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# Postmodern Subjects and the Nation: Contemporary Arab Women Writers' Reconfigurations of Home and Belonging

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POSTMODERN SUBJECTS AND THE NATION:  
CONTEMPORARY ARAB WOMEN WRITERS' RECONFIGURATIONS OF HOME  
AND BELONGING

POSTMODERN SUBJECTS AND THE NATION:  
CONTEMPORARY ARAB WOMEN WRITERS' RECONFIGURATIONS OF HOME  
AND BELONGING

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
Of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies

By

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## ABSTRACT

A lot has been said about the declining status of national paradigms. Most recently, the forces of change have been located in the transnational and global phenomenon. Contemporary Arabic literature, however, identifies globalism as only one among many factors undermining the existing national formations in the Arab countries. Among these factors is the postcolonial condition, and in the case of Palestine, the struggle against the continuing military occupation of Palestinian lands, wholesale and unsystematized modernization, and complex internal social, cultural, religious and racial differences exacerbated by neo-colonialism. The contemporary Arab women writers' fiction analyzed in this dissertation posits yet another dimension that can be said to dismantle the concept of the nation as an imagined and constructed political community from *within*. This fiction implies that the limited and independent aspects of the nation are its most imagined/false characteristics. The falsity of imagining the nation as such (limited and independent) becomes even clearer when we examine the nation's subjects, whose identities, by contrast, are fluid and unfixed. The argument proposed in this study is that the contemporary Arab women writers' fiction gnaws at the concept of the nation as a limited and fixed political entity, by depicting the individual identities of the national subjects as similarly constructed and therefore constantly reconstructed and unfixed. The writers discussed in this dissertation insist, thus, on the dynamics inherent in the act of construction—that is its constant reconstruction and resignification, resulting from the enactment of identity.

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Fatima Sawalha-Shaheen, Marwa, Umm Jamal, the many persons in one, who had set me early on on the path of learning and education. She has been my shams (the sun) that has illuminated my world for many years.

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## INTRODUCTION

### The Writers, their Texts and Contexts

A lot has been said about the declining status of national paradigms. Most recently, the forces of change have been located in the transnational and global phenomenon. Contemporary Arabic literature, however, identifies globalism as only one among many factors undermining the existing national formations in the Arab countries. Among these factors is the postcolonial condition, and in the case of Palestine, the struggle against the continuing military occupation of Palestinian lands, wholesale and unsystematized modernization, and complex internal social, cultural, religious and racial differences exacerbated by neo-colonialism. The contemporary Arab women writers' fiction analyzed in this dissertation posits yet another dimension that can be said to dismantle the concept of the nation as an imagined and constructed political community from *within*. As Benedict Anderson suggests, the nation is especially imagined as "both inherently limited and sovereign" (15). The limited and independent aspects of the nation, then, are its most imagined/false characteristics. The falsity of imagining the nation as such (limited and independent) becomes even clearer when we examine the nation's subjects, whose identities, by contrast, are fluid and unfixed. The argument proposed in this study is that the contemporary Arab women writers' fiction gnaws at the concept of the nation as a limited and fixed political entity by depicting the individual identities of the national subjects as similarly constructed and therefore constantly reconstructed and unfixed. The writers discussed in this dissertation insist, thus, on the dynamics inherent in the act of construction—that is its constant reconstruction and resignification, resulting from the enactment of identity.

In his article, “The Nation as a Contested Construct,” Emmanuel Yewah rightly maintains that, disillusioned by the broken promises of their post-independence rulers and their dictatorships, postcolonial writers “have turned their creative endeavors into weapons to challenge, indeed to deconstruct ... ‘any signifier that could correspond to the nation’. Such subversive activities of de-centering the nation, of questioning established national boundaries, have taken various forms” (45). In similar terms, the Arab women writers discussed in this dissertation de-center the nation, undermining its fixity and various boundaries (geographical, cultural, historical and racial), by depicting characters who not only transcend these boundaries but who reenact and their identities but never in the same way each time. More importantly, as depicted in these writers’ fiction, agency and community-sustaining abilities are contingent on this aptitude to repeat identity with a difference. By depicting the national subject as such, the Arab women writers foreground the nation as “having a shifting and unstable significance” (Yewah 45).

In this study, I highlight the models of constructed identities in four novels, analyzing how they manage, or fail, to gnaw at the Arab nationalist imagined communities and at the essentialist representations of the Arab and Muslim subjects, men and women, but especially the latter, in both nationalist and western hegemonic discourses. These identities, this study shows, prove indispensable as grounds for agency, at both the individual and collective levels, during the times of crisis depicted by the writers. The novels that constitute the primary texts in this analysis are Radwa Ashour’s *Granada*, Zeina B. Ghandour’s *The Honey*, Huda Barakat’s *The Tiller of Waters* and Leila Aboulela *The Translator*.

The personal and national crises and losses depicted in the novels (civil war and the national struggle for liberation in *The Tiller of Waters* and *The Honey*, respectively, exile and the loss of the beloved through death in *The Translator*, and cultural and religious genocide in *Granada*) provide the occasion, albeit unfavorable, for a display of the various and multiple constituents making up the identities of the novels' women, and sometimes men. In addition, these crises function as catalysts whereby the protagonists manage to "relay and resignify the theoretical positions that have constituted" them, producing their subject positions (Butler, "Contingent" 9), which renders them more agential in reclaiming, if sometimes only temporarily, not only their personal lives but also new forms of community.

Some of the questions this dissertation answers are: How is the nation depicted in the novels? And how is it allegorized? Which aspects of Arab nationalist thought and discourse do the novels critique? How is the intersection of nationalism and other forms of hegemony articulated? What alternative models of collective identity do the novels offer and what factors into the success or failure of these models? Are we to interpret these models realistically or symbolically? Do they bespeak any historical reality at all? To what extent are these models of identity credible within their texts and context(s)?

**Context: why postmodern subjects?**

Interestingly, this notion of repetition with a difference of identity's constitutive theoretical positions and material practices not only resonates with postmodern theories of identity, but it can be seen as a reversal of national thought, which is grounded in *preserving* origins and past histories. In theorizing nationalism, Partha Chatterjee refers to the split or the contradiction inherent in national thought, which makes claims to

authenticity and pure origins that differentiate it from the west while attempting to modernize based on the values of the Enlightenment (41). Implied in this split, as Edward Said warns, is the nineteenth-century imperial division between the native and the westerner at the heart of Orientalism (Yegenoglu 122). Ingrained in nationalist thought, then, are the very structures this thought claims to oppose. Likewise, the gendered discourse of nationalism whereby women are entrusted with the task of preserving original culture while men assume responsibility for the public sphere correspond to this inherently split within nationalism.

There is another way of conceptualizing this postmodern critique of national thought as a critique from within. In her study of identity in the Palestinian oral poetry duet, literary and film critic Nadia Yaqub rightly remarks that “intimately related to the question of national identity is that of locality, the process of locating the subject” (16). What is relevant to my argument in Yaqub’s statement is the fact that the notion of community, in her case the nation, operates from the bottom up, which, ideally speaking, renders the subjects with their shared as well as distinct identities relevant to notions of home and belonging. In a similar venue, I argue in this dissertation that in the novels the constructed, always in-process, rather than fixed and essential, identities function as models that help the writers envisage a notion of home, belonging, and community that, too, is always in the making and, thus, diverges from the limited and fixed notion of the nation. Central to my analysis of these models, therefore, will be their localities, to use Yaqub’s term, or constitutive elements, which are cultural, social *and* personal. Simultaneous with this overarching goal is an analysis of the significance of this constituency in relation to agency, social and political change, as well as hegemonic

representations of the Arab and Muslims, especially the women, in both nationalism and western discourses. The four chapters in this dissertation will manifest that as the writers depict and imagine fluid and constructed identities, essential elements on which both hegemonic discourses and representations of Arab and Muslim women, in particular, are based are interrogated and undermined.

In *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology*, Lamia Zayzafoon articulates the common ground of all representations of Arab and Muslim women that makes the deconstruction of the one a deconstruction of the other(s). The Arab Muslim woman, she contends, is “as a single ‘category,’ the ‘Muslim woman’ is an ‘invention,’ whether in the Western discourses of Orientalism and Western psychoanalytic feminism or in the discourses of Arab nationalism and Islamic feminism in colonial and postcolonial North Africa” (1). Being a construct, and more importantly a *singular* one, the “Arab Muslim Woman” can aptly be counteracted through an *array* of constructs that not only speak to the multiplicity and diversity of Arab women’s identities, but these constructs inevitably foreground resignification, reconstruction, and agency as integral aspects of their constituency. Through this reproduction of locality as a harbinger of agency and as the ground on which unofficial forms of community and belonging can be erected, the contemporary Arab women writers studied in this dissertation may be able to escape being “hostage to the categories of Eurocentric thought” inherent in national paradigms (Yegenoglu123).

Alternative notions of home and belonging, as those insinuated in these novels, are pertinent to the postcolonial reality not only as they redefine limited and limiting nationalist and western hegemonic narratives, but they are indispensable within the

context of the postcolonial condition of exile and migration. Postcolonial writers, therefore, have tackled the nature of belonging, imagining a spectrum of alternatives, ranging from a disavowal of familiarity as a basis of belonging to adhering to traditional forms of cultural identity and place (Koshy 48). However, what is common to many redefinitions of belonging is the writers' foregrounding of the role of *individual* creativity in the reconstruction of self and home (48). Creative, indeed, are our Arab women writers' reinventions of belonging, home and community. They are so, however, not because of a predetermined act of disavowal of and disassociation from home and the familiar, but because of their being the outcome of a *different* re-enactment of the familiar elements of one's locality, which may or may not intersect with the official collective identity, and which in the process of this re-enactment end up being reconstructed and reconfigured.

The following chapters should make it clear that the very nature of identity—that is its constructedness—belies the very spirit of nationalist and western hegemonic representations of Arabs and Muslims and the nation as a whole. While nationalist formations imagine fixed boundaries of identity, gender, and place, adopting a hierarchical gendered agenda in order to preserve them, western representations similarly posit an ahistorical category of Arabs and Muslims, both men and women. The Arab women writers' fictions analyzed in this study, by contrast, explore, as legitimate venues for the construction of the national subject, a large variety of Arab and Muslim women's identity constituents that are usually purged in the formation of the fixed national signifiers. My study will navigate disparate geographical and historical times wherein wit, intelligence, spirituality and mysticism, romantic love, counter-histories and counter-

narratives, Arab sciences and intellectualism undermine the nation's fixed signifiers, especially its hierarchical binaries of self/other, public/private, and home/exile. These elements inform the novels' characters identities, especially the women and dictate their agency within the various contexts depicted in the novels, which are the Spanish Reconquest of Muslim Granada, the Palestinian military resistance in post-Intifada Palestine, the aftermath of human loss and exile, and the Lebanese civil war.

### **The Novels and Novelists**

#### **Radwa Ashour**

Ashour was born in Cairo in 1946. She started her education in French schools but grew resentful of their emphasis on adopting foreign ways. Four years later, she was to be transferred, at her own request, to a state school, where she excelled. Ashour came of age at the zenith of the Nasser period. Among the first memories she recounts is Nasser announcing the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956. She received her PhD from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst in African American Literature in 1975, becoming thus the first to receive a PhD in this area at the University of Massachusetts. Radwa Ashour's fiction writings include *The Journey: Memoirs of an Egyptian Student in America* (1983), her autobiographical rendition of her stay in the US; *Warm Stone* (1985), a novel set in Cairo; *Khadija and Sawsan* (1989), a novel in two parts narrated respectively by mother and daughter; *I Saw the Date Palms* (1989), a collection of short stories; *Siraj*, (1992) a novel set on an imaginary island off the coast of east Africa in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *The Granada Trilogy* (1998), the first book of which is analyzed in this dissertation, is a novel in three parts recounting the history of three generations of a Muslim Arab (later, Granadine Morisco) family, after the fall of

Granada, covering the period from November 1491 to October 1609. The first part of the trilogy *Gharnata* [*Granada*] was published in Arabic and then translated into English by William Granara in 2002. It also won the Cairo International Book Fair Book of the Year Award in 1994. Ashour's most recent work, *Atyaf* (1999) is an autobiographical novel that just came out in English translation under the title *Specters* (2011). Ashour was also awarded the 2007 Constantine Cavafy Prize for Literature.

