identity before that encounter. Clearly, her existence as a woman depended on his existence, in a fashion reminiscent of Levi Strauss’ *The Raw and the Cooked*:¹⁰ there would be no such a thing as “raw” if man did not invent cooking; there would be no woman if man did not precede her existence.

Consider also the following lines from a poem titled *Lā Takdhibī* (Don’t Lie) by Kāmil al-Shinnāwī (1908-1965), an Egyptian poet who should not be confused with the late Egyptian movie star Kamāl al-Shinnāwī:

Be as you wish

but you will never be

for I made you of my love

¹⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

and my insanity

and I have been cured

from love

and from insanity

The speaker, also given a voice here by a male poet, is a heartbroken man addressing his (female) beloved after he caught her in the act of cheating on him with another man. He consoles himself by reminding her that she “will never be,” she will never exist without the power of his imagination and/or maladies (love and insanity). In other words, he made her who she is. This poem, which was in fact made into a song combining a musical score by Muḥammad Abdul Wahhāb and the voice of Najāt al-Saghīrah, not only allows us to see the concept of woman as a man’s idea in practice, but also invites us to stop and contemplate the qualities he chose for her creation: the maladies of man, love and insanity – the very qualities mostly attributed to the nature of women and their behavior, making them inferior to men, the guardians of reason. The heart, after all, is lower than the head.

It is perilous, however, to suggest an omission altogether of the “woman” category since, in the real world, there does exist what one calls a woman. In one of his Yale lectures on the theory of literature in 2004, Professor Paul Fry pointed out the following:

In real life, in real material existence, there certainly are women. They are oppressed by laws, they are oppressed by men, and their rights and their very lives need to be protected with perpetual vigilance. The theoretical idea, in other words, that there's no such thing as a woman is not an idea that can be sustained in life. Yet at the same time, the implications of what the language of identity politics is always calling "essentialism," the implications of saying "woman" is one particular thing--and it might be better if we said "woman" was one particular thing, but something other than what men have been saying she was all along--but making the problem worse, saying that "woman" is one particular thing, which is just what men have always said she was--only it's a good thing, right, that positions of this kind are taken up in this way, despite the fact that they're absolutely necessary for practical feminism and for real-world feminism--is nevertheless detrimental to a more sensitive theoretical understanding of gender and of the possibilities of gender.¹¹

This, I believe, is the point where traditional feminism and gender theory have not yet reconciled. We cannot possibly do away with the notion of a woman altogether without risking the erasure of an identity so deeply entrenched in different cultures around the world, an identity with which many individuals still choose to identify themselves. Yet feminism receives a great supplement from gender theory in the way in which the latter challenges the man-picked, predefined qualities and attributes that must exist exclusively in a woman if we are to call her one. Again, the tradition of Judith Butler places culture vis-à-vis to biology, highlighting and

¹¹ A video of the lecture, The Classical Feminist Tradition, is available to watch at: <https://oyc.yale.edu/english/engl-300/lecture-20>

crediting human agency as a deterrent in the way in which one “performs” the gender with which they identify.

Is it plausible, then, to differentiate men’s writing from women’s writing? More importantly, how is one to do that without reproducing the negative, patriarchal attributes that have notoriously accompanied women’s status throughout history?

In her seminal work *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf embarks on the idea of writing with a mind that is both male and female, i.e., the idea of androgyny, which later became central in the works of what became known as French feminism:

If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought. But it would be well to test what one meant by man-womanly, and conversely by woman manly, by pausing and looking at a book or two.¹²

¹² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 82.

It is interesting how Woolf uses the processes of fertilization and creation both figuratively and androgynously. Fertilization is a male prerogative, and so is creation: The Creator in the Scriptures is referred to as a male. Adam, whose body was the base for the creation of Eve, was also male.¹³ Woolf's point is still valid when discussing gendered prerogatives and questioning the essentiality of defining women's writing as opposed to men's writing; the ideal situation, it would seem, is to read a text without considering its gendered aspects, and texts must aspire to that degree of emancipation from the confinements of gender. Yet it is necessary to remember that just as we risk the erasure of women's identity by doing away with the idea of woman, we also face the risk of carrying out the historical tradition of marginalizing literature written by women; the tradition of gynocriticism must be expanded upon, if anything, and not discredited and tossed away, if we are still looking for literary texts that could enhance our understanding of the different experiences of women.

Where are the women in Arabic literature? In classical Arabic literature, there are a few greats, the same ones we keep reading about: al-Khansā', Wallādah bint al-Mustakfī, and Rābi'ah al-'Adawīyah, but there is not "a sense of an ongoing tradition, of a developing tradition within which one could write" (Fry:2004)¹⁴. Having read her pre-Islamic works, al-Khansā'¹⁵,

¹³ While the Qur'an does not describe the creation of Eve in detail, it mentions on different accounts that humanity started from the creation of one soul, i.e., Adam: "It is He Who created you from one soul and created from it its mate that he might dwell with her in security." (Qur'an 7:189). See also the Hadith: Allah's Messenger said, "And I command you to take care of the women in a good manner for they are created from a rib and the most crooked portion of the rib is its upper part; if you try to straighten it, you will break it, and if you leave it, it will remain crooked, so I command you to take care of the women in a good manner." (al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl, as-Sahīh, Ḥadīth 5186).

¹⁴ I am borrowing this phrase, as I believe it is appropriate in this context, from Professor Fry's lecture on The Classical Feminist Tradition (see footnote 11), where he discusses women as authors in the Western world.

¹⁵ Al-Khansā' is one of the *mukhaḍramūn* poets, i.e., her life spanned both the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras.

the best-known poetess in the tradition of classical Arabic literature, devoted most of her elegiac poetry to her two brothers, trying to entice her tribe to revenge them in a way that relied heavily on notions of hyper masculinity and shamed those who failed to meet its high standards of valor and chivalry. While her poetry adhered beautifully and masterfully to the aesthetics of pre-Islamic poetry in the Arabian Peninsula, it was not included in the collection of the seven *qaṣīdahs* (odes) best known as the *mu'allaqāt*. When speaking of the latter, or even of pre-Islamic poetry in general, the first names to be mentioned are Imru'u l-Qays, Ṭarafah ibn al-'Abd, Zuhayr bin Abī Sulmā – all male poets whose works are nothing short of genius. The poetry of al-Khansā', on the other hand, seems to be mentioned only when narrowing down the focus to the pre-Islamic tradition of female poetesses in particular. In the first chapter of *Arab Women Novelists*¹⁶, Joseph T. Zeidan wrote that an anthology collected during the eighth century by al-Marzubānī titled *Ash'ār al-Nisā'* (Women's Poems) included biographies of thirty-nine women poets, but their works did not become canonical because “the first collectors of pre-Islamic poetry were looking for certain qualities, which they found only in men's poetry.” According to Zeidan, those collectors of poetry were also too influenced by “the inferior status of women in their own era and were thus reluctant to record women's poetry from the pre-Islamic period.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Joseph T. Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 41-44.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 42.

