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## The Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Arab Women's Literature: Elements of Subversion and Resignification.

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The Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Arab Women's  
Literature: Elements of Subversion and Resignification.

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## **Dedication**

*For my parents*

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Abstract

Arab women's literature continue to receive considerable critical attention by scholars in East and West. However, through my focus on three novels in this dissertation, *The Cinnamon's Aroma* (2008) by Samar Yazbek, *Brooklyn Heights* (2011) by Miral al-Tahawy and *It's Called Passion* (2009) by Alawiya Sobh I hope to contribute a more holistic understanding of these works by highlighting features not fully explored in previous scholarship. I concentrate on the creative means of struggle and resistance to the entrenched structures of oppression locating sights of potential hope and emancipation. I point out the ways in which these texts subvert and present a new articulation of ossified social and cultural truth value notions on gender and sexuality. This subversion and resignification is done through exploring the relationship between concrete transgressive acts and narrative construction. Subversive and alternative acts pertaining to sexuality and gender are ephemeral and transient if not transmuted into a structured, narrative form. In *The Cinnamon's Aroma* I analyze how the sexual relationship between two female characters is presented as an act of subversion and resistance to patriarchal oppression. *Brooklyn Heights* addresses the need to re-conceptualize female gender identity. *It's Called Passion* discusses sexuality and war in rural and urban settings stressing the significance of fiction and narrative construction in any subversive and emancipatory project. I also discuss the focus on the body as contested site upon which sexuality, violence and oppression are discussed. The dissertation also explores the temporal and spatial mobility of traditional patriarchal

structures and gendered oppression. I explore the unifying elements binding these novels in addition to their diversity. I complicate my study utilizing feminist theory, gender and sexuality and theory of narrative construction.

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### List of Transliteration Symbols

ث	th
ح	h
خ	kh
ذ	z
ش	sh
ض	d
ط	t
ع	‘
غ	gh
ق	q
ة	a
ء	’

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Since the rise of the Arabic novel in the early twentieth century, Arabic fiction in general, and the novel in particular have become an increasingly important platform to discuss social, political and national ideologies ranging from questions of national identity to poverty, urbanization, migration, corruption and gender and sexuality among others. Arab female writers took advantage of this new and rising literary form to present counter-narratives that emanate from an attempt to level the ground of inequality experienced by women in modern Arab societies. These voices have progressed and developed over time, accompanying cultural, social, political and economic shifts in the Arab world and elsewhere, especially the West. Here, women speak as loudly as men, shaping collective and individual experiences.

The issue of gender and sexuality is one constant throughout these developmental stages and shifts. Sexuality, understood as a physical experience as well as a larger cultural concept and narrative has remained a predominant topic along with the accompanying gender identity issues. Gender and sexuality have mainly been discussed within the framework of gendered oppression, gendered suppression and gendered violence. This order of objectification and marginalization is regarded an essential feature of a widespread patriarchal structure deeply entrenched in the cultural, social, political and economic apparatuses of the public and the private domains.

In this introduction, I first introduce the three works treated in this dissertation and their authors and some shared themes that link them and the criteria behind their selection. Then I provide an analysis for the theoretical framework I am employing discussing mainly the theory of narrative construction, gender and sexuality in a structuralist, post-modern sense. This is followed by a brief overview of the history of the modern Arabic novel in general, and the feminist novel in particular. Then I move on to explore the secondary literature most relevant to my topic. In the following section I define the key terms I am using employed in this dissertation, mainly gender, sexuality, subversion and resignification. Finally, I provide a brief chapter's summary.

Storytelling, writing, fiction and the imaginative realm were and are still employed by Arab women writers to challenge and defy the order of oppression and hegemony. Imagination and fiction as used in this dissertation do not allude to fantasy or to the unreal; to the contrary, they represent the possible. Imagination and fiction are the space where these women writers envision ways of resistance, hope and emancipation. Oral and written narratives constitute the realm of representation which retrospectively constitute what we call the real world in a Lacanian, Freudian and Derridian sense. Imagination is the space of argumentation, the space of defying predominant orders of patriarchal hegemony and the space of envisioning avenues of hope and emancipation. The realm of representation created through oral and written accounts and stories is the link between the existent or real, and what could become, the imaginative and fictional. Both worlds, real and imaginative are constituted through narrative representation with the only difference that one is lived, exist and the other's existence is envisioned, aspired for through the existence of these narrative and oral accounts. The common denominator

between both worlds and realms is their constructed nature through narrative in its oral and written form. Thus, these accounts, though fictional, have a direct influence and implication into the world of reality. This retroactive relationship between fiction, imagination and reality will be further discussed in each of the chapters and especially in Sobh's chapter.

Yazbek, al-Tahawy and Sobh continue in a long tradition of imagining ways of resistance and defiance to the entrenched order of patriarchal oppression through producing narrative accounts and inserting them in the field of representation as counter narratives to existing ones which are of hegemonic nature. However, Arab women's narrative accounts have progressed and developed over time to accompany social, political and cultural shifts domestically and internationally. The main eras and shifts will be detailed in the third section of this introduction presenting a historical overview of the feminist novel. But, reading these novels, I noticed some new distinctive features present in the three texts under discussion and in contemporary texts in general. These new features are the result of building on a long history of original, influential and subversive works written by Arab women over decades.

Reading these three texts and situating them within the larger context of works written by Arab women, I noticed this new element of what I refer to here as deconstruction and resignification of concepts like womanhood, motherhood, sexual conduct and gender identity presented as categories that are not descriptive or reflective of the thing they are supposed to describe or reflect. I noticed an original approach to the ways in which Arab women writers talk about or negotiate issues of gender and sexual relations; an approach worth exploring and researching. These identity categories and

sexual practices are described as culturally and socially imposed on the female subject, hence, they are more alienating than descriptive of this identity.

In this sense, I found there is an interesting and probably some kind of original approach in terms of discussing gender equality or women's liberation that can be addressed from a theoretical point of view, specifically using the theory of narrative construction addressed in a poststructuralist or postmodern way presenting that language or narrative are not necessarily positive representations of the things they stand for but they are constitutive of those things. Every discourse or narrative has a certain genealogy or history formulated within, and through certain power relations; this genealogy can be restructured or resignified in the light of new shifts in power structures or cultural contexts.

This approach is not addressed quite enough in discussing Arab women's literature and specifically the three novels under discussion in this dissertation. Thus, After reading a good number of novels written by Arab women in the last 10 to 15 years, roughly, I chose these three texts as examples of discussing the ways in which Arab women writers talk about sexual and gender relations, the ways in which they defy, resist and envision new ways to subvert those relations in their fictional writings through the theory of narrative construction drawing a continuous relation between the real and the imaginative.

However, my analysis is based in the texts, it's a textual analysis that looks to the shared themes among these texts, the treatment of the body as a contested site of signification, gender violence, oppression and locates sights of hope or emancipation present in these texts and the significance of narrative and female's access to narrative, in

its oral and written forms to tell their stories and the broader cultural effects that this access and this production of narrative can have.

This dissertation tells the story of these women represented in the three novels under discussion and also those who have written them – and how their experiences are shaped by gender, sexuality and the oppressive modes of patriarchy. These stories are stories of struggle, pain, objectification, melancholia and loss, but also, they are stories of hope, resilience, courage and in some cases, triumph. Although these female characters do not succeed in bringing down the entrenched patriarchal settings they battled with, the very fact of having these narratives in circulation is an act of triumph for the characters and their female writers. Carving a counter-narrative space in a predominantly masculine field to hear women talking about issues of gender, sexuality and oppression, is a true act of victory.

Arab women writers and specifically the three writers under consideration in this dissertation, Samar Yazbek (1970), Miral al-Tahawy (1970) and Alawiya Sobh (1955), have always employed methods of subversion of the dominant patriarchal narratives to forge their own counter narratives and bring change to their lived experiences. As thus, they profited from the novel as a literary genre resembling everyday life and speech and from narrative conceived as a construction or build up. Hence, this dissertation analyses the ways in which these women writers and characters represent their struggles, oppression, violence and subjugation employing the technique of subversion and resignification of the narrative construct using the novelistic literary genre.

Arab women writers in general, and al-Tahawy, Yazbek and Sobh in particular share common concerns even if their works remain distinct in different ways. All three

novels focus on the body, which becomes a key battle ground, a site of oppression and resistance at the same time. Male characters and society in general objectify and oppress female bodies. Female characters assert their subjectivities and liberation by claiming ownership over their own bodies. This ownership takes the form of a subversion of the widespread moral code of chastity and decorum imposed upon women. These characters allowed their bodies to freely explore sexual acts considered religiously, culturally and socially forbidden. In the case of Sobh, she is also concerned with the textual body, showing that it is through control of the narrative that her female characters regain control over their bodies and develop their individual identities.

The perspectives they provide on sex, gender and the body also bind the three novels. These are some of the most explicit sexual novels produced in modern Arabic literature, particularly in their treatment of the female body and female sexuality. Their overt discussion and graphic description of sex acts and sexuality have few parallels in the works of their male counterparts. When male authors have written sexually explicit novels, they have dealt with it from a male perspective focusing, for example, on intercourse or masturbation. Al-Tahawy, Yazbek and Sobh produced narratives describing female sexuality and the sexual experience of the body from the perspective of a female author. Carving a female voice in a predominantly male narrative arena to talk about female sexuality, gender and the body is an act of reformulation and resignification of the predominant narrative on female's bodies and sexualities.

By recording their own tales of illicit and culturally sanctioned sexual encounters, the female characters in these novels voice a previously silenced perspective. By detailing sexual acts forbidden by religion and culture, such as extramarital affairs or

homosexual relations, they preserve their success and triumph, albeit fleeting, over the order of patriarchy that attempt to control, sequester and suppress the female sexual desire and pleasure.

Female gender identity is another binding perspective. There is no emphasis on the traditional female roles of mother, wife and seeker of a male lover. Motherhood is not a defining aspect of the female's personhood. Wifehood is related to the traditional cultural representation of the woman. As thus, the female characters ventured into extramarital affairs or homosexual relationships. Instead of a male lover and romance tales, we predominantly see oppressive husbands and violent, debased and hypocrite male characters. Al-Tahawy, Yazbek and Sobh advance a new conceptualization of the meaning of mother and wife and the idea of a female in need of a male lover or protector.

A shift in the setting is a common theme amongst the three novels. The move from rural to urban in the case of al-Tahawy and Sobh, and from low class to high class in the case of Yazbek, underlines the common theme of the illusion of liberation and equality created by the city or the West in al-Tahawy's case. The village and the generation it represents exists as a background delineating the violence, oppression and corruption of the patriarchal order versus a more liberal urban atmosphere permitting a more free sexual exploration. However, in all three novels, the patriarchal structures of the village flourish in the urban and the transnational environment continuing to deny women the opportunity to rebel and permanently level the field of sexual and gender inequality.

In addition, all three novels highlight the importance of class in the negotiation of gender, sexuality and inequality. All three female protagonists come from a lower and



rural social class correlative to the fact that the three authors come from the same working class, rural background. The movement from rural to urban reflect another movement to relatively better social situations especially in the case of Sobh. However, as mentioned before, the feeling of alienation and marginalization experienced in all times, places and contexts attests to the fact that patriarchal structures are entrenched in cultural structures across time, place and social class.

The image of the mother is another bonding factor amongst the three works. The predominant portrait of the mothers of the three main protagonists is that of a victim, even when she is portrayed as complicit and promoter of the patriarchal culture, in Sobh's case. Succumbing and accepting the status quo is a mechanism of survival in a harsh and antagonistic context. The texts also portray a generational divide between mothers and daughters in that the three main female protagonists show an alienation from the traditional mother figure symbolized in their own mothers whether portrayed as mere helpless victims in the case of al-Tahawy and Yazbek or active participants in the predominant culture of oppression in the case of Sobh.

The portrayal of the father figure is relatively similar. He is a repulsive figure of oppression and violence of sexual nature in the case of Yazbek, a more complicated figure of authority granted to him by the patriarchal culture in the case of al-Tahawy, or a positive but helpless figure in the case of Sobh. The father's figure in the three novels, though it differs considerably, articulate that men too are victims of this predominant order called patriarchy. As a man, it sanctions an inhuman behavior based on sexual violence that destroys the male's character and integrity; or victimizes that character. In

both cases, fathers, the patriarchs, are portrayed as negative or tragic figures victimized by the cultural structure called patriarchal.

In their narratives, al-Tahawy, Yazbek and Sobh trace an arc of despair in the past, present and future before locating a site of healing and hope. This is most evident in Sobh's case where female acquisition of narration, oral and written, is the ultimate source of hope. Similarly, al-Tahawy's story stresses the importance of the written word but falls short from presenting a more hopeful future because her protagonist fails in penning down her story like in Sobh's case. Yazbek presents a more desperate present and future due to the subject matter of lesbian homosexuality and the socio-political nature of the Syrian context. Also, Yazbek's novel is void of any reference to writing or narrative construction which, I argue, are the main sites of hope located in al-Tahawy and Sobh's texts. However, all three novels place a great significance on the relationships and bond between women. These relationships are presented as caring and nurturing in most cases. When these relationships are allowed to be maintained, they become a source of empowerment, courage, hope and triumph.

\* \* \*

I have chosen to focus on these three novels, *The Cinnamon's Aroma* (2008), *Brooklyn Heights* (2011) and *It's Called Passion* (2009), because they meet criteria prerequisite for the achievement of goals outlined in this dissertation. First, I have chosen to analyze contemporary texts written by women in an effort to highlight their perspectives on the issues of gender and sexuality in a contemporary context influenced by the socio-political, economic and cultural events that have occurred and shaped our current world in the last ten years or so. A sub-goal is to present the perspectives of these

narratives within the larger framework of women writers demonstrating the differences among women writers and their diversity in tackling issues of gender, sexuality, inequality, liberation, and women's rights. Second, I have chosen to analyze these texts employing a comparative, interdisciplinary approach between Arab women's narratives and mainly a Western literary and critical theory of narrative, gender and sexuality. This approach serves the main goal of highlighting the elements of subversion and resignification of predominant cultural narratives as advanced by women writers. It also serves the goal of analyzing and highlighting the symbolic or textual nature of cultural constructs, in this case pertaining to gender and sexuality to counter more absolutist, positivist and transcendental approaches.

I analyze the ways in which the three texts under consideration challenge and deconstruct the widespread narratives entrenched in patriarchal systems of power and oppression. Ultimately, this study is an attempt to complicate and add to the current understandings of the genre, particularly in areas of gender, sexuality and narrative construction. Finally, I also present women's perspectives on contemporary issues of social, economic, cultural and cross-cultural nature analyzing the ways in which they intersect, affect and shape the discussion on gender, sexuality, women's issues and social equality.

Temporally, the novels are published in the same period. *Brooklyn Heights* in 2011, *The Cinnamon's Aroma* in 2008 and *It's Called Passion* in 2009. Both, Miral al-Tahawy and Samar Yazbek moved to France and the United States respectively in 2011 and 2007. However, Yazbek wrote *The Cinnamon's Aroma* when she was still in Syria. All three writers depict a context they belong to and a society they lived inside. They

present intimate and detailed description of gender relations and sexual acts situated within their respective socio-political context. Hence, they present an accurate and holistic image of their respective social structure and its intersections with gender, sexuality and women's lives. These texts are deeply related and reflective of the current social, political and economic situations we live with. Al-Tahawy discusses neo-liberal policies and globalization from the perspective of an immigrant, single-mother, Arab woman in New York City. Issues of gentrification, otherness, social inequality and race are delineated through the lens of gender and sexuality as presented and experienced by al-Tahawy's protagonist. The sexual dissonance and graphic descriptions of poverty and violence described in Yazbek's text is directly related to the Syrian social and political reality stemming from the regime of dictatorship in Syria. Sobh's discussion of urban, rural and war sexuality is associated with the political atmosphere in Lebanon before, during and after the civil war period.

The fact that all three authors come from a lower social class background is another uniting factor. As Joseph T. Zeidan states in *Arab Women Novelists, the Formative Years and Beyond*, Arab women's writing can be traced back to the 'Nahda' period translated as Arab awakening or renaissance that began in the late nineteenth century, particularly due to the gradual improvement of women's education. In the 1950s and 1960s women writers emerged in greater numbers and women's novels gained momentum. However, as Zeidan states: "The subject matter tended to center around a few main issues, as those in a position to write were almost always from privileged backgrounds and were most concerned with issues affecting them directly" (6). Thus,

these authors and their novels represent a perspective on gender and sexual relations from a different class lens.

Geographically speaking, all three writers come from the Levant and Egypt where the pioneering women's fiction was produced since the mid-twentieth century. The number of women writers who have emerged since then in North Africa and the Gulf has increased and still increasing rapidly, but the shared cultural and literary tradition among the Eastern countries present some unifying factor.

In addition to theme, the second criterion of my selection, scholarly attention, is supported by the available literature on these three novels. *Brooklyn Heights* received considerable critical success. It won the "Naguib Mahfouz" medal in Egypt and was nominated for the 2011 Arabic Booker Prize, an international prize for Arabic fiction. Al-Tahawy was named "One of the most influential writers of the Oriental world" by Forbes Magazine in 2014 and her novels garnered national and international recognition. Also, al-Tahawy's works have become a kind of established texts in the academic canon on modern Arab women's literature and modern Arabic literature in general. However, *Brooklyn Heights* has received little analytical scholarly attention compared to al-Tahawy's two other novels, *The Tent* (الخباء) and *Blue Aubergine* (الباذنجانة الزرقاء). The *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* published three different scholarly articles for the latter novels in their March and July 2017 issues. *Brooklyn Heights* has been the subject of much journalistic and popular acclaim, mainly in Arabic in form of magazine or newspaper articles and internet blogs. These articles mainly center on issues of belonging, immigration and mobility. While these articles mention that al-Tahawy's protagonist struggle to find her place and identity in this world, they rarely analyze the

true identity crisis of womanhood and its relation to narrative construction. This is particularly important in regards to my analytical focus on the interiority of the characters and al-Tahawy's discussion of the crisis of a female unable to belong in a world constructed on a universal discourse of gender inequality.

*The Cinnamon's Aroma* and *It is Called Passion*, received little analytical attention although both have been the subject of journalistic and popular interest. *It is Called Passion* entered the 2010 long list of the Arabic Booker Prize, however, the novel has not been translated to English, yet. Again, most of the journalistic articles or blog posts on both novels focus on the daring subject matter and graphic sexual description which was acclaimed as taboos breaking practices or criticized for that same reason. Like *Brooklyn Heights*, the writings on these two novels do not address the interiority of the characters or the elements of subversion and resignification of the gender and sexual discourses. Instead, most analysis present that these women were driven to the described unconventional sexual acts because of the harsh nature of the context they live inside. Thus, there is an obvious inclination to find external factors, mainly social and political ones to rationalize these feminist writings. As example, a number of the opinion journalistic pieces on *The Cinnamon's Aroma* state that the text primarily revolts against the crushing socio-economic order of poverty, corruption and social inequality which drove the two main female protagonists into same sex relations.

While the socio-political, economic, geographical, time and space contexts are given considerable analysis in the three chapters discussing these texts, this dissertation adds a new dimension missing from the discussion by pointing to the analysis of subversion and resignification of the totality of social narratives, especially in relation to

sexual and gender relations. For example, the same sex relationships in *The Cinnamon's Aroma* are described as more pleasant, appealing and fulfilling than the heterosexual, specifically matrimonial ones described as violent and oppressive. The first are associated with the pleasant smell of the cinnamon, the latter with repulsive odors and scenes. The extramarital affairs in *It is Called Passion* are genuine and passionate relations and the source of the triumph and hope for the female characters. *Brooklyn Heights* features a woman at odds with being a woman in the traditional sense. The only character who escapes the female victimhood prevalent in the novel is a female character who left her husband, son and family in Egypt to lead an unconventional, free spirited, promiscuous and hippy life in New York City. These internal characteristics and relations in the three novels are hardly given any attention in the few critical works available on these three texts.

I go beyond analyzing the internal relations of the texts in their portrayal of sexual violence, gender violence, female body politics and textuality to relate this close reading and analysis to the theory of narrative construction particularly as it pertains to gender and sexuality. I link these subversive practices to the notion of discourse and language as constitutive elements of what Lacan calls the Symbolic order, in other words the world we live inside. This is to say, using a Foucauldian analysis, that sexuality is not a natural given, sexuality has a history, a genealogy constituted through discourses and narratives elaborated inside systems of power. Also, using Butler's notion of gender performativity, gender relations are not natural given but a performative activity shaped and developed by cultural dominant narratives. Gender and sexuality are dominant metanarratives elaborated inside specific structures of power to keep those structures in place. Any

project addressing gender and sexual inequality must address the genealogy of the discourse of gender and sexuality paying attention to their discursive formation, which, being discursive, allows for narrative subversion and resignification. This approach has been rarely addressed in analyzing Arab women's literature in general and specifically the three novels under study in this dissertation.

Adding this new analytic dimension to the texts under consideration focus on not only the harsh socio-economic conditions, gendered and sexual violence and oppression as reasons for this kind of subversive feminist writing, but, as discussed in Sobh's chapter, possessing and accessing the discourse through storytelling and writing is the ultimate act of hope and triumph presented in the text. In this regard and in the same chapter, I analyze Joanne Frye's ideas of the role of narrative and tales in influencing and changing women's everyday lives and experiences. Women have to carve a presence in the domain of representation advancing their own personal narratives to affect and challenge the established and dominant discourses of patriarchy.

I will now turn to a brief analysis of the theoretical framework I am using in this study. I will start with Nietzsche's analysis of the relation of language to truth and reality. I will then move to Lyotard's analysis of postmodernism and metanarratives followed by an account of some feminist contentions with postmodernism and deconstruction. I will end by addressing Butler and Foucault's premises on gender and sexuality as they relate to narrative and language.

\* \* \*

The elements of subversion and resignification of the representations of gender and sexuality happen on the level of narrative. For this I am indebted to the Nietzsche's



analysis of the relation between language and reality. “Is language the adequate expression of all realities?” (Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lying* 358). According to Nietzsche, language is not an adequate representation of objects; designation and things do not coincide. A word is a nerve-stimulus in sound (Nietzsche, *On truth and Lying* 358); meaning the nerve-stimulus of the human subject has a certain percept or image conveyed through sound. Language is the product of the entirety of nerve-stimulus sound to the outside objects. As Nietzsche puts it, there is no proposition of causality between nerve-stimulus sound and percept. The only relation that is formed out of this practice is a relation of dominance of the nerve-stimulus over the percept. Therefore, the percept or object is a product of the subject’s nerve-stimulus sound: “The stone is hard; as if “hard” was known to us otherwise; and not merely as an entirely subjective stimulus” (Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lying* 358). ‘Stone is hard’, originally a product of the imaginative and erroneous proposition of causality between nerve-stimulus and object, is transformed into a concept, an idea that designates an outside, objective fact or truth. Hence, the origin of truth and reality is subjective; an assumption that a relation of causality exists between nerve-stimulus and percept.

The method through which human subjects construct their social realities happens by means of forgetfulness: “Only by means of forgetfulness can man ever arrive at imagining that he possesses “truth” in that degree just indicated” (Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lying* 358). After the first formulation of imaginative subjective ideas or concepts through nerve-stimulus sound, and by virtue of repetitive usage, man forgets the original process through which these ideas were created. They become fixed and idolized concepts; they are treated as objective truths and realities:

What therefore is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically, intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seem to a notion fixed, canonic, and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions. (Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lying* 359)

Truth is the metaphor of believing that ideas are suitable reflections of an objective knowledge existing in the outside world. Following Nietzsche's exploration, accurate perception as the adequate expression of an object in the subject does not exist (Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lying* 361). Truth is an artistic creation of the human subject after he forgets that original metaphors of perception are metaphors and take them for, "things in themselves" (Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lying* 360).

Thus, truth and reality are formed and created through a linguistic construction of a human subject who projects his own perception on outside percepts and establish them as real, by practice of forgetfulness. The realities of the world for human beings are similar to realities of the fictional world for fictional characters. Both exist inside a world they think it contains an objective, sublime truth, and are unaware that it is formed through their own narratives.

Subsequently, Nietzsche poses the following question, why does man ignore the process of subjective formation of truth through linguistic construction? According to Nietzsche, such a realization would bring the destruction of the human subject. The human being has always relied on the idea that there exists a transcendental, fixed truth in form of a metaphysical world free of corruption, death, change and suffering. Henceforth, the purpose of human existence is to discover the immaculate world by acquiring the true, positive knowledge. Such acquisition brings unity and completeness to the human character, in other words brings him happiness: "Happiness can be guaranteed only by

being; change and happiness exclude one another. The highest desire therefore, contemplates unity with that of being. This is the formula for, “the road to the highest happiness” (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* 366). Then, man’s primal goal becomes a fulfillment of a desire, a drive toward happiness: “Man projects his drive to truth, his “goal” in a certain sense, outside himself as a world that has being. . .” (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* 366).

Man creates a world that reflects his basic desire for happiness; this desire is insatiable, unchanging and in constant need for satisfaction. That is why the human subject hates change, ephemerality, alteration and values fixation, totality and completeness. He finds relief in the fixed and unchangeable because he is in constant fear to lose happiness if the order of things changes. Then, by valuing an unchangeable truth, man values a constant desire for happiness: “Obviously, the will to truth is here merely the desire for a world of the constant” (Nietzsche. *The Will to Power* 366).

The subject’s desire for happiness necessitates the existence of objects for this desire. These objects are not present inside the subject, but outside. Therefore, the existence of a ‘world in itself’ and ‘objects in themselves’ independent from the subject becomes a necessary factor for desire fulfillment and happiness. In addition, if a world in itself does not exist, a subject in itself cannot exist as well. If the world is a production of the subject, therefore, the subject is completely dependent on this world because he has no other world to exist inside. When the subject does not exist inside a world, it is hard to think of a subject as a being, an entity in time and place. Hence, the destruction of the idea of a real world outside the subject destroys the idea of a real subject and destroys the idea of existence. The invention of a ‘world in itself’ and a ‘subject in itself’ are

necessary to have a sense of existence and to have objects for the subjects' desires. Thus, man creates a world inside which he guarantees his own existence and happiness. Man creates a world of metaphors and projects them onto outside objects, later he refers to the world of metaphors as real and true. In other words, man brings forth what secures his happiness, existence and survival. This practice ties together the imaginative and the real as two entities which the human subject cannot escape because his presence and existence is related to them. So, the human subject turns his essential problem into a solution, a way toward safety and restfulness.

Nietzsche admires this process through which the subject preserves his existence and entity: "One may here well admire man, who succeeded in piling up an infinitely complex dome of ideas on a movable foundation and as it were on running water, as powerful genius architecture" (Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lying* 360). This genius architect has managed to create a powerful web of ideas that construct his reality. These ideas rest on a movable foundation in the form of an arbitrary relationship of nerve-stimulus-sound and percepts. Nevertheless, the admiration for the genius architect, or this instinct of survival should not be confused with the impulse for truth. As Nietzsche says, if someone hides a thing behind a bush, seeks it again and finds it in the same place, then this cannot be considered a discovery (Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lying* 360).

What this idea suggests is that man needs to live in a world that has some certainties, standpoints and positive knowledge or truths. The annihilation of all these transcendental models destroys the subject as a thinking and rational being. That is why the subject invents those certainties and realities through language and forgets that these

realities are his own linguistic invention. But, this process of invention and forgetfulness is a necessary one because outside this construct, self-consciousness would be destroyed:

. . . only by the invincible faith, that *this* sun, *this* window, *this* table is a truth in itself: in short, only by the fact that man forgets himself as subject, and what is more as an *artistically creating* subject: only by all this does he live with some repose, safety, and consequence. If he were able to get out of the prison walls of this faith, even for an instant only, his “self-consciousness” would be destroyed at once. (Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lying* 361)

Nonetheless, this admired instinct for self-preservation and artistic creation does not have positive outcome in all circumstances and cases. If revoking the idea of a real world in itself destroys self-consciousness, on the other hand, the belief in a transcendental, complete reality also destroys consciousness through suppression and hegemony. This is what happens when subjectively constructed ideas and concepts are regarded as absolute truths; they are transformed into dominant ideologies and practices, such as morality.

According to Nietzsche, morality is a system of rules which we have forgotten their genealogy; that they are formed by a human subject through linguistic construction. Moral concepts, similar to all human concepts are formed through the process of nerve-stimulus sound projected on a certain percept. By virtue of forgetfulness, the human subject forgets his artistic creation and deals with it as an object in itself, a reality, a concept in itself or a truth.

A morality, a mode of living tried and proved by long experience and testing, at length enters consciousness as a law, as dominating and therewith the entire group of related values and states enters into it: it becomes venerable, unassailable, holy, true; it is part of its development that its origin should be forgotten, that is a sign it has become master. (Nietzsche, *The Will* 363)

It becomes clear that in this case, Nietzsche has a problem with the process of forgetting the origin of moral concepts. At one point, he regarded the artistic subject as a genius engineer who deserves some admiration because of his ability to preserve his existence and consciousness by framing a world he can live in and forgetting the original rules of this formation. However, taken from a different perspective, this practice creates dominant, suppressive notions and constructs like morality, or, as I would argue later, using a Foucaultian analysis, sexuality.

Dominance is achieved when powerful social groups or individuals use language to serve their own benefits. As Nietzsche previously demonstrated, human beings project their own percepts onto outside objects to form concepts and realities. This process makes language a tool through which the real is constructed; nevertheless, this tool and process are not equally available for all individuals and subjects. If each individual creates his own system of understanding, we would have an infinite number of ideas, percepts, concepts and realities. Such a stand takes us back to a fragmented world composed of different realities and truths where there exist no sense of certainty and completeness. But as stated before, the human subject cannot live in a world of fragmented realities and truths; these constructs should be definite, complete and holistic.

Transcendental and holistic narratives are created by certain social groups or individuals who use the tool of linguistic construction to formulate realities suiting their own benefits; later, these narratives become transcendental and fixed truths. The result of this practice creates common systems of beliefs and values called ideology, culture or morality: “It is the powerful who made the names of things into law, and among the powerful it is the greatest artists in abstraction who created the categories” (Nietzsche,

*The Will to Power* 363). When the powerful artists transform names into laws they create narratives of dominance and hegemony, or what can be called meta-narratives. These metanarratives which have a speculative and metaphorical nature, categorize other narratives and practices as moral and immoral, legal and illegal, good and evil.

Nietzsche says: “. . . So that morality itself were to blame if man, as species, never reached his highest potential power and splendor? So that morality itself was the danger of dangers? . . .” (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 8). Nietzsche regards morality as a vice and danger because it has become a tool for dominance and hegemony, a metanarrative imposed by powerful groups of people on others. As a social example of his theory, Nietzsche offers a critique of what he calls the Judeo-Christian system of morality. As he puts it, forgetting the genealogy of this system, its linguistic formation (nerve-stimulus and percept) allowed a certain social group to force its moral narrative as fixed laws categorizing good and evil: “Assuming that what is at any rate believed as ‘truth’ were indeed true, that is the meaning of all culture to breed a tame and civilized animal” (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 24).

Nietzsche asks for an acknowledgment of the structured nature of truth-value systems and narratives. This should be followed by an investigation of the genealogy and historical formation of these truth-value narratives:

We need a critique of moral values, the value of these values should itself, for once, be examined – and so we need to know about the conditions and circumstances under which the values grew-up, developed and changed. . . since we have neither had this knowledge up till now nor even desired it. People have taken the value of these ‘values’ as given, as factual, as beyond all questioning. (Nietzsche, *On Genealogy* 8)

To avoid hegemony of fixed realities and to avoid distortion of imagination we need to address, investigate and criticize the value of absolutist discourses of value, bringing their

origin and formation into question. By questioning the origin of reality formulated through these truth-value narratives, we acknowledge the influence and importance of imagination. This conversation brings forth a rational and healthy subject who is not suppressed by realistic hegemony, nor fragmented by an ephemeral imagination. In both cases, this conversation cannot be conducted except through language.

Gender and sexuality, as discussed later in this chapter, mainly through Foucault and Butler, and in the analysis of the texts under consideration, adopt the same Nietzschean theoretical framework. Gender and sexuality are language constructs elaborated inside systems of power relations that have been taken as fixed truth-value systems. Uncovering the genealogy, or history of these systems and pointing out their linguistic constructed nature is essential to deconstruct and reshape their current hegemonic and oppressive nature.

With the advancement of structuralism and later postmodernism, the notion of reality as a textual structure that is always ephemeral and changing by the practice of construction and deconstruction of narrative structures became predominant. Some feminist scholars were suspicious of the idea of a world based on an ephemeral textual reality deemed detrimental to the feminist project. Others championed that same idea as a much needed reformulation of the traditional, grand narratives of patriarchal nature.