### ***Granada***

In *Granada*, Ashour reactivates the Andalusí imaginary for presentist concerns. The novel therefore not only brings to life central elements of the cultural history of the Muslim rule in the Iberian peninsula and the dramatic and tragic historical events that led to its demise, but does so in a way that allows the novel to resonate with present-day concerns, especially with the similar Palestinian history of exile, loss, and dispossession. Whereas this dual representation— which has been seen by some critics as a misrepresentation for failing to take into account the other tragedy that took place at the same historical moment depicted in the novel, which is the expulsion of the Jews from Spain— does indeed invoke the Arab and Palestinian political context, it brings into play the cultural identity of al-Andalus itself. The novel depicts the political dramas of 1491 and thereafter through the three generational family story of a Granadan bookbinder, Abu Jaafar, his wife, widowed daughter-in-law, her two children (Saleema and Hasan), and his two apprentices.

Following the fall of Granada to the Castilian Christian rulers, the cultural and religious lives of the city's Arabs gradually disintegrate and so do the family and human relations. Nevertheless, Abu Jaafar continues to pursue his dream of educating his two

grandchildren, especially the young girl, Saleema, the brighter and more strong-willed of the two. As the male characters adopt mutually exclusive positions, by means of which they respond to the restrictions imposed on their freedoms by the Christian Inquisition, tensions rise in the family, adding internal hurt to external injury. Concerned about his family's safety, the new family head, Saleema's brother, Hasan, asks his sister's husband, Saad, to disavow his relationship with the Muslim resistance to the Christian rule. Saad, instead, does the opposite, opting to leave the family and join the outlawed resistance in their mountainous hideout. By contrast, Saleema and her sister-in-law, Maryama, manage to overcome the debilitating effect of personal and collective crises, by means of their versatile identities and their constant rearrangement and reconstruction of their constitutive elements, central to which are Saleema's intellectualism and Maryama's intelligence and wit. More importantly, their subjectivities create empowering spaces that tend to the emotional and physical well-being of their endangered community. In the end Saleema is tried by the Inquisitions Office upon accusations of witchcraft (which is what her medical practice and strong will are seen to be) and is ultimately burned at the stake. Nonetheless, hope and salvation are transferred onto her daughter who, while resembling her mother, will grow to carry on her aunt Maryama's more adaptable legacy, Maryama being the one who assumes the responsibility of raising the little girl after the death of the girl's mother.

### **Zeina B. Ghandour**

Ghandour a Palestinian lawyer, a United Nations advisor, novelist, essayist and short-story writer, was born in Beirut in 1966 but raised in England. After graduating from Kent University with a master's degree in Islamic and Jewish law and practicing

criminal law for a few years, Ghandour headed to Central and South America, where she experienced a whole new way of looking at life, one in which, as she saw it, a person “depends on his [sic] senses and intuitions rather than on a pragmatic way of thinking” (“Reads”). By far Mexico had the most lasting effect on her. “Mexico was amazing,” Ghandour remarks. “People there experience a three-dimensional world: the spiritual, physical, and magical” (“Reads”). From this experience, explains Ghandour, the rich and powerful vocabulary of *The Honey* emerged. Returning from Latin America, Ghandour was hired by the United Nations as a consultant, taking her to the globe’s trouble spots, including the area of her heritage, the Arab world. In Palestine she worked as an aid worker with non-governmental organizations. Experiencing the Middle East as an adult for the first time, Ghandour sees it as a landscape riddled with death, destruction, political oppression and military occupation. For Ghandour, *The Honey* offers the soothing voice of the young Ruhiya and the sense of redemption with which this voice imbues the novel. In addition to *The Honey*, Ghandour is also known for her two amazingly sassy and uproarious short stories, *War Milk* and *Omega: Definitions*, published in the recent anthologies *Transit Beirut: New Writing and Images* (2004) and *Hikayat: Short Stories by Lebanese Women* (2007), respectively.

### ***The Honey***

First published in 1999 by Quartet Books, then reprinted in 2008 by Interlink’s world fiction series, *The Honey* is Ghandour’s debut novel. After appearing in English, *The Honey* was then translated into Arabic in 2002 by the major Arab publisher *Dar Al-Adab*. *The Honey* begins with a fable about the abandoned imaginary village of al-Ahmar

in the Israeli-occupied West Bank in Palestine. The novel, then, sets off in a clear thematic and stylistic shift to depict the events of one day in the village of al-Ahmar and in Jerusalem. Accompanying the twenty four- hour events is the unfolding of the stories of a variety of people, through numerous flashbacks, internal, first and third person narration. Central to these stories is the family history of the village muezzin (the person who calls to the five daily prayers). The story reveals his love story, marriage to the Christian Hurra in 1967, and his subsequent loss of her, when she takes her own life after being raped by Farhan, the village honeyman and chief. *The Honey* narrates also the love story of Hurra's daughter (Ruhiya) and her childhood love-object, Yehya, and the near loss of that love.

The story starts when this loss is prevented this time around by the mystical, healing (honey-like), and sensual voice of Ruhiya. Seeing her father bedridden and unable to carry out his daily thirty-year old ritual, Ruhiya calls to prayer herself. Although her act represents a breach of an entrenched customary taboo on women's public voice, it turns out to have a miraculous impact on Yehya. The luminous voice reaches the latter in Jerusalem and dissuades him from carrying out a suicide mission he had set out on with a colleague, who "succeeds" in detonating his explosives—and himself. Following Yehya's retreat, a foreign journalist shows up and follows the story to the village of al-Ahmar, where it shatters into a rumor about the young woman acting as muezzin. The journalist fails to elicit information from the village elders, until Asrar, the secret-bearer, tells her to look for Ruhiya and Yehya in the desert. Asrar— the only one who sees and not just hears Ruhiya calling to prayer, and who like Ruhiya, has

superhuman abilities and can see and hear everything— reveals to us Hurra's rape story and other secrets and horrors.

In addition to following the events of this eventful day and other relevant events in the characters' pasts (love, marriage, rape and death, the physical and emotional pain inflicted by the military occupation of the West Bank) *The Honey* is linked, in the fable/prelude with which it begins, to an unspecified future time, after the village is abandoned by its inhabitants, except for a bird woman, Ruhiya, who calls to the prayer from the top of its minaret. Other than the set of names (name of the village, its mosque, and Ruhiya's who calls to prayer) the prelude with its mundane story bears no resemblance to the remainder of *The Honey*. Long ago, the men of the village of al-Ahmar, so goes the prelude, painted their yellow mosque blue, but it turned out green. They peeled and painted again, producing different colors, but never the benevolent sky blue they desired. Unable to amend their act, the village inhabitants abandon the mosque and eventually the whole village. Although this story comes at the start of *The Honey*, in the imagined time of the novel, it is more accurately the end. The prelude's function therefore is symbolic, standing for the myth that glosses over and appropriates the real drama of failed masculinities and triumphant femininity in the rest of the novel. This mythologization is reminiscent of the appropriation women's roles undergo in nationalist narratives, in general, and the Palestinian narrative in particular.

### **Huda Barakat**

Barakat was born in 1952. She is an acclaimed Lebanese novelist who lived much of her life in Beirut and later moved to Paris, where she now resides. Barakat was raised in the Maronite Christian town of Bsharré, Lebanon, the birthplace of Jibran Kahlil

Jibran, where she lived until she moved to Beirut to study French Literature at the Lebanese University, graduating with the onset of the civil war in 1975. For two years (1975-76), she lived in Paris where she started working on a PhD, but decided to return home as the war continued. During this period she worked as a teacher, translator and journalist. It is also during this war that all of her later works are set. Her fiction, written in Arabic, has been translated into many languages, including English, French, Italian, Spanish, Turkish, Dutch, Greek and German.

In 1985, she published her first work, a collection of short stories called *Za'irat* (Women Visitors). Barakat, then, moved to Paris in 1989 and has lived there since then. Here she published a series of major works including *Hajar al-Dahik* (*The Stone of Laughter*, 1990), the first Arabic work to have a gay man as its main character, winning the prestigious Al-Naqid Award for first novels. Her second novel is *Ahl el-Hawa* (*Disciples of Passion*, 1993). Her third novel, *Harith al-miyah* (1998) (*The Tiller of Waters*), discussed here, won the 2000 Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature. In 2002 she was honored as Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Minister of Culture, although she says she does not know why! In all her novels, Barakat depicts the tremendous pressures war has on men and the devastating choices it propels them to make. The fact that she never met antagonistic reactions to her topics that escape the umbrella of what is considered the social and cultural norm, primarily her representation of gay people, implies the societal acceptance for them and negates their exoticism or novelty.

***The Tiller of Waters***

Set in Beirut during the Lebanese civil war, *The Tiller of Waters* narrates the mingle of memories and hallucinations, or at least extraordinary experiences, of the cloth merchant Niqula. Finding himself with nowhere to go, after refugees take over his apartment during his brief stay with a family friend, Niqula ends up living in the basement of his father's fabric shop in the middle of the blown-out city center. There, Niqula becomes Adam-like in that no-man's land of Beirut, where he wanders the abandoned streets, which have been taken over by the lush vegetation and packs of stray dogs, with whom he is obliged to communicate on their terms, eventually befriending one of them. The basement provides him with the place and occasion to indulge his senses and sensations by wrapping himself up in the different fabrics while recalling his family history, humanity's stories of fabric, and his love story with his Kurdish maid Shamsa, who disappears/leaves him shortly before he loses his apartment and after he tells her the story of silk, the last in a series of stories about the premodern history of real fabric.

Each one of the three strands of recollections unfolds multiple and contradictory stories that complicate the identities, histories and subjectivities of the people inhabiting them. Simultaneously, these multiple identities, histories and origins are implicitly compared and contrasted to the multi-layered history of the city. Not only do these multiplicities invoke the poverty of the *modern* Lebanese history, which culminates with sectarian strife and intolerance, but they also expose its appropriation by the history of colonialism in the region. In the end, once Niqula exhausts all his memories, recalling the last fabric story he told Shamsa during their affair, he finds himself in a liminal space between life and death, where he can only reflect in a disembodied voice on how and why his ending has come about.

## **Leila Aboulela**

Leila Aboulela was born in 1964 in Egypt to a Sudanese father and Egyptian mother. She grew up in Khartoum, learning English at an American primary school and later at a private Catholic school. After finishing her undergraduate education in Sudan, she attended the London School of Economics, Britain. In 1990 she moved to Scotland with her husband and their three children before she moved to Doha where she currently lives. Her first stories were broadcast on BBC Radio. *The Translator* (1999) is her first novel. It was long-listed for the Orange Prize 2000 and the IMPAC Dublin Literary Awards 2001, shortlisted for the 2000 Saltire Society Scottish First Book of the Year Award, as well as chosen as a *Notable Book of the Year* by the *New York Times* in 2006. Leila Aboulela won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2000 for her short story “The Museum.” Her most recent novel, *Lyrics Alley*, just came out (December 2010). Her other writings include a collection of short stories, *Coloured Lights*, where “Museum” appears, and a second novel, *Minaret* (2005).