In the case of the Andalusian poetess Wallādah bint al-Mustakfī, many a scholar has argued that she is indeed an imaginative figure invented by the male imagination, due to the explicitly sexual nature of her poetry which is considered an oddity among her contemporaries.¹⁸

In more recent times, early in the twentieth century, many women authors were among the founders of the modern Arabic literature, including 'Ā'ishah al-Taymūriyyah (1840-1902), Zaynab Fawwāz (1860-1914), Farīdah 'Atiyyah (1867-1918), Labībah Hāshim (1880-1947), and Malāk Ḥifnī Nasīf (1886-1918). This era marks the beginning of the timeframe with which my analysis of women's novels is concerned. Like the poetesses of the pre-Islamic and early Islamic eras, the names of these women novelists appear in anthologies and scholarly works whose focus is intentionally limited to female writers.

The literary works of women during this stage onward has sought to break the alliance of patriarchy and logocentrism – an alliance emphasized in the work of French feminists, including Helene Cixous, an alliance also reminiscent of Michel Foucault's "Alliance of Power" and "Alliance of Sexuality." Since then, women authors have successfully proved their ability to create a new mode of literary expression which exploited the rising secularist and liberal tendencies of their time.

¹⁸ See, for example, Hazza' bin Eid al-Shammari, *Wallādah bint al-Mustakfī Bayn al- Ḥakīkah wal Ostūrah* (Al-Riyadh: Dar Aja, 1997).

Yet women's writing has not found its way into the mainstream literary canon, with a few exceptions including Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī and Ghādah al-Sammān. A prevalent notion among scholars working with modern Arabic literature is that the first Arabic novel was Muḥammad Ḥassan Haykal's *Zeinab* (1914).¹⁹ However, collectors of earlier works of Arabic literature have gathered that a novel titled *Ḥusnu l-'Awāqib* (Best Results) by a Lebanese female author whose name ironically happens to be Zaynab Fawwāz and who passed away in 1914, is in fact the first literary work in Arabic that takes the form of the modern Arabic novel.²⁰

In order to conceptualize the marginalization of modern female novelists, I went to the online archives of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF)²¹, which has become the most prestigious literary award in the Arab world since its launch in 2008. The award has successfully stirred public interest in reading Arabic novels, and attracted the attention of Western media outlets and publishers who translate and publish the winning novel every year, making it accessible to foreign audiences.²² The data I collected can be used as a parameter to reflect on the status of contemporary female novelists, with regards to their presence and the acknowledgement they receive for their literary achievements in comparison to their male counterparts.

¹⁹ Elliott Colla, "How Zaynab Became the First Arabic Novel", *History Compass* 6 (2008), 10.1111/j.1478-0542.2008.00573.x

²⁰ Joseph T. Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, 66.

²¹ The official website of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF): <http://www.arabicfiction.org/>

²² For more information about the literary prize, see: Anne-Marie E. McManus, "SCALE IN THE BALANCE: READING WITH THE INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR ARABIC FICTION ('THE ARABIC BOOKER')." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48, no. 2 (2016): 217–41. doi:10.1017/S0020743816000039.

Throughout the past nine years, 1189 novels were nominated for the award, representing 18 Arab countries. Of these novels, 140 appeared on the longlist (16 novels each year, except in 2012 when only 13 novels were selected, and in 2015 one novel was removed from the longlist for violating the rules). Among the 140 long-listed novels, which represented 15 Arab countries, only 28 works were by female novelists. The award is given to one novelist every year, except for 2011 when two novelists were announced as the winners, one of whom was Rajā' Ālem, a female novelist from Saudi Arabia. The cycle of 2011 was the only time when a female novelist made it to the finish line, accompanied by a male novelist to share her glory.

The full data can be seen in the list below:

- **Since 2008, 1189 novels representing 18 Arab countries received nominations for the IPAF**
- **140 novels were long-listed, representing 15 Arab countries**

Egypt:	30 novels
Lebanon:	25 novels
Palestine:	15 novels
Iraq, Syria:	13 novels
Morocco:	11 novels
Saudi Arabia:	7 novels
Algeria:	6 novels
Yemen, Tunisia, Sudan:	4 novels
Libya, Kuwait:	3 novels
Jordan, Oman:	1 novel

- **54 novels were short-listed, representing 12 Arab countries**

Egypt:	13 novels
Lebanon:	8 novels
Morocco, Palestine:	6 novels
Syria:	5 novels
Iraq, Tunisia:	4 novels
Saudi Arabia:	3 novels
Sudan:	2 novels
Jordan; Algeria; Kuwait:	1 novel

- **Winners**

Egypt:	2 novels
Saudi Arabia:	2 novels
Morocco; Lebanon; Kuwait;	
Iraq; Tunisia; Palestine:	1 novel

- **Representation of women**

20%	of the 140 long-listed novels
22.2%	of the 54 short-listed novels
10%	of the winning novels

The information listed above shows clearly that despite the abundance in women's production of novels, which witnessed a spur starting in the 1950s, accolades and acknowledgement for literary achievement remain chiefly given to men working in this domain. In the next chapter, I will survey, analyze, and discuss the erotic aspects in selected works of

female Arab novelists, some well-known and others lesser known, starting with Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī's *Zeina*.