Postmodernism shed doubt on the grand historical metadiscourses or metanarratives. Jean Francois Lyotard's famous slogan is quite telling: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences" (xxiv). The progress in sciences, particularly technology, changed people's way of visualizing and conceptualizing the



world. The old transcendental, metaphysical narratives by which Lyotard designates any science that legitimates itself referring to a metadiscourse or some grand narrative such as the dialectics of spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject (xxviii) are dismantled. These transcendental discourses used to function as sources of legitimacy for people's discursive practices, and cognitive models to evaluate their actions. These discourses created a certain world order which Lyotard calls 'the condition of knowledge' that defined and governed how people relate to the world and consequently how this world functions. The world was and is structured around the grand metaphysical narratives; the dismantling of the foundations of this structure altered the world as we know it and reconstructed a new world order which Lyotard refers to as postmodern. Thus, it becomes evident that at the heart of this new postmodern world lies the 'crisis of narratives' as Lyotard suggests, that is, the radical change in the function and authority of narrative. Dismantling the grand narratives is the loss of faith in their former function as sources of authority, truth and value; also called sources of legitimacy. Lyotard contends that language has a predominant aspect which he calls 'pragmatic': "Emphasizing facts of language and in particular their pragmatic aspect" (9).

The operational nature of language has nothing to do with grand scales of unification and organization. At the contrary, language moves are heterogeneous; they don't create unified, organic bodies, but give rise to what Lyotard calls institutions in patches – local determinism: "The social bond is linguistic, but is not woven with a single thread. It is a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number) of language games, obeying different rules" (Lyotard 40). Thus, the theoretical knowledge based on the ideas of unity, emancipation and progress is

imposed on these heterogeneous language games from above giving them a false appearance of homogeneity. In reality, they are metaphysical and transcendental implying that they don't belong to the nature of the linguistic element.

When the grand narratives of unity and critical knowledge are disseminated, all what is left is a linguistic game of reciprocal utterances and moves or performances. In the postmodern age, knowledge descends from the realm of the transcendental which legitimizes the heterogeneous language games and gives the social bond a fake unity, to the level of the game itself. Thus, that very game becomes the new generator of knowledge, the source of its own legitimacy: "That is what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narratives. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction" (Lyotard 41).

Feminism and feminist theory had a contentious relationship with postmodernism. On the one hand, the deconstruction of metadiscourses and metanarratives of legitimacy, truth- value systems is at the heart of the feminist practice. On the other hand, some feminist/female critics saw postmodernism as a project of dismantling foundations which ultimately hurt the feminist cause. This contentious position is articulated as back and forth responses between a group of feminist critics including Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser. The book is entitled *Feminist Contentions, a Philosophical Exchange*.

In her essay entitled "Feminism and Postmodernism: an Uneasy alliance", Benhabib warns from feminist alliance with postmodernism. She states that the struggle against the grand narratives of Western enlightenment brings feminism and

postmodernism together. However, certain characterizations of postmodernism should make us ask the question “feminism or postmodernism?”. At the heart of her critic is what she calls the death of man, death of history and death of metaphysics, arguing, that each of these deaths does not serve the feminist argument and its project of emancipation. Postmodernism preaches the death of the man or the subject as a unified, holistic entity: “the subject thus dissolves into the chain of signification of which it was supposed to be the initiator. Along with this dissolution of the subject into yet “another position in language” disappear of course concepts of intentionality, accountability, self-reflexivity, and autonomy” (Benhabib 20).

According to Benhabib, the death of the unified, autonomous subject in the chain of signification can be detrimental to the feminist project because it takes away agency. A subject who does not have autonomy and unity cannot have agency. In this regard, Benhabib criticizes Butler’s notion of gender performativity stating that it reduces female’s agency to a “doing without a doer” (Benhabib 22).

The second point of criticism in Benhabib’s analysis is the death of history. Benhabib acknowledges that history is a metanarrative written and told mainly by men. And while a call to end the practice of grand narratives might be understandable, however, the death of history might also mean a death of the project of emancipation of historical figures and historical narratives considered marginalized by the grand discourses of history of patriarchal nature: “Can feminist theory be postmodernist and still retain an interest in emancipation?” (Benhabib 24). Finally, Benhabib contends that the death of metaphysics might lead to the death of the very subject matter of the feminist project: “Social criticism without philosophy is not possible, and without social criticism

the project of a feminist theory, which is committed at once to knowledge and to the emancipatory interests of women is inconceivable” (Benhabib 25).

In her reply to Benhabib’s essay, Judith Butler contends that the practice of deconstruction and resignification of narrative and the subject, does not mean the deconstruction of agency or the subject as a political and social entity: “To claim that politics requires a stable subject is to claim that there can be no political opposition to that claim” (Butler, *Feminist Contentions* 36). Butler opens her essay asking the question “what is postmodernism” and states that terms like post-structuralism, deconstruction and postmodernism gets convoluted together when they mean different things and when the theorists behind them like Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault and others were not always in accordance with each other:

In a sense, this gesture of conceptual mastery that groups together a set of positions under the postmodern, that makes the postmodern into an epoch or a synthetic whole, and that claims that the part can stand for this artificially constructed whole, enacts certain self-congratulatory ruse of power. (Butler, *Feminist Contention* 38)

For Butler, postmodernism, socialist and feminist theory in general, are bound by the analysis and investigation of the structures and practices of power relations within narrative and philosophy:

I don’t know about the term “postmodern,” but if there is a point, and a fine point, to what I perhaps better understand as poststructuralism, it is that power pervades the very conceptual apparatus that seeks to negotiate its terms. . . that this implication of the terms of criticism in the field of power is not the advent of a nihilistic relativism incapable of furnishing norms, but, rather, the very precondition of a politically engaged critique. (Butler, *Feminist Contentions* 39)

Thus, for Butler, questioning foundations is not to do away with foundations. But, it is to question what these foundations, as theoretical positions, include and exclude. It is to question the power relations that go into these foundations. Similarly, according to

Butler, stating that the subject “I” is culturally and linguistically constituted, is not equivalent to say the “I” is fragmented and can’t claim an agency: “The critique of the subject is not a negation or repudiation of the subject, but, rather, a way of interrogating its construction as a pre-given or foundationalist premise” (Butler, *Feminist Contentions* 42). According to Butler, the constituted character of the subject is the very premise of its agency:

But to claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency. For what is it that enables a purposive and significant reconfiguration of cultural and political relations, if not a relation that can be turned against itself, reworked, resisted. (Butler, *Feminist Contentions* 46)

Applying her ideas to feminist theory and the subject of feminism, Butler calls for a resignification of the subject, a reworking and re-questioning of the constructs of its formation and epistemological given. It is opening the term to new meanings, significations and connotations that might free it from the oppressive ontological concepts attributed to it:

Paradoxically, it may be that only through releasing the category of women from a fixed referent that something like “agency” becomes possible. For if the term permits of a resignification, if its referent is not fixed, then possibilities for new configurations of the term become possible. In a sense, what women signify has been taken for granted for too long, and what has been fixed as the “referent” of the term has been “fixed,” normalized, immobilized, paralyzed in positions of subordination. In effect, the signified has been conflated with the referent, whereby a set of meanings have been taken to inhere in the real nature of women themselves. To recast the referent as the signified, and to authorize or safeguard the category of women as a site of possible resignifications is to expand the possibilities of what it means to be a woman and in this sense to condition and enable an enhanced sense of agency. (Butler, *Feminist Contentions* 50).

Thus, Butler is calling for a kind of deconstruction and re-signification of the term woman based on the premise of the constructed nature of narrative and subject: “To deconstruct these terms means, rather, to continue to use them, to repeat them, to repeat them subversively, and to displace them from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power” (Butler 51). Butler’s position is in direct alignment with the overarching theoretical and thematic position discussed in this dissertation; specifically, the elements of subversion and re-signification discussed in the three works under consideration. As it becomes clear from the arguments of Butler, Nietzsche, Lyotard and others, such a deconstruction and resignification should happen discursively by addressing the genealogy of narratively constructed discourses.

For example, in *Brooklyn Heights* I argue that the protagonist is a woman at odds with the fact of being a woman. As Butler suggests, the term has become an oppressive descriptive identity category in need of being deconstructed and re-opened to new meanings, connotations and possibilities. In *It’s Called Passion*, a novel with a postmodern, solipsist and metafictional structure, the only site of hope and triumph for its female characters is the access to discourse through storytelling and writing. This access symbolizes a resignification of the predominant patriarchal narratives on women, their lives, bodies and sexualities. As humans, we are produced as subjects within a given network of discourse/power relations. Agency, hope, resistance or revolution lies in the possibility of bringing forward a new form of discourse/power relations through analyzing, reworking and re-signifying pre-existing discourses and narratives: “if the subject is a reworking of the very discursive processes by which it is worked, then “agency” is to be found in the possibilities of resignification opened by discourse” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 135).

A similar position is advanced by Drucilla Cornell in the same exchange between Butler and Benhabib. Cornell says: “Feminism demands nothing less than the unleashing of the feminine imaginary - an imaginary made possible, paradoxically, by the lack of grounding of the feminine in any of the identifications we know and imagine as woman” (Cornell 147). Cornell’s premise is linked to her analysis of Lacan’s theory of the ‘phallus’ and the female position in this theory as advanced by Lacan. We enter our culture as speaking subjects through a traumatic event, the cut from the maternal body, a cut from this imaginary world of fulfilled desires. The law that imposes this symbolic castration is the law of the imaginary father or patriarchal culture. The signifier for this patriarchal culture is the phallus which is of masculine nature. The male finds himself compelled to identify with the phallus, this symbolic cultural order of patriarchal nature leaving the female as the other in this equation. As the other, the female is trapped in a dilemma of accessing and living in the symbolic order which is of masculine/phallic nature. As Cornell says: “For Lacan, the law of civilization is that we as women are denied access to a field of signification in which we could re-symbolize ourselves and have the “words to say” who we are” (Cornell 90). That’s why Lacan refers to the female as lack. The female has to access and function in a culture that symbolically is of masculine, phallic nature.

However, it is at this point that Cornell situates the agency of the female, precisely because of her position as the other or lack in the symbolic phallocentric culture. Freud and Lacan after him, are both accused of producing phallocentric theories; of taking man as the normal and woman as what is different from it. However, a number of feminist and non-feminist critics have explained, since then, that Freud and Lacan were mainly explaining the mechanisms through which subjects enter the social order and

become functioning individuals in what Lacan refers to as ‘the symbolic order’; the dichotomy of the subject/world both discursively and narratively produced. This order, rather than being a natural given, is of a symbolic nature; it is constituted through language or discursive practices as stated by Lacan: “What happens in an analysis is that the subject is, strictly speaking, constituted through a discourse, to which the mere presence of the psychoanalyst brings, before any intervention, the dimension of dialogue” (Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality* 62).

Going back to Cornell, she states that Lacan’s work is implicated with the symbolic construction of femininity, and masculinity for that matter. According to Cornell, the analysis of this symbolic construction should not be conflated with actual women. There is always a gap between these constructions and the lives of actual women. It’s within this gap, opened by the difference between the construction and actual lives that feminism operates. This gap means that there can be no empirical or positive truth to who we are as women or to the sexual differences of the two genders. The female as other, as lack, means that the feminine signifier is not fixed, even symbolically. Thus, the feminine signifier can always be reworked, re-signified, constructed and deconstructed: “

If woman is lack, and thus, in Lacan’s sense lacking meaning, she can “be” anything. The impossibility of absolutely fixing the meaning of woman yields endless transformative possibility. And because of this impossibility we can challenge any theory that supposedly imprisons us in the truth of our difference. We can also operate within the gap between these constructions and our actual lives and, consequently, open the space for the enactment of new choreographies of sexual difference. (Cornell 87)

The analysis of the three novels under consideration in this dissertation explore the ways in which the female characters are addressing their position of other and lack in their cultural settings. These characters are accessing the public space, becoming visible,



using discourse to let their voices be heard. They are, by definition operating within this gap between the phallic/patriarchal symbolic order and the realities of their lives.

Operating within this gap, they are re-signifying discursive narratives pertaining to the symbolic order and attempting to change the realities of their lives. The female protagonist of *Brooklyn Heights* roaming the streets of New York City, the same sex relations in *The Cinnamon's Aroma* and the extra-matrimonial sexual relations in *It's Called Passion*, to name few examples, are non-conformist and defying acts in real life transmuted to the symbolic order by the act of writing and storytelling, by the fact that we have these accounts written in novelistic form.

This brings me to Foucault's discussion of the mechanisms of repression and proliferation of the discourses of sexuality and the significance of talking about sex. In a form of historical analysis, Foucault was interested in analyzing the historical, social and cultural forces that went into the elaboration of what he calls 'sexual discourses'. In other words, Foucault was trying to answer the question of how sex entered discourse forming what he calls 'discursive facts' and shaping a narrative, we now call sexuality; or what can be also called, the truth about sex. How did we come to know what we know about sexual practices and establish a truth about sex, is similar to Nietzsche's analysis of how the truth about morality got established. The relation of sex to truth (discursive fact) cannot escape the relation of truth to power and discourse or language: "The object, in short, is to define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in our part of the world. . . What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all "discursive fact," the way in which sex is "put into discourse.'" (Foucault 11). Foucault maintains that institutions of power like the church, through the practice of confession which, for a long time centered on the importance of confessing the intimate details of

people's sexual acts, or the state through the apparatuses of institutions of jurisdiction and knowledge like the courts, science or medicine elaborate these discourses and disseminate them as knowledge, or the truth about sex.

However, the elaboration, dissemination and circulation of these discourses are not open and free. They operate through, and by a mechanism of repression and exclusion to insure a kind of sexuality (the true knowledge about sexual acts) that is economically useful and politically conservative. This is what defines 'normal' in terms of sexual behavior; a sexuality beneficial for the socio-economic system in place, elaborated by institutions related to this system like the church, the university, the hospital and others. This is why, for Foucault: "Truth is not by nature free, nor error servile, but that its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power. The confession is an example" (Foucault 60).

Foucault presents us with a complex and intriguing analysis of discourse formation and its relation to knowledge-truth-power triad. This formation relies on a practice of proliferation and repression in the sense of allowing talks about sex to proliferate through certain controlled avenues like church's confessions, medical and scientific observation and information gathering in places like hospitals, clinics or asylums. However, the purpose of this proliferation is actually to conceal or repress certain speech-act form like practices, deemed immoral or unnatural, allowing a specific speech-act or discourse-truth form like narrative to circulate and become dominant. This discourse, or what Foucault calls "discursive fact" embodying the truth of sex is elaborated by, and serves the interests of certain power structures that helped bring it forward and disseminated it as truth and normal, excluding other discourses/practices as abnormal or pathological. This is how Foucault explains the power-knowledge-truth-pleasure relationship.

Hence, discourses and practices circulating outside the established, conventional avenues, or we can say outside truth or the normal are subversive by the nature and by the fact of their very existence outside the channels created by the knowledge-truth-power-pleasure complex. They were originally excluded from the knowledge-truth construction process because of their perceived threat and lack of benefit for the established cultural order in place.

According to Foucault, if repression has been the fundamental link between power, knowledge and sexuality, it stands that in order to free ourselves, there is no other way but to break with repression and the rules or discourses created by this power-knowledge-pleasure structure: “nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power will be required. For the least glimmer of truth is conditioned by politics” (Foucault 6). The way I understand Foucault’s premise is a reworking of the types of established relations between power-knowledge-truth structure through practice and discourse. It is what Cornell calls working in the gap between the established relations or meaning of the symbolic order and real life experiences.

Foucault’s analysis is important to my general argument in this dissertation as it pertains to the three works under consideration in this study. The female authors under consideration, and their protagonists are trying to deconstruct or challenge what Foucault calls discursive fact about women and about sexual acts. These novels, directly or indirectly map this knowledge-power-truth relation revealing that what we call the truth of sexuality, the normal and abnormal, the permissible and impermissible are discursive construct created to serve the established socio-political order. As Foucault says, to speak about sex is to defy the established law and somehow anticipate the coming of freedom.

The same is true of practicing sexual acts outside what is defined as acceptable, normal or natural avenues. Hence, what we see in these texts, but also in women's literature in general, is a constant and open talk about sex and free exploration with sexuality.

Foucault delineates how truth value systems gets established and enforced by law through practices of discursive repression and dissemination. In other words, he delineates how the normal gets to be formed and imposed. On the other hand, through these texts, I analyze the ways of subverting and uprooting what is called normal because, as Foucault says, truth, normal or natural never exist outside the realm of political power relations. Change and hope lies in this gap between the symbolic order and reality, as Cornell states, which allows a reworking of those power relations on the discursive and real life levels. This project happens on the level of language and discourse.

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Since the rise of the Arabic novel and short story in the early twentieth century, Arabic fiction has become an increasingly important vessel for the negotiation and discussion of political, social and cultural issues ranging from questions of identity, nationalism, women's rights, oppression and more recently issues of globalization, migration, hybridity and otherness among other topics. Associated with progressive politics, the novel was and still the main literary form employed to discuss and question controversial issues or advancing progressive and subversive points of view. Hence, it is not surprising that Arab women took advantage of this new and rising literary genre for articulating the complexities and intricacies surrounding gender relations and sexuality roles within the, more often than not, violent and oppressive contexts or societies in many parts of the Arab world. The novel, once considered an imported Western literary genre,

is now considered an integral part of Arabic culture and the main form of literary production.

The Arabic novel explores pressing social and political realities by means of a variety of ideological perspectives, sophisticated textual forms and flexibility of power relations. The novel has increasingly become an element of social and political form of resistance and engagement in the pressing cultural issues. Thus, the Arabic novel conveys a plurality and multiplicity of competing voices arranged in dialogical setting.

The political, religious and cultural censorship that has historically limited freedom of expression in the Arab world is also the reason why Arab authors have adapted a variety of experimental forms and have resorted to creative innovation in terms of creative writing to circumvent established boundaries and address taboo subjects. This included criticism of corrupt governments, political and economic corruption, and, of course discussions of sex and sexuality.

In terms of addressing taboo subjects, especially sex and sexuality, we find a good amount of novels, especially those written by women, overtly and graphically talking about sex and sexual acts. In this regard, in addition to the three authors under consideration in this dissertation, we can mention Nawal el-Saadawy (1931), Hanan al-Shaykh (1945), Salwa al-Nuaimy (mid 1950s), Ghada Samman (1942) among others.

In shifting their attention from realist modes of representation, Arab authors in general and women in particular used these new forms of expression to focus on the interiority of the novel and the inner interactions or interrelations of characters and dialogues. This experimental tendency has opened new trajectories for Arab female authors who have employed innovative techniques such as interior monologue, stream of consciousness, multiple voices, solipsism, fragmentation, non-linear narrative among

other techniques. These techniques aimed to depict different spatial and temporal modalities, ambiguity, fluidity and relativity of meaning, deconstruction of established settings among others. This has resulted in a full spectrum of narratives that have set out to explore more profoundly the psychology of the character and the effects of oppression, repression, marginalization, sequestration, desire and sexuality. These techniques have also brought forward more characters that are unresolved, complex and constantly developing. The complexity of characters and open-ended form of a lot of novels also helped in shaping and positing sites of hope and emancipation in the future.

Similar to the three novels under consideration in this dissertation, Arabic novels, especially women's novels are unresolved, complex, open-ended stories that, more often than not, use a non-linear narrative plot. This can be attributed to the authors' situations, writing from contexts hostile to freedom of speech and positions of oppression and marginalization in the case of female authors. Innovation in terms of writing technique and complex, open ended stories and characters is a way to transcend a gloomy reality locating sites of hope and emancipation in the realm of the imaginary and the future.

These techniques were employed by many authors, males and females in an attempt to capture their chaotic and ambiguous impressions of contexts of war, corruption and oppression, through experimentation, stream of consciousness and fractured narratives. The Lebanese war novels provide an abundance of these narrative techniques with authors like Elias Khoury and Ghada Samman as examples.

*Al-Jabal Al-Saghir* (1977) (*Little Mountain*) by Elias Khoury is an influential work in the field of Lebanese civil war narratives. Stylistically it is a postmodern, fragmented novel with a plethora of different voices mirroring the disorientation, chaos, destruction and sense of internal psychological division prevalent during the Lebanese

civil war. The novel follows five male characters in their attempt to make sense of the war in which they have been caught up.

Ghada Samman's *Kawabis Bayrut (Beirut Nightmares)* 1976 features a girl trapped in her apartment in the middle of the civil war and unable to go out safely. Due to the lack of action because of the heroine's solitary imprisonment in her house, Samman resorts to devices, such as nightmares, to give the novel a plot of action and internal unity. The novel is written as a series of nightmares. Through these nightmares, Samman creates a fantasy world inhabited not only by people, but by abstract ideas like death or religious holidays acting as characters.

However, as Evelyn Accad argues in *Sexuality and War, Literary Masks of the Middle East*, female protagonists in novels written by women realize that their oppression is strongly tied to their gender and sexual identity and tend to seek non-violent, alternative personal and social solutions. Their stories are transcendental in the sense of denouncing violence and oppression while situating a site of hope, healing and emancipation even in the fictional realm. Sometimes, in these novels, death itself is portrayed as an act of resistance, freedom and emancipation. Whereas male writers and protagonists continue to reinforce the patriarchal order and practice acts of revenge and violence. Men's novels usually have more pessimistic structures in the sense of fragmented, alienated and tragic characters unable to transcend their tragedies. The titles of part two and three (Women Unmask War) versus (War Unveils Men) is quite revealing. Women as the subject of unmasking alludes to the fact of being the agents of revealing the truth about war and exposing it; whereas men, as the object of 'unveils' alludes to the fact that war unmasks and exposes the reality of men; a point Accad makes it clear drawing a relation between patriarchy, nationalism and war.

Contemporary women's writing in the Arab world engages with cultural, social and political issues involving women's position in societal and familial structures. There is a long and rich tradition of female authorship in the Arab world, starting with the pre-Islamic period with poets like Al-Khansa' (575-664) and the figure of Shahrazad in the *Arabian Nights* who remains an influential and inspiring character even for contemporary Arab women authors. Throughout the pre-modern period, women continued to add to the tradition of producing poetry. Famous names from this period include Wallada Bint al-Mistaqfi, Rabi'a al-'Adawiya as well as slave girl poets.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, as girls were given access to primary and then secondary education, women started to contribute in a meaningful way to the fields of journalism, literary salons and the emerging genre of the novel. In his seminal work, *Arab Women Writers, the Formative Years and Beyond*, Joseph T. Zeidan calls this generation of women writers, spanning roughly from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, 'the pioneering generation'. They come mainly from Lebanon and Egypt, but mainly from Lebanon if we take into consideration that a number of them emigrated from Lebanon to Egypt. Zeidan describes the challenges this generation of women writers faced at a time where girls' education was still considered an immoral act and a sin, by many. From among those who were educated and became writers, mainly belonging to the elites, they had to face issues of sequestration, veiling, marriage and family responsibilities and lack of access to the public space. In addition, women's attempt to make contributions to Arabic literature was faced by heated controversy from some prominent male writers of the time who cast doubt on women's artistic and literary creativity because of their gender. As Zeidan puts it: "The pioneering generation of Arab women writers worked under serious handicaps insofar as the male-dominated society



was not ready for their endeavors. The social and intellectual restrictions imposed on women were so rigid that one wonders how they were able to express themselves at all” (Zeidan 82).

Some of the most influential names of this period are, Zaynab Fawaz<sup>1</sup>, ‘A’isha Taymur<sup>2</sup> and Mayy Ziyada<sup>3</sup> who owned one of the most famous Arabic literary salons in Egypt. They all addressed women’s issues such as access to education, veiling, sequestration and exclusion from the public space in the Egyptian press and in fiction writing. They also discussed issues of national and religious identity. The most important contribution of the pioneering generation is their revival of a women’s literary culture, their struggle to access a literary field dominated by male figures and struggle to write and talk about issues of female emancipation in a more often than not hostile and unsupportive environment. As Zeidan states, the pioneering generation were aware they were accessing a male-dominated arena and remained hesitant and apologetic. Even when they advocated for women’s rights and emancipation they stressed the importance of the traditional roles of women as mothers and wives and the importance of family life and values.

Nonetheless, this period is marked by the advent of equal access to education and later the emergence of Arab feminist movement, driven in the twentieth century by

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<sup>1</sup> Zaynab Fawwaz (1860 – 1914) was born in South Lebanon. She later immigrated to Alexandria, where she became a writer concerned with the emancipation of Arab women.

<sup>2</sup> ‘A’isha Taymur (1840 – 1902) was one of the most important Arab writers in the second half of the nineteenth century. She belonged to an elite family and spoke Turkish and Persian in addition to Arabic. She was home schooled by tutors mainly due to the progressive views of her father.

<sup>3</sup> Mayy Ziyada was born in Nazareth to a Lebanese Maronite father and Palestinian mother. She immigrated to Egypt and wrote in both French and Arabic.

women journalists, authors and activists such as Nawal el-Saadawy<sup>4</sup>. This period fostered a resurgence of Arab female literary tradition. However, such developments were perceived as driven externally, by colonial and post-colonial forces and thought, as evidenced by the fact that most schools were Western missionary schools and the novel as Western imported literary form that went through a long process of adaptation creating conflicting positions toward the novelistic genre that have yet to be solved.

It was not until the late fifties and sixties that Arab women started to produce influential narrative works engaging with social, political and cultural issues, also opening new horizons for women's resistance against oppressive and manipulative apparatuses of rigid patriarchal traditions in the Arab world encouraging discussions of new identities and challenging women's position within the prevalent gender and power relations. These texts do not conceal the existence of submission, oppression and despair, existing parallel to their counterparts: resistance, defiance, achievement and hope. Joseph T. Zeidan labels this form of production which some would argue its essential features and subject matters still exist to this day, 'the quest for individual and later national identity'. It is distinguished by a revolt of women against the rigid social constraints that prevented them from asserting their individual identities and making their own decisions about their lives.

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<sup>4</sup> Nawal el-Saadawy (1931) was born in Kafr Tahla in Egypt. She earned a degree in medicine from Ayn Shams University and studied at Columbia University in New York. El-Saadawy is a feminist writer, activist, physician, and psychiatrist. El-Saadawy remains a prominent novelist, writer and activist today.

The first contemporary novel by a woman that ushered this era is Layla Ba‘albaky’s<sup>5</sup> *Ana Ahya (I Live)* in 1958. The title of the novel, using the first person ‘I’ and ‘live’, will become a distinctive feature of Arab women texts talking about themselves and their lives. In *The Arabic Novel, an Historical and Critical Introduction*, Roger Allen highlights the importance of this work, observing that “the very title presents a forceful statement, a challenge. The account of family relationships and feelings is no longer given within the framework of a distant, omniscient third-person narrative, but shifts to a direct first-person experiential montage” (Allen 104). The use of first person, the distinctive feature of this and later works from this period, also made them controversial as they granted their female narrators a challenging, defying voice as Allen observes in *Modern Arabic Literature*: “In this novel Layla Ba‘albaki declares open revolt, the revolt of the girls of the Middle East against their present reality. She rebels against the emptiness of life. . . and everything that is tawdry about our social relationships and the way people think” (Allen 69). Ba‘albaky’s criticism of religion and sexually explicit stories brought her to trial while her work was censored. Ba‘albaky’s work was followed by a number of works addressing similar topics including Colette Al-Khury’s<sup>6</sup> *Ayyam Ma‘ahu (Days with Him)* in (1959) and Emily Nasralla’s<sup>7</sup> *Tuyur Aylul (The Birds of September)* in (1962) as well as several other works.

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<sup>5</sup> Layla Ba‘albaky was born in Southern Lebanon in 1934. She was a journalist and wrote novels and short stories. Her two influential works are *I Live* and *The Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon*.

<sup>6</sup> Colette Al-Khury was born in Damascus in 1931 into a Christian family. She comes from a notable, elite family. She is a novelist and a poet.

<sup>7</sup> Emily Nasrallah was born in Southern Lebanon. She is a novelist, journalist and scholar, and has won a number of awards for her fiction.

Despite the influential and revolutionary nature of this literature in terms of style and subject matter, it did however suffer shortcomings. The representation of the male character in these texts is often plain and unconvincing; mainly presented as villain. Zeidan attributes this to the fact that these authors were very young when they wrote their books and didn't have much contact with men due to the seclusion of women in Arab societies. They did not have direct experience of what men really are and how they lived their lives. These novels with their quest for personal identity, rely heavily on the lives of their authors. The autobiographical and semi-autobiographical nature of these texts meant these authors tended to exhaust their material in their first book so the following ones were repetitions or expansion of previously discussed topics. The mastery of the art of writing dialogues, usually offered in colloquial, and the different levels of sophistication within the colloquial language proved to be another problem for these writers. This might be due to the fact that most of these women novelists were partly educated in a foreign language and did not have the same exposure to Arabic literature like their male counterparts.

A major leap came with the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war and the development of what would come to be known as the Lebanese civil war narratives. Joseph T. Zeidan states: "The volume of the women's contributions to fiction on the Lebanese civil war is impressive" (Zeidan 191). The Lebanese literary critic Yumna al-'Id observes that during this time period: "writers explored the contradiction and complexities of reality and its possible ramifications, and they worked on creating a multi-pronged discourse whose language expressed multiple viewpoints and nuances in diction, mindful of speech variations in a society that was becoming more sharply divided

and on the verge of civil war” (al-‘Id 30). The Lebanese civil war continue to be a background setting for many recent novels including Sobh’s *It’s Called Passion*.

Among the many important contributions by women authors to the field of the Lebanese war narratives is *Beirut ’75* by Ghada Samman. Written on the verge of the civil war and prophetically predicting its eruption, this text marks the starting point of the genre of civil war fiction. The novel traces the lives of five main characters in their journey from Damascus to Beirut. Their lives continue to intersect through the book in complex ways as they come to discover they are trapped and have no control over their destinies. Samman indicates her hope that while these five characters are unable to escape their destinies, future generations may succeed in changing those forces in the Lebanese society.

Samman’s other important Lebanese war novel is *Kawabis Beirut (Beirut Nightmares)* (1976), which I mentioned earlier. *Beirut Nightmares*, shares similar issues explored in this dissertation, especially Sobh’s *It’s Called Passion*. The protagonist entrapped in her apartment in war torn Beirut, insists on recording her experiences and thoughts, finding release and meaning in her life through writing. The activity of writing has a shared value in most of Arab women’s literature; it is often described as the true site of hope, resistance and emancipation.

*Sitt Marie Rose* (1978) by Etel Adnan is another important Lebanese civil war narrative, originally written in French. The novel is based on the true story of a Marie Rose Boulos, killed by the Christian militia (The Phalangists) because of her support for the Palestinian cause. The novel deals with violence and resistance to patriarchal society through the adoption of non-traditional gender roles.

*Hikayat Zahra* (*The Story of Zahra*, 1980) by Hanan al-Shaykh is “Possibly the most impressive work in the history of Arab women’s novels” as described by Joseph T. Zeidan. *The Story of Zahra* has been an extremely successful novel and considered a work of belles lettres in its own right. It has accumulated major critical acclaim and has been treated extensively in scholarly works. The novel tells the story of Zahra’s tumultuous life as she grows up, moves to Africa, marries, divorces and comes back once again to Beirut. Throughout this part, Zahra suffers multiple forms of oppression and abuse on the hands of multiple men but also on the hands of her mother. Also, Zahra is driven to a kind of madness or nervous breakdowns by a long history of abuse and frustration. In the second part, which takes place during the war in Beirut, Zahra finally defies patriarchal gender roles and starts a sexual relationship with a sniper stationed at a nearby building. This relationship, described as empowering and liberating, ends tragically when Zahra is shot by the sniper after she confesses to him that she is pregnant with his child and wishes to marry. The novel is an articulate, complex, shrewd political and psychological text dealing with identity crisis and its intersection with violence, war, abuse, and the interrelations of gender, sex and politics.

Even years after the end of the civil war, women kept producing novels that deals directly with the war or its aftermaths. Works such as *Ya Salaam* (1999) by Najwa Barakat, *Baa Mithil Bayt Mithil Bayrut* (*B as in Beirut* 2005), *Hayawat ukhra* (*Other Lives* 2010) by Iman Humaydan and *Maryan al-Hakaya* (*Maryam the Stories* 2002) by Alawiya Sobh whose novel *It’s Called Passion* set before, during and after the civil war is treated in this dissertation.

The Lebanese civil war novels written by women authors share thematic characteristics. They focus on violence and the body with some explicit talk about sex.