### ***The Translator***

In a realistic but unembellished lyrical style, Aboulela meticulously weaves a narrative that attends to the inner tribunals her protagonist, Sammar, goes through after the loss of her childhood love, Tarig, who is also her husband and the father of her child, both at home and in her Scottish exile. After his sudden death in a car accident while residing in Aberdeen to complete his education as a physician, Sammar feels alienated and decides to return with her son to her home country Sudan. Upon her return, she discovers that Sudan is no longer the home she knew while growing up and becoming more closely attached to and in love with Tarig. Gradually we get to understand

Sammar's love for Tarig and soon realize that it has shaped her feelings and memories of Sudan itself. Therefore, the loss of Tarig means a loss of home. Sammar next opts for self-exile. Leaving her son behind, she returns to Aberdeen, where instead of finding some relief becomes doubly alienated and more aware of her cultural Otherness than ever. She eventually develops feelings for Rae an Orientalist scholar for whom she translates materials about Islam and Islamic movements. Through his relaxed and familiar (Oriental) attitude that does not ostracize her, Sammar begins to experience Sudan in her place of exile, becoming aware of the fluidity of home and place and the centrality of love and unconditional acceptance to her sense of home. She then capitalizes on her new relationship with Rae through selective remembering of her previous life so as to nourish Rae's likeness of her and in the process continue to experience the Sudan of her love in her exilic place. Meanwhile she becomes more and more aware of her constructed identity. However, she fails at first to acknowledge the same thing about Rae's identity, and misrecognizes his sympathies with Islam for a potential Muslim identity that can be easily swapped with his atheism the moment he declares his conversion. However, when Rae insists on differentiating between Islam and his Orientalism, Sammar becomes disillusioned with their love and returns to Sudan. There, she has the necessary distance that allows her to better understand the complexity of identity by drawing upon her Islamic heritage, within which religious identity is also complicated, in a different way, involving divine intervention.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Being a study of the constructions of identity and their implications vis-à-vis nationalist notions of identity, home and belonging, my dissertation is informed by

postmodern and psychoanalytic feminist discussions as well as postcolonial theory.

Applicable to all four novels has been Judith Butler's theory on identity's constructedness and performativity, especially in accounting for two recurrent phenomena in the novels: the alienation the characters feel towards certain aspects of their social and gender identities; and the agency incurred by the characters' reenacting and resignifying their constructed identities. I have also found other feminist and psychoanalytic feminist theories compatible with this theoretical premise. Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic has been informative in a number of locations throughout the dissertation, as it nuances the notion of identity as work-in-process, accounting especially for the disruptions to identity from within.

In the chapter on *The Honey*, as the novel depicts the role of women's subculture in counteracting and re-orienting the Palestinian discourse of liberation, I have found useful discussions about the different forms of culture. For example, Arab feminist and sociologist Nahla Abdo distinguishes between national culture and official and institutionalized nationalism and their respective functions. This helps me to theorize the contrast Ghandour draws between the two contradictory ways of belonging, as adopted by the two protagonists. I also use feminist and cultural theories that correlate notions of belonging with the patriarchal law. For example, Luce Irigaray's discussions of the abject maternal body in the patriarchal law help account for the equation of reproduction, including the reproduction/perpetuation of home and the nation) as repeating the same past, origins and experience, hence the emphasis in nationalist narratives on origins. By contrast, Irigaray's theories can account for a different notion of community that is grounded in differentiation, similar to the mother-daughter relationship. In this chapter, I

also draw on history for real examples of Palestinian women's manifestations of belonging that are grounded in constant processes of rehearsal and reconstitution, and which resonate with the novel's female protagonist's enactment of her sense of belonging. Additionally, in accounting for the seemingly conflicting and unclear details and relationships in the novel, I have found a large amount of insight in Cynthia Cockburn's relevant theory about the processes of appropriation and erasure attending to the production of nationalist discourses.

In the chapter "Knowledgeable Women, Loving Men: The Andalusí Experience and the Reconfiguration of Modern Arab Identity in Radwa Ashour's *Granada*," I apply what feminist and postcolonial theorist Paula Moya describes as "a realist theory" of identity, which builds on postcolonial theorist Satya Mohanty's discussion of the *cognitive* aspect of experience. In Moya's and Mohanty's view, essentialist theories reduce identity to its experiences (be they of place and geography, race, class, gender, or sex). These experiences, rather, they contend, do not grant knowledge unconditionally. Epistemic knowledge, which leads to knowing the world and the self, is contingent on the intersection of all the elements, making up social reality. The two theorists' propositions have been foundational in making my argument that Ashour does reveal a genuine interest in the Andalusí identity, along with her presentist concerns. I use Moya's theory to demonstrate how the different social facts about Ashour's characters produce different identities, dictating the course of their actions.

In establishing the link between the models of constructed identities and the texts' visions of community, I draw upon postcolonial theory, especially principles that resonate with theories of identity. For example, in *The Tiller of Waters*, where the parallel

between national narrative and personal history is drawn early on in the novel, I use postcolonial theorists Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, and Homi Bhabha in theorizing this underlying parallel. Especially relevant have been the theorists' discussions of the relationship between the repression and violence of nationalism and the nation-state and those of modernity. I also use Gramsci's and Mohanty's notions of hegemony and the subaltern in interpreting the function and role of the Kurds in *The Tiller*.

In the chapter on *The Translator*, I use postcolonial theories of place and discussions about difference to account for the protagonist's identity and her notion of home. Gayatri Spivak's and Trinh T. Minh-ha's discussions about difference as the basis of cross-cultural relationships have been particularly informative. The fact that Sammar's difference/identity are grounded in love and emotions has allowed me to make use of anthropologist Lila Abu Lughod's theorization of the politics of emotions. In *Language and the Politics of Emotion*, Abu Lughod deconstructs the essentialism of emotions and their language by highlighting their pragmatic function. I also employ postcolonial theories of place (as relational) to account for Sammar's agency in reconstructing home in exile, by reinscribing her love-centered identity using the discourse of emotions. Home here is no longer the nationalist place but a more personal space that can be defined and located differently from one person to another. Helping in substantiating my argument have been Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin's insight on place in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Belonging as Becoming: Feminizing the Palestinian Nationalist Narrative**

#### **in Zeina B. Ghandour's *The Honey***

“One was born into this life to share the time that repeatedly exists between moments: the time of Becoming, before Being risks to confront one yet again with undefeated despair.”

—John Berger (609)

#### **Introduction**

In occupied Palestine, John Berger cannot but notice, there exists a very special kind of despair that he describes as despair “without fear, without resignation, without a sense of defeat, [that] makes for a stance towards the world here such as I have never seen before” (604). As defiant and pragmatic as this despair might sound, one remains skeptical of its viability, for no despair can be ultimately triumphant. Indeed, as Berger probes for what lies behind it, we are reassured in our skepticism. “The stance of undefeated despair,” he proceeds, “works like this: A refusal to see immediate consequences” (608). Although this despair emanates from the state of “Being,” it is synonymous with blindness, shortsightedness, and, therefore, unfavorable. Berger’s final appraisal of the Palestinian situation, though, is not all bleak. As he remarks in the above epigraph, there is also what he calls “the time of Becoming,” which is more in-line with the original purpose of life—that is with existing and living. Whereas “being” leads to despair, “becoming” “disarms the leading question: why was one born into this life?” of occupation, displacement and oppression (609). As the opposite of the state of being, becoming can be tantamount to change, agency and maybe undefeated *hope*. However, leaders, small and large, as Berger describes them, who make History, especially the

history of nationalisms in conflict, make the manifestations of being more salient and predominant, by insisting on identity claims based on pure origins that need to be repeated and reproduced for self-assertion. Nowhere can this repetition-as-being be seen more evidently as in the inscription of women's reproductive roles through the trope of the nation-as-woman-and-mother.

In her study of Palestinian women and the nationalist movement for liberation, Nahla Abdo makes a distinction between official/institutionalized nationalism and national culture with regards to their respective potential for change and emancipation for women. Abdo's distinction is similar to Berger's two states of being and becoming. Official nationalism, she notes, "constructs an ideology of motherhood which relegates women to the home by focusing on women's appropriate arena for fostering national identity through their child-rearing and domestic responsibilities as wives and mothers" (150). This fostering, preservation and reproduction of national identity is embedded in an understanding of reproduction as repeating the same and, hence, is synonymous with the stasis of being. Therefore, women's assigned reproductive roles, reiterated extensively in nationalist discourses, not only place women in fixed positions but more seriously equate the manifestation and preservation of the nation with being, fixity, and sameness, rather than with becoming, change, and work-in-process. "Unlike institutionalized forms of nationalism, however," Abdo maintains, "national culture produced in the course of struggle has the potential to be emancipatory and progressive. But this depends on the extent of women's active involvement as well as their success in pushing women's issues to the forefront of the national agenda" (151). It can be concluded, then, that national culture, part of which is women's sub-culture, is closer to

the state of becoming and work-in-process than of being. Unfortunately, despite the potential of this culture, where women's activism and actual roles exceed the ideology of motherhood, it is official nationalism and its discourse of repetition as being that usually prevail, including in the Palestinian context.

### **The Novella**

Using the imaginary and mythical, Zeina B. Ghandour's *The Honey* envisions an alternative scenario within Palestinian contemporary history, particularly post-the first *intifada*, wherein women's sub-culture, in the novella, reorients and redefines the course of official nationalist discourse and its notions of community and belonging, from one of being, sameness and stasis to one of becoming, difference and work-in-process.

Moreover, Ghandour explores these possibilities by appropriating the very Palestinian narrative inscribing fixed notions of women and nation, which is the Palestinian nationalist narrative of 1947-1948 events, known in Palestinian and Arab history as the *Nakba* or catastrophe. While depicting the Palestinians' expulsion from their homeland and subsequent dispersal, as part of the hegemonic nationalist discourse, the *Nakba* narrative mythologizes historical Palestine. Therefore, it is an epitome of the traditional notion of the nation as "being" and of the processes of appropriation, mutation and erasure that accompany the formation of this notion and other nationalist myths.

Exemplary of these processes is the re-appropriation of women's real lives and experiences into metaphors. Among these experiences is the rape of Palestinian women during the *Nakba*, an experience almost always referred to in official national discourse as a rape of the land, rather than of the women themselves.

By contrast, the novella *reveals* the rape story of one of its protagonists, who stands for Palestinian women and their culture before the occupation. Concomitant with *The Honey's* denunciation of the nationalist preoccupation with a fixed and pristine version of Palestine, is the novella's foregrounding of a notion of home, belonging, and the nation as becoming and work-in-process, rather than as being. Therefore, in *The Honey*, the protagonist's transformative belonging and agential subjectivity are grounded in repeating elements of her identity and her community's with a *difference*, rather than in the same exact way, revealing, in the process, voices and stories previously muted stories by the official nationalist narrative. This reiteration of the Palestinian nationalist narrative implies a redefinition, rather than an absolute rejection, of the intersection of gender and nation in occupied Palestine. When the nation comes to signify difference and change, those responsible for its preservation—who are usually the women—will no longer have to play fixed roles. Additionally, a notion of home and nation denoting difference and change undermines the national preoccupation with pristine origins and histories, which can potentially repeal the processes of erasure and appropriation that create and maintain these histories. Therefore, the novella incorporates various, sometimes contradictory, narratives, voices and subjects usually excluded from, muted, or appropriated by the official narrative of the *Nakba*, in particular, and the contemporary nationalist discourse of liberation, in general.

This redefinition of the woman-nation relationship is what many postcolonial feminists call for. Useful for my purpose of highlighting *The Honey's* community and nation redefinition has been Irene Gedalof's call for the urgency of rethinking the terms on which community and belonging are defined. According to Gedalof, models of

community belonging that fuel ethnic, religious and nationalist conflicts “are underpinned by a notion of reproduction-as-stasis that ties female embodiment and women’s reproductive activities to a logic of sameness” (92). This association of belonging and community reproduction with being and sameness can be easily accounted for from within the relationship between nationalism and patriarchy. Within the latter, the Law of the Father foregrounds the formation of identity and the self on the exclusion of the mother and the feminine, as a prerequisite to the self’s entry into the symbolic order (Irigaray 246). In her reading of Luce Irigaray, Michelle Walker notes that due to this exclusion, “reproduction—the realm of the silenced mother—is equated with repetition-as-same” (163). Irigaray rightly argues that it is the Law of the Father’s exclusion of the mother and the willful forgetting of her maternal body that is the origin of all dichotomies, clear-cut distinctions and discontinuities (246). In similar terms, nationalist movements have been described as masculinist enterprises, dedicated to the creation of the nationalist subject who is always already masculine, to the exclusion of the maternal and the feminine. Subsequently, reproduction within the national context—the reproduction of national culture and community— is understood as stasis, rather than change, mobility and difference. To sum up, the equation of home and belonging with fixity is a by-product of the binary logic that defines “notions of belonging together with ‘woman’, ‘home’ and the reproductive sphere—as the realm of ‘being’—in opposition to the mobile, fluid space of citizenship, rights, justice and political desire or becoming” (Gedalof 96).