Chapter Two
 Desire, Abjection, and Social Hierarchy
 Nawāl el-Sa'dāwī – Egypt

Since the publication of *Woman at Point Zero* in 1975, Nawal el-Saadawi has established herself as one of the leading women novelists in the Arab world. Her works of fiction and nonfiction continue to reinforce her position as one of the most outspoken women writers who have, fiercely and fearlessly, discussed all things considered taboo when it comes to drawing the ambit within which the two sexes relate to one another in Egypt. A former political prisoner and an award-winning author, her works have always been received with accolades paralleled with an equal amount of controversy, making her one of the most radical feminists in the contemporary Arab world.

It is quite plausible to claim that Nawal el-Saadawi's work has contributed immensely to the budding feminist tradition in modern Arabic literature. In her capacity as a physician and a psychiatrist, el-Saadawi has dealt with countless accounts of physical and mental abuse against women, which she employed in her works of fiction, the latest of which is *Zeina*²³, a novel published in Arabic by Saqi Books in 2009 and followed by an English translation two years later. Being the latest of her works, my selection of *Zeina* was guided by a desire to follow the development of el-Saadawi's voice as a novelist, to supplement her usual stance as a relentless advocate for women's rights. Indeed, *Zeina* declares el-Saadawi's fully-mature ability to employ poetic language, and to use a non-linear, dream-like narrative style to tell a story, in contrast with

²³ Nawāl el-Sa'dāwī, *Zeina*, trans. Amira Nowaira (London: Saqi Books, 2011).

her earlier works which depended heavily on a journalistic – and sometimes memoiristic – style of narration.

The novel, which prophesies the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution in 2011, tells the stories and probes the sexual lives of multiple women from different backgrounds and social classes: Budour al-Damhiri²⁴, a professor of literary criticism and a wannabe novelist married to the wheedling columnist Zakariah al-Khartiti; Mageeda, the daughter of Bodour and Zakariah; and Zeina bin Zeinat, an illegitimate child whose social misery is amplified by the fact that she carries her mother's name and not her father's. Whether Zeina is the abandoned illegitimate child of Bodour and Nessim is a possibility at which the novel hints in different places, but never clearly confirms or negates. Suffice it to say that el-Saadawi uses the same descriptions to picture the mannerisms and appearances of both Nessim and Zeina: they both had tall, spear-like figures that “cut the air”²⁵ as they walked; they both had fresh and luminous eyes that “radiated a blue light bordering on blackness.”²⁶

El-Saadawi has always been a harsh critic of the marriage institution and has chosen to voice her views once again in *Zeina*. The premarital affair between Bodour and Nessim – her tall, blue-eyed, confident revolutionary college sweetheart who died under torture in a police station – is the only representation of a sexual relationship between two adults sharing a sound emotional connection, yet it had a tragic ending. All the married couples in the novel, on the

²⁴ Throughout this chapter, I am using the spelling of the characters' names as they appear in the English translation of the novel.

²⁵ Nawāl el-Sa'dāwī, *Zeina*, 19.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 23.

other hand, including Bodour and her husband Zakariah, are depicted as cold, uninterested, even hypocritical; their union is only based on maintaining shared material interests and an obsession with reflecting a false image of stability in the public eye.

Throughout the conversations among men in the novel, there is an unnerving sense of a radical Otherness ascribed to women: “Cleanliness is godly and dirtiness is womanly” is a common phrase that repeatedly appears in the thoughts and dialogues among many of the male characters, particularly those obsessed with displaying a public image of piety – the emir/Islamist prince Ahmed al-Damhiri, for example. Women are made abject, cast off, because they blur the space separating the manly self from the outside. The Story of Creation, which Bodour reads in the Old Testament, New Testament, and the Quran, as advised by her late lover Nessim, highlights the space woman occupies in relation to man: woman is a product of his own body – his rib – yet it attempts to lead a life of its own. Therefore, it is hard for man, who was raised and taught these stories from infancy, to consider woman as his fellow human and not see her as a mere object of desire. “The abject,” writes Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*²⁷ “has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, [...] what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place_ where meaning collapses. [...] It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the

²⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. L. S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

ambiguous, the composite.”²⁸. Such Otherness, such a radical form of abjection, blocks any chance for building a relationship of empathy with “the Devil’s allies” – a description given to women by Mahmoud the chauffeur as he thought of Zeina and the emir’s scandalous desire for her.²⁹

Woman gains the status of the Freudian *das Ding* (the thing)³⁰ with her presumed uncanny, monstrous character. Zakariah al-Khartiti, who writes in his column about purity and religious virtues but does not identify with an Islamic group – goes even further and hands his wife a leather belt, requesting that she whip him:

He wanted to wake up his wife so that she might take the belt and beat him. He screamed aloud as she lay next to him, “Please beat me up, Bodour, beat me up so that I may desire you! [...] He handed her the leather belt one night and asked her

²⁸ Ibid, 2-4

²⁹ Nawal el-Saadawi makes it clear to the reader that her attack is not solely aimed at the highly-patriarchal order present in religion alone. Rather, she proves her disillusionment with ideology in general, her awareness of the way in which ideology can be manipulated to serve as a basis for sexist practices. For that purpose, she presents the character of Safi, Bodour’s best friend, who was married multiple times to men from different ideological affiliation: her Marxist university colleague, then an Islamist. Both men ended up having affairs, and both found excuses within their ideologies to justify their infidelity. The Marxist claimed that men were polygamous by nature. “Infidelity for him was the residue of feudalism and private property. A wife didn’t own her husband because human beings were free, and freedom was the highest ethical value, only paralleled by love.” It is highly questionable whether he would allow her the same privileges, and whether he thought of her as a human being as free as himself. Her Islamist second husband’s excuse, when she also caught him in the act, was that “God’s law gives me the right to marry another woman. The law of the land gives me the same right. Go to court if you wish!” And so she did, got a divorce, and ended up living alone in a small apartment on al-‘Agūza Street.

³⁰ In an article in *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Canadian psychoanalyst and linguist François Peraldi states that Freud used the term *das Ding* for the first time in 1895 in *The Project for a Scientific Psychology*. See: Peraldi, F. *Am J Psychoanal* (1987) 47: 309. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01255223>

to beat him. Bodour was speechless, unable to lift her hand with the belt to beat him. Something held her back, something deeply ingrained in her soul that was akin to fear, shame, or the sense of what was proper for a woman to do.³¹

Zakariah is not submitting himself to his wife but is rather staging his own servitude, suspending social reality in a theatrical performance where he maintains his own position as the one who dictates the activities of his woman. In other words, as Slavoj Žižek explains in his article “Courtly Love, Or, Woman as Thing”³², he writes a contract, a screenplay, in which woman stands for his narcissistic projection, still following his directions, and appearing not as she is, but as she appears in his dreams.