They address the patriarchal structures of oppression as well as creative means of resistance by the victims. War symbolizes a destruction of a certain prevalent order and its socio-political and gender relations. The chaos and destruction brought by the war have a twofold effect on women's lives. On one hand, women take advantage of this destruction to negotiate new positions in term of gender and sexual relations and reposition themselves in the new social reality. On the other hand, chaos and destruction bring new forms of gendered violence and oppression. Women might gain a sense of empowerment during the war, but soon enough discover that this is an ephemeral stage because of the entrenched structures of patriarchy that demonstrate remarkable temporal and spatial mobility. Thus, the war, by no means is a reliable source of freedom or liberation. The theme of madness and psychological distress is also prevalent in these stories featuring gruesome scenes of torture, violence and death. In addition to mapping the connections between gender, sexuality and violence these text discuss the relationships between women.

Parallel to women's impressive input and contributions to the Lebanese war narratives, the Palestinian issue also influenced Arab women's literary production in Palestine and in other places of the Arab world. Sahar Khalifa and her novel *al-Subbar* (*Wild Thorns* 1976) and the poet Fadwa Touqan, are essential figures. In addition to discussing gender relations and patriarchal structures inside contexts of war and violence, they discuss resistance to a foreign enemy and the effects of occupation and resistance on women's lives.

As mentioned before, the themes and subject matters treated by the generation of the late fifties and sixties as well as the themes treated in the novels of the Lebanese women authors persist to this very day affected thematically and stylistically by the

political, social and cultural changes of recent times. However, it is important to point out to the label “jyl al-tis‘inaat) translated as the nineties generation, mainly, the generation of Egyptian writers and other cultural markers whose creative works came out during the transformative years of the 1990s and early 2000s. This generation, influenced by globalization and technological development which created an interrelated world produced new discourses on identity and gender relations. The nineties generation stressed hybridity, fluidity, polyphony and intertextuality distorting from conventional binary oppositions like secular versus Islamic, male versus female, private versus public or us versus the other. Due to enhanced exposure to other cultures facilitated by the increase of movements across borders and states and a globalized economic system, otherness became an essential topic in this literature. However, instead of the binary opposition between genders, individuals or states, these works present a world of hybridity and fluidity with complex interconnections intersecting on the lines of gender, ethnic, class and racial relations. It is a world dominated by neo-liberal policies and global capitalism which ushered new forms of inequality and marginalization. The nineties generation are preoccupied with identity politics and prioritizes individual construction of female identities.

Alienation and disappointment are two main characteristics of the works of the nineties generation. Political and economic corruption, unemployment, illiteracy, poverty and wars that plagued Egypt and the Arab world at that time, and still, created a sense of hopelessness, alienation and impossibility. Faced with these negative feelings, the 1990s generation produced a subversive literature in both content (taboo subjects) and radical experimentation with language forms (bold inclusions of street language, e-language and foreign expressions). The 1990s ushered a new era of subversive literary production that



shattered conventions and articulated the uniqueness of personal identity structures while dealing with issues of globalization, consumerism, and hybridity; the 1990s is one of the most interesting periods in the history of the Arabic novel thematically and stylistically. The work of women writers of this generation, matches, if not surpasses, both quantitatively and qualitatively that of their male counterparts as stated by Samia Mehrez quoted in Valerie Anishchenkova's article (Feminist Voices of the 1990s Generation) (2017). As Anishchenkova observes: "The women writers' dominance catalyzed the growth of the New Age feminist writing. Abd al-Rahman Abu 'Uf (2012) points out that "creative works of the 1990s both reflected and inverted reality; they attempted to articulate and explain the emergence of the generation of a liberated educated women who shatters the taboos, restrictions, morals and values of the middle class." (Anishchenkova 91).

Similar to previous eras, women's participation in literary production during this era, faced backlashes. While the authors of the 1990s generation, males and females were accused of nihilism, loss of direction, poor education, stylistic poverty and obsessive concentration on the body, taboos and sexuality, women's works came under specific attack. The derogatory label 'kitabāt al-banat' (girl's writing) was applied to the extensive body of work produced by women writers. Male and female writers were essentially occupied with similar issues, mainly identity politics. However, female authors came under attack for relying heavily on their personal self and for being preoccupied with subjects of sex, the body and taboos. Unsurprisingly, as discussed by many literary critics, this obsession with identity translated into reshaping gender discourses.

Miral al-Tahawy is one of the main female authors of (jyl al-tis'inaat) (the nineties generation). Her novel *Brooklyn Heights*, although published in 2011, retains the essential thematic features of the works of literature produced during the nineties. The story follows the journey of an Egyptian, Bedouin woman who moves from Egypt to New York. The novel intricately describes a world order sharing similar gender, ethnic, class and racial prejudices as the fortune cookie, the protagonist opens in a New York café, prophetically reads: “what is awaiting for you is not better from what you left behind” (al-Tahawy 13). The novel describes and intricate word of hybrid identities created by movement and migration across national and transnational borders. This hybridity, influenced by a world interconnected more than ever complicates and transforms gender relations and sexuality.

The novel also describes a protagonist alienated from her identity as woman perceived as an oppressive instead of a descriptive identity category. The comparison between Egypt and New York and the female experience in both places, leaves us with an image of a world built on patterns of marginalization and inequality where the individual, male and female, struggle to find a sense of identity, security, belonging and emancipation. The novel criticizes the ideologies of the West and the traditional Muslim discourses situating a site of potential hope in hybrid identities represented by the novel's protagonist being a female, immigrant, Arab, American, divorced, poor alienated entity in both places and cultures. The novel tells a woman's painful journey into the depth of herself, but its polyphony of narrative voices, intricate intertextuality, hybridity of representation and movement of bodies across times and spaces, essentially the idea of experiencing hybridity through movement might create informed citizens of the world committed to equality and emancipation.

Themes of hybridity, intertextuality, polyphony and diversity persist up to this very day. The Arab spring is another major event having an influential effect on Arab women's literary production. However, it falls outside the scope of this study since the works treated were produced right before the events that triggered the Arab spring. The disappointments of the Arab spring, the Syrian war and the refugee crisis led in recent years to the production of works preoccupied, once again, with themes of war violence, destruction and displacement. For example, Samar Yazbek, the author of *The Cinnamon's Aroma* treated in this dissertation, moved to France and wrote *Taqato 'Niran* (*A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*) (2012), and *Bawabaat Ard al-'adam* (*The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria*) (2015). These somewhat documentary works move away from her earlier fictional productions. However, these events are very recent and more time is needed to evaluate their effects on the Arab female literary production.

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My dissertation can be located more broadly within the body of scholarship that treats Arab women novels in the contemporary period, thematically and stylistically. It focuses primarily on the treatment of the subversion and resignification elements of gender and sexuality – discussions largely absent from the scholarship produced on these works for reasons stated earlier – it's important to mention works that have studied and treated similar topics.

The secondary literature, anthologies and edited volumes on topics of gender, sexuality and women in the Arab world increased significantly in the last decade. Works like *Desiring Arabs* (2007) by Joseph A. Massad, *Sexuality in the Arab World* (2006) by

Samir Khalaf and John Cagnon, *Sex and the citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World* (2014) by Shereen el-Fekki, *Rethinking Gender in Revolutions and Resistance, Lessons from the Arab World* (2015) by Maha el-Said, Lena Meari and Nicola Pratt, *Female Sexuality in the Middle East, Histories and Representations* (2009) by Samar Habib are but a few.

Most of these works portray a kind of dissonant and contested form of sexuality and gender ideology. Modern Arab societies have a twofold, ambiguous approach to sexuality and gender. On the one hand, there is an obsessive interest in sexuality, desire and the woman's body, often suppressed, oppressed and treated as a threat to morality, decency and the Arab cultural identity. This contested, ambiguous approach centered on suppression, silence and masculine hegemony creates fractured, incoherent identities, individually and collectively. Samir Khalaf in his introduction to *Sexuality in the Arab World* entitled "Living with Dissonant Sexual Codes" observes:

The Arab world, perhaps more so than other socio-cultural settings, has been undergoing some profound and unsettling transformations in sexual and gender relations. The sexual realm, particularly in recent years, has been subjected to conflicting and dissonant expectations and hence has become a source of considerable uncertainty, ambivalence and collective anxiety . . . the advent of global, transnational and postmodern venues of communication, consumerism, popular culture and mass 'infotainment' with all their digital and virtual technologies, websites and chat-rooms have however exacerbated the magnitude and intensity of the conflict. The risks and anxieties generated by such compelling incursions have compounded further the process of forging coherent and meaningful self-identities. (Khalaf 7-8)

Shereen el-Fekki's *Sex and The Citadel, Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*, reflects similar approaches in her work studying mainly women's sexual and intimate lives in the Arab world. The image is of a dissonant form of sexuality, especially female

sexual activity. Women have to abide by strict sexual and moral codes ranging from covering, sequestration, chastity and decorum, all while living in societies obsessed with sexuality, desire, the woman's body and valuing overt femininity, fit and attractive bodies. Like Khalaf, el-Fekki notes the challenges and dissonances of such orthodox sexual positions in the world of technology, cell phones and satellites revolving around sexual stimulation and sexual freedom.

El-Said, Meari and Pratt's book *Rethinking Gender in Revolutions and Resistance, Lessons from the Arab World* discusses the reshaping of the discourse of gender and sexuality in the Arab spring as a movement of social transformation. Nonetheless, the fact that sexuality and related moral issues jumped to the forefront of heated discussion, is important to note. By this token, there are a number of suggestions that the failure and maybe setbacks of the Arab spring are attributed to a major failure in addressing sexuality and advancing a more advanced or unified sexual ideology to replace the dissonant sexual reality described by Samir Khalaf.

Joseph T. Zeidan's *Arab Women Novelists, the Formative Years and Beyond*, remains a seminal study in the realm of Arab women's writing; however the book was published in 1995. Miriam Cook's *War's Others Voices, Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (1988) offers a discussion of how the writings of women about the Lebanese civil war are different from their male counterparts. Despite some criticism of her work, Cooke is largely credited for drawing attention to women authors who were previously ignored in favor of their male counterparts because their writings were considered unprofessional as they did not adhere to the dominant masculine forms.

Evelyn's Accad's *Sexuality and War, Literary Masks of the Middle East* (1990) is an important book as it draws connections between sexuality, gender and violence in contemporary Arabic fiction, stressing that issues of sexuality and oppression are best understood as socially, politically and culturally assigned structured roles in a patriarchal society like the Middle East. Using literature, Accad seeks to demonstrate the link between war, sexuality, political ideas like nationalism and patriarchy.

Another text worthy of note is Roger Allen, Hilary Kilpatrick and Ed de Moor's edited volume *Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Friction* (1995), which focuses on themes of love and sexuality as portrayed in various works of prose and poetry in the twentieth century. The volume's essays further an understanding of the themes of love, sexuality and gender relations in a variety of literary works in modern Arab culture.

My study endeavors to further these arguments by studying the interconnections of gender, sexuality and the unique opportunity discourse provides us with practices of subversion and resignification. The fictional works that my dissertation explores, reveal that issues of gender, sexuality and oppression are shaped performatively, affirming hybridity and fluidity not only between gender, ethnic and socio-economic differences but also within each of these categories. My dissertation also endeavors to describe how women negotiate gender and sexual relations inside these structures of constructionism, hybridity, dissonance and contradictions to locate sites of hope and optimism for the present and future. Often, these sites of hope are of discursive nature as a form of oral, and most importantly narrative preservation of subversive practices and defying positions these characters take in their lives. Also, the material under study in this dissertation has not been studied in any of these works.

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In this section I will define the key terms repeatedly used in this dissertation of gender and sexuality. In *Gender* (2002), R.W. Connell disputed the fact of gender as “the cultural difference of women from men, based on the biological difference between male and female” (Connell 9). It is a similar position advanced by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Referring to Wittig, Butler says: “For Wittig, the binary restriction on sex serves the reproductive aims of a system of compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler 26). The focus here is on difference or naturalistic claims of gender’s binary opposition. Connell and Butler argues that such a dichotomy does not reflect the complexity of reality. Gender cannot be divided into the binary of male and female, or masculine and feminine for such a reductionist understanding does not allow for a real analysis of the differences among women and men including but not limited to homosexuality versus heterosexuality. Also, gender naturalist binary opposition idea is hegemonic as it gives preeminence for one gender as well as privileging normative cisgender identities of either traditional gender over other possibilities.

Connell advocates for a reconceptualization of gender as a social structure: “the way human society deals with human bodies and their continuity, and the many consequences of that ‘dealing’ in our personal lives and our collective fate” (Connell 11). Judith Butler, while problematizing the other binary opposition of essentialist versus structured nature of gender, presents that gender is a regulated cultural performance congealed through essentialist discourses:

In this sense, *gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the

metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 33)

Under this definition, gender is not innate, rather it is negotiated through processes of inclusion and exclusion, some of compulsory nature, that begin at childhood and continue through adult life: “The coexistence of the binary is assumed, and then repression and exclusion intercede to craft discretely gendered “identities” out of this binary” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 69).

Butler’s analysis is similar to Nietzsche’s position concerning truth and morality. The genealogy of these processes by which gender gets to be constructed and implemented is forgotten in favor of fundamentalist, naturalistic approaches: “Far from foundational, these dispositions are the result of a process whose aim is to disguise its own genealogy. In other words, “dispositions” are traces of a history of enforced sexual prohibitions which is untold and which the prohibitions seek to render untellable” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 82).

This definition allows to renegotiate gender in different cultural contexts through a discursive analysis and resignification of the genealogical and historical dispositions of gender. Subverting and re-signifying those dispositions, mistaken as natural foundations, will problematize gender and sexuality and will consequentially alter the socio-political and cultural relations of patriarchy:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts. . . (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 44)



Sexuality is of course closely related to gender, as both deal with the body. Freud approaches sexuality as “divorced from its too close connection with the genitals,” viewing it as “a more comprehensive bodily function, having pleasure as its goal and only secondary coming to serve the ends of reproduction” (Freud 23). Similar to Butler’s notion of gender, Foucault defines sexuality as knowledge formulated within, and by certain power structures, through a process of exclusion (repression) and inclusion (knowledge/truth about sex). Sexuality, as a specific type of knowledge constructed by a specific type of power relations maintains those relations of power and vice versa. But, as sexuality has a history, a genealogy to be uncovered, by the same token, it can be addressed, re-signified and renegotiated: “Sexuality must not be thought of as a natural given which power tries to hold in check, or an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover: it is the name that can be given to a historical construct” (Foucault 105). This historical construct of sexuality opens the possibility of a new construction of sexual knowledge that will bring forward a new form of power relations.

Adopting the standpoints of Connell, Butler and Foucault, I analyze how the female authors treated in this dissertation, through telling their stories and the stories of their protagonists in the novels, present us with a dissonant, oppressive and repressive type of sexuality maintained by certain power relations of patriarchal nature. Their acts of resistance, discursive and practical, present us with subversive features to the prevalent gender and sexuality discourse and consequentially to the established order of power relations.

Complex and dynamic, feminist literary theory and literary criticism are disciplines whose chief undertaking is the uncovering of the insufficiency of traditional

literary methods and schools in the analysis of the historical and textual implications of gender relations and sexual politics; offering alternative modes of analysis and interpretation. Since the 1960s, feminist literary criticism in the West underwent several stages of development and change, beginning with the deconstruction of literary images of women in literature written by men, moving to advancing a feminist aesthetics of fiction and narrative construction drawing attention to the representation of gender in fiction and narrative forms, and finally transcending the category of gender to draw attention to the equally important factors of race, ethnicity, class, religion, socio-economic status intersecting with gender and amongst each other in the production of textual analysis.

The fundamental approaches through which Western feminist literary theory evolved and developed over time is important in my dissertation as it helps to illuminate the interrelations of sexual identity politics, gender arrangements and women's practices of resistance, subversion and resignification. I use the works of Joanne S. Frye, Fadwa Multi-Douglas, Fatima Mernissi, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray among others to comment on key issues in this literature like the significance of oral storytelling, writing or sisterhood. Also, to comment and analyze the significance of some thematic and stylistic features of Arab women's literature that has been criticized or denigrated like biographical elements included in this literature.

Taking into account that feminist Western theory cannot always be applied to other contexts, in this case, Arab women's literary production as a number of Arab literary critics have warned against, this dissertation will approach the literary works under consideration as the main source of analysis. Theoretical elucidation will explore

the applicability of the diverse methodologies of western feminist theory and literary criticism where it applies and where it helps clarifying an important aspect of textual analysis. It is worth noting that Arabic literature concerned with feminist matters, feminist theory and literary criticism in the Arab world do not show a linear development through stages resembling the ones that took place in the West or evolving parallel to the developmental stages of Arab women novelistic production, discussed earlier. This is perhaps due to the fact that critical approaches to literature in the Arab world engage with the most recent or contemporary approaches in Western critical theory. Hence, I'm indebted in my discussion of gender and sexuality in this dissertation to the field of Western gender studies and modern literary theory in general. As outlined above, I rest much of understanding of the complex procedures of gender and sexuality and the practices of subversion and resignification on the works of Foucault, Butler, Connell, Lacan, Frye, Nietzsche, Lyotard among others.

The overarching goal of my dissertation is to provide a more profound understanding of the processes and mechanisms through which the multiple forms, meanings and interrelations of gender and sexuality are discussed in these three novels and the mechanisms of resistance, subversion and resignification of the discourses and processes of the prevalent and oppressive gender and sexuality order. In this sense, I examine the ways in which the various theories that originated in the Western academic circle can be appropriated or maybe challenged, when applied to contemporary Arab women's literature and what kind of novel avenues or interpretations this comparison might yield. Despite the significant discussion of the social and discursive construction of gender identity and sexuality in the academic circles of the West and the possibilities of

subversion and resignification it opens in terms of challenging traditional discourses of gender and sexuality, these matters are relatively under-studied in non-western literature, including Arab women's fiction. Taking into consideration the relatively small amount of critical scholarly work produced on these three novels, this dissertation aims to provide a more comparative insight into this literature, adding to the discourses and efforts to address gender inequality and the dissonances of sexual ideology in the Arab world through giving attention to the voices of Arab women writers.

Also, I trace the inner development of character in these stories, revealing how characters negotiate their gender and sexualities, their privileges and exclusions in the different contexts and societies presented. I also reflect on the interrelatedness, interconnectedness and intersections between different identity categories and the ways in which they affect negotiations of gender relations and sexualities in different contexts. Finally, I aim to locate a site of hope and healing in these novels within the seemingly prevalent order of oppression, dissonance and marginalization. This site of hope is often transcendental and futuristic, also, based on some discursive or narrative production of the author and, or characters.

\* \* \*

This dissertation is divided into five chapters: an introduction, a conclusion and three chapters dealing with the novels. Chapter one treats Yazbek's *The Cinnamon's Aroma*, also entitled *Cinnamon* in Emily Dandy's English translation published in 2012; however, the cinnamon's aroma or the smell of cinnamon is a more literal and I would say authentic translation of the original title. This novel paints a grim picture of a society crushed by corruption, inequality and poverty that translates into similar grim, oppressive

and violent gender and heterosexual relations. The novel relates the story of a lesbian relationship that develops between Alya, a thirteen year old girl from the slums of Damascus who is brought to work as a maid in Hanan al-Hashimy's house, the rich woman from the upper middle class. Against a background of oppression, dissatisfaction, violence and sexual abuse in the case of Alya, Hanan entices Alya into a sexual relationship. The novel is set on a pattern of comparison and contrast between opposites such as, the slum versus the city, the life of the poor versus the life of the rich, men versus women and, the protagonists' lives before and after their meeting and most importantly heterosexual versus lesbian sexual acts.

The greater emphasis in this chapter is put on the sexual acts that take place in these contrasted contexts, and mainly the comparison and contrast between heterosexual/matrimonial and lesbian encounters describing the first as violent, oppressive and dehumanizing while celebrating the second as appealing and pleasant like the aroma of the cinnamon. The novel is set in an intricate and complex context of binary oppositions featuring an equal complicated gender and sexual relations. The gloomy description of a society based on gender inequality, gendered sexual violence, corruption and hegemony complicates sexual and gender relations presenting us with fragmented, complex characters tottering on the edge of despair and madness. This chapter analyzes the ways in which these female characters use sexuality as an element of escape and a healing process, however, a peculiar sexuality tied to the oppression, inequality and violence of its context.

The story ends tragically by the separation of Hanan and Alya, symbolically represented by the dissipation of the aroma of the cinnamon. Alya goes back to the slums

and Hanan reverts into fits of hysteria and madness. However, the chapter identifies a site of hope in the very form of alternative and unconventional sexuality that of lesbians desire, treated in the novel as an alternative, pleasant and empowering form of sexual activity.

In chapter three of the dissertation I discuss Miral al-Tahawy's *Brooklyn Heights*. The novel relates the story of a single, divorced mother from rural Egypt, named Hend, who moves to New York City with her eight years old son. The novel is also set on spatial and temporal contrasts between Hend's former life in Egypt and present one in New York City. The novel is a deep and sad journey into the psyche of a female character overwhelmed by a sense of melancholia and dissatisfaction. These negative feelings are related to the fact of her being a mother and a woman; identity categories whose attributes alienate Hend from herself. In New York, as well as in Egypt, Hend was marginalized and her aspirations were cast away because this world, in East and West, is set on pattern of prejudice against the female subject. Thus, I employ Butler's notions of the necessity of deconstructing the category of gender in the postmodern age opening it for new possibilities and attributes to free the female character from oppressive ontologies.

As an immigrant, poor, divorced and single mother in New York City, Hend observes how feelings of marginalization and exclusion are shared by other people of a specific race, social status, income status, geographical location and immigration status. The novel offers an interesting description of the intersections of race, gender, ethnicity or country of origin in shaping patterns of exclusion and inequality. These patterns are attributed to a global socio-economic order which patriarchy is its cultural manifestation.

I identify a site of hope in the character named Lelet, and old woman, but who, like Hend, left Egypt to settle down in New York City. However, Lelet, left her son and family behind, embracing a free soul life style in New York, marked by sexual freedom and exploration of different forms of desires and pleasures. Also, the novel stresses the importance of writing as an element of triumph and empowerment. But, Hend fails to attain her dream of becoming a writer. The stack of unfinished manuscripts reminds of the challenges facing women in their struggle to reformulate and re-signify their role and worth in society.

In the fourth chapter, I discuss Alawiyya Sobh's *It's Called Passion*. The novel relates the story of passion between Nahla and Hani, two married people. Their love, although an extra marital affair, stands as a true symbol of passion, devotion, happiness and commitment. Similar to Nahla, her group of three different friends venture into extra marital affairs and sexual exploration trying to free themselves from a history of violence, oppression and hegemony. These adventures are the elements of empowerment and resistance which transformed these female characters from helpless victims into triumphant, empowered women. Their acts clearly defy the rigid norms of a cultural system that tries to imprison the female subject and deny her natural right in freedom, desire and happiness.

The novel is also built on a pattern of contrasts between the city (Beirut) and the rural south, exposing two competing subjectivities. The rural south values family structures and the father figure and functions as a foundation for gender inequality and oppression and repression of female sexuality. This past is threatened by a different urban subjectivity opening a possibility for individual freedom and sexual exploration.

However, despite the superficial picture of freedom and liberation from patriarchal structures painted by urban structures, the same patterns of oppression that defined the rural setting persist in the city.

The novel's most interesting stylistic feature is the solipsist and metafictional nature of the story. A writer named Alawiya, whose name is the same name as the author Alawiya Sobh, is asked by Nahla to write her story of passion for Hani. The other stories are embedded in Nahla's story and the novel is a collection of various stories breeding from each other and interconnected by articulating the continuous patterns of women's subjugation across time and space. The first and last chapters feature Alawiya, the character/author pondering on the process of writing, its significance, and whether she is writing a fictional story or an account of true events.

Writing and storytelling are, at the very last, the main elements of subversion, resignification and resistance. Free sexual exploration is an act of rebellion, but its effects are temporary as it only succeeds in resisting patriarchal patterns in the moment. However, by talking and then writing about sex in particular, women can find a path to lasting liberation from traditional patriarchal structures and social norms. Sexuality has to be subverted discursively. By talking and writing about sex, even in novelistic, fictional forms, women insert their own narrative into the body of discursive presentation creating a unique writer-text-reader relationship that will renegotiate and readdress traditional narratives. Hence, the true site of hope and empowerment in this text is the activity of oral storytelling these female characters practice when telling their stories to each other, and later the activity of transforming these tales into a novel by Alawiya.



It should be noted that unless stated otherwise, quotations from the three novels under consideration are my own translation.

## Chapter 2

### **Alternative Sexuality and Subversion in *The Cinnamon's Aroma*.**

Published in Beirut in 2008 and translated to English as *Cinnamon* in 2012, *The Cinnamon's Aroma* portrays a homosexual relationship between a poor maid, named Alya, and her lady, the extremely rich, Hanan al-Hashimy. *The Cinnamon's Aroma* is one of several recent novels to portray a lesbian relation, since the publication of *Ana Hiya Anty, I am You* (2000) by Elham Mansur, considered the first novel in Arabic which deals exclusively with the subject of female homosexuality. Mansur's novel generated over a dozen newspaper reviews which predominantly agreed that the novel was poor in composition, structure and logic. However, as Samar Habib observes in her book, *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East*: "This onslaught of criticism appeared to be significantly motivated by hidden moral prerogatives" (Habib 89). *The Cinnamon's Aroma*, received some newspaper and blogs' reviews despite its considerable success, which, for the most part, praised the novel as well written and structured. Yet, it is hard to find published scholarly articles on this novel. However, most of these reviews praise Yazbek's novel on moral grounds, pointing out at Yazbek's skillful use of the taboo subject of homosexuality to divulge the ills brought by poverty, oppression and inequality.

In other words, most of these reviews state that *The Cinnamon's Aroma*, is not a text about lesbian homosexuality, per se; first because the characters don't fit the description of lesbians as an identity category or sexual orientation. Second, these

relationships have negative causes rooted in oppression, dissatisfaction, alienation and poverty. Thus, lesbian homosexuality is used to expose the corruption and decadence of society, which, consequently, can be considered as a condemnation of these types of relations.

Such reactions are common in responding to Arabic novels dealing with the taboo of sex or portraying homosexual encounters, especially lesbian ones. Samar Habib, detailing the general reception of similar novels in the Arab world, mentions that homosexuality happens for an external, most often, unfortunate causes delineated as:

1. Women turn to other women due to the “harshness” of men.
  2. Women turn to other women due to experience of sexual trauma (with men).
  3. Women turning to other women are immoral, deranged, and suffer mental ailments.
  4. Homosexuality is caused by something whose value is unequal to the value of the presumed cause of heterosexuality (i.e. procreation/”nature”/ “God’s intent”).
  5. The cause of homosexuality is usually an aberration of upbringing.
- (Habib 91)

Each of the reasons mentioned above can be found true in the case of Yazbek’s novel, as we notice looking at some of the reviews. An online magazine named al-Houqoul, writes in its literary section: “Samar Yazbek uses female homosexuality as a bridge to show us the loosening and eradication of values of the rich. We see how savage they have become . . . we see their harsh and inhuman treatment of the poor as they live an immoral life”. This review considers the maid Alya, a hopeless victim of a deviant and deranged rich lady.

Other reviews considered both women victims of a corrupt and oppressive social system, and consequently, victims of their bad experiences with the men they encountered. As a child, Alya suffered mental and physical abuse, not only from the boys

in the ghetto where she grew-up, but also from her violent father. Hanan, belonging to the upper class society, had to adhere to a strict moral code and had to succumb to the family's wish of marrying her cousin. Fatima Shaaban observes in *al-Ittihad's* newspaper: "This kind of relationships is triggered by the strict social restraints rich Damascene families force on their daughters. Hence, they don't take the risk of starting relationships with men as they might lead to a disaster if discovered. Lesbian relationships are low risk as women's congregations are unsuspicious" (Shaaban 2008). Similarly, a blog review mentions that poverty and class differences are responsible for throwing the two female protagonists in Yazbek's novel into a homosexual relation: "We notice that Samar Yazbek refers female homosexuality to external factors imposed by social constraints. This type of homosexuality can disappear if the reasons responsible for putting it in place are altered" (Rainbow Sudan blog).

I am not aiming at proving or disproving if female homosexuality in *The Cinnamon's Aroma* has natural or social reasons as I don't see this as the major critical aspect of the novel. In fact, I am interested in analyzing the elements of subversion of what is considered normal sexual conduct and the ways in which it affects women's lives in their struggle to challenge hegemony, oppression and violence. Yazbek sets a dichotomy between heterosexual sex acts and lesbian ones. The first, almost exclusively, are portrayed as violent, oppressive, objectifying, dull and humiliating. These types of relationships are associated with repulsive scents and unpleasant scenes. On the other hand, female sex acts are described as pleasant, appealing, soft, exciting and heartwarming. They are associated with the aroma of the cinnamon and with bright, colorful scenes. This chapter analyses the dichotomy set between the two types of sexual

activity and the ways in which this dichotomy subverts the notion of natural and moral when it comes to sexuality, portraying lesbian sex acts as more natural, human and moral than their heterosexual counterparts. This analysis pays close attention to the inner relations of the novel which most of the newspaper reviews skip over. This technique of binary opposition which results in subversion of the conventional idea of sexuality offers potential sites of hope, empowerment and emancipation, despite the overall grim picture painted in the novel. Yazbek's bold and careful use of the topic of lesbian homosexuality present a potential message of empowerment and emancipation for the female character.

As Judith Butler says in *Bodies that Matter, On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, a body who does not confirm her/himself to the heteropatriarchal norm is a subversive political body. The sexual practices portrayed in *The Cinnamon's Aroma* are clearly subversive sexual acts constituting a deviation from the pervasive heterosexual ideology attached to the patriarchal culture. This subversion is meant to foreshadow an element of empowerment on the part of the female character. The lesbian relations portrayed in the novel are acts of subversion, as thus, they hold elements of empowerment which most reviews on the novel ignored or considered aspects of social corruption and evidence of total despair on the part of the female characters.

However, as a number of literary critics, including Joseph Massad and Samar Habib, have pointed, gay and lesbian identity categories are western constructs that should not be imposed on Arab sexualities and Arab culture which has a rich history of depicting homosexual acts in literature and elsewhere, especially during the Middle Ages considered a much tolerant and open society toward sexual acts between the same gender. The same applies to Yazbek's texts, in the sense that Alya and Hanan, do not fit the

description of lesbians, as a political, social and personal identity category, or as a sexual orientation in a western sense, especially taking into consideration the tragic end of the story when Alya initiates a sexual relation with Hanan's husband punishing her lady for her arrogant, aristocratic demeanor. Their sexual acts, as well as the other female homosexual acts between Hanan and other women, are acts of subversion, defiance and empowerment. They aim at challenging the hegemony of the patriarchal culture by challenging its imposed sexual ideology (heterosexual/matrimonial sex) through subverting its moral and naturalistic claims.

The novel opens with the image of a half closed door allowing some light to seep in. Hanan al-Hashimy followed this light and discovered the maid, Alya, in bed with her husband. This image is repeated throughout the novel reminding of the dissipation of the cinnamon's aroma, a metaphor standing for the sexual relationship between the two female protagonists. The novel, narrated backward, in third person, is set in Damascus, Syria. Alya and Hanan's relationship provides a framework inside which Yazbek discusses the state of a society engulfed in corruption, inequality, poverty, oppression and depression. The general state of corruption, poverty, hierarchy, illiteracy and oppression found in the Syrian society, specifically in Damascus' lower class, is mirrored through the intimate lives of the characters of the novel and their sexual practices. The two protagonists belong to two different and separate worlds, yet, they are closely related by the experience of sexual oppression.

The intricate and complex relationship between the two females started when Alya's father brought his eleven years old girl to work as a maid in Hanan al-Hashimi's

villa. The circumstances leading to Alya's arrival in Hanan's house describe the depth of gendered violence, oppression and misery the girl has suffered.

Alya comes from the slums or ghettos of Damascus. A girl belonging to a family of several kids due to the insatiable, animalistic sexual desire of an unemployed father who lives with the money his wife and kids make working as servants, and in Alya's case collecting trash with a group of wretched youngsters during which she was eventually raped. Alya took the name of an older sister who became paralyzed by a kick from the father after he discovered her and his wife hiding some money from him to feed the hungry mouths of the brothers and sisters. Unable to move, she was repeatedly raped by a neighbor, before younger Alya, our protagonist, caught him on top of her sister and left permanent marks with her knife all over his body. That same night, older Alya committed suicide and our protagonist, whom the mother started calling her after her deceased sister, was blamed for exposing the incident.