Indeed, *The Honey* enacts a double move through which it celebrates women’s role in reproducing a sense of home and community while contesting the equation of

reproduction with stasis and being. Indeed, the problem, the novella also seems to suggest, “is not only the association of women with fixed notions of community belonging, but also the definition of community belonging in terms of fixity” whether its agents are men or women (Gedalof 96). By contrast, in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others and Postcoloniality*, Sara Ahmed implies that there are always processes of rehearsal and reconstitution of a sense of home or community, rather than a sense of home being produced once and for all (89). These dynamic processes of belonging, are, however, written over by the traditional images of women as nurturing mothers or heroic fighters, which permeate nationalist liberation discourses. The Palestinians’ nationalist discourse of liberation at the heart of which is the story of the *Nakba* is no exception. Indeed, *The Honey* not only reveals the flexibility and mobility of women’s reproduction of community and its ultimate appropriation by the hegemonic notions of home but exposes the masculine, including nationalist, notions of community as grounded in fixity and sameness.

### **The *Nakba* Narrative and *The Honey*’s Prelude**

Around the fiftieth anniversary of their dispossession and expulsion from their homeland, the Palestinians started to tell publicly their memories and recollections of the *Nakba* at an unprecedented pace (Abu-Lughod 13). Their stories recount how most expelled Palestinians became permanent refugees in neighboring countries while some managed to relocate, as refugees still, in other parts of Palestine. For both groups, however, birth hometowns, villages and the lands that sustained them not only economically but socially and culturally became beyond reach, after being razed or transformed as the land of the newly established Jewish state. Researchers point out that

the refugees' stories of the *Nakba* share common thematic and stylistic features, such as the quality of fable (Bresheeth 170), the refugee figure, the trope of woman as nation and sometimes stories of the rape of Palestinian women. Ghandour re-appropriates these elements within the more contemporary history of post-*Intifada* Palestine, in order to posit a notion of reproduction, home, and belonging as becoming. This era has witnessed more complications to the Palestinian problem, as a result of the collapse of the super international powers' manufactured "peace process," initiating the Palestinian struggle for liberation into a new stage that utilized what the Palestinians call martyrdom operations, otherwise known as suicide operations. In spite of these challenges or, for some analysts because of them, the *Nakba* story continues to hold ground, manifesting the persistence of the same notion or myth of home and belonging as stasis and this notion's gender implications. Literary critic, poet and scholar Lena Jayyusi, for example, notes that during the post-Oslo period, two dynamics unfolded, both as a consequence of Oslo, intensifying the Palestinians' need to tell, narrate, and document their experiences at the heart of which is the *Nakba*. The first of these dynamics, which is more related to my argument, was

the movement to foregrounding the issue of the right of return, after an initial yet marked backgrounding of the refugees and their issues, [which] arose within official discourses, especially during and after the fiftieth anniversary of the *Nakba*, when it became mobilized in the pursuit of the project of statehood that began to seem more elusive. (126)

In other words, memories and recollections of the *Nakba*, most of which posit a mythical Palestine, have been employed to reinforce the Palestinians' right to return as part of any project of Palestinian statehood.

It is this very premise that has been problematized by another camp of Palestinian historians, academics, and even refugees. Anthropologist, Diana Allan, points out some of the stakes of the obsession with the *Nakba*. Although this preoccupation with the *Nakba*—one of whose strongest manifestations has been the intensive research work done on the camp refugees and their recollections of the past—is informed by empathy to establish the legal justice of the Palestinians right to return, such an agenda “may also cause us to lose sight of distinctions—the ways in which the past does or does not continue to shape the present” (Allan 277). Unlike first-generation refugees, Allan argues, for whom “‘return’ means to a physical place that has been experienced and lost, [the later] generation appears to understand it in more abstract terms—as a restoration of dignity and justice, the right to respect oneself and be respected” (276). Based on the evidence of this generational difference, Allan calls for a need to move beyond the “coercive harmony of a national identity rooted in past history to include emergent forms of subjectivity that increasingly privilege individual aspiration over collective, nationalist imperatives” (277). In similar terms, *The Honey* revisits the *Nakba* story to argue for an alternative notion of home and identity that achieves a balance between the collective and the individual. By depicting home and identity as becoming and a work-in-process, Ghandour reiterates a balanced relationship between the two, the part and the whole, at both the thematic and structural levels of the novella.

Ghandour manages to foreground her notion of home reproduction as becoming, using the fantastic. This enables her to coalesce disparate voices that, nonetheless, make up the story of Palestine and that need to be confronted rather than glossed over, before a better understanding of home as well as a practical resolution to the conflict can be

imagined. Only when the novella's young woman protagonist, Ruhiya, reproduces a sense of community with *a difference* can the usually glossed-over voices of real women, children, and a retreating suicide bomber be heard. Previously muted, unheard of, or appropriated in hegemonic nationalist discourse, the novella's different voices, and their underpinning discourses, are depicted in five sections that are simultaneously different and related, which highlights their relationship as parts of a whole. The independence of these voices is highlighted by their appearance in respective sections marked by different tonalities, ranging from the strictly journalistic style, as in the novella's prelude, to the profusely poetic, as in the section carrying Ruhiya's name. At the same time, they overlap thematically, producing different versions of the same story. Additionally, each one of the five sections is entitled after one of the Muslim five daily prayers, which, while marking the different parts of the day, indicate the day's temporal progress and the passage of one day. This simultaneity of overlap and independence stands for the intricate relationship between the whole (nation) and the parts (subjects).

### **The "Prelude"**

Framing this structure of multiple voices is the fable with which the novella begins, under the title "Prelude." While it shares a few elements with the rest of the novella, the prelude is structurally set apart from *The Honey*'s five sections. It is also thematically different. Except for the appearance of the names of the protagonist and of the mosque wherein the main event in the novella takes place later in the first section, the three-page prelude tells a seemingly irrelevant story to the rest of *The Honey*. It depicts the futile attempts of the men of *al-Ahmar* village in the low plains around the Dead Sea

to change the color of their yellow mosque. Every time they attempt to paint the mosque, something encumbers their ability to produce the new desired color.

Implied in the various external reasons behind the villagers' attempts are several problems pertaining to the people themselves. At the top of the list is their being too blinded by their enthusiasm to consider the limitations of their inexperience and multiple deficiencies. When they fail to paint the mosque the first time, we are told, there "was no need for any conferring;" only their unease drew them back to the mosque and their paint brushes (5). They seem to be so absorbed in the immediacy of their actions, or the state of being, rather than the becoming or future consequences of their behavior. They are exemplary of the "undefeated despair," Berger describes earlier, which occurs when one refuses to see immediate consequences. Only such blindness makes them miss their objective once they have achieved it. Therefore, when "they finally achieved the desired colour," the story goes, "they were so absorbed by their task that they failed to recognize it, and painted it lilac" (6).

Additionally, it can be argued that camouflaging these multiple "failures" is the men's resistance to change. This is evidenced in their failure to notice that they have achieved the desired color. In the end, the men's inability to envision a different outcome creates a "feeling that there had been a failure to atone and make amends" (6), to which they respond by abandoning not only the mosque but the village altogether: "With time the entire village was deserted, for the men were unable to bear the permanent reminder that they had blundered on a hallowed place" (6). Absent from the villagers' notion of community and home reproduction, thus, are the elements of negotiation, change and difference, hence the disintegration of the *al-Ahmar* community. Ironically, the villagers'

adherence to a sense of community reproduction that is grounded in sameness and fixity renders their mosque's function of congregating worshippers incongruous, which results in its abandonment. By contrast, the rest of *The Honey* confirms the entanglement of change and fixity in notions of reproduction, including community reproduction. The fable ends with the story of the bird-woman who calls to the dawn prayer from the minaret of the deserted mosque, the setting for the novella's main event, when the bird-woman's namesake, Ruhiya, calls to the morning prayer in her village.

This fable functions as an appropriating device that produces, out of the five following disparate voices, a more or less seamless story about the history and desertion of the imaginary *al-Ahmar* village in occupied Palestine. In this, the prelude bears resemblance to the *Nakba* narrative, which posits a mythical Palestine, by erasing and appropriating the lives of the real people. Isabelle Humphries and Laleh Khalili confirm that even individual recollections of the *Nakba* events and the refugees' "memory-making [go] through the lens of patriarchy" (224). Both the *Nakba* and the prelude are not unlike nationalist discourses and practices that "construct remembering, through silencing some narratives and authorizing others" (224). Describing the process of community reproduction—that is the processes by which community is maintained—Cynthia Cockburn uses the image of the family tree, from which all the "messy connections," (Gedalof 105) of "every wife, cousin and sister-in-law" have to be left out in order to clearly trace the (male) line of descent (Cockburn 229). In similar terms, models of "proper" belonging, Cockburn implies, come to being by excluding the disruptive elements that complicate real life. The novella's prelude is similar to the

family tree, as it excludes the actual voices making up the real story of the deserted mosque.

The prelude's fable embodies the discursive processes of appropriation or "cleaning-up" of messiness giving way to the story of the deserted *Al-Ahmar* village and the mythical creature left to occupy its mosque. In the rest of the novella, though, Ghandour writes these "messy" elements back, at both the narrative and genealogical levels. At the top of the list of these elements are women's sub-culture and spiritual life, whose loss from Palestine was accelerated by the *Nakba*, the occupation, and the demands of the nationalist discourse of liberation. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea emphasizes that before the occupation, Palestine enjoyed a rich cultural life of women—songs and dance, storytelling and poetry, prayer, medicine, and shared emotion (179-80). Echoing these by-gone elements and erased or appropriated voices, and in a sharp contrast with the seamless fable told in the prelude, the novella's five sections reveal not only contradictory stories and women's culture but a messy lineage. The latter, in particular, implies the need for an alternative genealogy, based on which a different nation and home can be imagined. *The Honey* gestures towards a female genealogy or ways to belong to "altogether messier family trees" (Cockburn 105)—ways that can translate into more egalitarian notions of national communities and visions of co-existence.

### **The Bird-Woman and the Rest of *The Honey***

Despite the erasure of the counter-hegemonic narratives from the "Prelude," the bird-woman continues to signify subversively. In contrast with the men, the half-bird-half-woman creature undermines different binaries and hierarchies manifested in the anecdote about the yellow mosque. She is reminiscent of the legendary creatures known

in Greek mythology as the sirens. Like them, the woman-bird, who mounts the minaret of the abandoned mosque every dawn to call to the mourning prayer, has an enchanting voice as well as a seductive look. Those who have heard and saw her testify that “her smile would resonate in your heart long after tears of joy had streamed down to your feet upon hearing her voice as you stood at the bottom of the minaret” (7). Like them too, she is described as a mermaid— of the desert, though, not of the sea. She simultaneously embodies joy, sadness, love and fear. She is capable of giving life as well as instilling death. Therefore, it “is a firm heart which comes to her in need” (7). Like the sirens, the bird-woman, Ruhiya, interrupts men’s journey while away from home. However, whereas the sirens end up distracting the mariners from returning home and even destroying them, Ruhiya does the opposite. She is a wish-fulfiller and a life generator: “It is said that nothing requested of the trapped soul is too much trouble, that she is the source of the spring which feeds the oasis” (7). Hence, although the mythic Ruhiya’s similarity to the sirens situates her within an older and a larger literary tradition that acknowledges the feminine’s ability to affect the individual-community relationship, the prelude’s depiction of her transcends the limited and negative role played by the sirens. The life-perpetuating ability of the prelude’s Ruhiya is reiterated by the implications of the real Ruhiya’s call to the prayer later in the novella. As *The Honey* reveals, through her call to the prayer, Ruhiya brings her brother and love-object, Yehya, back home, from his suicide mission. The story of the real Ruhiya, then, we come to realize later in the book, has been re-appropriated into the mosque and the bird-woman fable.