Yet Zakariah does not always come across as a masochist. On different occasions, he approaches his wife Bodour with a leather belt and whips her, hoping for a sign of resistance, hoping she would fight back, but he was often disappointed and quite disgusted by her submissiveness. “If her coldness upset him, he’d slap her on the face or whip her with his belt on her belly and thighs. She never hit him back. [...] He didn’t have the courage to tell her, ‘hit me sweetheart, hit me. Graze my skin and take me...’ What would she think of him then?”³³ A woman’s refusal to fight back turns a sadist from a subject into an object, a slave following the woman’s orders to beat her, which defeats the original purpose of claiming sovereignty over the

³¹ Nawāl el-Sa’dāwī, *Zeina*, 64.

³² Slavoj Žižek, “Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing” (1993) in D. H. Richter, *The Critical Tradition* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 3rd ed., 2007), 1181.

³³ Nawāl el-Sa’dāwī, *Zeina*, 63.

woman and, consequently, infuriates him and leads him to beat her even harder. Zakariah finally resorts to asking his wife directly to whip him, a request which she also declines, since she is just as afflicted by the distorted social definitions of man/woman as her husband.

Parallel to the abjection of women, which is strongly present throughout the novel, is a sense of sublimation, particularly of Zeina, the illegitimate child. She is a “whore” and the “daughter of a whore,” yet despite her presumed misery she is depicted as an inaccessible object of desire – she is the *objet petit a* in the Lacanian sense³⁴: “... she was perhaps the only one who possessed a body, a body that housed the spirits of gods and Devils together. She resembles ancient goddesses: the goddess of life and death, the goddess of vice and virtue, the whore, the saint and the virgin all rolled into one. She rose above the laws of earth and sky and had no god but herself.”³⁵ It is this autonomy, this “possession” of a body, this rising “above the laws of earth and sky”³⁶ – in short, this flagrant threat to the patriarchal social order – which places her outside the social spectrum altogether, leading the Islamist Ahmed al-Damhiri to fantasize about raping her. “She held her head high on stage, and under the lights she seemed like the goddess Venus, Isis, Nefertiti or the Virgin Mary. Or perhaps she didn’t resemble any of them, for she was a caliber all her own.”³⁷ Just as she was done reciting her own poem on stage, in which she described her desire to build her mother a well-equipped home – building and home ownership being masculine prerogatives – Ahmed “wanted her to lie beneath him so that he could penetrate

³⁴ Jacques Lacan introduced the term *objet petit a* for the first time in his 1957 seminar, *Les formations de l’inconscient*, in which he described it as the object of desire one seeks in the Other.

³⁵ Nawāl el-Sa’dāwī, *Zeina*, 149.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

her with his iron rod and gouge her eyes with his finger. He wanted to make her moan endlessly underneath him, pleading for forgiveness like a worshipper praying to God for His mercy.”³⁸

After a few failed attempts of being alone with her, Ahmed begins to admit to himself that she is beyond his reach, “... a wild mare that would not be mounted or subdued,”³⁹ a stark contrast to the one and only depiction of womanhood familiar to him. “She united masculine strength with feminine gentleness, and danced like an unruly horse without an owner or a bridle.”⁴⁰ After his recurrent failing attempts to possess her inaccessible body, and having acknowledged that she has rejected him, he decides to use his position as the emir of an underground Islamist group and put her name on a death list. This is not merely a case of deliberate placement of an obstacle in order to heighten libido on Zeina’s behalf, but rather a case of an injured ego. Zeina is eventually shot on the street among angry, chanting crowds, in a dramatic, admonitory scene, shortly after the assassination of journalist Mohamed Ahmed inside the basement of an investigator’s office. The journalist was accused of heresy, following the publication of his article about Zeina’s genius and grace, in *al-Thawrah* (Revolution) Newspaper.

Nawal el-Saadawi makes a brief stop at another manifestation of aggressive-phallic male penetration, reminding her readers of the crucial role played by social class in making one, male or female, susceptible to sexual objectification. Bodour recollects a scene from her childhood in which she walks on her father in the so-called “rats” room and finds him raping the lame street boy “who looked like a little monkey,”⁴¹ who was also subjected to the humiliation and ridicule

³⁸ Ibid, 117.

³⁹ Ibid, 205.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, 98.

by other children and seems to have no adult guardians. This traumatizing experience seems to dictate the nature of many relationships in Bodour's life; it is also el-Saadawi's way of widening the scope of the lens by which she examines society's hypocrisy and double standards, where people are caught up in the dilemma of being their true selves and meeting societal expectations. The result is always tragic, or at least a "split personality," like that of Bodour's. To go with her split personality, she married a man who yoyoed "between Karl Marx and the Prophet Muḥammad, between British imperialism covering itself with fig leaves and American imperialism shamelessly flaunting its nakedness, between women wearing headscarves and others parading in miniskirts. Between these were the young women who hid their hair with scarves but wore extra-tight jeans revealing their bellies."⁴² And, of course, between men and women who abandon their true love and get married to someone who fits into their family's social and economic status.

In conclusion, Nawal el-Saadawi's novel, *Zeina*, excels at examining different types of sexual deviance and the way they are connected to social, economic, and political corruption in Egypt, in a way that is expected from a physician, psychiatrist, and prolific writer of fiction and nonfiction. Throughout the novel, we only read about the erotic desires of men in a predatory fashion while women are either the cold recipients of the act or the ever-running prey: women are either abject or sublime, but never expressing their inner desires where doing so is walking into the lion's den.

⁴² Ibid, 57.

Sexual oppression and social injustice did indeed cause the outbreak of a revolution that ousted Hosnī Mubārak in 2011, as predicted in el-Saadawi's novel, and we have witnessed the rise and fall of Islamists during the short-lived presidency of Muḥammad Morsī. The rise of al-Sīsī's security state, however, has yet to be confronted.

Moving into the Levant, we will next discuss the erotic aspects of Hanan el-Sheikh's *The Story of Zahra*.