Alya's rebellious, untamed and brute nature have caused her to get into several fights with the boys in the slum, where she would bite and kick them or cut them with her knife. Damascus' slums are described as hunting grounds, where girls have constantly to fight for their physical integrity and safety. In most cases, however, it is a lost fight. Eventually, Alya was raped on a pile of garbage while collecting trash. The group of boys she worked with conspired to "break the eye" of the only girl who stood up to them up till now. After this incident, Alya defied her violent and abusive father and stayed home refusing to go to work. Alya is not silent, complacent or submissive as is expected from her and as others are. Alya's removal from the neighborhood became inevitable after becoming clear that her rebellious nature cannot be tamed. Hence, the father took the

young girl to work as a maid in Hanan al-Hashimy's villa. After taking the money from Hanan, Alya never saw or heard from her father or family.

Hanan al-Hashimy grew up in a wealthy, aristocratic household in Damascus. Unlike Alya, Hanan grew up a shy, reticent girl of a wealthy family. She was the object of admiration of a selfish mother proud of raising a tamed, obedient girl. Hanan was pressured by the family and an egocentric mother to marry a cousin whom she grew-up with like brother and sister. Married to a foreign woman he loves but childless because of a medical condition on his part, the cousin was also pressured to marry Hanan whom he considers a little sister. Eventually, Hanan developed extreme feelings of hatred and disgust toward her husband, who is, for the most part a silent figure in the novel. These feelings emanate from the fact of being forced to sleep and have a sexual relation with a brotherly figure. The reader learns that Hanan considers the sexual relationship with her husband, brother, cousin as incest: "she never loved this man who was a brother, then a cousin, then a husband and finally an old crocodile" (91). The animalistic words Hanan uses to refer to her husband, especially 'crocodile', reflect the deep feelings of disgust and repulsion.

Hanan does not necessarily hate Anwar, the silent, human figure throughout the novel. In Fact, Anwar was her beloved cousin and companion in her childhood. He married a woman he fall in love with and, like Hanan, he was forced to comply with the family's wish of divorcing his beloved wife blamed for not bearing a child, and marrying Hanan, his young cousin. Before Hanan married Anwar, she described him as a person of integrity and a kind hearted man. The animal, degrading and repulsive terms Hanan uses to refer to Anwar occur after their first sexual experience on their first night. From that



night on, Anwar is transformed into a crocodile figure with bad scent, with ugly features, especially the sexual organs which Hanan, recurrently describes as sagging, ageing and repulsive. Clearly, this transformation is related to the act of sex between the two: “The crocodile who puts his hand on her mouth asking her to be silent. He would silently get on top of her for minutes, then leaves to wash himself before he goes back to his shell. She was growing and maturing while Anwar was just getting old” (Yazbek 92). Within this context, the sexual relationship between Hanan and Alya starts. A relationship between a woman from the bourgeoisie, living a state of depression, melancholia, apathy and ennui, and a young girl, coming from the slums and bearing years of poverty and abuse.

Hanan, experienced her first sexual pleasure, which was of homosexual nature, as a child, when she accompanied her mother to a bridal shower in a Damascus’ Hammam. The Hamman is a place covered with white marble where women of upper class, mostly naked, have their bodies scrubbed with aromatic soaps and massaged with oils and herbs. The place is associated with white color, bright sights, appealing fragrances, soothing and enchanted ambiance. These associations of bright, beautiful colors, sights and aromatic fragrances, especially the sweet aroma of cinnamon, recur constantly in the novel whenever there is a lesbian encounter or lesbian desire. The aroma of the cinnamon is the metaphor referring to the nature of these encounters.

Like Alya, Hanan was a young girl when she first experienced female sexual pleasure in the Hammam, on the hands of the bride. Despite her initial perplexed reaction, she enjoyed the experience, feeling excitement and arousal:

The bride sips her tea and the aroma effuses, the aroma of cinnamon with incense, hot water, laurel oil and mud that covers her body . . . the bride

puts Hanan in her lap and suddenly her nipple hardens and she makes feeble moans. She felt fire burning in her veins when the bride opened her thighs and started shaking her. Hanan felt her body tremble at this moment and the strong aroma wafting from the hot cup put her in a trance and passed out. (Yazbek 121)

Hanan never forgot the excitement of this gratifying experience and as the novel puts it, the aroma she hid in her heart for years came back at the hands of her maid, Alya. (Yazbek 123).

The same aromatic fragrances and bright colors of the Hammam are found again at Nazek's villa, the second place inhabiting female sexual pleasures and effusing the aroma of cinnamon. Nazek, is a single lady belonging to an upper-class wealthy family. The novel describes Nazek's house as a place of refuge, where rich Damascene women, like Hanan, wanting to escape the alienation of their domestic spaces and dullness of their marriages, indulge in lesbian sex acts exploring their inner-femininity and sexuality with each other. Nazek's villa is a romantic, enchanting and exotic place lit by candles effusing beautiful perfumes coupled with the sweet and delicious taste of mint or cinnamon mixed with tea and of coriander mixed with coffee: "The room is warm and sounds of music come from the ceiling and a table in the shape of a heart is at the edge of the bed . . . Next to the two drinking glasses different kinds of cigars scented with mint" (102). The sweet tastes and beautiful smells are a manifestation of the beautiful, tranquil sensations these women enjoy with the company of each other. Hanan and Nazek started a sexual relation after they were introduced at a party.

With the arrival of Alya, Hanan, through her sexual relationship with the young maid, was able to transform her own house into another soothing space similar to that of Nazek's villa and the Hammam. Before Alya, Hanan described her villa as a big dungeon

filled with the bad, suffocating, crocodile like scent of her husband. When the sexual relationship between Hanan and Alya started, that same house was filled with the aromatic scent of cinnamon and with bright, colorful scenes.

Hence, we can understand some of the novel's reviews pointing to the fact that Alya and Hanan's relationship is disturbing as it can be viewed as a sexual exploitation of a young girl by a woman in a position of power. However, I would argue, this sexual relationship can only be understood and analyzed when put in contrast with the heterosexual, particularly, matrimonial relationships between husband and wife. The novel is set on a pattern of binary opposition and juxtaposition of spaces, times, scents and, mainly, on the binary opposition of sexual acts between male and female versus females. It portrays a negative picture of the first based on objectification and violence, while it presents a pleasant one of the second based on desire and excitement.

Starting with the most central metaphor in the novel, the scent of the cinnamon invoked each time women experience sexual pleasure together. This scent is prevalent in the Hammam, in Nazek's villa and in Hanan's villa after the sexual relation between Hanan and Alya started. The cinnamon's aroma is a symbol that reflects the pleasantness, joyfulness and excitement categorizing these sexual acts between women. The Cinnamon's aroma is set against other repulsive, bad scents engulfing the worlds of Hanan and Alya. These repulsive scents, like Hanan's crocodile scent of her husband which overwhelmed the villa before the start of lesbian relations, and the scent of trash in the slum, dominated the lives of the two protagonists. That same bad scent, arise whenever heterosexual and marital sexual relations occur. Alya remembers the smell of

sweat and garbage associated with her rape and Hanan smells a crocodile like scent when she remembers her sexual acts with Anwar.

Similar to scent, the contrast between bright and dark scenes is another symbolic juxtaposition. When Alya's father drags her mother each night to the dirty bathroom floor and makes sex to her, a scene described as an act of rape, the mother perches over the bathroom's hole and sees nothing but darkness. That same darkness categorizes Alya's rape experience over a pile of black trash bags. Similarly, Hanan, referring to the sexual experience with her husband, observes: "I was under his skin in a scary place where you see nothing but darkness" (Yazbek 74).

The description of homosexual versus heterosexual relations is another binary opposition. Almost exclusively, heterosexual relations are portrayed as violent, painful and inhuman, especially for the female character. In addition, these relations are void of any pleasure or desire. They are mainly acts of aggression conducted by a male toward a female. Apart from rape, Alya's parents and Hanan's relation with her husband are the main matrimonial relations. In the case of Alya's parents, the narrator says:

He used to wake her up in the middle of the night when she would be exhausted from work and drags her from her hand . . . he would take her, half asleep to a small bathroom, which is a kitchen as well . . . he makes her get down on her knees, rides her for minutes and leaves quickly. She used to cry afterwards until she got used to it so she started doing it automatically, without him even asking. She would take her clothes off and lay still underneath him. She takes a quick shower after he gets off without looking at his face, goes back quickly to her bed and sleeps deeply. (Yazbek 53)

Similarly, Hanan's relation with her husband is equally dull and objectifying: "Have you ever tried to lie down under an aging crocodile? Under a crocodile's saliva, rheum and sniff. I tried. . . I was under his skin in a scary place where you see nothing but darkness"

(74). The nature of the sexual relationships pertaining to the two different social classes are similar to the ones described above. In Nazek's villa, rich women dissatisfied with their sexual lives and marriages gather to experience lesbian pleasure. In the slum, people hear the sounds of steel sheets at night forming the walls of the adjacent houses. Like Alya's mother, the novel alludes to similar objectifying sexual relations taking place behind these thin walls.

The difference between Alya's reaction to Hanan's sexual acts and her reaction to the rape incident and sexual harassment by the boys of the slum is also another significant juxtaposition. The primitive, aggressive and untamed Alya, always carried a knife with her in the slum and used it several times whenever she was harassed by the boys. But, Alya never reacted to Hanan's caresses in the same way. Despite Alya's initial astonishment at Hanan's sexual behavior with her, she never rebelled or donned her aggressive nature. Alya's reaction to Hanan's first caresses resembles those of young Hanan during the Hammam's experience: "The kind foreplays which she feared at the beginning and came to haunt her as nightmares were transformed into day dreams she came to desire" (Yazbek 84).

In the slum, Alya was wild, angry, untamed and aggressive. With Hanan she was silent, quiet, obedient and tamed. Nothing could have prevented Alya from reacting the same way with Hanan as she used to do with the boys in the slum. In fact, despite fearing her violent father's harsh reprehensions, Alya couldn't be stopped from going back to leave permanent marks with her knife on the face of the boy who raped her and the neighbor who raped her sister. The change in Alya's behavior and nature signals the

difference set by Yazbek between lesbian and heterosexual sex acts. The description of Alya's sexual assault is graphic and gruesome:

. . . she felt she is crushed under his heavy weight. She was about to suffocate and felt his hard, hot thing touching her. If he had persisted for longer, she would have died like what happened to her sister . . . she felt his liquid smearing her lower thighs . . . he raised his knife, got closer and said: one word and I split you in half. He spit on her. She died for seconds, closed her eyes and stopped hearing her heart beat. Her cold, lower half stiffened and the smell of garbage bags she laid on kept steeping through her nose.

However, despite Alya's stupefaction at the beginning, she never considered her lady's sexual acts with her an act of rape or violation. Thus, her reaction and feelings were quite different:

Occasionally she would let herself feel an unbounded happiness, she would put a big foam on her belly and massage it, while her lady is in a trance, holding her fingers tightly and smiling to her . . . she remembers the smooth sensation of her lady's skin and the refreshing fragrance of oils and feels she lives in heaven. . . She experienced a refreshing feeling in a clean and colorful place . . . she tries to believe she is in a place surrounded by trees and the windows' drapes swing to the wind. Most importantly, her father's kicks won't reach her here, the ghost of her sister with her wide open eyes does not follow her here and she will not smell the scent of garbage. (Yazbek 83)

Alya felt she is living in a kind of heaven she never wanted to leave. Hanan's villa became an aromatic, beautiful sanctuary and healing place inside which she left behind the horrors of her previous life. The time Alya spent in Hanan's house is the only time Alya was happy and protected.

This narrative technique of binary oppositions creates an alternative world where both women are sheltered from the agonies, miseries and violations they experienced in their previous lives. It is a happy world where the bad scents are replaced by the aroma of cinnamon, where darkness is replaced by white, colorful scenes and where heterosexual

relations are replaced by lesbian ones. However, these binary oppositions are viewed by some as a negative aspect which sets the novel on its inevitable tragic end, symbolized by the obliteration of the cinnamon's aroma.

Yazbek is considered to be setting the stage for the inevitable destruction of this alternative universe standing for the lesbian sexual encounters between women. The element of hierarchy and unequal power dynamics, in addition to Hanan's character bring the novel to a tragic end. Hanan treated Alya as an object of pleasure at night and a servant during the day. As she notices afterwards, her time with Alya was devoid of any words or conversations. She never allowed Alya to sleep in her room past dawn and when it happened, Hanan re-fixes the hierarchical relations by scolding Alya and asking her to leave the room immediately. Alya, humiliated and hurt, initiates a sexual relation with Hanan's husband to seek revenge. When Hanan discovers Alya in Anwar's bed she kicks her out of the villa in a moment of intense and hysterical fit of anger.

In "Female Homosexuality in the Contemporary Arabic novel", Jolanda Guardi says: "*Cinnamon* is a mainstream novel, i.e. it inserts itself in a discourse near to power because it shows us Hanan, the Westernized Bourgeois (presented as) a perverted woman, the "bored woman" and 'Aliya, who at the end of the novel returns home to her exploited life. There is no real relation between the two characters and no hope for a possibility of empowerment" (Guardi 21). Guardi contends that Yazbek's novel ends with a sense of despair and does not provide any possibility for hope or empowerment. She bases her argument analyzing the two elements of subject matter and narrative technique used in the novel.

On the issue of subject matter, Guardi says that Yazbek's novel does not address homosexuality because the two protagonists don't identify as lesbians. Hence, Hanan and Alya's relationship is one of exploitation of a poor maid by a rich mistress dissatisfied with her life and marriage. In Guardi's analysis, Alya, the victim, finds herself driven to sleep with her master as an act of revenge against Hanan because of the level of inequality between the two. Hence, this story is devoid of any real love or affection and is mainly a story about class differences between rich and poor. In such a context, there is no avenue for hope or emancipation, whether futuristic or imaginative: "At this point the balance of power is reversed, and the novel ends with a sense of desolation: with such assumptions, the relation cannot last. In *Cinnamon*, the homosexual intercourse is presented as a power relationship between the master and the black slave, thus perpetrating a patriarchal stereotype" (Guardi 20).

The perpetration of patriarchal stereotypes, according to Guardi is also found on the level of the narrative technique based on binary oppositions or juxtapositions. According to Guardi who uses Sedgwick's analysis, the binary system between homosexual/heterosexual, male/female, health/illness, natural/unnatural is a heteronormative epistemological system: "The power discourse, through other related discourses . . . makes our perception of the world possible only through this binary system, and therefore we can perceive sex only as heteronormative (woman/man). . ." (Guardi 26). Thus, if a deconstruction through this novel is ongoing, it should break the binary couple. Instead, "the novel's structure does not challenge the heteropatriarchal norm and therefore the presence of a female homosexual character is only functional to reproduce the male structure of society" (Guardi 27). As mentioned before, Guardi's



analysis does not deviate from the majority of reviews, especially in the Arab world, which traditionally evaluate novels with similar subject matter on moral grounds. Thus, according to this analysis, Yazbek's novel is mainly a story about a beautiful black maid exploited by a deranged, rich mistress. Understandably, the story ends tragically when the maid revolts against her mistress by sleeping with her husband and gets fired.

However, such an analysis does not give full consideration to the novel's complex interrelations. Also, these standpoints fail to see the significance of the narrative technique of binary oppositions, which I analyze it as a technique of subversion offering a message of hope and emancipation. On the level of subject matter, the binary opposition or juxtapositions between scents, scenes, times and places all converge as allegorical symbols of patriarchal/heteronormative sexual acts versus their lesbian counterparts. Despite the fact that lesbianism is not discussed as a sexual identity category or orientation, it is employed as a subversive technique. As Butler says, bodies that are not conformist, are subversive by nature. And I would add, subversion is consequently an element of empowerment.

Yazbek's binary oppositions shifts the perception on heterosexual relationships, especially spousal relationships depicted in the novel, from natural, innate, normal acts of sexuality to unnatural, repulsive and immoral. Her narrative structure of comparison and contrast shakes the reader's conventions on issues of prevailing sexual behavior and sexual ideology in the Arab world. Yazbek pushes the reader to realize that there is something wrong with this structure of corruption and oppression, which equally threatens the decency and integrity of male and female characters. She uncovers and exposes sexual practices stemming from the narrative and conventions on sexuality

particular to this context. She uses the framework of sexuality, especially hetero-sexuality to both comment and expose the decadence, hypocrisy and corruption of a whole social structure and the type of sexual behavior that takes place inside it, and to subvert and challenge the traditional conventions and cultural narratives on and about sexuality.

In *The Cinnamon's Aroma* the reader, consciously or unconsciously, feels alienated from the kind of sexuality that takes place between a male and a female or husband and wife and is drawn to sympathize with the sexual encounters that take place between different female characters, especially Alya and Hanan. This sympathy does not necessarily come from a positive or negative standpoint on lesbian homosexuality, but, from the experience of satisfaction and protection these previously abused women experience through lesbian sex. This, I argue, is a subversive element on the level of subject matter and on the level of narrative technique which brings an element of hope and empowerment for the two protagonists.

The relationship between Hanan and Alya opens up a process of healing for both characters; it is the only space of joy and happiness compensating for the psychological and physical bruises of their past lives. This path of healing is reflected in Alya's words: "Hanan's fingers and the smell of tea with cinnamon obliterated all previous scents" (105); a reference to the scent of trash associated with the misery, the psychological and physical abuses of her past life. Alya considered Hanan's villa a small heaven she was expelled from, as reflected in her words of agony on the way back to the slum: "I won't go back" (Yazbek 77).

Alya's journey back to the slum is one of the saddest and gloomiest aspects of the novel. The return to the old, dirty neighborhood makes Alya relive a painful line of

memories as if she was going back to her old destiny after a short period of emancipation. Alya and Hanan's separation dissipated the cinnamon's aroma and took the two females back to the world they lived in prior to their meeting. When she was making the agonizing journey back to her previous world, Alya started to smell garbage again and memories of sexual and physical assault came back to haunt her. For the first time in years, she holds her knife tightly as she witnesses the scenery change from the beautiful, clean, colorful houses and streets to the dusty, dirty streets of the slum with their depressing brown color. This change in scenery reflects Alya's state of mind which goes from tranquility and satisfaction to worries and anxiety over her future life in the slum.

The agony of going back to the slum signals the agony of losing the element of empowerment Alya gained through her relationship with Hanan. For the first time in her life, Alya was transformed from a poor, helpless girl, to what the novel describes as 'the queen of the place', meaning Hanan's heart and villa. In this alternative universe of sexual behavior between Hanan and Alya, the allusive and reserved maid, witnessed a shift in her position of power. Alya is portrayed as a victim of her gender identity and also of her social status and class. Hanan was and remained in a position of power when she induced Alya into a same-sex relationship. Yet, Alya realized the position of power this relationship gives her and she used this element of power to become "The lady of the place" (151). Alya enjoyed this position of power, especially at night when her mistress is at her own mercy: "... her lady has succumbed to her wishes and her master is at the mercy of her plays. The big house where she lived has become her own castle where she manipulates its people the way she wants. The day was not important anymore, she barely cleans whatever she wants to clean; Hanan would not care about that" (145). Alya

became the dominant figure in the relationship manipulating her submissive mistress sensually and sexuality which gave her full control over Hanan.

Alya, for the first time felt the warmth of being loved and being safe from a predatory outside world she experienced in the slums: “The bed was so appropriate to let her feel safe and compensate for the ugly nights she spent in the slums. She started to think she was not born in that neighborhood and her lady created her out of her pure crazy desire” (144). Alya’s sexual conduct progressed from a young girl who was offering her lady sexual services without fully understanding the nature of her acts to a girl who experiments with sexuality and uses it to assert a certain position of power and supremacy she never had before.

Hanan, too, like Alya, is a helpless victim of her upper-social class patriarchal culture. Belonging to a rich family, she grew up silent and obedient the way girls belonging to rich families are supposed to be. Like Alya, Hanan felt parental abuse on the hands of an assertive, egocentric mother and was forced to succumb to the family’s decision of marrying a much older cousin. Like Alya, Hanan felt sexual violation and objectification and like Alya, she had to bear the gender oppression of her own social class. Hanan’s relation with Alya is the only time and place she feels happiness and satisfaction. Consequently, through this relationship Hanan was empowered and the novel describes her transformation from a sad, melancholic lady to a woman filled with excitement and happiness.

Alya’s incident of betrayal and Hanan’s decision to treat Alya as a mere maid during day time is taken as evidence for the lack of affection and for treating the whole relationship as an act of exploitation of a young girl by her rich lady. As Guardi puts it:

Hanan too, though very fond of Alya, does not seem to feel love. It is rather a sort of obsession and a vindication against her husband, whom she was forced to marry and does not love. The end of the novel with Hanan, who in her nightdress drives her car like a fool in search of Alya, reminds us more of the desperation of a child who has lost her toy rather than a human being who has feelings. This attitude is present throughout the novel. (Guardi 21)

Most reviews focus on the element of love and affection to condemn Alya and Hanan's relation as nothing but a cruel act of exploitation through deviant sexual behavior. As mentioned earlier in terms of sexual orientation, love or affection is not the focal point here. However, there are many references to aspects of emotional attachment on the part of the two females which are highlighted after Alya's departure.

The first sign is Alya's decision to hurt Hanan back after she scolded her for staying in her room past dawn. Alya was satisfied and happy in her role as Hanan's mistress which gave her complete control over Hanan's heart and mind. Alya, who thought Hanan loves her, was hurt by what she considered an act of disrespect and arrogance from Hanan. Thus, her decision to hurt Hanan back embodies an emotional aspect. Alya was hurt because Hanan treated her as a maid at the time when Alya expected to be treated as a beloved.

Her decision to sleep with Anwar was also based on an abundance of confidence in Hanan's love and need for her. Alya never expected to be fired or even to lose Hanan. As the narrator says: "She still can't believe that her lady fired her. She always thought her lady loved her to the point where she can't live without her. She was confident the tears and desire she saw in her eyes were real" (Yazbek 126).

From Hanan's side, her unexpected, violent reaction is also emotionally triggered. Hanan considered Alya's behavior and act of betrayal and infidelity: "She betrayed me

with a decadent crocodile. She says it loudly to hear her voice. She stares at her tears and discovers, for the first time in her life, how treason feels” (Yazbek 123). Hanan was jealous and hurt, two feelings she never felt toward her husband, though the novel alludes to his potential infidelity. With Anwar, Hanan felt indifference and apathy; with Alya she felt intense desire, pleasure and happiness which leads to feelings of jealousy.

When Nazek tried to reinstate her relation with Hanan after Alya’s departure, the latter felt a deeper sense of sadness when Nazek was kissing her on the neck: “A sadness which assured her, her feelings are for Alya” (Yazbek 142). Nazek was never able to regain Hanan despite filling her house with flowers, candles and the cinnamon’s aroma mixed with tea: “All this did not succeed in taking Hanan’s heart back which she left in her house with Alya. She was dying with passion and desire for her servant” (Yazbek 138).

The narrator describing Alya’s different feelings toward the two sexual experiences with Hanan and Anwar, says: “Anwar’s image came to her mind, his last image, the smell of his body, she felt repelled and took a deep breath. The lady’s smell made her flourish and expand while the master’s smell forced her to wash at the end of the night. Why did she do this with him? Why did she destroy her life with her own hands?!” (Yazbek 165). For Alya, there is a clear preference between the two sexual experiences even though her relation with Anwar was initiated voluntarily by her.

The act of betrayal of one woman toward another is another dimension of playing with boundaries of sexuality and gender roles. Conventionally speaking, infidelity exists between a man and a woman, but in this novel it happened between two women. This incident portrays a completely new power dynamics set against traditional ones in what

we consider normal sexuality. Usually, the image we think of in similar situations is of a man cheating on his wife with another woman where the male is in a position of power over both females. In this particular case, the image is of a woman betraying another woman with a man. Both women are in positions of power over a helpless, ageing, sick man sleeping in bed. In fact, it was Alya who came to the master's bedroom and slept with him. This new power dynamic is another comparison, contrast technique Yazbek uses to deconstruct traditional conceptions of sexuality developed inside the heteropatriarchal system of gender relations.

This incident of female betrayal is yet another indication that Yazbek's use of lesbian homosexuality is not for the sole purpose of critiquing the corrupt socio-economic and political system exposed in the novel through the description of gender and sexual relations. It is not only to say poverty, inequality, oppression and lack of individual freedom result in unconventional sexual behavior to substitute for some physical and psychological scars from the past. There is an element of passion, love, betrayal, attachment, agony and pain in the relationship between Hanan and Alya.

As mentioned before, the reader is drawn to sympathize, to feel very comfortable and celebrate the joyful moments of lesbian sexuality and to feel very irritated by male to female sexual encounters. The emotional element inserted in the relationship pushed the boundaries to accept new forms of feelings and sexuality as alternative forms uncontrolled by patriarchy and taking place outside its world. Hence, the technique of binary opposition presents us with an alternative model of a world where females, sexually speaking, practice unconventional and alternative sexual acts. Clearly, these acts are described as empowering and joyful.

Most reviews focus on the presence or absence of emotional attachment to argue if the novel advocates for lesbian relations or not. *The Cinnamon's Aroma*, however, presents alternative forms of sexual practices invented, practiced and narrated by women. Men have no role to play here and are forced out of the equation. In the Hammam, in Nazek's villa and in Hanan's villa, women experiment with desires and pleasures available to them in their bodies to provide sexual satisfaction lacking from their lives, as Hanan observes:

She felt better among women. Men frighten her femininity. Here, between women she walks as if she is in a dream . . . she feels trusted and closer to her broken heart . . . with women there is something more beautiful and sensual, something that makes you glow. (Yazbek 94 –5)

Or as Hanan tells Alya: “No man can please you like the soft fingers coming from the inside of you instead of from the inside of a man's body. . . This is how you become the master of your own existence” (Yazbek 72-73).

Becoming in control of your own existence, life and body is the ultimate message of the novel. The control of women, poor and rich, old and young over their own lives and bodies is brought forward by an unconventional, subversive form of lesbian sexuality, developed and structured outside the realm of heteropatriarchy.

In *Out of the Closet: Representation of Homosexuals and Lesbians in Modern Arabic Literature*, Hanadi al-Samman argues that homosexuality, as portrayed in modern Arabic literature, is predominantly an outlet for feelings of frustration and anger. Al-Samman claims that representations of homosexuality, especially lesbianism in modern Arabic literature is a prelude to, abnormal deviation from, or a temporary replacement of normative heterosexuality. This literature, according to al-Samman, does not give attention to the biological essence of homosexuality or body politics, rather it presents



homosexuality as an outlet for feelings of alienation, anger and outrage experienced by the Arab individual, especially the male individual enduring wars, economic hardships, dictatorships and colonialism (270). This observation, similar to Samar Habib's one described at the beginning of this chapter, explains the attitudes we found in the reviews stressing the victimhood of Alya and the victimhood of women in the novel as a prelude or excuse for having what is considered abnormal sexual relations.

Yazbek's novel lays out the interconnectedness of biological essence and gender politics to primarily advocate for women's empowerment and freedom. Yazbek's work celebrates and idealizes the female body and the distinctiveness of female biology transforming this distinctiveness into an element of subversion and resignification of female sexuality. Although Alya and Hanan's relationship is set against a past of sexual exploitation and dissatisfaction, Yazbek does not portray lesbian sexuality as a disease or temporary deviation from normal heterosexuality. On the contrary, she subverts notions of normal and ethical rendering lesbian sexuality a new, alternative norm versus an abnormal, unethical heterosexuality associated with a patriarchal cultural order of oppression. This alternative sexual behavior alternates established power structures and give women a form of happiness and protection.

The text creates a kind of an imaginative, utopian universe of female alternative sexual practices associated with the aroma of the cinnamon. In this alternative universe, women are happy, and in control of their own bodies. Inside this world, men are silent and insignificant like Anwar, Hanan's husband is; or, they are shunned away completely like Alya's aggressive father and the boys in the slum who became a distant, dying memory when Alya moved to Hanan's villa. Nevertheless, the novel portrays that this

hubris, created in Hanan and Nazek's villa, is a fragile alternative universe unable to establish itself in the real world. Thus, the world of the cinnamon aroma is doomed to end and collapse.

Hanan's behavior toward Alya can be criticized as arrogant and hierarchal. Also, Hanan can be criticized as hysterical, selfish and eccentric. In the same way, Alya's character foreshadows elements of manipulation and unfaithfulness. Both women are complex and peculiar characters who exhibit flawed characteristics. This refers to Yazbek's skillful depiction of characters who fit their context. The reader is left to wander, why the novel came to such a tragic end. The reader feels this agony as Alya is retuning back toward the slum and is left to imagine what kind of life is awaiting for her.

However, the complexity of Alya and Hanan's characters and therefore the fate of their relationship gives the text its artistic intricacy and evolutionary aspect. The world of the cinnamon's aroma is more of a utopian, imaginary world which realization is very hard to imagine in the depicted context. Hence, Hanan and Alya evolved as characters and as human beings but the tragic end of their story is inevitable. The separation of the two women, considered by reviews as a condemnation of the nature of their sexual relationship, might as well be interpreted as a lamentation for the loss of that imagined, utopian world. The ideal, happy end would have been for the two protagonists to continue their relationship. The fact that their separation is considered desperate and tragic speaks to the positive effects the sexual relation had on both women.

The sophisticated nature of the two females' relation and the complex nature of their characters also serves the aspect of breaking the contrast of binaries or juxtapositions set in the novel. In what might seem an unrealistic, one dimensional

description of negative male figures versus positive female ones and of unattractive heterosexual relations versus homosexual ones, Yazbek breaks this duality demonstrating that female characters too, and their relationships are not perfect or flawless. The lesbian relations serve as a counter example to those objectifying ones offering aspects of hope and emancipation. However, in a context similar to the one described in the novel, it is unrealistic and hard to imagine perfect characters and happy endings.

While one can argue that lesbian sexuality in the novel is set against a background of sexual oppression and objectification on the hands of men, yet, Yazbek's text does not use homosexuality to solely expose a corrupt social order. Through the framework of sexuality, Yazbek attempts to subvert individual, social and cultural conventions on sexuality with the aim of advocating first and foremost for women's rights and liberty. By using the narrative technique of comparisons and contrasts, Yazbek exposes the hypocrisy, deviance, unnatural and inhuman nature of social and sexual practices that are thought of as normal, natural, moral and status quo. By deconstructing conventional ways of thinking about sexuality, Yazbek can offer alternative ways of thinking and envisioning sexuality. These alternative ways break free from the order of sexuality elaborated inside a rotten patriarchal culture and offer women freedom in their sexual inclinations, choices and practices. I argue that the main objective behind presenting alternative sexuality and sexual behavior such as homosexuality or lesbianism is primarily to offer sites of hope for women in contexts where hope does not exist: "This is powerful. To be the source and end for yourself. Nobody dares to get close to your existence. Just like that. To swim with your own being one stroke at a time. Your fingers are your pilot and your brain the source of your senses and the resting place of your

trembles” (Yazbek 72). Being the beginning and end for yourself, enjoying your own body, desires and sexuality, are portrayed as elements of power and resistance.

Contrary to the prevalent reviews on the novel, Yazbek’s text present opportunities for hope and empowerment. The narrative technique of binary opposition employed, reflects the essence of the practice of subversion of normal, ethical and natural in terms of sexual ideology. Yazbek juxtaposes heterosexual practices elaborated and associated with patriarchy in contrast to lesbian practices presented as alternative practices elaborated inside a world controlled by women. This juxtaposition challenges the first by establishing the second as a more enjoyable, satisfying, human and normal form of sexual experience.

As mentioned before, the novel sets two systems and worlds in opposition. We have the world of traditional sexual behavior between men and women or husband and wife set inside a world of patriarchal culture and specific system of power relations championed mostly, by men. Corruption, oppression, hierarchy and exploitation define this world. It is the world of dark scenes and bad scents found in Alya’s ghetto and Hanan’s villa simultaneously. It is the world of heterosexual relations portrayed as rape and assault. The other world that of unconventional, peculiar and free sexual conduct is the world of the cinnamon’s aroma defined by colorful scenes and beautiful scents. Inside this world a new power structure is elaborated where women ascends positions of power and equality. At night, in the world of the cinnamon’s aroma, Alya ascends the social ladder becoming a queen over two masters. This subversion of power relations brings forward an equal subversion of traditional sexual conducts by leaving behind heterosexuality or what is considered natural sexuality and embracing alternative, lesbian

sexuality. It is an example of the ways in which sexuality, power relations and the social construct are fundamentally interrelated and the shift in one triggers a shift in the other.