Although Ruhiya— not unlike the Palestinian women appropriated by the nationalist discourse of liberation into the trope of the nation as a woman and a mother—

is turned into a legend and a symbol of renewal and rebirth, the implications of Ruhiya's mythologization still transcend the limitations of the nation-as-mother trope. For one thing, it is obvious that the "Prelude" fails to de-sexualize Ruhiya, as the nationalist trope does. On the contrary, both the bird-woman's voice and appearance confirm her sexuality and femininity. Those who saw her, the narrator points out, "describe yellow hair and brown skin, and eyes that seem to have been wired by a mesh of lightening" (7). More importantly, the bird-woman embodies and celebrates Ruhiya's call to the prayer, which is the manifestation of her identity and sense of community's being a work-in-process. The nationalist trope, by contrast, foregrounds fixity and being in the formation of identity and community. In other words, it is Ruhiya's alternative vision of self and community as "becoming" that— although ends up being re-appropriated into a legend in the "Prelude"— allows the bird-woman to transcend the limited implications of the originary myth she echoes.

Even before the "Prelude," the novella foregrounds the interplay of official history and myth or fiction through processes of appropriation. Following the novella's dedication and before the "Prelude," Ghandour declares that she wants to "tell it how it is" aided by "a non-poetic voice" (2). This introduction can be understood as an attempt to foreground the historicity or at least factuality of the story rather than its fictionality. Indeed, *The Honey* employs other devices that suggest the same thing, such as the reference to actual geography around the *al-Ahmar* village, where the story's events take place, and the narrator's testimony that the mosque featured in both the "Prelude" and the rest of the novella still exists: "The mosque stands there still"(6). However, no sooner is the novella's factuality established than it is undermined, as the prelude's historical and

factual elements overlap with myths, fables, and fiction. Ultimately, we are led to conclude that the history of the village cannot be separated from the realm of the legendary and the mythical.

Much of the Palestinian fictional and cinematic representation has employed the legendary form in an attempt to write a Palestinian nationalist grand narrative capable of confronting and challenging the Zionist narrative of rebirth (Sa'di 286). Palestinian film director Nizzar Hassan sums this attitude as he says, "One cannot undermine a mythical story, a legend. It cannot be challenged, and I don't want anybody challenging my existence" (Bresheeth 174). Ghandour, thus, parodies this Palestinian preoccupation with myth and grand narratives but for the sake of propagating an alternative basis on which this myth can be established. A notion of home that is grounded in change, difference, and becoming is just as capable of confronting and undermining the Zionist narrative as is the nationalist myth of, if not more so.

### **Ruhiya and Yehya: Becoming Versus Being**

*The Honey*'s mythical and fantastic elements also make it possible for Ghandour to discursively conceptualize of her counter-hegemonic notion of community and nation—a notion that is ironically a more reality-and-context-based one. As Sara Ahmed argues, all imagined communities give the appearance of stasis, stability, and origins, which women are usually expected to preserve and reproduce; however, in reality home is created through a constant process of adjustment, transformation, negotiation, and redefinition that produces the appearance of stability and fixity that is part of the imagined community (*Uprootings* 89). It is this entanglement of the fixed and the

dynamic in the reenactment of community that Ruhiya's call to the mourning prayer emphasizes.

The first of the five sections of *The Honey* tells the circumstances surrounding and leading up to Ruhiya's call to the morning prayer in her village of *Al-Ahmar*, an act customarily seen as forbidden to women since it makes their voices public. The novella, however, persistently refers to the call as a song, depicting it as an evitable act of belonging in light of its circumstances and Ruhiya's background and upbringing. As the section unfolds, it becomes clear that Ruhiya's call to prayer is a redefinition and a reconfiguration of, rather than a break away from, her cultural upbringing and her parents' religious and spiritual lives, which characterize their sense of community. Ruhiya's call to the prayer is an example of the adjustment and transformation the elements of one's belonging undergo in the process of producing the "appearance of stability" of the community. Under new circumstances, Ruhiya assumes the role of perpetuating her village's spiritual community in a new way. Her act is a manifestation of the entanglement of fixity and mobility in the reproduction of community. As this chapter will manifest, this transformation and redefinition is typical of women's reproductive acts, in general, and Palestinian women's acts within the nationalist movement, in particular.

From the beginning of this section, Ghandour makes it clear that this is a multi-fold story, about Ruhiya as well as her parents, who make up her first community. Therefore, unlike the other four sections, which are first person narratives, depicting the story of a single character, this section, entitled "Ruhiya," is narrated using both the first and third persons. The section about Ruhiya, then, tells her parents' stories as well, which

are the building blocks of their daughter's story. The section starts off with Ruhiya's inner thoughts, contemplating her love relationship with the novella's other protagonist, Yehya, and the relationship's imminent end, due to Yehya's sudden disappearance on a suicide mission in Jerusalem, about which Ruhiya does not know yet. The section then shifts to the third person that narrates the story of Ruhiya's bedridden father, Radwan, the village *muezzin*, who due to his illness cannot carry on his daily job and passion of calling to the prayer. The polyphonic section underlines the parallel between the two stories: Radwan's illness, which threatens to interrupt a religious practice and a communal sense of spirituality, and Ruhiya's love story and its possible end.

This part of the novella reveals Radwan's spirituality as integral to both his subjectivity and to the village's sense of community. Radwan's illness is made even more painful by the vehemence of his spirituality, as the latter shapes his relationship with the Divine and His people alike, creating a community through spirituality. The village *muezzin* has called to the prayer five times every day for thirty years. Therefore, his inability to carry on what he has done for decades not only implies a personal failure but has repercussions for the whole village, which would sleep through the dawn hours, missing the prayer: "Radwan's brow was soaked with sweat, his cheeks were wet with tears" (13). The sweat and tears expose his physical *and* spiritual agony alike. "I haven't missed one *adhan* in thirty years" he mutters through his fever (13).

As the novella reveals earlier parts of his life, it becomes clear that Radwan's spirituality is inseparable from his romantic feelings for Hurra, the Christian from Bethlehem and later to be Ruhiya's mother. His love for Hurra seems to help him to articulate his love for the Divine even more. Hence, his wedding gift for the new bride

upon her conversion to Islam is a copy of the Quran. His calls to the prayer, too, are not reminders of worship times as much as an expression of his love and passion for God: “It had been agreed from the first day that the yearning in the young Radwan’s voice was unmatched” growing more poignant with time (24). Gradually his spirituality creates a new sense of community in the village, as everyone grows to experience Radwan’s spiritual feelings: “as the years went by, they [the villagers] too were swept along in the longing and in the twilight hours of the day, at sunrise, at sunset, his call to prayer flooded their eyes with phantom tears” (24). He, thus, not only creates a communal sense of spirituality, but creates community through the spiritual.

For all the above, it can be said that this spirituality represents Radwan’s bond with his community and the basis of his honor that is to be preserved at all cost. Honor, which is still maintained in other non-Arab societies, especially around the Mediterranean, is what achieves status more than family or individual wealth, size or power (Fernea 22). Traditional honor is based on masculine qualities since men are the ones in charge of preserving the family’s honor whereas femininity is imposed on women to guarantee their role as passive recipients of men’s protection (23). By contrast, being based on spirituality, Radwan’s honor is not strictly mediated by gender, which allows Ruhiya to contribute to preserving it.

Radwan’s wife, Hurra, too, epitomizes an alternative community based on spiritual and religious syncretism, not only of the monolithic religions but of pagan elements as well. Her conversion from Christianity to Islam marks a continuation between the two religions rather than a rupture. This continuation is emphasized from her first day as a Muslim. As Radwan’s bride, Hurra declares her conversion to Islam

“beneath the tower of the Church of the Nativity” (14), symbolizing thus a perpetuation of her spiritual journey. After her conversion she celebrates practices from both Islam and Christianity simultaneously: “She burnt her Orthodox church’s thick incense on every Muslim holy day” and “whose language was filled with superstition” (18). Moreover, despite the disapproval of her fellow women in *al-Ahmar*, she “announced her daughter’s name Ruhiya, an ancient pagan name unknown to any of the monotheistic religions” (19).

Hurra’s spirituality transcends not only the (religious and racial) boundaries dividing human communities but also those between humans and non-humans. The visible and invisible worlds are both a part of her life, as she perpetually attends to creatures invisible to other humans and “had a proverb and a talisman, a folkloric mystical solution for every situation that manifested itself in their house” (20). However, she assures her daughter that all religions and worlds are governed by God, who is capable of interfering in people’s affairs, guiding their outcome. “God,” she tells her daughter, “will show you the path and guide your chosen journey regardless of how occult it might seem at the beginning” (20). Her spirituality, thus, not only helps her to belong to a larger community than any other defined by ideology or creed, but it proves to be more enabling as a basis of subjectivity, as it allows more room for improvisation. Indeed, Cynthia Cockburn notes that similar cultural and religious hybrids have been used in areas of conflict, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as an alternative to narrow notions of nationalist and ethnic belonging. Women, Cockburn confirms, have tried to create and sustain new, hybrid cultural rituals and activities that implement within their families a broader sense of belonging that draws from different religions or ethnicities (216). An appreciation of all forms of lives leads to a better appreciation of the

*individuals* making up these lives, regardless of their origin or circumstances. Having waited for Ruhiya's birth for ten years, Hurra loves her daughter despite her being an illegitimate child, conceived when she was raped by Yehya's father, the village honeyman. Like her husband's, Hurra's love for the Divine culminates in her love for the human being.

The impact of Hurra's religious syncretism and spirituality transcends the realm of the spiritual onto notions of subjectivity. Similar to her unbound spirituality, Hurra's sociability is not constrained by propriety rules based on gender and social norms. Therefore, when Ruhiya was born, Hurra "ululated before the umbilical cord was cut" (18). She also dismisses the village women's disappointment for her "failure to bring a successor to the *muezzin*" (18). "Neither did their condolences dim the brilliance of the love she immediately felt for the baby. Instead, she courteously replied to the astounded villagers that she had been hoping for a girl all along" (19).

Ruhiya turns out to be an embodiment of her mother's spiritual and autonomous subjectivity, arousing different interpretations on the part of the community, which, by contrast, is grounded in notions of sameness as the basis of belonging. For some, she is known for her direct unyielding gaze. Others go as far as dehumanizing her: "The more avid gossips said her eyes shone brighter at night and that they darkened into a deep red gold, like those of a fox on the prowl" (19). What the narrator, however, asserts, is a different story, one that confirms an egalitarian individual, who, like her mother, feels for all things, the living and non-living: "It was true that Ruhiya was often heard in conversation with inanimate objects, with tables and chairs, with food and flowers, earnestly asking after their feelings" (19). This egalitarianism is accompanied, and

reinforced by, extraordinary vision and hearing abilities that help to dispel fear of the invisible and unknown world. Unlike other children, Ruhiya is not scared of the spirits who visit Hurra. On the contrary, she “understood their language, saw straight into their bottomless eyes and insisted that her bedroom door be kept ajar every night to let them in” (20).

On the night her father lay bedridden, unable to call to the dawn prayer, “the fluorescent figures who had filed into her room night after night ever since she could remember” and had stopped coming after her mother’s death, came back to caution her that “the whole village is going to sleep through the dawn prayer” (21). Although Radwan instructs his daughter to inform Yehya’s father—the honeyman who stands for the nationalist leadership— of his illness and request that he call to the prayer on his behalf, Ruhiya takes a different action, prompted by the fantastic creatures and recalling Hurra’s words. On her way to the honeyman’s house, and as “her mother once promised, another path appeared before her,” leading to the mosque (23). Just like her childhood world, which incorporated living and nonliving things, this path is guided by “the flamboyant bougainvillaea trees and the rows of jasmine” (24).