Chapter Three
Autonomy, Intimacy, and the Chaos of War
Ḥanān al-Shaykh – Lebanon

On September 9, 2001, the Cairo-based weekly newspaper *Akḥbār al-Adab* (Literary News) issued a list containing 105 novels, selected by the Arab Writers Union as the “Top 100 Arabic Novels.” The list, which sought to represent writers from all Arabic-speaking countries, featured 15 novels written by women authors – another indicator of the underrepresentation of women authors whose production of novels is nothing short of prolific.

This chapter will look into *Ḥikāyat Zahrah*⁴³ (The Story of Zahra) by Lebanese novelist and actress Ḥanān al-Shaykh, a fine example of an *écriture féminine*⁴⁴ – to borrow an expression from Hélène Cixous – where the author explores the idea of an autonomous female body in a patriarchal society. It is also an anatomy of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) – and of war in general, examining the relationship between war and gender.

The novel appeared on the aforementioned list at number 52. It was first published in Arabic in 1980, then appeared in English in 1986. For the purpose of this thesis, and as a practice I follow whenever possible, I read both versions of the novel and, once again, was saddened by the inevitable loss of the heteroglossia found in the original text, where *fuṣḥá* was reserved for the narration, and all other incidents of direct speech and dialogue appeared in the sweet-

⁴³ Ḥanān al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra*, trans. Peter Ford (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

⁴⁴ In her 1975 essay “*Le Rire de la Méduse*” (The Laugh of the Medusa), French writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous was the first writer to coin the term *écriture féminine* (women’s writing), referring to what she saw as a connection between language, the perception of the female body, and the consequent reception of female writers.

sounding Southern Lebanese dialect. Understandably, an English translation does not allow for a similar effect.

A polyphonic novel, *The Story of Zahra* opens with a chapter narrated by the eponymous antiheroine, Zahra, the protagonist of the novel. As we read along, we learn that the name ‘Zahra’ is in fact an antiphrasis: *Zahra*, the Arabic word for flower, a symbol of beauty and conventional femininity, does not match the description given of a female with less-than-average looks, poor hygiene, and a peculiar premarital sexual life. Giving her such attributes, the author uses her protagonist to pose questions about conventional femininity, the female ideal, and the intertwined connection among patriarchy, a female’s prospects of marriage, and her sense of self-worth.

At a very young age, Zahra becomes aware of the manifestations of the patriarchy surrounding her – her brother Ahmad receives blatant favoritism from both their parents:

Every evening it was the same. My mother would never give me a single morsel of meat. This she always reserved for Ahmad, sometimes for my father. Her ways never changed. [...] Everyday, as we sat in the kitchen to eat, her love would be declared: having filled my plate with soup she serves my brother Ahmad, taking all her time, searching carefully for the best pieces of meat. She dips the ladle into the pot and salvages meat fragments. There they go into Ahmad’s dish.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Hanān al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra*, 11.

Then her father rejects her due to her acne, declaring that she will never find a suitor. We learn about her compulsive pimple-picking by which her face ends up covered in scars to match those of her childhood memories: a violent, Hitleresque⁴⁶ father (Ibrahim) and a mother (Fatima) who uses her daughter Zahra as a cover for her secret meetings with her lover. Fatima's dishonest relationship with her husband plays a major role in causing Zahra's distorted memories and loss of certainty of time and place, and her contempt for the idea of marriage, leading to her future withdrawal from society.

“We were like an orange and its navel” is a telling leitmotif that one comes across throughout the chapters narrated by Zahra. It is telling of Zahra's troubled relationship with her mother and her own body, and of her later quest for autonomy and personal space, away from the scrutiny and invasion of males (her father, her mother's lover, her uncle Hashem, and later on her husband Majed). While her presence fulfils her mother's quest for an alibi, Zahra is able to sense that she is a mere accessory to her mother and, had circumstances been different, her company would not be needed nor welcomed.

But once news of the affair reaches the macho father, he subjects both females to a brutal, bloody punishment, leading the mother to attempt suicide and seek refuge in the bathroom – an incident that scars Zahra for life. Such a revealing episode of domestic violence raises questions about the circumstances that surrounded the mother's marriage to a man she clearly does not love nor respect, her secret love affair, and the conditions that constitute a socially-approved marital relationship. Was it an arranged marriage? Was it an act of desperation? Was it due to

⁴⁶ This is my own term, as the descriptions given in the text allude to a figure who resembles Hitler in appearance and mannerisms without mentioning him by name.

poverty? The mother's victimization becomes unquestionably clear, and her own hubris is foretelling of that of her daughter's, as the two are equally entrapped by many aspects of objectification due to their gender and social class – indeed, they are like an orange and its navel.

Where marriage is an inescapable milestone for a female, Zahra chooses to rebel against such a predetermined destiny, silently and passively, by furthering her own social alienation: her pimple picking becomes severe; she has an affair with Malek, a married man who takes her virginity in a filthy garage and impregnates her twice (she manages to get an abortion both times). She recounts her ungratifying sexual encounters with him when she visits her uncle in South Africa. Going back repeatedly to the nearly traumatic sex with Malek, her *hamartia* (or tragic flaw in the Aristotelian sense), even after her first abortion, is a rehearsal of her own downfall. She talks about her utter disgust with the sexual encounters, and we cannot help but ask the question: why did she keep going back to him? Why did she not end the relationship and, instead, continued to give him free access to her body?

Having placed herself further outside the spectrum of marriageable females, she thought it necessary to master her own trauma – and fate – with repetition. “Why does the child repeat an unpleasurable experience?” asks Peter Brooks in his essay “Freud's Masterplot.”⁴⁷ It may be answered by the following: “by staging his mother's disappearance and return, the child is compensating for his instinctual renunciation. Yet the child has also staged disappearance alone,

⁴⁷ Peter Brooks, “Freud's Masterplot” (1977), in *The Critical Tradition*, ed. David H. Richter, 3rd edition, 2007.

without reappearance, as a game. This may make one want to argue that the essential experience involved is the movement from a passive to an active role in regard to his mother's disappearance, claiming mastery in a situation which he has been compelled to submit to. [...] If repetition is mastery, movement from the passive to the active; and if mastery is an assertion of control over what man must in fact submit to – choice, we might say, of an imposed end – we have already a suggestive comment on the grammar of plot, where repetition, taking us back again over the same ground, could have to do with the choice of ends.”⁴⁸

Then we are introduced to the many social and economic factors at play when deciding someone's marriageability. Zahra, despite her lack of physical appeal, gets married to her uncle's friend in South Africa. In chapter 4, Majed declares his motives behind marrying Zahra:

I married Zahra without even knowing her. When I saw her and heard she was still a spinster, and that she was Hashem's niece, I thought, 'Here is a ready-made bride waiting.' By marrying her I'll be saved from having to go to Lebanon to look for a wife. I'll save the costs of travel and trousseau, for I've heard that brides here do not expect a trousseau as they do back home. Even if she insists, she wouldn't find shops like those in Souk Sursok. Even the jewelry here is different and less expensive.⁴⁹

Clearly, this is not a proposal to share a life or even have a satisfying intimate relationship, but rather a financial transaction, a means of achieving social prestige and

⁴⁸ Ibid, 1161.