This analysis of Yazbek's text resonates with Foucault's ideas in *The History of Sexuality* when he states that sexuality is a specifically constructed cultural narrative or form of knowledge elaborated within and in the service of a certain power structure:

In actual fact, what was involved, rather, was the very production of sexuality. Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledge, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.” (Foucault 106)

Similarly, Yazbek's novel challenges a certain structure of knowledge, a certain discourse of sexuality by subverting it and transforming the natural, ordinary, acceptable and conventional to their complete opposites. Women here use their bodies and desires performing sexual practices set against, and challenging the prevalent sexual knowledge which one can argue is constructed and managed by a patriarchal culture.

As mentioned before, this analysis does not assert that Yazbek is advocating for homosexuality, queer or lesbian sexual identity as elaborated within a western epistemology. In this regard, it is noteworthy to draw attention to some scholarly and critical voices who tackled the subject of homosexuality and queerness in the Arab world and who tried to set a distance between discussing homosexuality in a western context versus discussing it inside an Arabic one. Voices like Joseph Massad in *Desiring Arabs* argue that homosexual practices always existed in some shape in Arabic culture and literature. However, the categorization of sexual identities into gay, lesbian, queer and

others is a Western conception that defines the Western subject and should not be imposed on sexualities of Arabs. LGBTQ organizations or what Massad calls the gay international form a colonial discourse trying to impose a form of Western sexual discourse and categorization on sexualities of the other. In the Arab world, as Massad says, it is the publicness of sexual identities rather than the sexual acts themselves that elicits oppression. In *Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame in Bareed Mista3jil*, Dina Georgis' materializes this idea in her analysis of *Bareed Mista3jil*, a collection of true stories of Lebanese queer women and their struggles with their queerness and sexual identity. Georgis argues that these stories reveal a new cultivation and negotiation of sexual identity under a variety of social and geopolitical circumstances very different in nature and form from their Western counterparts. The women telling their stories in *Bareed Mista3jil* are not trying to appropriate Western queer epistemology but are coming together to imagine ways of reconciliation between their sexual identities and culture. They are trying to organize and find possible ways of living in their specific context. Georgis characterizes this endeavor by replacing the word 'pride' and 'coming out' with the word hope, signaling that the coming out or pride might be more destructive for these individuals who, lots of them don't want to come out but want to keep working out the possibilities available for them to live their sexualities in their own geopolitical contexts (233).

These voices might help us understand Yazbek's approach concerning the intricacy of Hanan and Alya's relationship, the element of secrecy in their relationship, the tragic nature of the two characters and the tragic end of the story altogether. It helps us understand why the text sets a contrast between night and day where the first

symbolizes a utopian, imaginary world and the second is the world of reality. The only way the first is possible is by respecting the norms of the second, which are disrupted and twisted in the secrecy of the night, only. This secrecy is featured in all lesbian encounters like Alya and Hana's relation, in the hammam as well as in Nazek's house. This element of secrecy and alternation between night and day, between Alya the servant and Alya the queen, between Hanan the passionate lover and Hanan the aristocratic, hysterical woman represent the fragile nature of the cinnamon's aroma and what it represents. It is what Gerogis mentions in her essay that the word 'hope' fits this context better than 'pride' stating that queer Arab sexuality is mixed, complex, hybrid and unfinished (234).

Going back to the point I made at the beginning of this chapter, the characterization of Hanan, Alya and the women in Nazek's house as lesbian or the characterization of Yazbek's text as for or against homosexuality misses an essential feature inside the novel; which, I state is the end to which lesbian homosexuality is portrayed as an element of subversion giving women sites of hope and emancipation, albeit ephemeral and maybe futuristic. In *This Sex which is Not One*, Luce Irigaray contends that women, sexually speaking, are mainly a use-value, an exchange value or commodity among men. If women strive to change this reality, they have to set themselves apart from men and discover the love of other women:

For women to undertake tactical strikes, to keep themselves apart from men long enough to learn to defend their desires, especially through speech, to discover the love of other women while sheltered from men's imperious choices that put them in the position of rival commodities . . . these are certainly indispensable stages in the escape from their proletarianization on the exchange market. (Irigaray 33)

Whether within or outside a western epistemology of sexual identity, whether as Georgis states that Arab queer identity is still unfinished and maybe undefined; it is clear that these forms of sexual practices that defy what we call the normal, the natural or ethical by setting themselves against a prevalent form of sexuality constructed inside a patriarchal culture, brought a form of deconstruction to the status quo and shifted power structures, even if it only happened in the secrecy of the night and bedrooms. But, it was clear that this kind of world, metaphorically referred to as the cinnamon's aroma is still far from becoming a reality and for the time being it is destined to stay secret and hidden in the darkness of the night. I understand the kind of tension that governed Hanan and Alya's relationship and resulted in the obliteration of the cinnamon's aroma as an inevitable end to a world that does not exist yet, but the hope for its realization continues through the struggle and the attempts to challenge the existing one.

This struggle is reflected in the story's open-ended conclusion which reflects the myriad of reasons of why Alya and Hanan's relation was doomed to end despite offering both women protection from a dangerous world they both hated and were able to shield themselves from and find an inner form of happiness and satisfaction. Yazbek sets an atmosphere that implies that all the comfort and security that this relationship represents for the two female characters is destined to end and that both are meant to regress to their former lives. However, despite the sad ending, Yazbek succeeded in delivering a powerful and original message.

The time Hanan and Alya spent together is not marked solely by their sexual relationship, but by finding tranquility and being shielded from an antagonistic outside world. Hanan's house was their little paradise inside which they were protected from



being preyed upon and their bodies experienced the fulfilling pleasures of sensuality.

Hanan's house, just like Nazek's are alternative communities within which conventional ideas of sexuality are deconstructed.

The story's conclusion is realistic in the sense that the kind of sexual and individual freedom portrayed in it is still far from being achievable. However, Yazbek reaffirms that sexuality, as it is a taboo, is rarely discussed and addressed openly, nonetheless in subversive, altruistic manner; it is also rarely thought of as a tool of social change. In this sense, despite its end which brought back the gloomy world described prior to the inception of the world of the cinnamon's aroma, offer elements of empowerment and emancipation.

The feminine narrative voice, whether that of the writer, the narrator or the characters in the novel, is one of the features of change and empowerment. The fact of having a female voice depicting a lesbian relationship in a novelistic genre and discussing alternative forms of sexual behavior among women is powerful and significant. The subversive techniques employed in presenting alternative sexual conduct deemed culturally unacceptable and abnormal is also bold and original. The balanced approach used by Yazbek in addressing lesbian relations, not necessarily as a sexual orientation, but as an act of female's resistance and autonomy offer a new way of discussing subversive and alternative sexual conduct. The very fact of their subversive nature, make them elements of empowerment and sites of hope for potential redemption from the order of violence and subjugation expressed in the novel.

### Chapter 3

#### ***Brooklyn Heights: Mobility, Identity and Resignification***

*Brooklyn Heights*, published in 2011, is a novel written by the Egyptian female writer, Miral al-Tahawy. The novel tells the story of Hend, an Egyptian divorced mother who moves to New York City with her eight years old son. The novel won the Naguib Mahfouz medal for literature in Egypt and was short-listed for the 2011 Arabic booker prize attracting important popular and critical attention and acclaim.

Al-Tahawy grew-up in a Bedouin family in rural Egypt before moving to the US, where she is currently a professor of Arabic at Arizona State University. Similarly, the text tells the story of the protagonist named Hend, a divorced, single mother from Nile Delta in Egypt who arrives in New York in 2008 with her eight years old son where she lived in a poor neighborhood inhabited by Mexicans, black people, immigrants, refugees and underprivileged people. Her life in New York City triggers memory associations back to Egypt, a life she thought she left behind hoping for a better one in New York.

Through Hend, al-Tahawy offers the reader and insider/outsider position on both places and cultures. The cumulative message when it comes to gender ideology and epistemology, socio-economic and political structures, is that America and Egypt are two worlds that have little in common on the surface, but deep down share similar structures of hierarchy and inequality represented through the fact that Hend experienced patterns of marginalization and exclusion in both worlds and cultures triggering feelings of melancholia, sadness and apathy.

This text is an intensely moving novel about not only physical, but also emotional displacement and exile addressed from a gender standpoint. Adopting a narrative technique similar to that of Yazbek, the novel is structured around the flashbacks that happen in the mind of the protagonist between her current life in New York City and her former one in Egypt; it is a journey inside the psyche of a female character unable to belong. Her main message is that women are set to fail in this world. The novel conjoins the epistemology of gender to the socio-economic politics of global neoliberalism to map a global order of similarity when it comes to gender inequality and the ways it treats underprivileged groups of people such as women, poor people, immigrants or refugees.

Hence, the majority of critical responses to *Brooklyn Heights* identified three main aspects of the novel; the feminist aspect, the identity aspect and the East/West aspect. The novel is described as feminist in that it is narrated from a feminist point of view drawing an image of a world antagonistic to the female subject in both East and West. The feminist aspect indicates an identity schism of a marginalized protagonist, unable to belong because of being a female. Finally, most reviews focus heavily on the East/West dichotomy or otherness. These reviews praised the novel as astute, intricate and well-structured, but also, focused deeply on the general atmosphere of despair and unhappiness characteristic of Hend and other female characters.

In an 2014 interview with al-Tahawy on *Post45* website, the interviewer, Aaron Bady says:

You know, I've spent a lot of time thinking about Brooklyn Heights, which is a very melancholic novel, with a lot of quiet pain. It has an ending, but it doesn't really resolve: there isn't a happy ending, there isn't a sad ending. There's no catharsis, perhaps. And I wonder, if you were writing for a mass-market audience, maybe you would need a story that has more of a resolution?

Wael al-Najamy on *al-Kitabah* literary website observes that the protagonist of *Brooklyn Heights* suffers an identity crisis which ends by a total loss of identity due in part to her state as “an insider other”: “Those who enter a new homeland as marginalized classes in the Western world”. These people live in underprivileged communities with other ethnic groups and don’t get an authentic experience of the real western culture and lifestyle. Thus, they end up grappling with a serious identity crisis being unwilling to belong to the culture left behind and unable to belong to the one they moved to. However, al-Najamy blames Hend for looking down on her Egyptian heritage and culture when, for example, she allows her son to make derogatory comments about Bay Ridge, the Arab neighborhood in New York.

Al-Tahawy acknowledges that belonging is a central focus of the novel, as we see in her reply to the question about the unresolved ending of the novel: “for me, trying to belong, it’s something that has no end” (*Post45* 2014). Though the novel is not an autobiography, however, there are many similarities between the two lives of writer and protagonist. This issue was brought up in a number of interviews with al-Tahawy who acknowledges the interrelation between her own life and that of her protagonist Hend:

I wanted to become an actor just like my heroine in *Brooklyn Heights*. I wanted to have several faces and lives, more than what an individual can have. I am all the women in my novel, not only Hend, and I shouldn’t apologize for this sin. . . there was always a confessional aspect attached to my writings and works. . . in this text I got rid of the shyness inherited in my writings, I wanted to be free and wanted my writing to be free from all expectations.” (Al-Masri, 2010)

Al-Tahawy acknowledges that moving to the United States had a liberating effect on *Brooklyn Heights*, her only novel written in the states.

This chapter discusses the dilemma of identity and belonging as elements of subversion and resignification of gender identity stressing the fact that Hend is primarily alienated from being a woman and the identity characteristics attached to this term. Al-Tahawy's text implies a form of subversion and deconstruction of generally accepted truth-value notions of what it means and what it is to be a 'female' or 'woman'. Hence, the novel presents the female dilemma of belonging to a word set on a "pattern to bring you down" as the novel mentions.

But, the chapter also identifies sights of hope and empowerment through the character of Lelet, another fellow Egyptian woman who, like Hend, moved from Egypt to New York. Space is central in the novel and the fact that Hend was able to wander the streets of New York gave her an informative witnessing experience she used to find her way through life. Hence, the idea of the female wanderer, or "flaneuse" is also an element of empowerment. Finally, the lack of hope or optimism is also related to the fact that Hend failed to finish her manuscript of writing down her story, alluding to the significance of narrative composition in any emancipatory project.

Hend who grew up in rural Egypt belongs to the 'Falaheen', peasantry class. The novel is structured on temporal and space memory flashbacks between Hend's former life in rural Egypt and her current one in New York City. The chapters are entitled after New York's different neighborhoods such as "Flatbush", "Bay Ridge", "Atlantic Avenue", "Brooklyn Bridge" and other parts of the city. Each chapter starts with a reflection of the protagonist on her current life in a particular place in New York and goes back in memory association to a certain incident, time or place of her former life in Egypt. Al-

Tahawy acknowledges the story is set in two worlds she calls: “the world of memory and the world of present life” (al-Jaridah 2010).

Both present and past, Egypt and New York are united by the common fact of Hend’s feelings of alienation, dissatisfaction and melancholia. In both East and West, past and present Hend thinks of herself as victim because she is a woman. The novel describes the troubled psyche of the protagonist Hend who is at odds with a world pattern structured on bringing a woman down if she refuses to adhere to the very structure of her own marginalization and oppression.

Two key expressions summarize the novel’s message. The first expression is “change, hope,” the second, “What is waiting ahead for you is not better from what you left behind” (al-Tahawy 13). Hend and her son arrive in New York right before the election of Barack Obama as president. They keep seeing signs of “change, hope” spread across the city. On election’s night, Hend wakes up to the sounds of fireworks and celebrations coming from the nearby neighborhoods populated primarily by black people, immigrants, working class and poor people like her. Opening the window to watch the fireworks and hear the chants of celebration, Hend also feels a swirl of happiness and starts laughing and clapping her hands in a crazy way. She hopes change will finally come to her life with the change of the setting from Egypt to New York. But, right after this short moment of hopefulness, she opens a fortune cookie in one of New York’s cafes in the poor neighborhood she inhabits and reads: “What is waiting for you is not better from what you left behind” (13).

These two expressions sum up the novel’s message recounting the story of a woman desperately trying to change her life, to find a time and place in this world where

she feels appreciated, valued, loved and admired. But, at the end, her hopes evaporate when she discovers the sad reality; as a female, this world, in East and West is structured on a pattern to bring you down. The novel is set between two worlds which have little in common on the surface, but deep down share a gender ideology of hierarchy in cultural narratives, discourses and behaviors.

Hend is primarily a woman alienated from the very fact of being a woman. Being a woman is associated with the two figures of “mother” and “wife”. The novel presents these figures as victims, contrasted with what Hend considers more heroic and valued figures like those of female artists, writers, actresses or singers she sees on Television. Hend considers herself a victim specifically because she is a mother and a former wife which, being an Arab woman are almost pre-destined roles. Hend hoped that in New York she will be set free from these identity categories and embrace new identity characteristics of being a writer, an empowered woman, a free, resilient, productive and happy soul in a city that promises freedom and happiness. That’s why Hend arrives in New York with an unfinished manuscript of stories that, symbolically, was never able to finish. Up toward the end of the novel, Hend thinks she starts to suffer from dementia, which triggers some form of panic attacks thinking she might not be able to narrate and preserve her thoughts and feelings, thinking all what she will end up being is a mother, former wife, a woman, a victim.

Throughout the novel, the wife and mother figures are associated with unattractive physical traits such as “breasts dripping milk”, pregnancy stretch marks, aging, and obesity. These traits are contrasted with the beautiful, admired bodies and physical features of young, attractive actresses, dancers and artists. The novel details how

a woman's body changes from a symbol of beauty and admiration to an object lacking appreciation as a mother starts to age. These physical characteristics are accompanied by a sense of diminishing self-worth projected by society. Hend was referred to as "big fat ass" by two old men in New York, an American and an Afghan refugee when she refused their opportunistic and casual sexual advances.

Hend blames her victimhood on the fact of being a mother and consequently, on her son. That's why, the novel describes a peculiar and unusual relationship between mother and son. In most of their conversations she is silent and distant, while the son asks for money, for things to buy or give her remarks about her appearance, clothes and

English:

- You look weird mom, why you stopped wearing makeup?
- Maybe I don't have time. . maybe.
- Mom, you don't take care of yourself.
- It's more important that I'm still taking care of you. What did you do today?
- We did a demonstration and wrote "Change" and refused to eat.
- Why?
- School meals are boring, same thing everyday, we did a demonstration and wrote "we want pizza, hamburger and ice cream". We hold Obama's photo and wrote change, you also have to change.
- How?
- I mean your hair, the way you look and such. .
- So you don't like mom anymore?
- No, but you have to change. . you are always sad.
- Ok
- Mom, when you change the way you dress up and such, will you promise you won't love somebody else? You can go out with your friends and have fun, I mean you can "hang out" with your friends.
- Ok
- But if any of your friends asks you: can we have a "date"? you say no. "Date" means to get married and I don't want you to love somebody else.
- As you like. (al-Tahawy 26)



Hend's short answers, mainly consisting of "ok" and "as you like" foreshadows her inner feelings of being tied up to this role of motherhood which might be the main reason behind her apparent sadness and apathy. Noting the son's imperative tone of what she can and can't do with her life.

This tone of prescribed expectations is at the root of Hend's sadness and melancholia. Al-Tahawy posits the dilemma of the female subject imprisoned in a predetermined subjectivity figure and having to fulfill the expectations of that figure. However, this figure is more of an oppressive, alienating and imposed identity which create a fake subjectivity unrepresentative of the female person. Hend's ultimate aspiration is, as she says, to be free: "free from all expectations about myself, free in choosing my own salvation, a free soul. . . do you know what it means a free soul?" (al-Tahawy 88). The novel implies that Hend, wrongfully, thought she will find this freedom in New York. However, she was faced with the reality prophesized in the fortune cookie of what is waiting for her in New York is not better from what she left behind.

What Hend thought she left behind are the predefined expectations of the womanhood figure which sets the female subject to a life of victimhood represented through motherhood and wifeness. The symbolic and derogative image of which are "two breasts dripping milk" repeated in the novel. But, to Hend's disappointment, even in New York, nobody looked at her as anything more than a middle aged mother and a woman in the traditional sense of the term. That's why, when she agreed to play a role in a play directed by an American, Palestinian neighbor about generational divisions in the Arab community in the US, she was discouraged when she finds out that the role she is assigned is that of an Arab mother anxiously running behind her daughter asking her to

come back home. Dissatisfied by the role the director assigned her, Hend fails dramatically at performing this specific role which prompts Ziad, the director to say: “you’re a mother who’s about to lose her daughter, just focus on feelings of motherhood and loss” (al-Tahawy 216). As if Hend is defined by these feelings, as if these feelings come naturally with being a woman. Hend lowers her head to signal she understands but it was actually a sign of distress because as the narrator says: “she does not like this role and has never desired to be anybody’s mother. For once, she desired to be her own, she desired that some man will realize she possesses more than two breasts dripping milk. That she is qualified for roles other than motherhood” (216). As Hend later says, she thinks she has become a victim after she became a mother because all mothers are victims.

The mother figure is a central one in *Brooklyn Heights*. Al-Tahawy presents a contested relationship between Hend and her mother similar to the relationship between different mother figures and their daughters depicted in the novel. This contested, controversial relationship between the two figures of mother and daughter evolve from hate to pity to assimilation. As a child and teenager, Hend developed feelings of antagonism toward her mother. At this stage, the mother figure was described as one of the most oppressive figures in the novel. Later on, Hend’s feelings of resentment and anger toward her mother evolved into feelings of pity, even compassion when Hend realizes that mothers are victims and not oppressors. Toward the end of the novel, Hend fully identifies with her mother mentioning how much she has come to resemble that figure she used to resent.

All her life, Hend had feelings of pity, disappointment and sometimes antagonism toward her mother. She felt alienated from this figure that spent her life serving a cheating husband and accepting the fact of her own oppression. She was so oblivious to the state of her own oppression and meaninglessness that she was trying hard enough to raise Hend in the same path, making her believe that the best thing that can happen to her is to be the quiet obedient servant of a husband and family. Hend's artistic dreams and inclinations were mocked and ridiculed by the mother who couldn't imagine Hend in any other role than a mother and a wife.

Hend saw the mother an obedient, passive agent of a system of oppression and subjugation. The mother failed to value Hend the human being and failed to provide her with the emotional and psychological support she needed throughout her battles. The mother tried to destroy the rebellious Hend who believed in playing heroic, unconventional roles in life. Instead, she tried hard to raise a tamed, conventional girl who will adhere to her gender pre-formed roles of mother and wife. For Hend, the mother seemed at first an ignorant, callus and backward figure who is trying her best to turn her own daughter into another submissive and sad victim.

At the beginning of the novel Hend describes the relationship with her mother as "hell", using words like "I hate you", and "why don't you love me?" (al-Tahawy 18). As Hend says, she was not able to surrender early in these fights (18). Back then, she was still the rebellious daughter who threatened that she would leave the house if she felt she was prevented from doing what she wants (19). At this early age, Hend was not able to be disciplined as the mother wanted in order to be able to live amidst a jungle of males (19). Later on, Hend discovers that the constant attempts to crush her rebellious soul on the

part of her mother came from a genuine concern for the fate of little Hend, rather than hatred or jealousy:

All she discovered is that this woman who comes and goes in the house in her silvery robe, is her mother because she resembles her a lot. She resembles her, especially now, after she became familiar with the meaning of jealousy, desertion and obsession. They both have the same long nose, tired of tears' impressions. That her mom always holds her back, hurting from the constant pregnancies, that she constantly replaces hot pads to appease the pain, that she is always waiting for the father who comes late, sometimes does not come at all (19).

Toward the middle and the end of the novel, Hend, now living in New York, started to realize how much her life is similar to that of her mother. Despite Hend's despise of the traditional mother figure symbolized in the figure of her own mother, the mothers of her childhood friends and mothers she encountered in New York, Hend failed to make her life and destiny different from theirs.

These kinds of feelings and relationships are common images in Arab women's literature. The relationship between mothers and daughters is an essential, yet intricate one. The alienation from the mother's figure is the result of the progressive aspirations of the protagonist and the opposing traditional stances of their mothers as Dayla Abudi states in *Mothers and Daughters in Arab Women's Literature*: "In these works, the role model that the mother provides for her daughter is one of powerlessness, submissiveness, servitude, dependency, silence and ignorance. Not surprisingly, the daughter rejects everything the mother stands for" (60). However, Abudi also stresses the social and psychological pressure the mother has to bear because of her role as mother and female.

Mothers are considered responsible of raising daughters who adhere to cultural norms and traditions. The mother is hold responsible for the decent conduct of the daughter and her compliance with gender and cultural norms which include preserving

her virginity and decorum, finding a husband at an early age, silently and obediently serving her husband. The mother is blamed for the daughter's conduct if deemed inappropriate or rebellious. At the end, both mother and daughter are victims because they are females living in the same patriarchal world.

As the novel progresses, the reader notices the changing tone toward the mother. There's a shift toward a more compassionate and empathetic description of the mother figure. This figure changes from an oppressive, dominant figure to a figure representing agony, sadness and victimhood. As Aboudi mentions, daughters and mothers come to realize their similar victimhood and come to relate or identify with each other.

In addition to signaling out that motherhood makes victims of women, Hend explains that: "She hates the role of the wife because the real heroes are mostly not wives . . . she hates "Zahrat al-Oula" because all deceived wives live in the shadows like her and talk a lot about decency (al-Tahawy 105). The wives and mothers Hend encounters in her life, especially in Egypt, are left to grapple with feelings of deception and destitution. They end up alone and lonely contemplating life from afar, a life that they are not allowed to participate in. Hend is angry and resents a world structured on limiting women's capabilities, dreams and aspirations to play the secondary roles of mothers and wives. Described in her own words, Hends says she possessed "a real talent for enacting drama, weeping for no reason and an inner sentiment of resentment for existence" (al-Tahawy 214). Also, Hend, like most if not all wife figures in the novel was cheated on by her husband.

Hend, on the contrary, would have succeeded a lot more playing the role of the run-away daughter in the aforementioned play, a daughter fleeing her family, her

neighborhood and the people she knew. As a child, this was Hend's dream she thought she can materialize in New York. Escaping a life defined by constraints and expectations to embrace a free life, is Hend's own aspiration and desire. Symbolically, the play is about a kind of crisis between old generation Arabs and their descendants born in America who want to embrace their American identity and live an American lifestyle contrary to the wish of their parents holding on to the traditions and norms they brought with them.

Hend's own mother, grandmother, school friends, and other women she met in New York, are all described as sad, melancholic characters, primarily victims, whether consciously or unconsciously knowledgeable of their state of victimhood. They are withdrawn from life to the confinement of their domestic spaces like her mother and grandmother. Even those living and working in New York, an example of which is Hend's colleague, a server at Dunkin Doughnuts, lead a monotone, routine life of hard work and boredom that women in Egypt cope with by adhering to their domestic duties and those in New York try to escape pursuing sexual pleasure through casual, momentarily relations. Nothing is exiting about these lives limited by predefined expectations, trajectory and end.

Contrary to these figures, Hend aspired and longed for greatness: "Hend dreamt of becoming something great . . . she dreamt of playing a role in a big story and started to have this fascination with a big, impressive role in life . . ." (al-Tahawy 78). The greatness Hend aspires for is essentially to step outside the conventional, imprisoning roles of wife, mother and woman, in the conventional sense. These roles are dictated, imperative ones similar to the imperative tone of her 8 years old son telling her what she

can and can't do. It is also the tone of Ziad, the director, and society in general unable to see in her more than a woman figure translated in the novel as "two breasts dripping milk" and dictating for her to adhere and perform the prescribed expectations accompanying this idea of woman.

Through Henda, al-Tahawy makes the reader realize that the term 'woman' is not a transparent definition of the actual condition of womanhood. In fact, it has become more of an oppressive, imposing and alienating category that asserts the continuation of patriarchal cultural narrative and superiority. Judith Butler's speaks of the necessity of deconstructing the subject of feminism in the postmodern era which means: "to release the term into future of multiple significations, to emancipate it from the maternal or racist ontologies to which it has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear" (Butler 166). Thus, al-Tahawy is implying a form of subversion and deconstruction of generally accepted truth-value notions of what it means and what it is to be a 'female' or 'woman'. As Butler says, the deconstruction of the term suggests a form of broader cultural resignification that emancipates it from some current regressive and oppressive meanings attributed to it.

Al-Tahawy's ideas are original in the context in which they are presented. The deconstruction of the female gender identity, let alone of identity represents an original approach to tackle women's issues in Arabic literature. Al-Tahawy's originality comes from the fact of questioning the very meaning and idea of womanhood and motherhood. She goes beyond asserting that women have the right to be independent, free and treated with respect and dignity. Al-Tahawy asks women to reflect on what they are told are their natural inclinations, that of becoming mothers and wives. *Brooklyn Heights* is a novel

which asks women to question their prescribed gender identity and subjectivity. It pushes them to reflect on the origins of the category of female identity and envision new ways and forms of being and acting in the world.

However, the desperate tone of the novel comes from the fact that Hend failed in her endeavor to transcend this prescribed subjectivity by failing to finish her unfinished manuscript she brought from Egypt. The activity of writing is described as an essential one to counteract these feelings of sadness, melancholia and desperation. As Joanne Frye mentions “writing is the process of rethinking conventions and norms including the restructuring of patriarchal patterns” (433). For Hend it is the equivalent of playing a leading role in a big story standing in opposition to what she perceives prescribed, mundane roles which are the reality of her life. Writing is by definition the act of transcending reality to create a more suitable, imaginative world. Through writing, Hend can escape her reality of being a victimized mother and wife. Writing is a liberating activity and as thus it is one of these great roles Hend longed for. However, Hend is never able to finish her manuscript and is horrified when she noticed she starts suffering from forgetfulness.

The failure to finish her manuscript translates into Hend’s failure to escape the confinement of an imposed subjectivity, thus, the nature of Hend’s character as tragic. The novel is narrated from Hend’s state of mind and reflects her own observations. As a tragic character, her inner sense of despair and melancholia lingers over the novel.

However, the story of Lelet is unique and counter balances the description of the other women figures, particularly mothers and wives. Lelet serves as a symbol of the heroic character Hend wanted and failed to be. Lelet is an old Egyptian lady whom Hend



met in New York; she was an attractive woman and artist who belonged to the bourgeois class in Egypt and who married a rich, loving, caring, but nonetheless cheating husband. After years of living what appeared to others a rosy but deceptive life, she experienced unusual, mysterious, overwhelming feelings of sadness and depression after she gave birth to her son: “Lelet too, was once a joyful, dreamy girl who experienced an extreme mood shift after giving birth. . . After childbirth she became more erratic and depressed, smokes a lot and sleeps in her bed unwilling to see her newborn or her husband” (al-Tahawy 205). One morning she told her husband she cannot live this life anymore and she wants to travel. His only words were, “my son stays with me” (207). Indeed, Lelet moved to New York and speculations back home say she lived like a free spirit, painting tattoos on her body, hanging with hippies and artists and living with men she liked. After the death of his father, Lelet’s son, a devout Muslim, came to New York, became a successful business man and, contrary to expectations, took care of his aging mother. Although Lelet experienced the same feelings associated with motherhood in the novel, there’s a unique aspect to her story. Lelet’s body is not described in the same unattractive way as other mother’s bodies are or as Hend looks to her own body. Even as an old woman, the classy, well dressed Lelet was still admired by people around her. Lelet always embodied confidence, empowerment, authenticity and content. She refused to repent to God, upon her son’s demand for the sins she made because she does not feel she has to be purified from what her son calls sins (al-Tahawy 210). Lelet lived her life openly and honestly as the tattoo on her back “I am Free” attests to (al-Tahawy 211).

There is a dichotomy between her former life in Egypt, the life of the wife and mother, and the free spirited life she lived in New York. The former was full of agony,

melancholia and sadness because it's a pretentious, fake life. The latter is more joyous and fulfilling; it's a life lived authentically and truly which granted Lelet an ever attractive posture and self-confidence. This aura of confidence earned by living freely and unconventionally bestowed on Lelet the respect and admiration of the whole community, mainly Arabs, when one would have expected her to be shunned away based on moral prerogatives. She represents a figure of power, class and indifference. That's why she is described by Hend in a different way and her story ends differently. Lelet's body is never described in an unattractive way and she died surrounded by her son, family and friends as opposed to Hend's mother or grandmother who died alone. In her final years, Lelet suffered from Alzheimer's or memory loss, which, instead of being addressed as a bad ailment, is considered a positive occurrence because Lelet never went through feelings of fear and sadness that haunt old people. As Hend mentioned before, Lelet transcended other's conceptions of her and lived free in her spirit. She was the only one to break free from the state of victimhood characteristic of most if not all other female characters in the novel; she was freed from experiencing the same fate and feelings attached to the victimhood of mothers and wives.

The novel's ending with Lelet's death and the effect it left on Hend, is significant. In the last pages we see Hend going through Lelet's artifacts, paintings, dresses, shoes, papers and personal belongings put on the sidewalk to be taken for free by passengers. Suddenly, Hend glimpses the pictures of Lelet's son sent to her from Egypt with heartwarming messages on the back from the little boy. Most importantly, Hend also starts looking at random papers and discovers that are the unfinished manuscript of Lelet's autobiography cut short by Lelet's loss of memory. A mysterious feeling of fear

and panic overwhelms Hend when she felt her breasts dripping milk again. At that moment, Hend thought that Lelet and herself are the same person; their stories are the same as well as their destiny: “I feel I know these papers really well Emilia, I feel I wrote all what’s in them. . . these are my papers. I don’t know how this deceased lady took all I wanted to say and write?! . . . I lived the life of this woman” (al-Tahawy 244-45). Hend identifies with Lelet because the latter materialized Hend’s dream of breaking free from the roles of victimhood of mother and wife, and lived ‘free in her soul’ as Hend says. Hend wants to be Lelet because Lelet is a true hero, a true protagonist of her life who refused to succumb to the pre-fabricated roles for her. Lelet is the runaway girl in Ziad’s play who managed to escape and live freely. Lelet is a hero, a protagonist of her own story and her life as opposed to the victims of motherhood identity the others are.

However, Hend’s panic comes from the fact that Lelet’s manuscript, like hers, were never finished, stressing the importance of narrative formation in the project of empowerment and subversion of established truth-value notions on “woman” as a term and identity category. Lelet’s model of leading an unconventional life defying others expectations and limitations upon her, is transitory and fleeting unless preserved in narrative form. Similarly, Hend’s ideas of emancipation and freedom are ephemeral unless they are transformed into narrative. The fact that both women failed to accomplish their manuscripts correlates with the mood of despair, dissatisfaction and sadness mentioned by reviewers and acknowledged by al-Tahawy.