The novella depicts Ruhiya’s journey to the mosque and her call to the prayer from its minaret on behalf of her father as a reiteration of not only her mother’s spirituality but of her father’s, as well as other cultural elements of her upbringing. Inside the mosque, it is her father’s image that guides her up the stairs of the minaret: “His sunken face was in front of her. His eyes blinked once and then disappeared” (24). Ruhiya’s act is also shaped by a women’s sub-culture that, similar to her spirituality, allows more room for self-expression and improvisation. After her grandmother explains

to her the reason she prays many times a day is that if “you forget God, God will forget you,” smiling and covering Ruhiya with kisses (22), Ruhiya makes up her own prayer words that ensure that God remembers her: ““Ruhiya knows God, and God knows Ruhiya’ became my private prayer.... I said it in my prayers, I said in my sleep, I said it and said it” (22). It is here, in the realm of the imagination, that her spirituality sprouts. Following this improvisation, she starts to call to the prayer before she prays, a masculine role when done in public but permissible for women when carried out privately. Taking advantage of her father’s admiration for her voice, she stakes her hushed call to the prayer a step further: “I like the way my voice sounded and unconsciously began to raise it. I raised it and raised it, aiming for the sky” (22-23).

Ultimately, she calls to the prayer instead of her father. Ruhiya’s call to the prayer evokes other aspects of her background and upbringing, among which is pop art, which she becomes aware of through her grandmother. Like her parents’ spirituality, this culture transcends all boundaries dividing people in times of conflict and in peace. Standing on the circular balcony at the top of the minaret, she recalls her grandmother’s stories about the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum “with the power to silence a nation with her song” (25). The Egyptian diva, the grandmother’s memories reveal, influenced seculars and devout people alike that “even in Jerusalem [she] quietened entire neighborhoods when she was on the radio, from Ras al-Amud to the Orthodox Quarter in the Old City” (25). Not only Muslim and Christian neighborhoods shared the love and admiration for her singing, but the Israeli soldiers as well: “there was never any trouble from the soldiers when Umm Kulthum sang. Because her songs were from the heart” (25). In addition to the national and religious boundaries, her songs undermined class and age differences.

Ruhiya's grandmother tells her "that from the money-changers and barber-shops on Salaheddin Street to the university campuses in Bethlehem and Birzeit, eyes closed in dreamy contemplations at her songs" (25). Old men too "would sit twirling their moustaches and twisting their waterpipes pensively at her ballads" (25). Like Umm Kulthum, Ruhiya's words come from the heart, which overflows with love for God. "I'm bloated right now with the love God has shown me," she reflects, standing at the top of the minaret (26).

Only moments to the dawn prayer while she is still "holding her breath for an intrepid amount of time," Ruhiya pleads to the *morning* to be on her side: "Stand by me as I praise His greatness" (26). She again reiterates her spirituality, which undermines hierarchical differences among God's creatures. Finally, "the yell had escaped from her," as she declares, "*Allahu Akbar!*... At the end, with Yeyha in mind, she pauses correctly: "*La Ilaaha Illa Allah...*' There is no other God but me" (26). Through this declaration, she re-inscribes a mysticism that taps an enormous spiritual philosophical history, going back to Ibn al-Arabi and Mansur al-Hallaj, who professed the unity of the Divine and His creatures. Additionally, Ruhiya's call employs other aspects of her Islamic knowledge, pausing between the words the way Yehya had told her once to do. Furthermore, like Umm Kulthum's songs, Ruhiya's words of divine love are sweet and pleasurable. She "savored them like sweets dissolving beneath her tongue" (26), as she declares God's oneness over and over, repeating it more times than the traditional call to prayer requires. This is especially the case in the Arabic version, wherein she repeats God's oneness five times instead of once.

Although breaching a customary taboo on women's public voice, Ruhiya's call to the prayer, then, is both an inevitable and, at the same time, a different outcome of all the elements making up her personal and cultural identity. The call's unpredictability is a manifestation of the fluidity of belonging, which the novella's supernatural elements reiterate. In addition to being a part of Hurra's legacy, the realm of the supernatural stands for the different, and sometimes unacknowledged and unidentified, forces that play into one's sense of community and home, manifesting them as fluid and circumstantial rather than fixed and predetermined. Having come back in response to a sudden need, these invisible forces dictate a *different* manifestation of identity and community, hence Ruhiya's call to prayer. Ruhiya, thus, reproduces her community with a difference, determined simultaneously by immediate context and past history. It is, thus, her desire to preserve and perpetuate the village's spiritual community that begs a nontraditional form of reiteration. Although following the call, she leaves her community and disappears into the desert, she frequently returns to the outskirts of the village, where she makes ablutions in the spring water, confirming, thus, her belonging and spirituality simultaneously.

As subversive and enabling this act seems to be, the novella implies that equally important are the cultural and spiritual elements making it possible. Therefore, when the little girl Asrar sneaks up on Ruhiya in the middle of her call and the latter asks her to live up to the meaning of her name, which in Arabic means secrets, and to keep what she has just seen and heard a secret, Asrar— herself another spiritual child— tells Ruhiya that *she* (Ruhiya) is the secret, rather than her call to the prayer: "You are the secret, Ruhiya" (28). Bespeaking her parents' spirituality, a celebrated cultural and artistic

phenomenon (Umm Kulthum), and her love for God and Yehya, Ruhiya's call is anything but shameful: "Her mouth bore no traces of shame, despite the slight tremor and the tingling beneath her skin" (26-7). Ruhiya is reminiscent of Palestinian women's risking the family honor during the *intifada*, as the circumstances would sometimes demand, making acceptable the transgression of social norms and traditions. In his anthropological studies of Palestinian women's role in the *intifada*, Sharif Kanaana refers to many stories in which women risked the family honor in their attempts to rescue the youths chased by the Israeli soldiers. Among these stories are ones of the women hiding young men and boys in private spaces of their homes, such as their beds or the showers with other female members. In some stories, the women tucked the little boys underneath their long flowing skirts (123-4). Like these Palestinian women's daily improvisations, Ruhiya's decision to call to the prayer herself exemplifies the daily reconfigurations and adjustments involved in the manifestation of one's sense of community. As Gedalof articulates,

Community belonging and survival might be premised, then, not on the timeless permanence and stasis of repetition, but on the endless daily decisions about what to hold on to and what to let go. Home might be refigured, not as a fixed ground of identity from which to act, but as itself a continuous act of production and reproduction that is never fully complete. (106)

Based on her study of Brazilian women's preservation of community through acts of motherhood, under the extraordinary conditions of violence and poverty, Nancy Scheper-Hughes describes these women's work as "selective reproduction." Within these contexts, a discourse of motherhood that casts preserving home and community in terms of continuous nurturing, of repetition, and of preserving the same proves fragile and

impossible, and instead, community here involves “unbearable choices that still need to be borne—of letting go and holding on, of deciding what can be preserved and what has to change, which parts of disassembled homes can be reassembled, and in what form” (Gedalof 102-3). Palestinian women’s role within the national struggle for liberation exemplifies similar selective acts, like Ruhiya’s, that although can be interpreted subversively are always appropriated into the hegemonic nationalist narrative as exemplifying women’s traditional role of sacrificing for the nation. An example of such appropriated acts is the memorable role played by women in the *intifada*, which was their coming to the aid of the youths facing physical punishment or imprisonment at the hands of the Israeli soldiers. As Sharif Kana‘ana confirms, in order “to achieve their goal, [Palestinian] women have to be creative, courageous, and willing to make heavy sacrifices” (123). Although the Palestinian women’s acts are indeed risky, the potential sacrifice is not necessarily one made for the nation as a whole, as much as for the sake of the *individual* youths involved in these situations. In other words, in an obvious departure from the official nationalist discourse, these acts testify to the fact that women not only preserve the nation through creative and improvised, rather than the same traditional, roles but that they do that to perpetuate and *save* the lives of the Palestinians rather than sacrificing them for the nation.

This balance between the collective and the individual is echoed in Ruhiya’s call to the prayer. The need to read the call as epitomizing this balance is also evidenced in the causal relationship between the call and the novella’s other voices that follow. Highlighting the causal relationship between Ruhiya’s call to the prayer and the other four sections and voices, Ruhiya’s section comes first, although chronologically it

follows part two, which depicts the events of the night preceding the dawn on which Ruhiya calls to the prayer. In her study of Palestinian women's social and feminist activism under the occupation, Elizabeth Warnock Fernea concludes that "women's desires and demands are running ahead of their actual achievements" (177). Ruhiya's call to the prayer can be seen as a symbolic act that measures the action up to the desire. Only when such a non-traditional act is taken that real change ensues.

The first to experience the impact of Ruhiya's act is her love-object, Yehya, who later turns out to be her brother. In contrast with the balanced relationship between the collective and the individual, the divine and the human, and fixity and mobility that Ruhiya's call implies is Yehya's journey and suicide mission. While reinscribing Yehya's earlier teachings, the call is depicted as the total opposite of his journey later in life and its ensuing mission. As Ruhiya stands at the top of the minaret, preparing to call to the prayer, she faces Jerusalem, as she had previously done so many times during prayer, before Yehya admonishes her act as blasphemous. Ruhiya's earlier praying facing Jerusalem is an imitation of the early Muslims' prayer, before a divine order reoriented the direction of their prayer to Mecca. Ruhiya calls to the morning prayer, facing the holy city again, whereas Yehya goes there to die. "I stopped," she recalls her earlier prayers, facing the Jerusalemite holy place, "though I'm facing al-Quds now because I know this is where he is gone, and where he wants to die" (23). The juxtaposition of what Yehya considers "blasphemous" and his deadly mission, in the name of the nation, raises questions about the ethics of the latter act instead. The novella's questioning and ultimate denunciation of Yehya's journey to Jerusalem become more evident when contrasted with Ruhiya's journey to the village mosque. Unlike Ruhiya's journey with its different

reiteration of its founding cultural and spiritual elements, Yehya's breaks away from his earlier egalitarian identity while repeating in an *undifferentiated* manner painful childhood experiences.

Yehya's journey embodies the nationalist notion of belonging, until Ruhiya reclaims him with her song and sets him on a new path of belonging as a work-in-process. Yehya's notion of home and belonging is made clear through his internal monologues, as he sets off on another night journey that is to end with his death. The journey appears as the flipside of Ruhiya's trip to the mosque, except for the fact that, like Ruhiya's, it is the first of its kind. It is the first time that instead of the publicly declared rhetoric of the suicide bomber, we hear his unexpressed thoughts, as he attempts to carry out his mission but then retreats. Political and patriotic statements made by the bombers before carrying out their missions have usually been recorded in advance and later made public *only* after the bomber's death. Records of retreating bombers do not exist.

Aside from this aspect of the journey to Jerusalem, Yehya's internal monologues reveal his mission and the life leading up to it as an *identical* repetition of a childhood experience with the occupation soldiers. In this section we know, for the first time, that, as a child, Yehya was imprisoned by the Israeli soldiers who paralyzed his right hand. Therefore, in contrast with the erotic language describing Ruhiya's call to the prayer, Yehya's monologues of his last night are replete with images of death, pain and degeneration that echo and reiterate his earlier suffering. Whereas Ruhiya's section begins with a rhetorical question about her love for him, Yehya's monologue ironically begins with contemplating the explosives strapped to his body. He speaks about them in

very similar terms to Ruhiya's language about love. They are "butterflies in bushes to my heart. I can run around with them on my back, on my hips, in a bag, I could wear them in my shoes, strap them under my arms, balance them on my head. They're cotton wool, they're candy floss, they're for children, they're lightweight with wings. On which I ride I fly I die" (33).