⁴⁹ Ḥanān al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra*, 73.

strengthening social ties between individuals and families. In chapter 3, Hashem narrates his past life events as a leading member of the Popular Syrian Party, and how he escaped to South Africa to avoid imprisonment, following the attempted coup d'état in 1961. These two accounts, both of which exude masculinity, guaranteed Hashem a higher social status among the Lebanese community in South Africa, which allowed Zahra to take a social climber for a husband. Still, Zahra's premarital loss of virginity proves to be very problematic, as she already anticipated, but being in exile plays in her favor as it takes the pressure off her husband: The absence of an extended family makes failure to follow traditions verbatim less offensive. Once again, we are faced with questions about the very nature of traditional marriage and the extent to which it objectifies women.

The resulting lack of intimacy in Zahra's marriage is not surprising. Still tormented by her unfulfilled desire for a personal space, added to her uncle's perversion, his treatment of her body as a means to get "closer to home," and now the unwelcomed advances of her husband – whom she still views as a stranger, Zahra gets divorced and goes back to Beirut, where we get introduced to another aspect of discrimination against women: Where a woman's worth is measured by her ability to build a successful marriage, divorce alienates Zahra from society even further, and she resorts to eating and sleeping at an excess.

The second half of the novel introduces a new Zahra, simultaneously – or resulting from – the lack of order brought onto society by the breakout of the Lebanese civil war: It shifts Zahra's focalization outwards and encourages her to rejoin society. The author seems to have

predicted and agreed with the sentiments of Pamela Johnston Conover in "Gender, Feminist Consciousness, and War":

For centuries the dominant gender images of war have been limited and relatively stable. Men are the militarists and perpetrators; women are the pacifists and victims. Men start the wars; women try to stop them. Men are the "just warriors" marching into battle; women are the "beautiful souls" marching for peace.⁵⁰

Some of us may attribute the above statements to the different upbringing of men and women, others to biological factors. It makes a lot of sense to conclude that, in societies where women are chiefly responsible for the traditionally recognized chores of motherhood, in addition to the biological connection dictated by pregnancy and childbirth, women tend to be more dedicated to life-preserving social activities:

In the abstract, women are more afraid of the prospects of war and more wary of foreign involvements, though when given justifications they are as willing as men to ponder the use of force. But when we moved from the abstract to the concrete—from hypothetical wars to the Gulf War—the distance separating women and men grew, and on every measure, women reacted more negatively. These gender differences are some of the largest and most consistent in the study of political psychology and are clearly of a magnitude that can have real political significance under the right circumstances.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Pamela Johnston Conover and Virginia Sapiro, "Gender, Feminist Consciousness, and War," *American Journal of Political Science* 37, no. 7 (Nov. 1993): 1079.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1095.

And so Zahra begins to read the news every morning, and volunteers at a casualty ward. She begins to question the real reasons behind war, why men have to fight and die:

I wondered whether the leaders of the factions ever visited hospitals, and if they did, even for an hour, how they could live an ordinary day again? Could they stop themselves thinking of an amputated leg? Or of an eye that had turned to liquid? Or of a severed hand lying there in resignation and helplessness? Why did none of those leaders, as they stood listening to the groans, pledge to put a stop to the war and cry out, “This war shall end! I shall finish it! No cause can be won until the war is stopped. No cause comes before the cause of humanity and safety. The war ends here and now!”⁵²

The war brings back Zahra’s wish to be close to her mother “like an orange and its navel,” the same wish that began the narrative in the first chapter. It brings to mind the Freudian pleasure principle, where it is claimed that a living organism wishes to return to a previous state of being – as in being an inanimate object – and to do so on its own terms. Zahra’s meeting with the sniper in an abandoned building, her experience of love and sexual pleasure for the first time under the war-forced collapse of order around her, signaled that the end – to which she aspired from the outset – is near: the repeated sexual encounters and her screaming with pleasure as she orgasmed for the first time in her life, at the age of 30, were clearly the signs of being on “the verge of a short-circuit” as Peter Brooks puts it.⁵³

⁵² Ḥanān al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra*, 135.

⁵³ Peter Brooks, *Ibid.*

It is ironic, to say the least, that Zahra succeeded in breaking free from the bounds of patriarchy with the help of a sniper, a figure of patriarchal authority functioning on a different level.

She plans her suicide after she learns of her new pregnancy, but after telling the sniper, he promises to marry her and she trusts him. The novel ends with a pregnant Zahra being shot to death at the hands of the sniper, the father of her unborn child. Zahra achieves her end, but, alas, not on her own terms; her attempts to escape the patriarchal order and enjoy herself as an autonomous female with sexual desires led her into the abyss of misogyny.

Next, I will turn to *Salsāl* (Clay), a novel by Syrian author Samar Yazbek.

Chapter Four
 Death and Intimacy
 Samar Yazbek – Syria

In 2005, the award-winning⁵⁴ Syrian novelist Samar Yazbek (b. 1970) published her second novel: *Salsāl* (Clay),⁵⁵ in Damascus. The novel, the subject of this chapter in my gynocritical study and hitherto available only in the original Arabic,⁵⁶ is an *épater-les-bourgeois* text presenting an unabashed criticism of the dynamics of power in Syria; the lasting effects of the French colonialism; and the shaping of post-colonial Syria by the bourgeois economic interests. The novel does so by capturing a vivid image of the intimate relationships, marital and extramarital, among men and women from different social classes, characters who witnessed al-Assad's rise to power following the military coup in 1966, while living in the author's native town: Jableh, a coastal city on the Mediterranean south of Latakia.