Another example of empowerment and liberation is the activity of wandering the streets of New York City. Hend and Lelet were both wanderers in New York. Hend’s main activity in the novel is described as aimlessly walking through New York’s

different neighborhoods looking at the flow of life and commenting on the scenes she witnesses. Women, freely walking in the urban public space is discussed by many as a figure of modern liberation and empowerment. In *Flaneuse, Women Walk the City of Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, Lauren Elkin defines the term as: “noun, from the French. Feminine form of flaneur . . . an idler, a dawdling observer, usually found in cities” (Elkin 7). The literary critic Walter Benjamin is known for reviving the term in his seminal but unfinished work, *The Arcades Project*, a collection of writings on the city of Paris. In addition to its liberating aspect, the flaneuse embodies an informative feature. The person who wanders the city becomes an informed individual attuned to the different aspects of the public space and the intersections of lives and incidents occurring within it: “the flaneur understands the city as few of its inhabitants do, for he has memorized it with his feet. Every corner, alleyway and stairway has the ability to plunge him into reverie. . . the flaneur, attuned to the chords that vibrate throughout his city, knows without knowing” (Ellis 1).

As women were traditionally confined to the domestic space, the flaneur was: “A figure of masculine privilege” as mentioned by Ellis. Hence, the activity of walking in the urban public space is considered a subversive, transgressive act: “And it’s the center of cities where women have been empowered, by plunging into the heart of them, and walking where they’re not meant to . . . that is the transgressive act. You don’t need to crunch around in Gore-Tex to be subversive, if you’re a woman. Just walk out your front door” (Ellis 20).

Stepping out of the front door has, admittedly, put Hend in uncomfortable situations in the public space. When she goes to the café in the Arab neighborhood in Bay

ridge, she is agonized by the flow of questions about her immigration status, her personal life and financial situation. Although these questions led Hend to avoid the Arab neighborhood in Bay ridge, she couldn't be pushed outside the public sphere. She had a forceful presence at a place where others (men) consider it their own. This mere female presence and visibility in the public space is a deviation from the path constituting an act of subversion and resignification of that space:

She voyages out and goes where she's not supposed to; she forces us to confront the ways in which words like home and belonging are used against women. She is a determined, resourceful individual keenly attuned to the creative potential of the city and the liberating possibilities of a good walk. The flaneuse does exist, whenever we have deviated from the path laid out for us, lighting out for our own territories. (Ellis 23)

Hend was a city wanderer in New York, a flaneuse, even though most of her wandering took place in the working class neighborhoods where she lived. However, this activity in and by itself has a liberating effect, especially when contrasted with the figures of Hend's own mother and grandmother back in Egypt who were confined to the boundaries of their domestic space. As Hend mentions, her grandmother never left her house on the hill and never knew how much life has changed since she entered it as a young girl. She is described as a complete uniformed person, ignorant of the changes that have occurred on life around her. This aspect of confinement is behind the description of these women as ignorant to the state of their own oppression and marginalization. Despite the prophecy of the fortune cookie that Hend's life in New York will be not much different from her life in Egypt, despite the fact that in New York, Hend was perceived as a woman confined to the roles of motherhood and womanhood, yet, Hend is a very different character from those described inside the Egyptian context.

This liberating and informative standpoint gained through wandering the streets of New York City turned Hend into a kind of ethnographic recorder or anthropologist. Through Hend's gaze, al-Tahawy presents an interesting socio-economic and political reading of New York, America and the world. It is an intersectional description of what is commonly known as the world of neo-liberal capitalist order, which New York stands as its most representative emblem.

In New York, Hend lived in a neighborhood primarily populated by Arabs, immigrants and poor people from different ethnic backgrounds. It is a neighborhood strikingly similar to the one Hend grew up in in Egypt. Hend walks by the poor Black and Mexican neighborhoods where unemployed men are scattered on the sidewalks and in public squares (al-Tahawy 18). Hend's Russian friend Emilia tells an American crowd that they also are victims of a biased, propagandist media similar to the media of Soviet Russia (al-Tahawy 41). The refugees Hend meets at "The Refugee Assistance Agency" are a reminder of the United States meddling in the Middle East and other third world countries. Naguib and Ziad are reminders of the Palestinian diaspora, the result of the ongoing Palestinian/Israeli conflict and the US biased position against Palestinians. Hend feels a strong bond with women from Borna, Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Kurdistan. Like Hend, these women are poor and abandoned. New York City has only provided them with food stamps and a small stipend to keep them and their children from starving. Hend also does not fail to notice that this city throws away its own people, in this case white Americans once they become old and unproductive. It's a city for transient visitors with warehouses stocked with all kinds of gadgets fabricated in industries abroad. Naguib

who is fond of literature, art and music is the one who reflects on the inhuman, harsh nature of New York saying:

. . . This city is like a chopping machine. It respects you as long as you are a functioning part of the machine, but the minute you become rusty, the minute you disrupt the functioning order they throw you in garbage. His theories that the human being is not totally free in this place as they claim . . . the human being is chained to the means of living . . . “what kind of life is this that makes you bow to the customer because he keeps your store running? What kind of life is this that makes you bow to your means of living? If your dream is to own a house or raise a child, you will come to the end of your life while still paying back mortgages and student loans; you might even die before that” (al-Tahawy 191).

New York, as seen by Hend, presents a sad example of gentrification which results in amassing poor, immigrants and other ethnic groups in neighborhoods strikingly different from the common image of New York as a city of dreams, opportunities, glamour and freedom. Hend wanted to leave her old life behind and embrace a new life in New York. However, the Arab neighborhood in Bay Ridge was the only place she can afford to live in in New York. The representation of Arab culture from the point of view of a divorced female protagonist is sharp and unflattering. Hend describes Bay Ridge in deriding terms echoed by her own son’s words: “I don’t like to go to the Arab’s neighborhood. . . Bay Ridge is not clean, it’s also vulgar. I don’t want to be one of them” (al-Tahawy 45). She is reminded of her victimhood and of the despised past and place she left behind: “She feels more nostalgic for the ‘nargileh’, she heads to the popular coffee shop full of unemployed people smiling at her presence. They try to remind her of her origin when they surprise her with vulgar words they exchange in different dialects. She realizes then that she has arrived in the land of Arabs” (al-Tahawy 38).

The Arabian Knights Café in Bay Ridge is humid, dirty, full of the smell of cigarettes and of vulgar, curious men who ask Hend annoying questions about her

personal life. Are you married, do you have kids, do you live alone, do you have work permit? These questions aim at finding if there's any chance Hend is willing to have a relationship with them. An unmarried or divorced woman living by herself in a foreign country is perceived as the perfect opportunity to enjoy some casual sexual encounters.

There she meets Abdulkarim from Iraq. He is an alcoholic who was married to a seductive Mexican girl who used to cheat on him. He has several domestic violence charges for beating his own daughter whom he accused of having a loose, unreligious character like her mother. Abdulkarim works in the Islamic center and is in charge of the Islamic cemetery. He is the representative of the schizophrenic Arab man who is religious, alcoholic, violent and a womanizer at the same time. Hend also meets Abdul, a guy from Afghanistan who used to work for the American army. He is a spy and traitor who stupidly boasts about his connections to the American army. Hend pities his childlike, superficial character and refuses his sexual advances as well as his offers to smoke weed and drink vodka. Faced with rejection, Abdul reminds Hend of her 'big fat ass' and her unattractive, plump body. Abdul represents the Arab and Middle Eastern masculine, arrogant personality that considers any rejection coming from a female a form of humiliation that should be avenged.

These men are similar versions of the men she knew growing up in Egypt. There, she experienced deception for the first time in her life on the hands of the art teacher. He was a shy man who would always look to the ground when talking to girls. He wrote Hend a letter and she developed romantic teenage feelings for him to find out that he disappeared with 'Zouba' an attractive, seductive and promiscuous girl who openly boasted about her adventures with guys. The rumor says she was pregnant when they



both disappeared. Hend also tells us about the sexual admiration of the Arabic teacher for her friend Hanan and his relationship with Hanan's mother. The Arabic teacher was a smoker of weed cigarettes sold by Mahmoud the grocer who got married to a young woman the age of his daughter Noha, also, Hend's friend.

Charlie, Hend's American neighbor is no better than the type of men she knew in Egypt and the Arab men she met in New York. When Hend refuses Charlie's sexual advances he also reminds her of her 'big fat ass' while violently slamming his flat's door and cursing her. Charlie's unflattering representation is not balanced by any other positive representation of an America male character. This might be due in part to Hend's social status in New York. As put by Wael al-Najamy in his review article on *Brooklyn Heights*, the novel portrays an array of characters with fragmented identity. Quoting Allison Bailly, al-Najamy says this fragmented identity is formulated among those new comers or immigrants "the outsiders of the inside", who, although live in western societies, they are often gentrified and congregated in underprivileged neighborhoods constituted of multiethnic and multicultural communities. Thus, they lack access and integration into the predominant western culture and ideals. Hence, even if Hend lives in New York, the gentrified neighborhood she inhabits resembles more the one she grew up in in Egypt.

On the other hand, three Arab men are represented in a positive way including the Palestinian Naguib and his Lebanese Armenian friend Narak and Ziad, Naguib's nephew. Their positive representation is related to national identity like Naguib and their professions like Narak and Ziad who are artistic people. All three dislike Bay Ridge as much as Bay Ridge dislikes them. They are alienated from a place full of vulgarism and

superficial talk. Naguib, Narak and Ziad remind us of Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Miramar*<sup>8</sup> where the decent character, the female protagonist symbolizing the ideal Egypt/Egyptian ends up fleeing Miramar, the motel which represents the Egyptian society described as corrupt, dishonest and hypocrite.

As Hala Ghoneim mentions in "Imagined Audience and the Reception of World Literature: Reading *Brooklyn Heights* and *Chicago*", the novel is built on a pattern of sameness and difference that juxtaposes two worlds and looks to the patterns of sameness where they claim to be different. The politics of sameness and difference are examined from a gender point of view which intersects with ethnicity, social, economic status and immigration status. In this sense, the novel can be analyzed from the standpoint of postcolonial theory. Self-criticism, criticism of the former colonial power and the current imperial one symbolized by the United States is a common practice in Modern Arabic Literature in works like *Chicago* by al-Aswany, or *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Saleh. This literary trend aims at dismantling hegemonic western discourses on the Arab world inherited from colonial times; it also attempts to dismantle hegemonic discourses within Arabo-Islamic culture. *Brooklyn Heights* falls in this category of literature which holds a mirror to the self and to the other.

*Brooklyn Heights* describes a common space that transcends geographical boundaries. The centrality of the space and sameness highlights al-Tahawy's awareness of cultural problems of her own nation and the nation she moved to. She does not

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<sup>8</sup> *Myramar* published in 1967 is set in Alexandria, Egypt. Miramar is a pension that symbolizes the Egyptian society and its residents stand as emblems for the Egyptian people and their political affiliations. It is a society mainly defined by corruption and dishonesty.

romanticize any of the two revealing that each culture creates its own system of marginalization. Al-Tahawy does not favor one culture over the other nor does she despise or like one place over the other.

This awareness comes from the protagonist's peculiar position as an insider-outsider, an observer in both spaces and in both cultures as mentioned by al-Najamy and Ghoneim. Hend is not criticizing Arab culture from the premise of her newly acquired status as an American resident, nor does she criticize American culture from the standpoint of an Arab other. Hend belongs to both spaces and cultures; she also experiences alienation and marginalization in both entities. Her female gender identity gives the protagonist a peculiar, simultaneous outsider-insider position in both spaces and contexts. As al-Tahawy mentions, the text reflects the female dilemma of belonging to a world she feels antagonistic to her in both East and West.

Critically speaking, the Moroccan writer, sociologist and feminist critic Fatima Mernissi discusses the East/West dichotomy in terms of sexual relations. She compares the common aspects of gender inequality in East and West although they might differ in scope and form: “. . . I believe sexual inequality is the basis of both systems” (Mernissi 8). Mernissi dismisses the idea of a liberal West inside which women achieved gender equality versus a traditional East inside which gender inequality still prevails. This comparison is misleading because both worlds inherit a gender discourse based on the assumption that women are inferior to men. Mernissi mentions Freud's and the Christian account on women's sexuality where the first considers women to be masochistic because of the passive nature of their sexuality and the second considers women as biologically inferior to men. On the other hand, the Muslim ideology considers women's over active

sexual nature a danger to society; thus, it must be suppressed and regulated by male dominance. Mernissi studies the ontological, historical, religious and social foundations of sexual relations in both societies pointing out to patterns of similarity on the ideological level when it comes to the idea of control of female's bodies, sexualities and lives.

Al-Tahawy's work echoes Mernissi's analysis and presents a good case study in transnational feminism theory as it attempts to reveal the sexual and gender relations and their interrelatedness to socio-economic powers in two different societies. As discussed in the first part of this chapter, Al-Tahawy's novel attempts to dismantle a universal gender discourse based on inequality and oppression of the female figure while envisioning new meanings and conceptions for the term woman. In the same way, the novel sharply criticizes the established sexual relations in both East and West showing their fundamental dependence on a similar socio-economic world order of inequality and oppression which brought this system of relations forward at first place. Thus, the author calls for dismantling the old discourse on female gender identity and sexual relations while envisioning new concepts for what it means to be woman, the changes this might bring to sexual relations and the new socio-economic order it might create.

In *Brooklyn Heights* Al-Tahawy offers original paradigms to talk about feminist issues in the Arab world. She advocates for women's freedom and liberty by deconstructing an existent cultural narrative highlighting its constructed foundation and relation to power structures. She resonates with the postmodern notion of situating reality and truth on the level of narrative or more specifically, with Lyotard's notion of the deconstruction of meta-narratives, which, gender is one of them. Doing this, the author

transforms notions of natural, sacred and normal into constructed, dialectic and structured. This discourse breaks down instrumental barriers when it comes to talk about women's sexual freedom and autonomy in the Arab world.

In her essay "National, Diasporic Exile: Crossroads and Future Prospects", Marie-Therese Abdelmessih discusses what she calls the articulation of transient identities created by globalization through the increase of movement of people across borders, cultures and continents. She uses *Brooklyn Heights* and *An Oriental dance* (رقصة شرقية) by Khalid al-Bary as two case study. Abdelmessih states that works like *Brooklyn Heights* deals with the failure of globalization in creating a harmonious, humanistic, multicultural society because globalization is based on the two discourses of patriarchy on the local and national levels, and colonialism on the global level. These discourses are articulated on premises of marginalization and exclusion, creating identities founded on alterity and otherness, identities against each other, identities in crisis on the local and global levels:

Despite the fluidity of geographical boundaries due to increased human mobility, globalization failed in creating a holistic world because of the patriarchal discourse of the peripheries and the colonialism of the nations of the center. Both are built on central, exclusionary visions unable to build bridges for communication and inter-cultural exchange in the current situation. (Abdelmessih 101)

Hend's feelings of alienation and marginalization in both parts of this world are example of this fragmented identity constructed inside worlds defined by discourses of patriarchy and colonialism. These discourses are by definition discourses of oppression, superiority and exclusion, hence, they give rise to a world order based on gentrification, poverty, inequality and oppression.

But, despite this grim figure, Abdelmessih states that works like *Brooklyn Heights* offer a vision of hope articulated through artistic and imaginative creativity embodied in narrative. In their description of individual and communal feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction based on socio-economic and gender marginalization, texts like *Brooklyn Heights* envision what Abdelmessih calls a cosmopolitan vision, a vision counteracting the bad effects of globalization:

resistant to globalization and rooted in narrative artistic creativity so that imagination becomes a political activity attempting to counter act the dominant discourse by creating an alternative one in the inner world of the novel. This vision infiltrates the world of actuality through transforming the reader into an active participant in deciphering and uncovering the cultural emblems advanced through the imagined incidents and characters. (Abdelmessih 102)

Abdelmassih's analysis stresses, as this chapter does, the deconstructionist element found in al-Tahawy's text and its attempt to reconstruct a counter narrative to the dominant one. She also stresses the fictional and probably futuristic nature of this project done primarily through a narrative reformulation and resignification. Hence, stressing the centrality of narrative formation in any emancipatory project, the idea which will be given a considerable discussion in Alawiya Sobh's *It's Called Passion* (اسمه الغرام).

This chapter analyzed al-Tahawy's intricate and informed observations on gender and sexual relations inside two different context and places. I see Hend as a body and soul that eventually, didn't succumb to what Butler calls 'regulatory law', the materialization and normalization of sex and gender through reiterative practices so that bodies comply with these regulative laws elaborated within structures of power:

That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one

domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law. (Butler, Bodies Xii).

Despite the tragic nature of her protagonist and most of the female figures portrayed in the novel, the text present a bold message of deconstruction and resignification of gender discourse. It is to rethink the meaning of “woman” and envision new articulation for this term. This new articulation is done on the level of narrative and discourse and will alter all of social relations and global relations as well.

## Chapter 4

### **Telling Stories, Writing Fiction and Transforming Reality in *It's Called Passion*.**

*It is Called Passion* (إسمه الغرام), published in 2009, is a novel by the Lebanese writer Alawiya Sobh. Since its publication, the novel has had considerable critical attention driven mainly by Sobh's audacious, straightforward and graphical account on sex, women and their bodies. The novel features a group of women (Nahla, Souad, Nadine and Aziza) telling their stories of pain and struggle in a world of patriarchy. The setting shifts from the rural village in the South of Lebanon where these women grew up, to Beirut. This change, along with the temporal one of ante and post bellum Beirut will be discussed in the section entitled "Writing Urban, Rural and War Sexuality" detailing Sobh's delineation of women and sexuality in relation to these specific time and space situations. Structurally speaking, the narrative body is circular, in that the first and last chapters question the process of writing and the real versus the fictional nature of the tales.

The novel's protagonist, named Nahla, asks a writer named Alawiya to write the story of her passion to her lover named Hani. Nahla becomes the main narrator for the most part of the book before Souad, her friend, takes on this role after Nahla, struck by Alzheimer, disappears on a trip to her village in the South of Lebanon during the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon. Souad dies shortly after Nahla and as a result of Nahla's disappearance. Alawiya, the writer, ends the book questioning if she ever met a woman



named Nahla, if the notes handed to her by Souad are truly Nahla's notes, if the stories told by Nahla are real, and eventually if this whole story is real or a fictional account produced by the writer's own imagination. To avoid confusion, I will refer to Alawiya, the character/writer in the novel as 'Alawiya', and to the writer of the novel as 'Alawiya Sobh' or 'Sobh'.

Through the solipsist framework of the novel, the reader is introduced to the main story about a passionate love between Nahla and Hany tied to the parallel stories of Nahla's female friends and their intimate lives. The centrality of the body, specifically the female body and sex is clear and articulated by Alawiya Sobh. In one of her interviews with Tamy al-Samiry in the online newspaper *Al-Riyadh*, She says: "I think *It's Called Passion* is writing the feminine 'I', writing the body and discovering the female's language of passion and her relationship with the body of the other". The subject of the feminine body and sex is coupled with Alawiya Sobh's bold, straightforward and what some critics call unrestrained graphic and erotic sexual language to produce what, in the same interview, Alawiya Sobh calls "A different talk about passion". Sobh describes this different talk as atypical: "The totality of Nahla's talk about this passion that you call typical, is atypical. Typicality is common and I always wanted to write my vision through my atypical heroines". Thus, this chapter will explore the atypical, what I also call unconventional ways this novel describes the female body, sexuality and passion. Furthermore, this chapter explores the centrality of oral storytelling and writing in bringing forward this atypical talk about women.

## **Women's lives between storytelling and writing.**

In *It's Called Passion*, like in Sobh's other renowned novel, *Maryam al-Hakaya*, which translates to '*Maryam the Stories*', there are two major simultaneous activities that involve remembering and telling women's experiences. These activities are storytelling and writing, which are acts of revealing, release and creation at the same time. In the aforementioned interview in *Al-Riyadh*, Sobh is asked about her fascination with, even bias for storytelling. Sobh Acknowledges this bias which she links to the Arabic literary heritage since the time of Shahrazad, however, according to Sobh, storytelling is the narrative technique she uses to generate tales abundant with life that reflect authentically the characters and people they represent: "Because I am fascinated with telling I find myself moving from door to door and the stories are born from each other" (*Al-Riyadh*). Sobh wanted to write fiction that truly represents, and at the same time, creates the feminine 'I' she mentioned before. The feminine 'I' defined as a free feminine voice talking about its own body and sexuality while discovering them at the same time.

The prominent Lebanese literary critic, Yumna al-'Id, described Alawiya Sobh as a modern day Shahrazad concerned not with saving her life, but, rather, with preserving the details of that life, capturing: "images and feelings and composing them in a way that does not betray the lived experience" (al-'Id, 2002). The straightforward and graphic sexual language used by the women characters in the novel reflect an authentic and dynamic accounts on lived experiences.

Storytelling symbolizes an element of female empowerment happening in a twofold manner. First, by openly talking about their bodies, sexualities and inner selves, women create their own language and narrative that represent them. Simultaneously, this

new developed narrative and language discredit the traditional representation of the male and patriarchal narrative talking about the female body and its sexuality. This discrediting passes control of the language representing and defining the female subject from male to female. The man has, for so long, confiscated the language of the feminine 'I' in what Sobh calls Men's literature (الادب الذكوري) which also represents a wider social patriarchal narrative full of masculine fantasia about the woman, her body, her sexuality and her sentimentality: "This man who thinks he represents the woman because he owns her and speaks for her" (Sobh, *Al-Riyadh*). Through storytelling, women re-represent themselves configuring their own language. This female representation of the feminine symbolizes a regained control over the image of the body, sexuality and sentimentality of the female subject as Sobh, Talking about *It's Called Passion* says: "I think that Nahla's words about passion and the tale of the body was a break from the male writing on the female body as mentioned by critics" (Sobh, *Al-Riyadh*).

In *Woman's Body, Woman's Word, Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*, Fedwa Malti-Douglas recognizes the intrinsic relationship between discourse, the female's body and female's empowerment; a relationship that Douglas dates back to Shahrazad's character in *The Thousand and One Nights*: "Little did she know she would engender modern texts that would recast her own story. Little did she know that her control of narration . . . would be used to argue in favor of the Arab woman's access to discourse" (Douglas 5). Echoing Douglas's analysis, Sobh draws a similar intrinsic relation between control of narration, access to discourse and control over the body. As Douglas also mentions, to control the narrative process is no small task. Simultaneously,

this control reveals a vital relationship between storytelling, writing, sexuality, the body and the creation of a female's voice in Arabo-Islamic culture:

She will lead us not into her own nights of storytelling but into an investigation of the explosive relationship among sexuality, the body, and woman's voice in the Arabo-Islamic sphere . . . Shahrazad demonstrates to her literary cousins and descendants that an intimate relationship must be created between writing and the body. (Douglas 5)

Nahla and her friends are battling the patriarchal world they live inside by telling their stories, essentially to each other. Despite the painful and sad nature of these stories, the very fact of telling them becomes an element of power and resilience. Through these stories, these women give each other advice, support each other and make each other laugh. The cynicism, satire, and sarcasm they use to mock their easily-duped and dull husbands, communicate the sexism and misogyny of the society they live in, the experience of war, the oppression of battle and marginalization. They openly talk about their bodies and their sexualities and about physical and emotional pain; these dialogues become tools of subversion and deconstruction of the prevalent patriarchal narrative on women's bodies, sexualities, and lives. This prevalent narrative is defined by hypocrisy and lifelessness while the women's alternative narrative is characterized by creativity, complexity and passion in the case of Nahla.

The contrast between this alternative narrative created by the stories of these women versus the prevalent narrative of patriarchy is reminiscent of Bakhtin's account on the burgeoning and expanding genre of the novel versus the old, stale and monolithic genre of the epic in his famous masterpiece, *The Dialogic Imagination*. According to Bakhtin, the novel is the literary genre of modernity or the present while the epic is the literary genre of the past. The epic is a finished genre where meanings are monolithic and

complete. The novel, by contrast, is defined by its *heteroglossia* (the multiplicity and complexity of voices and languages inside the novel) and by *dialogism* which is the open-ended dialogue between the multiplicity of these languages and their interaction in the present time. The diversity of voices, the open-ended dialogue and the inconclusiveness of both are the new sources of meaning in the modern world represented by the novel.

The novel is the genre of the present because there are no conclusions in the present. The present is by definition the unfinished, the happening and the alive:

It becomes a world where there is no first word (no ideal word), and the final word has not yet been spoken. . . The novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic open endedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the open-ended present). (Bakhtin 7-30)

That is why the novel is a living and thriving literary genre while the epic is a dead one; one represents the present and the future while the other represents the past.

As Bakhtin said, the indeterminacy and open-ended nature are characteristics of the process of creativity, it is the birthplace of new meanings in the modern world; a process that is very much alive and thriving. The same indeterminacy and creativity characterize the stories of Nahla and her female friends in the novel. These are women, who, through the telling of their stories to each other are discovering their own bodies, sexualities and identities. This discovery will turn them from victims to resilient, victorious figures who control their lives and challenge the established order of patriarchy surrounding them. Their tales are indeterminate, complex and dialectic, which make them new, creative and pertaining to the present moment. These tales are constructing new meanings and creating a new, counter narrative to the ossified, monologic, old, unchanging and traditional patriarchal narrative on women's bodies and sexualities.

The graphic and erotic sexual language employed by women in the novel, and the move from the rural, conservative Lebanese southern village to urban Beirut, allowed Nahla and her friends to experiment with sex and discover passions, sexual pleasures and gratification in extra-marital affairs, lesbian relations and promiscuity. This new narrative belongs to women and their own ways of talking about their experiences, their bodies and their sexualities.

In the Arabo-Islamic culture, the female body was always a problematic figure. Fatima Mernissi, the Moroccan sociologist, has analyzed the idea of 'fetna', "disorder of chaos" provoked by woman's body and sexuality. According to Mernissi, 'fetna', also means a beautiful woman, the connotation of femme fatal who makes a man lose self-control (Mernissi 31). The concept of 'fetna' is coupled with the concepts of 'guile and ruse' or what is known in Arabic as 'qayd' (the power to deceive and defeat man, not by force, but by cunning and intrigue) on the part of the woman, which transforms her into a figure of vile and destruction, anti-divine and anti-social force of the universe: "The whole Muslim organization of social interaction and spacial configuration can be understood in terms of women's 'qayd' power. The social order then appears as an attempt to subjugate her power and neutralize its disruptive effects" (Mernissi 33).

According to Mernissi, both Islamic and Arabic literary traditions represent the woman as the sexually active hunter and the man as the passive victim. However, the Quran and most cultural traditions, comprising the Judeo-Christian West elevate the man to a superior position vis-a-vis the female, a position where he controls her body and sexuality. This ideology behind subjugating and neutralizing the destructive forces of the woman, according to these traditions as explained by Mernissi, turns the sexually active

woman into a masochistic passive being who uses guile and ruse, both destructive forces, to seduce the men and make them succumb to her fatal attraction.

Following this analysis, both Mernissi and Douglas explain the idea behind veiling or covering the woman's body, the 'fetna'. As Mernissi puts it, sexual segregation is a device to protect men not women (31). Douglas analyses the debate in medieval Arabic literature over "the principle that men's eyes should be averted from women" (44). Douglas, however, argues for the intersection of the gaze, woman's body and woman's narrative voice. Douglas cites two examples from what she calls medieval anecdotal literature, where two women cited a Quranic verse: "Say to believers that they cast down their eyes and guard their private parts" 67 to shame the gazers. While conforming to the male-generated system which dictates that the male gaze dishonors and defiles, these women used their verbal eloquence to shame the male and instruct him in appropriate behavior: "Woman turns from observed and passive object to active subject. It is only her ability to seize discourse that has effected this drastic change in her anecdotal status" (Douglas 44).

Medieval and classical Arabic literature might contain a variety of examples of eloquent women and of cases of male-female narrative encounter, however, according to Douglas, in the end, the woman always relegates to her corporeality and passes the final control over the word and the narrative to the man. This is evident even in the case of Shahrazad; though she narrates the stories, it is Shahrayar who has them written down. This clarifies Sharazad's relationship to literature. Shahrazad uses her eloquence and wit to survive a temporary crisis. At the end of the crisis, Shahrazad returns to exemplifying

the image of the woman, the mother and wife, while the preeminence of the narrative, the written text is reserved to Shahrayar:

The “nights” are like dreams that end with the rise of the literary sun of vision, reality, and male preeminence. In the process, body has been transmuted into word and back into body, corporeality is the final word, as Sharazad relinquishes her role of narrator for that of perfect woman: mother and lover. (Douglas 28)

Douglas and Mernissi map the construction of images of femininity in the shared public imagination of the Arabo-Islamic culture through their analysis of texts of literature and Islamic theology. Their analysis reveal an intrinsic relationship between the female’s body, the spoken word and eventually the written word. The drastic change from medieval Arabic literature, Arabo-Islamic religious discourse and even more recent religious and literary accounts is that Soboh’s *It’s Called Passion* attempts not only to subvert the image of the female body and sexuality in the shared public imagination, but it ultimately gives the woman a final control over the spoken and the written word altogether.

The woman is the main character and protagonist in Sobh’s text. Male figures are secondary players, or tools for driving the female narrative forward. They are silent for the most part and are described through the narratives of women. Men are agents in the stories of women. Even Hani, Nahla’s lover and the only positive male figure in the novel, speaks to glorify Nahla’s beauty, sexuality and eloquence. The only verbal or narrative authority possessed by the male character in Sobh’s text is the traditional, patriarchal discourse of hegemony and oppression. In other words, it is a dead discourse. Hence, the only power attributed to the male in the novel, is a physical power to harass, frighten and objectify the female characters.



Following the circular structure of the novel, the physical power coupled with the dead traditional patriarchal discourse diminishes as the male characters grow older, weaker and eventually become defeated, haunted and scared by the idea of their weakening sexuality. These men end up pathetic and tragic figures stripped of their narrative, moral and physical authority and of their integrity. On the other hand, Nahla and her female friends develop from weak and controlled female figures in the rural Lebanese southern village at the beginning of the novel to become strong, powerful, fearless, independent women in urban Beirut bragging about their sexual promiscuity and celebrating their rediscovered bodies and the pleasures they are experiencing.

The nature of the conversations between Nahla and her group of female friends on the one hand, and between the male characters presented mainly by Nahla's husband and brother on the other, give us a clear example of the significant shift of power dynamics relating to the nature of body, discourse and power over the course of the narrative time frame between past and present. Men, now haunted and subdued by the specter of diminishing sexual prowess, talk about the foods they cannot eat, the effects and side effects of Viagra, their blood sugar levels, the kind of diseases they suffer from, their trips to the doctors, vitamins and medicine prescriptions. Their conversations are more like traditional female talking points about cooking, cleaning and similar domestic topics. As Nahla notices: "I, who have known them for a long time can notice how their conversations have changed over time . . . their penises looked flat and retracted, some had them dropping from in between their thighs whereas they had them higher up in the past" (Sobh 215). There is a clear correlation between their current discourse and their

bodies or physicality. As their narratives have shifted from talking about women and sex in the past to pills and diseases, so their bodies and penises change shape and form.

This change in discourse and corporeality on the part of the male characters, contrasts with the changes in most of the female figures. Nahla and her female friends, now in their forties and fifties, are exalting in their sexual experimentations, passions, pleasures, and love reflected in older but more mature and beautiful bodies. Aziza, is now using her body to attract young and rich men. Mirna lives with her girlfriend and talks about the difference between heterosexual and lesbian sex, Nahla lives a passionate love with Hani. They all see themselves beautiful and attractive when talking about love and newly discovered sexual pleasures. Hani talking to Nahla said: “Love is best when we are a bit older, isn’t it Nahla? Nothing drives away aging except love. Look how you are glowing! You have become more beautiful after I slept with you” and Nahla replies: “Yes, you know, all my friends are telling me look how passion is making you prettier, you look like you’re in your twenties” (Sobh 266).

Nahla and her brother Jawad exemplify the new order of body-discourse-power relationship. Growing up in a southern Lebanese village with a misogynistic mother and her entourage, Nahla felt victimized, powerless and marginalized, while Jawad’s privileged treatment granted him an unquestionable freedom and authority over his own self and that of his sister. This power dynamic shifts later on, especially toward the end of the novel when Nahla becomes a triumphant, confident figure enjoying her passion with Hani and Jawad ends up a pathetic, miserable character haunted by erectile dysfunction and aging. Viagra, prostitutes and infidelity define Jawad’s senior years. When Nahla was enjoying intense sexual pleasures with Hani, Jawad was humiliated when he took a

sleeping pill instead of his Viagra, or when a mistress found him crawling on the floor after he dropped a pill. Jawad is the ultimate figure of authority provided to him by a patriarchal culture but at the same time, he is its ultimate victim as well.