Following his childhood encounter with the Israeli soldiers, Yehya is filled with the desire for revenge, so as to *return* the hurt they caused him and his mother. This desire gradually swaps places with Ruhiya's love. Hence, both Ruhiya's and Yehya's acts are grounded in emotions and desires: of love, in Ruhiya's case, and of pain and revenge, in Yehya's. As mentioned earlier, right before she says the words, calling to the prayer, Ruhiya feels so engulfed by her love for God that the "yell had escaped from her" (26). For Yehya and his mission companion, Eid, death is similar to the attainment of love. Contemplating the aftermath of his mission, Yehya ponders, "And finally to reach the point of love, the summit of healing, the centre of softness" (35). A close reading of his thoughts and emotions, however, prove these expectations false. Gradually it turns out that more accurately his mission reveals a different kind of desire— a desire to put down the burden of his previous memories: "I carry the screaming and the memories and I prepare to lay them down. I carry my mother's face with me the night they dragged me away, a crying boy, and brought me back a beast of blood. I carry it with me so I can lay it down" (34).

Unlike Ruhiya, who sees life in light of divine love and feels empowered by it, Yehya sees the world in light of his painful childhood encounter with the occupation, and therefore feels diminished. Natural elements— which invigorate Ruhiya's life and reflect

her egalitarianism and belief in the unity of the world— have opposite connotations for Yehya, reflecting his pain and nationalist hierarchal logic. The holy city of Jerusalem “looks like a rotten peach” (33). It is reminiscent of his deformed hand: “A crooked twisted broken limb, crippled by them like my right hand, hanging there on the edge of my wrist so useless, so useless, that I have to pick up the Holy Book with my left hand” (33). He himself feels diminished and de-humanized: “A thin oily film is sealing every pore, every orifice, every wound so that I slip through the night on a path illuminated by a crescent moon, a disinterested cockroach, my belly to the earth, my back to the sky” (35). Although Ruhiya compares herself to an animal, a seagull, the significance of the two protagonists’ animal symbolism is different. Obviously, whereas the bird imagery associated with Ruhiya reinforces her freedom, Yehya’s animal metaphors express his despair and lack of agency. Envyng Ruhiya her freedom, he thinks, “I wish I could fly with the same grace and not choke with this despair” (37).

This contrasts sharply with Ruhiya’s feelings of empowerment, right before and after calling to the prayer: “She stood steadfast as a volcano disgorging boiling liquid, dispensing words like ashes” (26). Ruhiya’s words are so powerful as if capable of causing injury. At the end, she feels the powerful impact of her call on her body: “Ruhiya pressed her hand to her lips as if inspecting a fresh wound” (26). Whereas Ruhiya calls to prayer without fear or shame, Yehya’s mission is permeated by these same feelings and more, which foreshadows its failure. For example, unlike Ruhiya’s earlier pleading to the morning to stand by her side as she calls out God’s name, Yehya feels ashamed on the morning on his mission: “Friday morning how I greet you. Loaded like a mule. With bound wrists and ankles” (41). Not only do Yehya’s thoughts betray his fear, but his

doubt as well, as when he is uncertain about his ability to identify his companion, Eid: “Will I even recognize him by the Old City ramparts in his black clothes and high hat?” (35). Even betrayal is not out of question: “One of us will betray the other, as it is always in hell on earth” (39).

Moreover, their mission can only be carried out if they camouflage, unlike Ruhiyeh who takes off her head-scarf on her way to the mosque. As she steps out of her house, she “began to tie her black hair back but then changed her mind. The night would conceal her, sleep would stand guard. Defiantly she wrapped the *hijab* around her waist” (23). Eid and Yehya, on the other hand, have to cover up; they have to be transformed: “They don’t know me now, can’t see me. I am them transformed” (33). The need to physically eliminate their difference is the epitome of their nationalist trajectory which is grounded in sameness and the negation of difference. Whereas Ruhiya gives expression to her desire in a new and a different way, Yehya follows an already prescribed path. The lack of differentiation in his act is implied in the fact that he follows this path with another person, Eid, who seems to be doing the same exact thing. Even their bodies seem to be interchangeable, as Yehya wonders, “What if I see him slouching with the importance of what he carries...? Will I look up at the sky and breathe it to him, straighten my shoulders and stretch my spine up for him?” (35). Eid and Yehya, both on the same mission, signify the repetition, and hence immobility, at the heart of nationalist thought and practice. Only Ruhiya’s feminine call to the prayer is capable of interrupting this cyclicity and fixity.

Unlike Ruhiya’s mission which resolves contradictions between the private and the public, the inside and the outside, the individual and the collective, Yehya’s mission

is based on negation and contradictions that reinforce these binaries. “My life acquires its meaning when I die,” Yehya thinks (33). His language reveals his contradictory logic as when he also says, “I am the clamour and the tuneless song. A free animal, I have destiny and a vision” (33). Like Ruhiya’s call, Yehya’s mission is a song, but a tuneless one that, *The Honey* implies, is better not heard. Ruhiya points out his contradictions when she once reminds him of the paradox between his name and his actions: “You are the Keeper of Tombs, Yehya! You don’t deserve your beautiful name” (36). His name means “he lives,” and is the Arabic form of the name of John the Baptist, recognized as a prophet in Islam. Being imbued with contradictions, Yehya’s journey is not an easy one. Unlike Ruhiya’s God-shown path, Yehya’s is full of obstacles: “the walls are observed, the borders have ears. Every step I take is a checkpoint to be transcended” (35). This is so because it is a path and a mission that reverse the logic of things. In Yehya’s logic, death is the epitome of love and living is weakness and danger: “Every beat of my heart is a danger sign. Still alive, still weak, still striving” (36).

Yehya’s mission is the ultimate stage in a series of earlier departures and separations that he undergoes, beginning with his official religious learning and ending with his fundamentalist political indoctrination. A subjectivity grounded in separation is reminiscent of the first negation, separation from, and forgetfulness of the mother, on which the coming into being of the masculinist subject in patriarchal law is predicated (Irigaray 246). It is in this context that we can understand Yehya’s gradual estrangement and alienation from Ruhiya, his people and God. Not unlike the speaking subject’s separation from the mother and the maternal, Yehya’s religious and political affiliations distance him from Ruhiya while emphasizing his masculine gender identity both in action

and appearance: “Then he exchanged his clothes for trousers with large pockets, that slid to rest on his narrow hips and honoured the crown of his head with a white crochet cap. He said now his uniform was for real, now he was for real, and stopped shaving” (15). The Arabic version of the novella translates “now he was for real” into “al-ana asbahtu rajulan” (now I’ve become a man), highlighting thus the gender implications of Yehya’s political indoctrination and its celebration of masculinity (16).

By contrast, before his indoctrination, Yehya upholds a fluid notion of gender identity. He encourages Ruhiya to be like him and frequently pulls her scarf off of her hair. “Now you can feel the air on your neck like me,” Ruhiya remembers him once saying, “Don’t you want to be like me?” (17). He himself recalls this oneness and gender equality between the two of them: “She was in and on me, until I was Ruhiya and Ruhiya was me” (38). Before his indoctrination, Yehya and Ruhiya are one and the same. It is not until they come of age that Ruhiya realizes their sexual difference:

I had known before and I knew again that I would live and die with Yehya, that a lifetime on this earth was not enough time together and that maybe eternity, maybe heaven stood a chance of doing justice to our love. But I could never be like him again, since little rivulets of my blood had come between us, as surely as a ravine running through cliff walls. (17)

Despite Ruhiya’s consciousness of their sexual difference, actual separation does not take place until Yehya starts receiving his official religious learning in school. When he goes to the Quranic school, their relationship becomes hierarchical, as he starts to correct her prayers and recitation of the Quran (17). His ensuing political indoctrination brings about further hierarchies and separations, the ultimate manifestation of which is his suicide mission. Indeed, nationalist visions, as Simona Sharoni reiterates, “always involve, explicitly or implicitly, particular assumptions about masculinity, femininity, and gender

relations” (33). It is the moment Yehya declares his fundamentalist affiliation that Ruhiya feels most distant from him: “The way he said Holy Book scared me, it made me want to run from him” (15). His subsequent meditation brings about a physical separation and distancing: “She said she would no longer interrupt my meditation and let it take me where it will and her eyes swelled with tears of certain knowledge that her love meant nothing and that I was leaving” (38).

Yehya’s gender binary is in line with other identity binary structures he upholds. In identifying his Other/enemy, he relies on a singular image: “Is that a Jew I see before me? He doesn’t look like the Jews I know” (41). Yehya’s statement implies a notion of difference as a basis of Othering. Although he ultimately manages to identify his target, his notion of identity as premised on a cut between self and Other is undermined, as a false structure. The result of this logic is a life of anxiety and repression prone to dissipation and disintegration, as when Ruhiya frequently disrupts Yehya’s unnatural state of being: “But soon she was forever interrupting my anxiety, like a distracting sprinkling of sugar on my nightmares” (38). Grounded in binary thinking and structures, Yehya’s notions of being and community have no room for cultural, national and religious syncretism, except through death. Like Ruhiya’s and Hurra’s spirituality that coalesce the different religions, Yehya’s mission is supposed to bring self and Other together, but only in death: “Soon we become entangled, once and forever, with enemy flesh. Soon we manifest the hateful alliance scientifically, biologically” (42). Being a union through death, it can only take place by force, which renders it a charade of a union: “Our hearts and our passions will be forcibly exhibited” (42).

In addition to the gender signification of Yehya's new appearance and dress code, there is a salient political meaning to his dress that, too, is based on differentiation, which arouses Ruhiya's concern: "*I am worried about Yehya. He threw away his red kafiya*" (15). Unlike the newly adopted white cap, the red headdress he wears earlier signifies multiple meanings, among of which, but not limited to them, are communist and royalist affiliations. Therefore, he "*threw away the scarf, lest he be mistaken for a communist, or worse, a royalist*" (15). Ruhiya, though, undermines the limited signification of the new headdress by giving Yehya her own veil (*hijab*), wrapping it around his neck and insisting that he keep it on at all times for warmth. It is important to notice that a *hijab* worn on a part of the body other than the head has another meaning in Arabic. In such a context a *hijab* also stands for an amulet inscribed usually in Quranic verses to protect one from the evil eye. It is implied here that it is Ruhiya's source of protection and empowerment (her spirituality) that Yehya needs, not fundamentalist indoctrination, signified by his white cap.

By wearing a *hijab*, Yehya becomes *mohajjab* (veiled), which yet has an additional meaning in Sufism. As the novella's glossary indicates, the word "*mohajjab*" refers to a Sufi doctrine that considers a person governed by intellect or emotion incapable of accessing the immaterial world. Ruhiya's *hijab* signifies Yehya's inaccessibility to this world, to which Ruhiya by contrast has access. It is implied, then, that Yehya's political indoctrination disconnects him from Ruhiya's immaterial and spiritual world at the heart of which is God. Therefore, in asserting his identity and belonging, Yehya's realm of signification is limited, compared to Ruhiya's. Yehya's disconnection from God is one in a series of gradual departures and losses that

accompany his indoctrination. “Now he’s gone *again* and I can’t find him,” Ruhiya thinks upon Yehya’s disappearance to carry out his mission (17 emphasis added).

Yehya’s fundamentalist indoctrination might have initially given him some peace, but being grounded in repression and binary constructs, the peace shortly dissipates. Recalling how his fundamentalist indoctrination heals him from his occupation-inflicted wounds, he thinks, “I had stopped feeling pain, I had stopped expecting terrors. The injustice fell away like a badly formed idea and the shouting in my ear stopped and the burns miraculously healed” (38). However, Yehya’s healing is temporary, for it is based on repression and forgetting, unlike Ruhiya’s spirituality, which gives way to self-expression and remembering. With the newly adopted doctrine, he admits, “My body stopped remembering, reminding” (38). The disappearance of his earlier pain and suffering is, therefore, a mere cover-up over the hurt through denial and forgetting, and is therefore bound to return as memories of his painful past and ultimately in the figure of the suicide bomber. This forgetting or inability to remember is the opposite of Ruhiya’s remembering: of her mother’s words, her father’s spirituality, her grandmother’s stories, and Yehya’s teachings. In addition to its psychoanalytic significance, forgetting is a very loaded concept in Islam. The Arabic word for remembering is derivative from the same root verb (Dhakar) for *Dhikr*, which has a special Islamic significance. To stop *dhikr* in Islam—that is to stop remembering—is a huge spiritual lapse. *Dhikr* is the core human activity when one is aligned with God. Again, Yehya’s fundamentalist indoctrination implies a distancing from God rather than proximity. This disconnection is the flipside of his separation from people, especially Ruhiya.