The novel weaves the past into the present, and offers a harrowing narrative of events from the early Islamic era: through the memoirs of Haydar al-Ali, the novel's protagonist who makes his debut appearance in the text as a dead corpse, readers get a rare glimpse into the mysteries of *al-taqammus* (metempsychosis), one of the core beliefs of the Alawites who often describe their faith as “secretive” to members of other sects of Islam.

⁵⁴ Samar Yazbek received both the Swedish Tucholsky Prize and PEN/Pinter Prize in 2012 in recognition of her literary achievements.

⁵⁵ Samar Yazbek, *Salsāl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kunūz al-Adabīya, 2005).

⁵⁶ All quotations appearing in this chapter that are taken from the novel are my own translation.

The events of the novel are centered around the corpse of a dead man, from which spring many stories of love, betrayal, pleasure, isolation, and rejection of the bourgeoisie lifestyle, in a way that mimics the fascinations of the Decadent poets (France) and the Aesthetes (England). Every character is introduced in light of its relationship with the corpse of Haydar al-Ali, a noble-born man of means who seems to have taken his own life after his notoriously beautiful wife, Sahar al-Nsour, informs him of her decision to leave him and continue her affair with his low-born, ambitious, callous best friend, Ali Hassan. The dead corpse is of special interest to Dalla, the illiterate, grotesque servant who had a long-lived, silent desire to get intimate with Haydar. Though the two grew up in the same household, their shared childhood was never enough to erase the barriers of class, so much that Dalla's only chance to share a bed with him did not arrive until his death, a chance that she was unafraid of exploiting – true, it is a grim and perverse image, yet one must stop at the idea of death as a continuity of life, and the juxtaposition of death and sexual excitement, as in the expression: *La petite mort*.⁵⁷

In the analepsis Haydar entrusts with his daughter, the mesmerizingly-beautiful Riham al-Ali, readers become privy to the fact that Haydar believes himself to have undergone metempsychosis multiple times since the Umayyad era; he was always the tortured-to-death victim of a tyrant. His soul, according to him, did not find peace, and was not able to rest in a concrete body, until he met his wife for the first time, riding her white horse. The awkward encounter, it turns out, was a second birth through which Haydar's soul found a home:

⁵⁷ A French expression used to refer to the brief loss of consciousness, i.e., orgasm, whose literal meaning is “the little death.”

Since that day, I became a whole new being, and I thought I have forgotten you,⁵⁸ I believed you to be a hallucination I acquired from my obsessive reading. The smell of burnt flesh disappeared. The image of the man with the heads [al-Hajjaj] vanished. The time of blood and shrieks was over.⁵⁹

Clearly, the passage attempts to reverse the stereotypical image of a helpless woman waiting for her knight in shining armor. Instead, we are looking at a woman/savior through a man's enchanted eyes.

Reading on, the text also challenges the idea of woman's genesis from a man's body,⁶⁰ as Haydar continues:

I am the one created from a female's rib, born from a female's batting eyelashes. I am eternally lost between her magic and her bosom. I am the one tricked by god, when he told me she was made from my rib. I am the one whose women ran away from him. I am the final clay, dying from its own ingredients.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Addressing Sufyān ibn Mu'āwiyah al-Muhallabī, as he believed himself to be the reincarnation of ibn al-Muqaffa', whose body parts were hacked off his limbs one by one and thrown in flames.

⁵⁹ Samar Yazbek, *Salsāl*, 171.

⁶⁰ As discussed in the introductory chapter, there are many accounts of male writers using the notion of woman as the product of man's existence/body. This novel, written by a woman, is one of the rare incidents where a male character seems to hold and express an idea to the contrary.

⁶¹ Samar Yazbek, *Salsāl*, 202.

Behind the surface, however, a reader familiar with the history of the Baathist rule cannot miss the admonitory force of the text, as it reminds the Alawites of a bloody era in the history of the Abbasid rule. Further, one of Haydar's fragments is simply a poem written by al-Makzūn al-Sinjārī (d. 1240 AD), a prominent Nusayri mystical poet, in which he mocks man's claims of superiority and endurance before a woman's charms.⁶² Another fragment is taken from a text by Hussein bin Hamdān al-Khasībī (874-961), the founder of Alawi religious practice, in which he warns that a doomed soul cannot be redeemed if it transmigrates seven times and still fails to find its happiness.⁶³

The text delves into the private life of the deceased, his dreams and failed pursuits of old chivalric ideals in a Quixotic fashion, his mysterious – and always fruitless – hunting trips. He even quotes Cervantes, knowing that his obsession with chivalry is reminiscent of Don Quixote:

In short, he became so absorbed in his books that he spent his nights from sunset to sunrise, and his days from dawn to dark, poring over them; and what with little sleep and much reading his brains got so dry that he lost his wits. His fancy grew full of what he used to read about in his books, enchantments, quarrels, battles, challenges, wounds, wooings, loves, agonies, and all sorts of impossible nonsense; and it so possessed his mind that the whole fabric of invention and fancy he read of was true, that to him no history in the world had more reality in it.⁶⁴

⁶² Ibid, 191.

⁶³ Ibid, 196.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 167.

Also in these analects, which his daughter reads by the headlights of her car after running away from the men of Ali Hassan, Haydar reveals his inner turmoil as a man who found himself in a position of power since birth, and his rejection of his family's bloody history which, according to his vision, dates back to the Abbasside era.

It is only after these analects are given to Riham, Haydar's daughter, that we get a good look inside the dead man's psyche. And it is not until Dalla, the illiterate grotesque servant, delivers them to Riham shortly before his dead body is discovered. The disparities between the two women is dumbfounding.

The story of Dalla, her life with her family who served on the land of Ibrahim Bey – Haydar's father – sheds the light on the domestic servant: the marginal, overlooked entity.