Jawad is a tragic figure, and like most other male characters in the novel, he is the victim of the traditional idea of masculinity. This sick and perverted concept of masculinity portrayed in the novel as a form of oppression and control of the opposite gender and overt sexual activity is a toxic concept. It is the main reason behind the order of social oppression and at the same time, the main reason behind the defeat of the male characters and their tragic, pathetic fate. Describing the downfall of these now old male characters, Nahla, noticing their retracted penises says: "I thought this does not diminish their masculinity, attractiveness or humanity to the contrary of what they envision" (Sobh 216).

Jawad is the perfect example of the dangers of masculinity as portrayed in the novel. A handsome young boy whom all girls in the village and in the university found attractive, he ends up spending his life hooking up with prostitutes at the hands of which he discovered his sexual pleasure and gratification. A misogynistic man who spent his life cheating on his wife, he ends up somewhat lunatic after his wife's death as his sexual activity diminishes. As Nahla states, he would wake up at the middle of the night and walk to his wife's grave weeping and asking for forgiveness. Jawad is the example of the macho, masculine, strong and attractive male. He is the representative of this traditional idea of masculinity. Yet, these same traits are the reason for his tragic end and all together tragic life: "Life has changed Jawad and humiliated him after he got old" (Sobh 219). Despite the apparent freedom and promiscuity he exhibited, Jawad never

experienced love, self-satisfaction, or happiness. He lived a dishonest life that came back to haunt him when he would desperately try to fool people and himself as if he still possessed a long gone sexual ability.

Hence, femininity is presented as the face of honesty and resilience in the novel versus masculinity, which represents dishonesty and oppression. That is why, despite struggling with a history and entourage of oppression and misogyny, the female characters are triumphant while male characters are tragic. The victory of the female figure and the loss of the male figure are reflected primarily through this paradigm of body-discourse equation where what is presented in the discourse reflects a physical, corporeal image related to the power dynamics between the two genders.

This victory is reflected, essentially in narrative. As Sobh stated before, it is the reclamation of narrative and discourse from male to female. It speaks to the significance of narration and telling stories as analyzed in Joanne Frye's *Living Stories, Telling lives*. Frye argues that telling stories and narration help us create a sense of the incidents surrounding us, which are otherwise a strewn, complex and dislocated happenings. The narrative plot puts events in relation to each other in a chain of events moving from beginning to end which helps us create a sense of meaning or lesson from the sequence of events. Thus, according to Frye, narration in form of telling stories creates a form of personal, common and cultural identity from lived events, which reflexively affect the real world of events through the created individual and common cultural identity. According to Frye, narrative is a crucial human means for understanding lived experience: "the need to tell stories, hear stories, read stories; the need to make sense of

lived experience through setting events in narrative relationship to each other” (Frye 18 – 19).

In Sobh’s text, women are the tellers of stories and narrators. Through these stories, they help carve a new understanding of their individual and common lived experiences. These stories gave them insight to overcome the traditional, widespread narrative of patriarchy that oppresses and objectifies them, transforming them from victims to triumphant heroines. As Frye notes, this discourse used in people’s everyday lives, not only interprets, but in fact, re-interprets women’s lives. This re-interpretation functions as a mechanism to subvert the power of old patriarchal stories. Talking about novelistic narrative, which Frye likens to everyday discourse used in storytelling she says:

Despite the difficulties of traditional narrative forms for women, this very traditional novelistic voice has also provided surprisingly fertile re-sources for a renewed interpretation of women’s lives. . . the narrating “I” finds additional ways both thematic and structural, to avoid narrative entrapment, new ways to subvert the power of old stories. (Frye 8)

The second kind of relating and female empowerment in the novel is writing, in which the everyday experiences relayed through story telling are penned down on paper for the sake of preservation. In *It’s Called Passion*, women are conscious of the power of writing or the preservation of stories in narrative, novelistic genre. As Douglas mentioned, the preeminence of male over female in *A Thousand and One Nights* is restored by granting Shahrayar the authority of the written, preserved narrative versus Shahrazad’s verbal one. Or, as Alawiya says referring to Nahla: “She told me that

Mahmoud Darwish<sup>9</sup> says the one who tells their story owns the platform of the word.  
And she wants a platform for her word” (Sobh 326)

Additionally, As Frye argues in *Politics, Literary From, and a Feminist Poetics of the Novel*, the process of organizing dispersed everyday events in a chronological and meaningful order through storytelling must be followed by preserving it in a narrative genre. This narrative genre according to Frye is the novel, which I will return to later in this section. But, as Frye states, through narrative construction, human beings engage in the process of the construction of meaning, “In doing so, they have “created” their experience as a part of an interpretive construct . . . We act, that is, according to our narrative construction of experience, future as well as past” (Frye 19). Thus, Frye’s analysis suggests that narrative construction shapes and creates the realities of the world we live in, that is, the everyday lived experience.

If women want to change the experiences of everyday life, they have to engage in the process of narrative construction through storytelling and through writing. In this sense, the significance of writing is quite evident in *It’s Called Passion*. The two main female characters in the novel, Nahla and her friend Souad are both writers. Nahla is a poet and Souad, a university professor of philosophy. The third figure, equally important,

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<sup>9</sup>Mahmoud Darwish (1941 – 2008) is a famous Palestinian poet regarded as the Palestinian national poet. He was born in the village of Birwa, east of Acre in the Galilee. At the age of six, he fled with his family to Lebanon after their village was attacked by Zionist forces. He returned secretly with his family to Palestine in 1949, leaving again in 1970 for Moscow, then Cairo, until finally settling in Beirut in 1971. Much of Darwish’s mature poetry and prose was composed in Beirut. Even while he longed for his homeland of Palestine, he developed a deep affection for the city. In 1982, after the Israeli bombardment of Beirut, Darwish left the city for Tunisia, and then Paris. Darwish finally returned to Ramallah in 1996. Until his death, Darwish continued to pay frequent visits to Beirut for literary events.

is the writer Alawiya, whom Nahla, despite being a writer herself, asks to write down her story of passion with Hani. The story of Nahla and Hani is the framework through which we get to know about all the other stories of Nahla's friends, urban and rural Lebanese life, the war and other matters.

Despite her eloquence in verbal narration and writing poetry, Nahla is haunted by the idea of her fading memory. This element of fear hovers over the narrative voice throughout the novel. Additionally, the stories are somewhat dispersed over different narrators and sources. Nahla tells some of her story to Alawiya who knows most of the story from Souad, Nahla's friend and confidant. Souad narrates most of the stories to Alawiya and provides her with some of Nahla's written accounts after Nahla's disappearance. After Souad's death, Alawiya contacts some of Nahla and Souad's friends to have their intakes on the stories she was told and hear more of their own stories with Nahla. Here, the role of Alawiya the writer becomes crucial. Alawiya is the one who will preserve Nahla's story and the stories embedded in Nahla's one; Alawiya is the one who will construct the narrative that will grant Nahla and the other female voices the final preeminence and authority of the narrative voice. Alawiya will grant this female spoken voice the power to influence everyday lives through the process of interpretation and reinterpretation of narrative. Also, Alawiya is the one who will construct the narrative in the shape of a story having a chronological development which will grant it a sense of meaning and direction. Without this methodological narrative construction, the stories will be dispersed, and later forgotten verbal accounts that lack what Frye calls cause and effect, beginning and ending which are cognitive instruments of our daily lives (Frye 20).

In the first few pages of the novel, Alawiya, reflecting on the process of writing Nahla's story, says Nahla asked her to write down the story of her eternal love to Hani and the changes life brings as we get older. As Alawiya reveals, the first thing Nahla talked to her about was forgetfulness. Nahla was afraid her memory will be wiped out and her story will be forgotten. In the last chapters of the novel, Alawiya, again reflecting on the task of writing Nahla's story after Nahla's disappearance in the 2006 Lebanese-Israeli war, says: "If she had a grave I could go visit, I would read the 'Fatiha' for her and tell her that her story won't disappear the way she did and the way people's stories are buried under the rubble" (Sobh 290).

The novel begins by Nahla asking Alawiya to write down her story, progresses with Nahla and her friends' stories and ends by Alawiya's reflection on her role as writer, the process of writing and the significance of both. The authority of the verbal and written word starts and ends with the woman. Sobh's novel strips the male from any narrative authority and gives women preeminence over the discourse, which transfigures into an authority over physical reality, the body and over reality in general. In this sense, the novel can be read as a reconfiguration and reinvention of the image and role of women in the common social imagination through restructuring the order of discourse, body, writing and reality. It attempts to create a new spoken, written and lived reality.

Women, specifically Nahla and Souad, are conscious of the power of writing especially as they are the two most educated women in the group of female friends. They both want Alawiya to write down the story of Nahla and consequently their own stories intersecting with Nahla's. The goal of preservation is particularly important especially in a society facing constant wars and physical destruction. Through writing, *It's Called*



*Passion*, transforms the bodies, lives and verbal accounts of its female characters into elements of resistance and subversion of the dominant patriarchal discourse. After the physical and mental entity is gone in war or disease as in the case of Nahla having Alzheimer, the preservation of tales and memories through writing becomes the new source of resistance and subversion. In “Writing”, Barbara Johnson confirms that:

If, as Derrida claims, the importance of writing has been ‘repressed’ by the dominant culture of the Western tradition, it is because writing can always pass into the hands of the ‘other’. The ‘other’ can always learn to read the mechanism of his or her own oppression. The desire to repress writing is thus a desire to repress the fact of the repression of the ‘other’. What is at stake in writing is the very structure of authority itself. (Johnson 238-239)

The other here is, of course, women and their struggle to insert their narrative into a predominantly male literary scene. Hence, writing is seen as an act of resistance and reclamation of authority.

It is possible here to question the suitability of the novel for this project since the novel and narrative in general have grown out of a history of oppression and marginalization of women. Does this structure of authority, as Johnson states, change if the writer is a woman? Frye argues that “as novelistic narrative is an agent of interpretation, it becomes as well a possible agent of reinterpretation, not only giving form, but also altering accepted forms” (Frye 21). Relying on Bakhtin’s analysis of the dialogic nature of the novel, its heteroglossia and open-endedness, Frye states that the novel, linked to a lived experience and everyday discourse is flexible and in constant evolution. These characteristics allow the novel to engage into eternal re-thinking and re-evaluation not only of its subject matter, but of its own literary form and structure. The novel, a reflexive literary genre, represents while at the same time drawing attention to the complex, changing and evolving nature of that same representation: “The novel can

examine the novel's capacity both to represent women's experience and to redefine the premises of the representation" (Frye 16). This process of representation and redefining the premises of representation triggers a simultaneous process of interpretation and reinterpretation of the lives of women. This new reinterpretation or new discourse formulated by women resists and subverts the dominant narrative forms of patriarchy.

Returning to Johnson, it is precisely this fear of authority and its accompanying subversive techniques inherited in writing that has caused those in power to minimize its importance, even trying to block the 'other' from having access to it. And, it is this authority that the female characters in *It's Called Passion* are trying to lay claim to either through verbal or through written representation.

The attempt to preserve through writing serves several purposes. First, it signifies a shift from the spontaneous and ephemeral nature of verbal storytelling to the structured nature of literary writing. This means that these accounts will go through a diligent process of organization before they are preserved in novelistic genre. Hence, the fluidity and spontaneity of the spoken word is given a fixed status in writing. However, this static nature is open to the process of reinterpretation and resignification of narrative as mentioned by Frye. Nonetheless, the written word's fluidity is of a different nature from the oral one as Edward Said explains in *The World, The Text and the Critic*: "texts impose constraints upon their interpretation, or, to put it metaphorically . . . the closeness of the world's body to the text's body forces readers to take both into consideration" (Said 39). Even if the oral word is in the world, it is more fluid and shifting than the novel, itself not completely static.

In this regard, Alawiya the character, frequently ponders on, not only her role as a writer, but the ways she will write Nahla's story putting all these accounts into a structured narrative tale. After Nahla's disappearance and Souad's death, Alawiya enters a phase of doubt as to what all these stories mean, whether they are real and whether she even knows the whole story or fragments of maybe untrue, formulated accounts. Then, Nahla comes back in form of daydreaming images or hallucinations to restore Alawiya's faith in the process and the necessity of writing: "Write Alawiya, write. Write the passion. And believe me when you write my passion, you will be telling what is true, not what is fictional" (Sobh 335).

Nahla also tells Alawiya that she does not care much about how Alawiya will organize and structure the story, how she will envision the beginning and end. This is Alawiya's job but the most important issue for Nahla, as she reminds Alawiya, is for her to write, to come up with a novel, a structured story. As Nahla tells Alawiya, "Writing leads you to knowledge instead of knowledge leading you to writing" (Sobh 325). In her fanciful, daydreams, Nahla appears to Alawiyya as the young beautiful girl that Alawiya never met in the course of the narrative timeline. Alawiya only met the older, middle-aged Nahla. But, as Nahla who resurfaced again tells Alawiya: "When you write somebody's story, they become young again and go back to be injected in life, anew" (Sobh 335). Writing is injecting a life's account into life again. This injection grants this account eternal presence and ability to affect other lives.

Alawiya's struggle as a writer, and Nahla's dreamlike return in order to guarantee that her story will be put into a structured narrative plot, speak to the importance of the shift from verbal, spontaneous account to a more structured written one. Writing is a form

of preservation for Nahla's story which is at the same time the fact of its very existence even if that existence is open to multiple reinterpretations. The existence of the narrative plot is, as Nahla explains, the assurance that she will be always alive. Through this narrative existence in life, Nahla's and women's stories will continue to affect, resist, subvert and challenge dominant structures of power through the process of interpretation and reinterpretation.

Nahla wanted to eternalize her corporeal figure and the story of her passion for Hani. After Nahla's corporeal end, Alawiya's story will preserve Nahla's physical figure and passion. The freedom Nahla exhibited toward her body and sexuality, and the freedom she exhibited in her passion for and relationship with Hani, are elements of subversion and defiance toward a prevalent patriarchal structure of power. This unconventional and subversive example of sexual freedom and feminine resilience should not die or disappear with Nahla's death. On the contrary, it should continue to live on, affect lives and change reality. Writing, is the only mean of eternally preserving and the presence of Nahla's example of freedom in life.

Throughout the novel, cues invite both the real and fictional reader to take as biography or autobiography what is at heart, fiction. Examples include the shared name between Alawiya the character in the novel and the author, Nahla's disappearance in the 2006 Lebanese-Israeli war and the references to the Lebanese civil war (1975 – 1990). Toward the end of the novel, we get to the point where it is unclear if Nahla is speaking of real people or of fictional characters in Alawiya's story. Alawiya also questions if her stories are fictional accounts more than relaying the lives of real people as transmitted to her: "The war made me delusional and lost, unable to differentiate if I really know a

woman named Nahla whose story I am writing or if I am envisioning the story of a woman who died under the rubble . . . the line between the story and writing is blurred” (Sobh 326).

The confusion of fact and fiction in a postmodern sense constituted an issue of concern for a number of female critics. Is not the whole premise of women’s literature to change women’s life in the real world? Hence, if women’s narrative productions are works of fiction, how can they possess the agency to affect real life? This question is the main topic of *Feminist Contentions, a Philosophical exchange*, a book composed of four essays of back and forth responses between Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser. For this chapter, I will reference Benhabib, whose essay questions the alliance between feminism and postmodernism. She specifically addresses the issue of the death of the subject, history and metaphysics into the chain of signification: “I want to ask how in fact the very project of female emancipation would even be thinkable without such a regulative principle on agency, autonomy, and selfhood?” (Benhabib 21). To which Butler responded that to say the ‘I’ is constituted does not mean it does not exist or it does not have agency: “But to claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency. For what is it that enables a purposive and significant reconfiguration of cultural and political relations, if not a relation that can be turned against itself, reworked, resisted?” (Butler 46). Hence, diverting attention to the textual and constructed nature of narrative and the subject are tools of subversion and resignification.

Therefore, what is the significance of Sobh's recurring technique of blurring the lines between fiction and real in most of her books, and particularly in *It's Called Passion*? In fact, as Joanne Frye states in "*The Woman Warrior: Claiming Narrative Power, Recreating Female Selfhood*" in which she analyses Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* argues that fantasy and imagination create an independent female identity:

Claiming fantasy not as a separate inner world of the imagination but as a powerful tool for reshaping lived experience beyond the repressions of personal daily life. . . the narrative process, then, enables Kingston to develop a strong female identity, grounded, as is narrative itself, in the capacity to choose and to interpret and the ability to act in a societal context. (Frye 294)

There is an inherent power in the narrative construct related to its very nature of being a narrative and a constructed entity: "This use of fantasy is not precisely an "inner life" as distinct from the "societal possibility. Rather it is a restructuring of societal possibility through the dail-iness of stories remembered. . . the claiming of the power of language through a heritage of power in fantasy" (Frye 297). As Frye states, apart from some postmodern extreme positions that reality is fiction as it is constituted by imaginative narrative structures, narrative has the power to influence and reshape societal context through the process of interpretation and reinterpretation.

In Sobh's text, Nahla, who is transformed into a fictional figure in a dreamlike frame at the end of the novel, relates to Alawiya the necessity of writing the story regardless of whether Alawiya knows all the correct details of what happened to Nahla, if Nahla's story was all true, if Souad added or subtracted details on her own and what destiny will she draw for Nahla after her disappearance:

One thing you will not know, that is what is happening now. What you wrote might be my story or a story you imagined of another woman under the rubble. Of course, you are asking yourself; is this the real Nahla who is standing at the front of this ship and talking to me, or is it Nahla of my thoughts and imagination? There is no big difference and it does not matter. I want you to know, now that you are getting closer to the end of the story that I am not sure of all what took place inside it. Maybe what I told you is not very accurate and you can doubt all what you wrote. But, the only thing I am sure of, and I am confident it happened is the talk about this thing called 'passion'. (Sobh 336)

The word 'talk' here which is 'kalam' in Arabic, also means the words used in a story like, or everyday speech account; hence, 'the talk about passion ', can also stand for this story or this tale about passion.

As Nahla told Alawiya before, the most important fact is to preserve the story through penning it down, again, in the last paragraph of the novel, she reiterates that the one on one association between reality and narrative production is quite unnecessary. Whether it is a biography or autobiography of a sort is not the main issue. What is at stake here is that these female voices carve a presence in the traditionally male dominated arena called public imagination discourse. The fate of Nahla in the story is not as important as preserving and offering this female account on this thing called 'passion'. This thing called 'passion' is women's own account on their lives, bodies and feelings. It is a counter narrative to a predominantly patriarchal one. The existence of this counter narrative is more essential than the factual existence or non-existence of Nahla and the other characters. Consequentially, the very existence of the narrative ensures the presence, therefore the existence of Nahla and her friends in life, everlastingly.

In addition to Frye's idea that social reality and context are influenced and shaped by narrative imagination through the process of interpretation and reinterpretation and postmodern accounts that reality is a fictional narrative construct, the significance of

Sobh's text in this matter lies in stating the secondary importance of whether women's texts and works of literature are representation of real life stories. Whether these accounts are autobiographical or not, they maintain that inherent power of narrative construct to influence, and reshape societal realities and consequently to change women's lives. Hence, the purpose of writing a novel, as Nahla alludes is not only to preserve the life stories of the characters. It is a path to influence social contexts and offer other women a path to change their lives transforming writing into an act of hope and resistance at the same time.

In this regard, Frye highlights the necessity of a 'feminist interpretive community' that will complete the process of rethinking conventions and reinterpreting or re-signifying dominant patriarchal narratives begun by the author through writing:

Through a paradigm centered in female experience (thus raising to visibility, among other things, the previously invisible qualities of women's strength and agency) the novelistic claim to portray a view of social reality becomes a means of access to newly shared experience and provides the possibility, through the writer-character-reader triad, for a sense of community in the new shared reality. In this view, it is not that there is no reality, as in extreme versions of postmodernist thought, but that the novelistic constitution of reality is a part of the endless interaction between information and interpretation by which we all live. . . A key in this contemporary reopening of conventions to process is the presence of a feminist interpretive community. (Frye 44 – 45)

This is a new way of understanding the relation between author-character-reader advanced through feminist literature and criticism.

In "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading", Patrocino P. Schweickart argues that gender plays a role in our reading of literary texts and experience of interpretation: "Feminist readings of female texts are motivated by the need to connect, to recuperate, or to formulate – they come to the same thing – the context, the tradition,



that would link women writers to one another, to women readers and critics, and to the large community of women” (Schweickart 623). As Nahla told Alawiya, writing leads to knowledge. This knowledge will be a shared feature between writer, character, reader and the larger community of women. It asserts the more intimate relationship between author, text and reader in feminist literature and grants this literature an objective of creating a sense of community in the newly shared reality as stated earlier by Frye.

However, this new form of characterization of the relationship between author, text and reader, the objective and role of this process creates a body of literary texts defined as feminine. A Feminine text is not necessarily a text written by a woman. Texts written by men can also be considered feminine texts, in the same way as texts written by women can be masculine texts. In “Castration or Decapitation”, Helen Cixous explains:

A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there’s no closure, it doesn’t stop, and it is this that very often makes the feminine text difficult to read. For we’ve learned to read books that basically pose the word ‘end’. But this one doesn’t finish, a feminine text goes on and on and at a certain moment the volume comes to and end but the writing continues and for the reader this means being thrust into the void. (Cixous, 241)

The whole novel can be characterized as endless, especially the end which is open-ended, in addition to the solipsist nature of the novel. One can say there is no real end for *It’s Called Passion*, or the end can be interpreted as the beginning of the process of writing. Throughout the novel, the stories bleed from and into each other seamlessly. Women’s stories intersect and the end of one story signals the beginning of the following one. Aziza’s story of promiscuity starts as an encounter to Souad’s lack of sexual activity and chastity. Mirna’s lesbian relationships are put in comparison and contrast to Nahla, Souad, Nadine and Aziza’s stories of pain, sex, pleasure and agency. In

this regard, one can understand the logic behind Sobh's narrative strategy of blurring the lines between fiction and reality or of drawing attention to the process of writing. As these critical accounts suggest, these writing techniques are in the service of creating texts serving the female's project of resistance and empowerment.

Lacan, expanding on Saussure's work on signifier and signified argues that: "no signification can be sustained other than by reference to other signification" (Lacan 150). This creates a signifying chain that is linear in time. Lacan compares the signifying chain to "rings of necklace" making the signifier a ring in another chain made of rings (Lacan 153). In this way we can understand the connected stories in *It's Called Passion* and the stream of consciousness like narration at some points. This circular, and solipsist structure or signifying chains that has really no beginning or end makes *It's Called Passion* a feminine text.

In *Margins of Philosophy*, Jacques Derrida explains the establishment of meaning as "differance": "... the signified concept is never present in itself . . . Every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts, but the systematic play of differences" (Derrida 286). Meaning is always deferred and different, it is constructed in relation to other concepts to form a chain of signification. In French, the verb 'to differ' carries both meanings of 'to postpone' and to be 'different'. Hence, there is no complete meaning in the text or in the sentence, but, the meaning is always deferred, postponed until it is contextualized inside a conversation. It is inside this conversation or dialogue that the text or narrative shapes a certain aspect or acquires a certain connotation. Additionally, meaning is always [differer] in the sense of 'different', that is, the same text or narrative acquires different

significances in different conversations or dialogues. Thus, this text, possesses a multiplicity of meanings and significances like any other narrative construct, depending on the conversation and the context inside which it is invoked.

This conversation, which, in our case can be replaced by the ‘interpretive community’ is essential if the novel aspires to establish a meaning, an interpretation and reinterpretation and to affect the social reality. Nahla told Alawiya that writing her life’s story is Alawiya’s way of escaping the death brought by the war. Like Nahla, Alawiya wants her name to be written on a novel instead of on a white bag. A novel enters the realm of interpretation and reinterpretation, it is out in a conversation that creates meaning and keeps the story and its character in the realm of life granting them a form of immortality. This presence in life through conversation guarantees the continuing effect the written text exerts on society and its people. Thus, after the novel is written, it is the interpretive community that keeps the novel and its characters alive and evolving.

Additionally, Lacan and Derrida’s analysis speaks to the fact that there is no final meaning, answer or end in narrative constructs. The absolutism of meaning is a feature of masculine texts while feminine texts adheres to Bakhtin, Lacan, Derrida, Frye and Cixous’ analysis of dialogism, open ended form, solipsist and circular structure of the narrative. That’s why Nahla told Alawiya “Writing is never complete” (325). It’s a process of creation that leads to knowledge.

This concept is further emphasized, especially at the first and last two chapters of the novel through Alawiya and Nahla’s conversations on the task of writing. Nahla comes to Alawiya in dreams or in some form of hallucinatory day dreaming. In the first chapter, Nahla comes to Alawiya in the dream to ask her why she has not started writing the story

of her love to Hani yet. Alawiya, who suffers a kind of breakdown because of the 2006 war in the south says: “So what do you want me to write, I don’t know you very well, I only know what you told me and these are not enough to write down the story of your life” (Sobh 6). To which Nahla replied: “Who told you even if you knew me for a longtime you will know enough to write about me. Get up and write, while writing you will be guided and maybe you will start knowing. Don’t forget, writing is always incomplete” (Sobh 6). It is what actually happened when Alawiya started writing what she knew and eventually the stories started breeding from each other intersecting with Souad, Aziza, Mirna’s stories and the stories related to theirs.

It is worth noting that none of these stories have an actual end except Souad’s, which ends in her death. However, Souad’s corporeal death opened a new line of narration about the nature of her relationship with Nahla, if what she told Alawiya is true, if she changed some of the stories and notes written by Nahla and ultimately if she was Nahla’s best friend and confidant or a jealous figure. As for the others, we come to know about their struggle with love, patriarchy, oppression and their journey of discovery of their selves, their bodies and sexualities. But, as their stories don’t have a real end, their narrative life stops with the disappearance of Nahla.

The circular form of the novel continues in the last two chapters, which, similar to the first one reflects Alawiya’s musing over the task of writing Nahla’s story after her disappearance. Again, Nahla comes back in Alawiya’s day dreaming to ask her once more why she hasn’t written the story yet. This time, Nahla warns Alawiya from changing her fate in the story like she did with Dounya. Dounya is the main character in one of Sobh’s other novels. Asking Alawiya about Dounya is another dimension of

blurring the real/fiction border and relating Alawiya the character in the text to the novelist Alawiya Sobh. Alawiya says: “I didn’t tell her that this destiny game bothers and scares me. . . I don’t want to write the destiny of lives, this is tyranny. . . writing stories with beginnings and ends is but a dictation from the author” (Sobh 327). Alawiya is struggling with her role as an author and her role as a female, thinking they are in contrast. Alawiya, the female character in the novel and Alawiya the female writer knows that writing beginnings and ends or taking charge of destiny is a masculine practice and produces masculine, absolutist texts succumbing to the authority of the male writer. As women are combatting authority, women writers naturally veer away from the authority the writer possesses to dictate beginning and ends or to draw conclusions.

This dilemma is resolved by Nahla, the transcendental figure toward the end assuring Alawiya, the writer that writing is not complete, writing defies authority, writing does not have beginnings and ends, the same way stories are and the same way meanings are constructed. Hence, writing, storytelling and the establishment of meaning or interpretation are feminine, or have become feminine by nature. As feminine practices, they are similarly elements of subversion and resignification of traditional narratives of authority and dominance. Thus, through storytelling, writing and the effects of both, women put their voices and stories out there, challenge dominant narratives, change discourses, lives and social structures. It is what ultimately Alawiya Sobh stated about writing the feminine ‘I’ and changing women’s lives through the act of writing.

### **Writing Rural, Urban and War Sexuality.**

Writing is an act of rebellion as seen above which allows women permanently to challenge patriarchal structures of oppression and dominance by inserting a counter narrative in the body of representation. In this sense, the act of sex can also be an act of rebellion. Sex or sexual desire is regulated by cultural norms and traditions that favor men. Therefore, sexual acts willingly practiced by women outside these cultural boundaries are interpreted as acts of rebellion, defying the patriarchal boundaries that try to control sexualized bodies. It is specifically this act of sex outside the conventional and acceptable cultural norms that Nahla, Aziza and Nadine, though not Souad indulge in after they moved from their village in the rural south to urban Beirut. Through unconventional and culturally unaccepted sexual activity, these women challenge what they perceived systems of control of their bodies. Their discovery of sexual pleasure and gratification outside the bonds of marriage is the main source behind their establishment of individual identities, physical autonomy and some form of emancipation from the physical and emotional oppression they have experienced. These elements are the main reason behind their triumph and transformation from miserable, helpless and in most cases abused women to exultant, independent and victorious figures.

Their journey from the small rural village in the south of Lebanon to what was then war torn Beirut and later postwar Beirut is accompanied by a similar journey in their sexual activity. This journey from village to city, from rural to urban is a journey of struggle, perseverance but also of liberation. It signals the shift from the predisposed cultural boundaries of sexual act related to patriarchy to a more loose and experimental kind of sexuality pushed forward by females.

This territorial shift is complemented by a consecutive shift from their teenage years to adulthood and middle age. The novel is structured backward when the story starts with the meeting of Alawiya and Nahla, now in her late fifties relating her story of passion with Hani. From this point, the stories move back and forth between the south and Beirut, between urban and rural, between childhood, teenage years to adulthood and senior years. In all these stages and sequences, the novel presents a dissonant and contested structure of sexual codes directly related to the similar dissonant and contested order of a whole social and cultural structure.

These acts of rebellion in practicing sex outside the conventional avenues of matrimony are, nevertheless, temporary and limited. They happen within the boundaries of patriarchal structures which they don't overtly defy or subvert like the act of writing. For example, all the sexual acts of these women remained secret and confined among the group of female friends composed of Nahla, Nadine, Aziza and Souad. While on the other hand, men are free to brag about their sexual freedom and promiscuity like Jawad, Nahal's brother: "He would look so proud when he says 'my mistresses' in plural. As if his masculinity diminishes if he does not refer to them in plural" (Sobh 220). The fact that Nahla's relationship to Hani remained secret speaks to the double standards when it comes to gendered sexual activity.

Jawad is the prototype of masculinity, patriarchy and machoism as understood and practiced in this society. However, it is this very toxic image of masculinity that is also the reason of his portrayal as a tragic human figure as I mentioned in the previous part of this chapter. Before, during and after the war, it is evident that women are not the only victims of patriarchy; men too, although are considered the favored gender in this

system, end up being victims of the structures of dominance and oppression they put in place to assert their authority. The tragic fate of men and masculinity is based on the disparity and dissonance of a sexual ideology structured to favor one gender over the other when it comes to sexual activity and desire, when, in fact, *It's Called Passion*, reasserts that both genders have equal sexual desires, needs and should have equal freedom in practicing them. In this regard, the tragedy of masculinity and disparity of the sexual ideology comes from the fact of its opposition to natural tendencies.

Jawad's enablers are ironically his mother and his aunt. They instilled in him the idea of the man of the house in charge of disciplining his sister whenever her behavior is considered inappropriate. The inappropriate behavior is always related to sexual desire. When Jawad discovers the love letters Nahla used to write and bury in the ground, he punished her, with his mother's encouragement and approval by sticking her hand to the hot stove. This same Jawad discovered sexual activity at the hands of a prostitute and developed a fantasy for prostitutes that he never was able to get rid of: "The university girls did not attract him as did prostitutes whom he discovered his sexual pleasure with them. He spent his life at bars and cabarets escaping from his wife Samiha. The odd thing is when he used to fall in love with a woman, he wouldn't be able to touch her or imagine himself with her" (Sobh 220). For Jawad love and sexual desire are disconnected. Love, a pure thing cannot be associated with his sexual desire connected to prostitutes and prostitution.

Jawad says: "Oh God, women! I know them very well. They are all whores. This is the only thing (sex) a woman wants from a man for her to love him and take care of him" (Sobh 222). These were his words to his wife Samiha when he slept with her after a



long time of not touching her. In fact, he took a Viagra pill and came back home erected after a woman cancelled her date with him. The next morning, Samiha put a bowl full of fruits on the table instead of his usual apple. He is a man in need of love and care, which for him transcends the disdained sexual desire he links to prostitution. Jawad's relocation from the southern village to Beirut did not change his sexual behavior. In fact, his debased sexual conduct overcame some political ideals he embraced like supporting leftist policies, social liberation and women's rights to freedom and self-determination.

Most, if not all the male figures, with the exclusion of Hani, Nahla's lover, follow Jawad's path in finding sexual pleasure and satisfaction outside the bonds of marriage. As examples we can site Souad's husband, a university professor, is attracted to his students. Aziz's second husband is attracted to domestic maid servants who are usually from the Philippines or Ethiopia. When Aziza tries to seduce him he says: "Look Aziza, I love and respect you, if you want life to continue between us and you want to keep me, forget about sex. I spit on 'Halal' to become 'Haram'<sup>10</sup> so I can enjoy it" (Sobh 184).

As a female, chastity and decorum are essential aspects of appropriate behavior. Hence, exhibiting sexual desires on the part of the female is considered a violation of the rules of appropriate conduct. Sexual desire and sexual need are limited to the male, while the woman should be almost asexual. As such, a woman, but especially a wife should not reveal sexual desires, should not discuss sex with her husband and should not feel sexual pleasure or satisfaction. Wives should be good women, which means should be obedient, discrete and chaste mother figures. Their joy and happiness is them having a man and

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<sup>10</sup> Halal, is what is religiously permissible and Haram is what is religiously forbidden. In Islam, Sex outside marriage is Haram.

taking care of their families. This is the reason men lose sexual interest in their wives and revert to some kind of sexual fantasy or deviancy to satisfy their desires.

As the novel shows, most wives don't even know that women experience sexual pleasure. When Aziza asked her first husband if it is true that: "A woman feels pleasure and comes" he lost his mind and said before he beat her: "Tell me who are you talking to? Who are you hanging with? Which sluts are you encountering? I'm sure it's Nahla who told you about this or Souad" to which Aziza replied crying: "No one told me anything, I just heard it and I am asking you if a woman comes or not" (Sobh 182). Afterwards he tried to calm her assuring her that a woman feels nothing and sleeps with her husband solely to satisfy him.

Aziza's husband felt threatened by his wife's question about sexual pleasure. Most men in the novel suffer from some kind of erectile dysfunction or impotence at some point or another, especially as they start to get old. Denying sexual pleasure to the other gender is a form of self-protection as masculinity, erections, social status and privilege are connected. In *Sexuality and War, Literary Masks of the Middle East*, Evelyne Accad, referring to the work of the Moroccan woman psychiatrist Ghita El Khayat-Bennai writes: "She notices that it's men's fear of women, in particular of their sexuality, that leads men to subjugate and oppress them" (Accad 19). According to Michael S. Kimmel in *The Gendered Society*: "men's violence against women is the result of entitlement thwarted" (Kimmel 317). As masculinity is rendered analogous to sexual prowess, hiding sexual malfunction by hindering the other gender from experiencing sexual pleasure becomes a patriarchal tactic to assert not only social dominance and entitlement but also to preserve a positive image of the self.

Thus, gendered violence and male violence are employed to solidify the position of power. In *Masculinities*, R.W. Connell observes: “Violence is part of a system of domination, but is at the same time a measure of its imperfection. A thoroughly legitimate hierarchy would have less need to intimidate” (Connell 84). Thus, violence reflects a form of insecurity and fear. Men are threatened by the other gender becoming sexually savant and active. Masculinity looks to female sexuality as a threat and source of intimidation. It resorts to violence, oppression and dominance to cover the weakness in the structure of patriarchy. Female sexuality and male sexuality are put at odds with each other. This pattern did not change much with the move of most characters from the rural south to urban Beirut.

In fact, female sexual activity was the one more influenced by an urban context as opposed to the rural one. As said before, women, represented by Nahla, Souad, Aziza and Nadine took advantage of the urban context to become sexually active, defying the social and patriarchal boundaries set for them in their former rural context. This change is driven by war, by creating a form of community between the females, but mainly, by the discordant and irrational structure of patriarchy, especially its attempt to suppress human nature as related to sexuality in order to maintain a position of authority and protect itself from its own imperfection.

As Miriam Cooke describes in *War's Other Voices, Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War*: “Day is light and dangerous; night is dark and safe. The natural order has been reversed” (Cooke 34). War is a disruption and disintegration of the order of things, in this case of the order of patriarchy. Like any oppressed group, women usually try to use the destruction and disruption of the prevalent order, brought by war, as

a tool to readjust and reposition themselves vis-à-vis the new structure of power. Sandra Gilbert says: “As patriarchal culture self-destructs, those it has subordinated can’t help feeling that the sacrifices implied by the “sound of skies” might nevertheless hold out the hope of a new heaven and a new earth” (Gilbert 28). Or, as Thomas Friedman quoted in Cooke’s book, states in the *New York Times*: “It has driven some people mad or into crime, while enabling others to discover positive qualities in themselves that they never knew existed” (Cooke 193).

Nadine’s story in Sobh’s text is an attestation to the changes brought forward by war and urban living in relation to women’s sexual activity. Nahla, talking about Nadine says: “Nadine changed after her family moved to Beirut and settled there. She became a different person. Her personality changed quickly and dramatically from the confused, reclusive and shy girl to the wild young woman eager for all kinds of experimentation. . . she joined the leftist militias and fought in battles during the civil war” (Sobh 92). Nadine, unlike Nahla, does not look to her past life in the rural village with nostalgia, but with contempt and feelings of relief to have left a place and time she associates with oppression, misery and tragedy. Nadine’s father was a womanizer who used to beat his wife constantly. In response, Nadine’s mother would collapse into hysteric like fits hitting her vagina with her shoe, saying: “If it weren’t for the fact that he pleases you, you son of a bitch (meaning her vagina) and makes you forget everything, what would have kept me with this mad dog son of a dog and womanizer” (Sobh 93). Later on, Nadine’s older sister and protector commits suicide after her fiancée tried to force her to

consummate their marriage after *katb al-kitab*<sup>11</sup> and before the wedding ceremony based on the advice of his father.

Moving to Beirut to fight alongside male comrades, Nadine took part in different forms of sexual activity becoming the mistress of different male fighters until eventually she discovered her homosexual tendencies with the wife of the commander in chief of the militia group she belonged to at that time. In a section in the first chapter of Cooke's book entitled "Pornography of Violence" she explains the historical closeness of sex, war and violence: "Witnessing atrocity forced awareness, and in many cases it was also sexually arousing" (Cooke 32). When all values crumble due to war, all what is left are the limit of the body and a return to instinct feelings. This is exactly what Nadine experienced as described by Nahla:

Nadine was then in her early forties, lost and depressed and hopeless of men and of the war which she lived and experienced its atrocities . . . she witnessed with her own eyes massacres executed by her own comrades which led her to cocaine to be able to cope and forget what she saw . . . during the war, her comrades in the party used to convince her that having sex with a fellow comrade is part of the struggle for freedom. She was driven from one to another and felt violated and debased. Each one of them left her after he had sex with her. What drove her crazy is when one of them asked her to have sex with his friend after she fell in love and dreamt of marrying him. (Sobh 208)

As the novel puts it, this experience drove her to homosexuality after she hated men and their animal like sexual acts.

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<sup>11</sup> In Islam, *katb al-kitab* is the official signing of the marriage papers. After *katb al-kitab* the couple can see each other without a chaperon. However, the consummation of marriage does not happen until after the wedding ceremony, which is considered the public declaration of marriage. Though it is religiously and officially permissible to have sex after *katb al-kitab*, it is socially unacceptable in some contexts.

Even during the war, when women apparently were able to enjoy a greater amount of sexual freedom, the subtext was always one of exploitation. When the prevalent social structure crumbles during war, women's lives change and transform, the old rural codes of behavior and honor don't apply anymore. Women become fighters, mingle with men freely and experiment with sex. However, women who previously saw the city as a site of liberation, soon discover that the city and war cannot bring down the structures of patriarchy that run deep into society.

What is truly liberating and what poses a challenge and threat to the entrenched structures of patriarchy, is women's access to discourse through oral and written narrative as discussed in the previous part, and as described by Cooke: "Discourse, the conduit of power, could also become the locus of its ultimate threat. These women used discourse to undermine and expose assumptions. . ." (Cooke 11). In this sense, Nadine, is eventually a triumphant and victorious figure in the novel as the other women are. Despite her painful experiences in the past, she is saved by discourse, by Nahla's narration of their story and by Alawiyya preserving it in writing.

In fact, Nadine is proud of the confident and liberated woman she has become. She asks Nahla after she encounters her again in Beirut: "Aren't you pleased with this new birth? Pointing to herself confidently and boastfully" (Sobh 92). The traumatic experiences of rural settings and war were a necessary path to embrace homosexuality and find love on the hands of Mirna. In Nadine's case, homosexuality introduced her to her body and to its hidden pleasures. Unlike male characters who devolved from assertive and confident figures in the past which is related to rural settings for the most part, Nadine, like her female friends evolved into a confident and triumphant character.

Aziza is also another example of a character whose life changed dramatically in terms of sexual freedom by moving from the rural to the urban setting. Aziza, like all the other girls who grew up in the village was a modest girl who believed in platonic, romantic love and opposed the idea of sex outside marriage. She wanted to remain virginal and pure for her future lover and husband. But, the treatment she suffered on the hands of her first husband who actually raped her after she refused to have sex with him because of his constant cheating, her second husband's attraction to fornication, in addition to the deceit at the hands of a third lover, cause her to lose faith in her old romantic ideals. She discovers real sexual pleasure for the first time in her forties at the hands of Fady, a guy more than ten years her junior: "Fady, who is ten years her junior made her body crazy, and made her crazy. With him she discovered sexual pleasure and joy" (Sobh 187). Aziza broke up with Fady because of his drug addiction, but, after she discovered the physical pleasure of sex she has been denied for so long, she vowed to live her life freely and respect only the instincts of her body. She exchanged her body for money for some time before she vowed to only date rich and physically abled man who can support and please her.

Like Nadine, Aziza is also portrayed as a triumphant and liberated figure despite a past full of oppression and subjugation. Aziza's biggest achievement is discovering sexual pleasure which, as mentioned before, is considered a threat to men and the patriarchal system of power. This discovery and liberating moment happened with Fady, outside the bonds of marriage. Aziza believed in love, romance, marriage and family. However, she discovers these traditional social values were the main source of her imprisonment and misery. Marriage denied Aziza sexual pleasure, thus, experiencing

sexual pleasure outside marriage is a symbol of her struggle, challenge and triumph. The break with the old, traditional and rural values and the discovery of sexual freedom and pleasure brought Aziza back to life as described by Nahla: “At this age, she possesses a radiant energy mixed with a pleasure-seeking attitude. She wants to embrace life fully, and to obtain both pleasure and money . . . her desirable body possesses such a strength she did not possess when she was younger” (Sobh 195).

It was Aziza who lectured Souad, the only female character who did not follow in the footsteps of Nahla, Nadine and Aziza to leave her husband and seek free sexual pleasure: “You stupid, get up and let your heart beat from love and passion instead of blood pressure. Go out and live and dump this loser, your husband” (Sobh 197). Souad who suffers from a skin disease, was ashamed of her body and was the only one who did not venture on this sexual escapade like her friends. As thus, Souad’s character did not evolve much from rural to urban settings. She was Nahla’s best friend and confident. As she did not develop an independent, defiant and triumphant personality like the others, she died right after Nahla disappeared. Souad, the university professor, restrained her body from exploring its natural tendencies and pleasures. When Nahla disappeared, Souad’s body and soul followed what was their only source of pleasure in life represented by Nahla’s tales of love, passion and sexual activity. As if Souad, who hated her body and who intentionally deprived it from experiencing pleasure because of her skin disease was kept alive by hearing Nahla’s talk about passion and pleasure. It seems interesting that Souad, the university professor and intellectual was the only one not to become sexually adventurous. In part, this might relate to her skin disease and the importance society attaches to women’s appearances and looks. Nahla always inquired if Souad loves her or



is she jealous of her. As if Souad longed for sexual exploration like the others but was hindered due to her skin disease.

Thus, the novel establishes a dichotomy between an order of demise and death symbolized by an oppressive patriarchal culture seeking to limit the natural tendencies and aspirations of the human body and a feminine one. Women struggled to break free from the old order embracing an adventure of pleasures seeking pursued by the human body and soul. These pleasures are of sexual nature and are the essence of transforming Nahla, Nadine and Aziza into glorious and victorious figures.

The move to the city highlights the change in patterns of resistance among women. This change is also echoed in the divergent ways in which the rural population of Nahla's parents' generation and the urban population of her generation negotiate their sexualities. In the rural population, women were either complicit agents promoting patriarchal dominance like Nahla's mother, or defeated, self-pitying victims like Aziza's mother. The common thread that binds these two experiences is patriarchal hegemony. In both the city and the village, masculine power and male dominance are consolidated through male violence and through depriving women of experiencing sexual desire and pleasure. Nahla's urban population, which coincided with the war and with the post war periods, took a much daring attitude to challenge patriarchal dominance through seeking passion and sexual pleasure. As we have seen, however, this rebellion, even when it is successful, is contingent and temporary unless it is embodied into writing.

### **Writing Passion and Subversion.**

The main element of subversion and resignification of traditional patriarchal cultural norms is the story of passion between Nahla and Hani. It is an unconventional story of undying love, passion and physical attraction between two married people in their fifties. In any different context within an Arabic/Islamic world, this story would be considered treason, infidelity or debauchery. People, especially women, in their forties and fifties are not conventionally considered physically desirable. Nevertheless, Nahla and Hani are two character figures who defy and challenge social conventions of their context when it comes to love and sexuality. Through this story of passion, Sobh deconstructs widespread assumptions about the female body and female sexuality. Additionally, through Nahla's passion to Hani, Sobh draws a new image of what masculinity could and should be like.

Nahla and Hani met in Beirut during the civil war. Belonging to two different religious sects in a country torn by a sectarian civil war (Hani is Christian and Nahla a Shiite Muslim) they were destined to separate. Nahla defied her brother's order to cut ties with Hani, however, neither she nor Hani could have defied the demarcation line that separated the Christian and Muslim neighborhoods of the city. Like millions of young men of his generation, Hani immigrated to France and Nahla was left with the only choice of marrying a well-off man. Hani and Nahla regained contact during Hani's occasional visits to Beirut and reinstituted their physical relationship in their mid-fifties; a relationship that continued until Nahla's disappearance when she went to visit her village in the South during the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon.

When Nahla regained contact with Hani during his short trips to Beirut in the middle of the civil war, she says: “Our relationship in our early forties was more beautiful than beauty itself. . . our relationship becomes more free maybe because we become more in touch with our feelings and emotions” (Sobh 170 – 171). Through Nahla and Hani, Sobh glorifies passion and sex at an older age. She puts it in contrast with the animalistic, objectifying and pathetic desire of the other old men for young girls. It is this very desire that is at the root of their portrayal as pathetic and tragic figures. Nahla and Hani’s relationship transcended the type of corporeality associated with a problematic masculine obsession with the sexualization and possession of a young female body. It is the reason why Nahla and Hani’s relation is portrayed as ethical, beautiful, human and heartwarming.

During their years of separation, Nahla had some flings with other men. When Souad asks her if she feels she is objectifying her body in these relationships and in her relationship with Hani, Nahla says: “I’m disrespecting it, why? At the contrary, I’m living it and giving it its right to keep carrying me” (Sobh 22). It speaks to the idea of celebrating sexual activity as long as it is a consensual act between two free individuals.

Furthermore, *It’s Called Passion* idolizes the human, especially the female body and inverts every traditional concept of shaming, covering, sexualizing or objectifying this body. Nahla’s love, adoration and idolization of her body is an act of rebellion in face of what Denise Riley in “Bodies, Identities, Feminisms” calls: “The history of the body as a narrative of morbidity and its defeats” (Riley 221). This history of oppression and suppression of the female body, of considering it ‘aoura’ and ‘fetna’ as discussed by Mernissi and Douglas, of long time practices of veiling and sequestration, of fantasizing

and shaming feminine corporeal functions like menstruation, pregnancy and aging are all subverted upside down through the ways in which Nahla looks and treats her body. For Nahla, the body is a divine gift to allow us to celebrate life and taste its pleasures: “I assured her (Aziza) that she who does not enjoy her body and celebrates it, she who does not let it live and love, god will judge her at the end and throw her into the fires of hell” (Sobh 91). Hence, we see a complete inversion of the religious doctrine on the body. The body, for Nahla is God’s creation, as thus, we humans should not limit the potential of the body nor disdain its functions.

In the same way, Nahla subverted every narrative of defeat and morbidity as mentioned by Riley on the female body including menstruation, menopause, virginity, the vagina, aging and sex itself. Talking about the vagina, traditionally referred to as the source of ‘‘aoura’’, Nahla says:

When I stand naked and look at it, I see the source of my motherhood and passion, the source of light, of warmth and of feelings. Oh Souad, it becomes the birthplace of happiness and sensations when you think of it as a source of love, rather than a place of hardships, a place violated and defiled or a place of pain and miscarriages. . . It represents the traditional logic of violation of the female, where in reality, it represents her humanness. (Sobh 45)

As for menstruation, Nahla contrasts her reaction to her female school colleagues. Nadine wanted to kill herself when she first saw the blood on her underwear. Aziza went into fits of intense crying. While Nahla, celebrated the fact that menstruation signals a positive phase when the body is finally capable of exploring the full potentials of pleasures provided to it. It’s an addition and not a subtraction: “I didn’t cry of distress then, nor did I show this despair and defeat you see on the faces of girls during their monthly cycle. . . what’s wrong with that? I said smiling, this is what happens when our

bodies become complete and we become young women” (Sobh 87). Menstruation for Nahla is an event to celebrate as she did when she first saw the blood on her underwear. She ran joyfully to her mother delivering the good news.

Similarly, when Nahla attained menopause, also synonymously called in Arabic ‘age of despair’, Nahla took it as ushering the age of wisdom and tranquility: “The unusual thing, is that when I attained menopause and ‘age of despair’, I had a stronger feeling of authority, as if another woman came from inside me. . . a different, clean woman that I know her and she knows me, a woman I’m at peace with as I was at peace with myself and my body at all ages” (Sobh 167). Nahla’s reaction is contrasted to her friends who try to lie, faking an extended menopause by carrying menstruation pads in their bags.

Virginity is an unnatural and as thus, irreligious man-made practice to interfere in God’s creation, which granted the body this extraordinary potential to experience the pleasures of life. Nahla says: “I used to hate and detest my virginity, unlike Aziza, who used to say that virginity is a debt the woman has to pay for her future husband” (Sobh 125). Nahla wanted to lose her virginity with Hani when they first met, but Hani, fearing for her, convinced her otherwise. When finally Nahla lost her virginity with her husband, she says: “During these moments, I felt sorry for this man who rode me like I was an animal, making a lot of effort to stick his penis deeply inside me and feel his triumph” (Sobh 126). The pain that accompanies the loss of virginity is probably the biggest fear that haunts girl’s minds since puberty, even childhood. For Nahla, this pain was not physical. It was more of an emotional pain because of the way her husband slept with her. The pain is mainly the humiliating, objectifying idea of penetration as a proof of virility

and manhood. As Sobh describes, it transforms the act of sex into an animalistic act of dominance.

Sex, one of the most beautiful and intense feelings granted to this body, should be celebrate and embraced instead of being called 'haram' according to Nahla: "I used to tell myself, what's wrong with this feeling that springs from inside my body and makes my heart merry. . . and when I look at the face of God, I see it filling all of the universe" (Sobh 54). As discussed earlier, free sexual activity, especially if coupled with passion, is a source of empowerment and triumph as seen with Nahla, Aziza and Nadine. While cultural restriction of sexual activity is a hegemonic patriarchal practice. Souad's demise as the only tragic figure amongst Nadine, Nahla and Aziza is directly related to her lack of sexual activity and lack of exploration of sexual pleasures.

As for aging, Nahla, like all girls and women, went into this stage of anxiety over the change in the shape of the body she adored and loved all her life. When she regained her relationship with Hani in her fifties, she stood in front of the mirror contemplating every part of her body. The little wrinkles under her eye, some extra fat on the belly, some sagging flesh, even the shape of her vagina. Nahla does not hide her anxiousness of the changes that occurred to her body over the years, however, all these negative feelings disappeared when she thought of her meeting with Hani and later when they had sex together: "Feeling of dismay did not last long. My sensation of my femininity and my body are much stronger now than in my youth and my passion toward Hani never faded. . . At this point, my irritation with the shape of my vagina faded, it's still full of life. I thought I will not be shy of my vagina now as I was never shy of it since my childhood" (Sobh 45). Love and passion transcends flesh and transforms the body into a repository

place for the soul and being of the beloved. That is why Nahla and Hani enjoyed passion, sex and their bodies at a time where other characters, especially males, looked at their aging bodies as source of irritation and shame.

Hani, in a moment of weakness, felt ashamed of his weakening sexual ability after suffering from a heart attack and says: “I thought I was cured of the body and mentality of the macho masculine man. . .” (Sobh 279). When Nahla reassured him that love and passion transcends sex and potency and that her passion to him is unrelated to his sexual performance, he suddenly regained his sexual prowess. The novel strives to portray that masculine virility is a source of destruction of the humanness of male and female alike. Unlike the common idea that stresses the importance of masculinity and virility, the text treats it as a disease that needs to be cured.

As Nahla later told Souad, in the fifties, the crazy, irrational emotions of younger years give way to beautiful, more stable feelings of affability and warmth: “When we grow old Souad, our love becomes mature and beautiful; it tastes like honey. As if the soul at this age reclaims its place in love and sex” (Sobh 274). When the body senses feelings of passion, as Nahla and Hani did, it rejuvenates and sanctions itself to feel and give pleasure again. Thus, the source of pleasure is passion and not a mere physical performance or erection and penetration as portrayed by a toxic patriarchal culture.

Passion, this honest and beautiful feeling, comes from the inside of the human heart and mind to grant the sexual act its purity and pleasure like feeling. As Nahla told Souad, she never thought she was cheating on her husband despite having constantly slept with other men (Sobh 135). For Nahla, any sexual act void of attraction, love and passion or free will is an unethical act of oppression and objectification. This is the nature

of most, if not all marital relations presented in the novel. On the other hand, a sexual act coming from a free spirit as an act of passion and love, is a moral, ethical and fulfilling experience.

Similar to what I discussed in *The Cinnamon's Aroma*, marital relationships are presented as unethical, immoral and unnatural due to the element of objectification and oppression present in them. While on the other hand, extra-marital affairs are described as fulfilling and genuine experiences. It was through these relations that Nahla, Aziza and Nadine break free from the order of subjugation and discovered their sexualities and corporeal pleasures. These redeeming experiences transformed them from tragic, helpless women into triumphant and resilient characters.

Nahla who is fascinated with the beauty of her body has, since a very young age, always had some form of adoration and admiration for her own physicality and also, for the physicality of the female physical traits in general. Since a very young age, Nahla developed a natural awareness concerning the importance of the body for a female. Nahla's body is described as an untamed source of intense desires and passions. The difference between Nahla and the other female characters is that Nahla always celebrated her body and its corporeal functions and looked at it as a source of pleasure and gratification: "I immensely loved my body the way I loved my life. I always felt it's clean and generous to me and Hani" (Sobh 22). "I loved and took care of my body since my childhood. Whenever my breasts got bigger, I gave them a new name. They were cherries, apricots and pomegranates" (Sobh 79). Nahla refuses the traditional and patriarchal belittling of the female body which she treats as a sacred temple transcending all other sacredness. This appreciation and gratefulness toward the female body is a



technique Sobh uses to subvert and challenge a power dynamic that sexualizes and fantasizes the female body to be able to control it.

In “Power, Bodies and Difference”, Moira Gatens using Foucault’s approach, states that the body is an imaginary site of signification constructed through relations of power: “The human body is always a signified body and as such cannot be understood as a ‘neutral object’ upon which science may construct ‘true’ discourse” (Gatens 230). Hence, the difference between male and female body and sexuality is not only biological. The difference that governs the ways in which these bodies live and recreate themselves is cultural; created by a specific discourse formulated inside a certain set of power relations. Culturally and historically speaking, this discourse, present the female body as lacking and the male body as full (phallic) in Freudian psychoanalysis or as ‘awra’ and ‘fetna’ in

Arabo-Islamic discourse as we have mentioned with Mernissi and Douglas. *It’s Called Passion*, subverts similar narratives of female physicality and celebrates the female body in all its functions and stages as full, complete and celebrated. In fact, the novel, following the tragic nature of its male figures, similarly describes the male body as lack. The male body is haunted by erectile dysfunction and a pathetic need to prove a virility often mocked, ridiculed and unappreciated by the opposite sex.

In “Write Your Body and The Body in Theory”, Trinh T. Minh-ha mentions:

In writing themselves, women have attempted to render noisy and audible all that had been silenced in phallioncentric discourse. ‘Your body must be heard’, Helene Cixous insists, ‘[Women] must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes’ ”. (258)

Sobh's *It's Called Passion*, attempts to re-signify female body and sexuality accompanying the new power-relation dynamics portrayed in the novel. This resignification is also a subversion of centuries old prevalent phallocentric discourses that attempted to regulate, objectify and control female's body and sexuality.

Nahla represents the ultimate defiance to the prevalent system of gender roles and its order of sexuality. It is a system defined by hypocrisy and dominance; a system that defies and suppresses human nature. Therefore, it is a system doomed to break people down and constitute similar social structures of violence and domination. The ultimate goal of Nahla is for the female subject to live its full potential and freedom: "I would stand for a long time in front of my mirror contemplating my seductive beauty. I would imagine myself walking down the street and turning heads, which fills me with joy while shouting at my picture: I am free . . . free . . . free" (Sobh 107). While Nahla, Nadine and Aziza were not able to completely break down that system of oppression they lived inside, their stories reflect the ways in which they resisted, overcame and triumphed over the power structures that wanted to control and dominate them. *It's Called Passion* grants Nahla and the other female characters release through the creation of a feminine, polyphonic and circular text.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

In the introduction to her book *Sexuality and War*, Evelyn Accad explains the relationship between literature and social change:

Is literature an adequate field to understand political and social realities? Can novels be used as social, anthropological, and political documents? What about the imagination, the fantasy of the author? What about his or her “distortions”? my immediate response is to say that creative works are more appropriate than other works. They give us the “total” picture because they not only include all the various fields – social, political, anthropological, religious, and cultural – but they also allow us to enter into the imaginary and unconscious world of the author. In expressing his or her own individual vision, an author also suggests links to the collective “imaginary.” (The “imaginary” can be said to be a speculation, with the means at our disposal, about what is possible. (Accad 5)

*The Cinnamon’s Aroma*, *Brooklyn Heights* and *It’s Called Passion*, are fictional, imaginary works grounded in the individual experiences of their authors. They present gender and sexuality in complex and unique ways bound by the feminist, subaltern perspective of the issues they present. They give us a total picture of the social, political, economic and cultural conditions of the contexts they depict, showing the interconnectedness of these conditions to gender and sexuality. This dissertation analyzed these texts, following Accad’s explanation, as the means to show us what is possible. The possibility of the reformulation and resignification of the social construct of gender and sexuality.

Narrative, especially in form of novelistic genre, is central to any current or future emancipatory and reformulation project. *It’s Called Passion* presented a strong example

of female empowerment and triumph based on the protagonists' engagement in narrative construction through storytelling and through writing. *Brooklyn Heights*, fell short of achieving an emancipatory end when its protagonist, constraint by antagonistic forces, failed to finish her manuscript. However, it advances a transcendental possibility of hope and emancipation through the character of Lelet, through Hend's activity of roaming the public space and her informative gaze. Hend failed to finish her transcript, but the possibility of engaging in narrative construction is there and can turn a character from victim to triumphant. *The Cinnamon's Aroma*, ends on gloomier aspect offering little possibility for hope or emancipation. The subversive acts of alternative sexual behavior dissipates by the separation of the two protagonists. The occurrence of the transgressive feminist act is ephemeral when it is not transmuted into narrative and discourse.

In this dissertation I have explored representations of gender and sexuality and the elements of subversion and resignification in the novels of Yazbek, al-Tahawy and Sobh. Similar studies of other novels in this genre have been undertaken and scholarship focusing on the similar elements already exist. Consequently, I have no doubt that scholars will continue to explore the rich narratives and subject matters of these texts searching for new meanings, discovering new aspects and re-interpreting the old in light of new and future realities and theories. However, rather than attempting to focus on the representation of women's oppression, war and inequality, I have used these texts as a lens through which to examine possibilities of change, emancipation and hope through highlighting the elements of deconstruction and reformulation of gender and sexual relations on the level of narrative and discourse. I have focused on the possibilities literature offers us to enunciate projects of social and cultural transformation.

Despite their shared thematic elements, I also examined the differences between the three novels. While all three novels dealt extensively with issues of gender, sexuality, violence, oppression or nostalgia, each novel presented a more central preoccupation with one of the above using it as a gateway to the other related topics. *The Cinnamon's Aroma* focused to a greater extent on alternative sexual behavior to counteract realities of subjugation and inequality, while *Brooklyn Heights* focused on the negotiation of gender in a global context predominated by neo-liberal policies. Finally, *It's Called Passion* created a rich presentation of Lebanese society and the essential role of narrative construction and its subversive effects through its explicit treatment of sex and sexuality. However, all three works are bonded in their representation of elements of transgression and resignification of gender and sexuality practices.

Thus, it became clear that connecting these three novels by highlighting their shared themes and concerns is more suitable for this project than using a single overarching literary theory or theorist. The interrelatedness between these stories and the lives of their protagonists, in addition to the contexts depicted, localizes these novels in many ways. To investigate this aspect I used Arabic criticism and reviews whenever possible in my discussion. However, an Arabic theoretical tradition that makes meaningful or parallel contributions to the works of Western feminist literary theorists, gender and sexuality theories doesn't exist; even if women's fiction produced in the Arab world explores these issues in many complex, interesting and creative ways. In a sense, literary writing in the Arab world is more developed than its theorization. This might be due in part to the very conception of the novelistic genre in the Arab world considered borrowed from Western literary tradition. At the same time, however, all three novels

reveal a concern with the human, the universal and the global; thus, the use of Western theory does not reflect a lack or intrusion on these texts. The experiences of the three authors are certainly global, especially in the case of al-Tahawy, but also in the case of Yazbek and Sobh who grew-up in the same world interconnected by globalization, technology and global capitalist policies. Even if their characters are local, they can be easily put in conversation with similar works by women authors from around the world.

In a statement on Arabic fiction and creativity for *al-Nahar* newspaper, the Lebanese novelist Najwa Barakat explains that “the Lebanese who reads me knows that I am Lebanese. The Arab reader imagines, depending on the level of destruction in his own country, that like him, I am Iraqi, Algerian or Palestinian” (Barakat 2006). Despite the specificity of different Arab contexts, they all share similar cultural, socio-political experiences, so an Arab reader can relate to these novels when they speak to the experiences of these and other women in their own lives and countries. The experiences of war, structural oppression, exploitation, violence and poverty, more generally communicate the broader significance of these novels as well as their place within Arabic and World Literature. There is a common shared experience that make these novels Arab novels, but also, Syrian, Egyptian and Lebanese novels.

At the same time, Yazbek, al-Tahawwy and Sobh are part of an urban, intellectual elite coming from a working class, rural childhood. Thus, their works depict female characters with rural backgrounds who move to urban settings allowing them to discuss sexual and gender relations in two different contexts. They reveal a concern for the collective rather than the individual which dominated Arab women’s writings for a long time.

As preoccupied with the collective and global, these texts go beyond advocating for social reform and women's freedom, they present an interesting case of deconstruction and resignification of transcendental cultural narratives of gender and sexuality imagining new possibilities of reformulation, resignification and ultimately new words and new realities.

These texts and others will continue the conversation on women's narratives, their significance, contributions and effects on local and international levels. This dissertation contributed to this ongoing conversation highlighting some representative aspects in light of new theoretical and cultural changes in the Arab world and elsewhere. It was my intention to explore the possibilities of new interpretations embedded in these texts that were not fully explored in previous scholarship. Women writers and women's literature will continue to re-imagine the structures of society and culture for generations to come.

The latest developments in the Middle East, mainly the Arab Spring and the tragic on going wars and conflicts will inevitably create new directions, new themes and new approaches in Arabic literature in general and Arab women's literature in particular. As these are still recent developments, one can only speculate about the scope and the nature of these changes. We have already few examples like Samar Yazbek's *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution* and *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria* written in a diary, documentary style. Women's impressive involvement in the Arab Spring and the subsequent backlash from conservative groups will inevitably be the focus of literary works. There are already voices suggesting that the failure of the Arab Spring to bring the desired social change is the reluctance to address issues of sexual freedom and liberation. Themes of migration, mobility, utopia, dystopia

and otherness will also continue to be much addressed topics as our world becomes much more interconnected and as a number of Arab women writers are forced or pushed to leave their home countries because of wars or ongoing conflicts. All these events will definitely add new perspectives about the ways in which women address, readdress and continue to change their lives and worlds through their writings.



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