Dalla, who grew up with Haydar and played childish games with him in the depths of the neighboring forest, deceptively presents herself to the world as an asexual creature. The text describes her grotesque appearance as the body of a little girl carrying the heavy breasts and buttocks of a grown woman. She is a perfect example of what Gamburd describes as “marginal insiders and intimate outsiders.”⁶⁵ Not seeing her as a threat, Haydar was never afraid to be his true self in her company, with all of his daydreaming and hallucinations, to which she listened carefully and responded with nothing more than a few tears of pity for her lost “prince,” all the

⁶⁵ Michele Ruth Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle: Transnationalism and Sri Lanka's Migrant Housemaids*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

while maintaining the values of hard work and virtuousness, so much that she refused to use an electric washing machine for a chance to touch the fabric that was once close to Haydar's skin. At the discovery of his death, she wonders "why hasn't everything disappeared?" Then she does the unthinkable and locks herself in the room with Haydar's dead body and tucks herself cozily next to his bleeding corpse.

Through Dalla, we are reminded of the historical conflicts and the deep-seated fear of persecution in the minds of the region's inhabitants, which is shared by the bourgeois and the peasantry. The locals have been living in fear since "times of blood calls and dark images which persisted in their memories over the centuries, when they used to be hung on piles then thrown to vultures and hyenas. They were happy with their loneliness; their mountains where they raised children, hunger, and cruelty. The mountains were their only safeguard which fended off the Ottomans."⁶⁶ Yet the bourgeois, represented by Ibrahim Bey, collaborate with the French colonizers in order to secure their possessions. Despite the respect they show to the feudal lord, the locals seem to harbor a sense of scorn for Ibrahim Bey who was known for turning in the revolutionaries to the French.

Another aspect of power relations is revealed through Ali Hassan's seduction of Sahar, Haydar's stunning wife. The novel reminds us that women's bodies have always been used as battlefields, where men, unafraid of declaring their intimate desires, like to conquer and score victories. But the two – Sahar and Ali – face the conundrum of deciding who Riham's real father

⁶⁶ Samar Yazbek, *Salsāl*, 16.

is, and things get more complicated when Ali's son, Fadi, begins courting Riham. Terrified at the possibility of an incestuous relationship, the adult lovers separate the young lovers without giving any explanations. Sahar and Ali – and Fadi and Riham – present a microcosm of the corruption that power brings onto the ties in a society otherwise united by trauma and a shared goal of protection against the unknown: Fadi follows the steps of his father and forces himself to drop Riham from his memory; Riham sells her diamond tokens of love and becomes herself a femme fatale with influence. Once again, power has the final word.

Conclusion

Using the erotic as a parameter, we have analyzed three novels by three contemporary women novelists from Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria: Nawāl el-Sa'dāwī, Ḥanān al-Shaykh, and Samar Yazbek, respectively. Since erotic expressions in the arts and literature are remarkably controversial in conservative societies – as in the Arab world, an analysis of this sort can lend itself to an attempt to understand the relationships of power and social hierarchies that govern said societies, in a fashion that follows the Foucauldian power/knowledge social theory. Having limited the scope of this analysis to female novelists, the tension between the creative mind and the expectations of the reading community become all the more pronounced; the extent of sexism all the more manifest.

Objects of desire

Whereas male novelists do not shy away from describing their male (and sometimes female) protagonists' innermost fantasies and erotic desires in a way that might be seen by some as a form of objectification, our three female novelists seem to have made an attempt to defy the "male gaze"⁶⁷ by lending their voices to a female protagonist who is the subject of this objectification. El-Sa'dāwī's Zeina is too familiar with men's fantasies involving her, and while she is well aware of her position on the social totem pole (an orphan born out of wedlock), she refuses to succumb to the rules of patriarchy by which she must either belong to a man or have a

⁶⁷ The term "male gaze" was first introduced by Laura Mulvey, a British feminist film theorist, in her essay: "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1975.

reputation of a prostitute – and she chooses the latter while maintaining full control of her own body and keeping herself inaccessible. Al-Shaykh’s Zahra starts out as a timid young woman, too weak to reject unwanted approaches from a married man or her uncle’s attempts, always seeking refuge in the bathroom, then grew up learning that one way to block such attempts was rendering herself physically and aesthetically undesirable – causing herself to be depressed as well. Finally, Yazbek’s Dalla, the grotesque maid in love with her master, ignores the sneers and scornful looks of the people in her village and makes every effort to stay close to him, using her physical asymmetry and ostensible naiveté as a shield.

It is worth mentioning, however, that when our three female novelists allow their female protagonists to act on their desires, they do not seem to spill as much ink describing the male object of desire’s physical attributes; speaking of women’s beauty in literary works is a primordial tradition that has yet to find its match within women’s accounts of the male body.⁶⁸

Autonomy in times of chaos

There seems to be an agreement among our three female novelists on an existing link between satisfying erotic desires and a state of chaos, namely of war, where one finds a direct threat to life itself.

⁶⁸ One of the best-known elaborate accounts of a male’s physical beauty can be found in the Qur’an, Sūrat Yūsuf [12].

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*,⁶⁹ Freud discusses the duality of life instinct and the death drive, pairing Eros with Thanatos: the desire to live, embodied by the sexual instinct, with libidinal sublimation, i.e., death. Despite the superficial oddity of this pair, Freud argues that these two opposing primitive instincts allow us to experience the phenomenon of life as we know it. This sentiment is echoed in the three novels examined: Budour makes love to Nessim, Zahra achieves her first orgasm, and Dalla gets intimate with her beloved's body under circumstances emanating with the scent of death – a revolution, a civil war, and a case of murder, respectively.

For long, physical violence has been linked with masculinity, and war has always been seen as a male's prerogative, one that affirms courage in the face of death. Women's participation in acts of physical violence, however, is viewed as an assumption of a masculine role, and so is claiming to have the autonomy to begin a pursuit of erotic pleasures outside the boundaries dictated by the patriarchal order.

Agency and social alienation

The three novelists also seem to agree on assigning social alienation as a price for practicing agency over a woman's body. Zahra's actions lead to her placement outside the spectrum of marriageable females and the social spectrum altogether; Zeina's predestined alienation due to her social class allows her to practice full ownership of her body; Dalla's

⁶⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* (New York: Liveright Pub. Corp., 1961).

grotesque appearance and social class hide her underhanded practice of agency and acting autonomously.

The novelists, however, seem to be disenchanted by this shortcut to freedom. As Zahra and Zeina's quests for autonomy lead to their death, one wonders if the novelists are whispering in the ears of their readers, "tread with caution."

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