Yehya's separations from Ruhiya and God are not the only separations; his fundamentalism also distances him from his community. As he tries to identify his mission's target in Jerusalem, he thinks, "I've crossed my tribe and several others, men from my region and his father's brothers, to find where he was at" (41). Yehya can, therefore, be contrasted to the multitudes of Palestinians who assert their national and religious feelings through defiant prayers in impossible situations. Their image in the novella suggests invigorating and unrestrained liveliness, unlike Yehya's despair and hopelessness:

On Fridays the faithful curse all the way to *al-Aqsa*, unstoppable pouring in from the severed countryside as stubbornly as arteries reconnecting with a healthy heart. From the beyond the threshold of the zoo, they knock down portals and doorways, they bend bars and squeeze out like gorillas evolving around a sudden consciousness. They forge trails of backroads and backalleys, indistinctly as primates teetering on familiar terrain. (40)

The ultimate trajectory of Yehya's nationalist belonging is embodied in the scene with the taxi driver who takes him to his mission's destination. Named Shaheed, meaning martyr, the driver represents public appropriation of martyrdom. Not only is the driver's unappealing image counter-Islamic, but it strips the concept of martyrdom of its privileged status, rendering it synonymous with mere death. With his bald head, heavy golden chains, and the plastic skull hanging from his car's rear-view mirror, the driver foreshadows Yehya's anticipated martyr-status.

It is from this death and perpetual degeneration that Ruhiya reclaims Yehya through her song, guiding him instead on the path to a way of belonging and being grounded in spirituality and divine love. It is Ruhiya's feminine call that is capable of reorienting Yehya's path, because it is essentially the elimination of the feminine and the

maternal that leads to the creation of the masculinist subject, a salient manifestation of which is the nationalist subject. At the very moment Yehya is supposed to blow himself up, Ruhiya's song reaches him: "But my seagull is upon me, drowning me in song, ripping my insides with her beak till I drop my weights and fly" (42). Just like Ruhiya's two stories of possible loss—of Yehya's love and the village's spiritual community—overlap, the reclamation of the one goes hand-in-hand with the reclamation of the other. Ruhiya's perpetuation of al-Ahmar's spirituality allows her to reclaim Yehya, underlining thus the intertwinement of divine and human love. In fact, the overlap of the two is underlined in the first sentence of section one. There, Ruhiya wonders about the best way to manifest her love for Yehya, when she sees in him aspects of the Divine: "Spirit or flesh. How do I honour my love? When I look upon his face I see it timelessly as God" (13). As it turns out, by honoring her love for God, Ruhiya ends up honoring her love for Yehya.

As Yehya retreats from his mission, after hearing Ruhiya's voice, his story becomes an embodiment of the Palestinian modern history of dispersion, exile, and refugeedom: "My seagull is on me, leading the retracted pilgrimage, the treacherous way home I traced as a martyr and retrace as a refugee" (42). Like the refugees who have born witness to their injustice and have suffered the absence of an audience to their story of pain (Abu-Lughod 12), Yehya wonders, "Who will stand witness to this agony, this journey?" (42). Through his subsequent wandering, he becomes the quintessential Palestinian refugee, whose suffering no one bore witness to, except the Palestinians themselves. Yehya's only witness, too, is his alter-self, Ruhiya. Hence, like the agony of the Palestinian refugees, Yehya's agony remains unacknowledged, as his witness,

Ruhiya, disappears with him into the desert. Ruhiya's call to prayer, by contrast, does not have the same stake of remaining unacknowledged. Not only is she heard, but also has a witness: the young girl Asrar who hears and sees everything and who in the end tells everything.

### **The Signifying Feminine**

Other people's responses to Ruhiya's song emanate from their notions of the subject and community as well. Being an expression of love, to both the human and the Divine, the song undermines traditional notions of the subject as masculine and rational, which infuriates the male members of the community. As Luce Irigaray notes, which is also applicable to notions of community as a whole, the history of Western philosophy can be read as one in which "any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the masculine" (133). Part of the shock the men in the village experience upon hearing Ruhiya's call is due to its being imbued with desire, something they are not accustomed to. When Ruhiya calls to the morning prayer herself, the narrator stresses the fact that this was *a first* in the village: "Never before had the call to the dawn prayer been howled with this much pleasure" (28). By expressing the emotions and desires, usually considered the realm of the feminine, in the public sphere, Ruhiya posits the subject as feminine. Ironically, then, it is not Ruhiya's breach of a divine law that enrages the men but her act's assertion of her femininity within the masculine realm of the symbolic: "the women immediately knew she would pay for this pleasure, even though it had been gracefully displayed" (28).

It is also the abruptness of this expression that takes the people by surprise the most: "And the hardest thing to get used to was that nothing could have prepared them

for the gratification and delight they felt on hearing her, or for the sweetness that lingered on in the atmosphere of her song at mid-morning” (28). Implied in this reaction is a resistance to the new and a notion of both identity and community as being or stasis. This links Ruhiya’s call to the prayer to the “Prelude,” begging a reading of the latter as more than the story of an abandoned mosque occupied by a legendary creature. The men’s failure in the “Prelude” to adjust to the mosque’s new color is similar to their inability in section one to bear the impact of Ruhiya’s song. Both failures result in the disintegration of the village’s spiritual community. On the day Ruhiya calls to the prayer, no other prayers are called to, as the mosque’s doors remain shut on the men gathered inside, “speaking in heated whispers” (80).

Inseparable from an assertion of the feminine, as a viable space for the agency of the subject, is the inscription of the maternal body. As Irigaray suggests, crucial to the masculine appropriation of the subject has been “an active denial of the maternal body, of any space for woman and women within the realm of what counts as meaning, truth, action, desire, becoming, etc.” (Ahmed *Uprootings* 104). Ruhiya’s call to the prayer locates both the feminine and the maternal at the heart of all these elements considered masculine realms of signification. Not only does Ruhiya resemble her mother in physical appearance and gender, but she obviously carries on her spiritual legacy. Therefore, it is because of Hurra, people believe, that Ruhiya has eccentric abilities: “It was true that Ruhiya was often heard in conversation with inanimate objects ... earnestly asking after their feelings. Even though they could not prove that she was emulating her mother with such behavior, they were sure she was not being scolded for it” (19). Ruhiya’s call to the prayer locates that legacy at the heart of the realms of meaning: the nationalist and the

sacred, and by calling Yehya back from his mission through her spiritual song, Ruhiya incorporates him within a system of meaning that harks back to the maternal. This becomes more apparent as the novel reveals the two protagonists' shared lineage. At the moment Yehya's suicide mission becomes less probable due to Ruhiya's song, the reader is made aware of their family connection as brother and sister, and not just as two lovers, as Yehya thinks, "Ruhiya, my father's daughter, my sister reclaiming me with her song" (41). She thus reclaims him, not as a lover only, but as a family and a community member. It is the activation of the repressed feminine within the symbolic order, through Ruhiya's song, that reveals their true relationship and that posits a new way of belonging.

The state she calls him back to is one of becoming rather than of being, as it is reminiscent of the imaginary stage preceding the formation of the being. It entails a union between the masculine, he stands for, and the feminine or the pre-symbolic maternal, embodied in Hurra and their childhood. "My seagull is upon me, circling the sky..." Yehya realizes upon hearing Ruhiya's call and feeling her presence, "Biding me to join her and slip out to sea" (40). The sea is the imaginary place of their childhood pretend games, where she "resolved that she was a seagull and I was the sea and she could sing as long and loud as she pleased and I lapped the shores and drowned in bottomless expanse, indifferently" (38). It is as children when they were one and the same: "She was in and on me, until I was Ruhiya and Ruhiya was me" (38). The previous undifferentiated relationship between brother and sister is similar to what Irigary calls female genealogy, which emulated on the mother-daughter relationship, is not premised on a cut between self and other (Ahmed *Uprootings* 104). Within this genealogy, there might be the possibility of repetition opening out towards difference, for mother and daughter are both

same in their sex/gender and different in their individual and generational positionings (Walker 170). Likewise, by calling to the prayer, Ruhiya reenacts her religious, spiritual and cultural upbringing through the difference of her feminine voice by which she reclaims Yehya.

By contrast, masculinist notions of the subject posit the “mother, matter, the female capacity for physical birth ... as an inert ground upon which the masculine dream of self-birth is erected within prevailing systems of signification and relations of power” (Irigaray 133). In similar terms, the manifestation of Yehya’s gender and nationalist identities alike have to be based on the exclusion of the maternal and the feminine, embodied in Ruhiya, hence his gradual separation from her. After he hears her song, he recalls his previous deafness to her spiritual and humanistic pleading. This deafness seems to be an assertion of his masculinity and his exclusion of the feminine within and without: “I’ve been deaf to Ruhiya’s pleading but I can hear her now, chirping my name like a little bird that has swallowed grass ... She ... reminded me to keep the latch on any weapon I came across. Ritualistically I turned to my brethren. But she couldn’t see my tears for the width of my shoulders” (36).

### **Hurra: the Silenced Mother**

Likewise, Yehya’s father, Farhan, depicts Hurra as, to use Irigaray’s above words, “an inert ground upon which the masculine dream of self-birth is erected.” Trying to justify his crime, Farhan describes Hurra as the *source* of desire and sexuality: “I grew fiercer, causing cries of pain and shame I came to endure, more aggressive as a desire to regress into the Sefer got grip on me. I wanted her to carry us there, to traverse time and meet me again at the beginning, to span back to the flipside of the sun and the original

mirror image of the universe” (97). Farhan sees Hurra as a spirit, an emotion, but never the real woman she is: “Hurra. The statue of spirit, the sadness of Magdalene” (96). For him, therefore, the possibility of her death as a human being or even her giving birth is incomprehensible: “I can’t believe she died, bled, birthed” (97). This dehumanizing essentialism is the counterpart of the privileging of an all-powerful but necessarily silenced mother within patriarchal law and by implication within traditional nationalist discourses. This privileging can only lead to the fusion and death of the daughter as a desiring subject and to the denial of the mother’s woman-ness (Walker 170-2). Once Farhan starts to see Hurra as a ground and a basis for his masculine subjectivity, Hurra begins to dissipate. “Hurra’s luminous skin grew dim but she was transparent,” reveals Asrar who witnesses the crime (76). Even Farhan, the perpetrator, confesses a similar thing: “The exalted virgin of my tumultuous nightmare was melting before me, she was that close to the fire” (99). Ruhiya’s voice, then, is doubly significant. Not only is it a manifestation of her belonging and agency but a denunciation and decrying of her mother’s silencing.

In contrast with Yehya’s and Farhan’s masculinist notions of self and Other is the female genealogy Hurra and Ruhiya represent and the cultural and religious syncretism to which this genealogy gives way. A female genealogy proves to be a way of thinking about identity “that refuses both the dichotomies and categorical distinctions of binary logic and the association of repetition/reproduction with sameness” (Walker 172-3). A female genealogy, however, is not allowed within the symbolic order. Farhan’s rape of Hurra and her subsequent death symbolize a double death: the death of the woman in the patriarchal law and the elimination of the female genealogy she and Ruhiya exemplify.

Moreover, within the Palestinian context, Hurra's rape and silencing have historical and metaphorical precedents. Metaphorically speaking, Hurra's rape and Palestine's occupation/rape have similar trajectories. Joseph Massad points out that after 1947 Palestinian nationality was linked to paternity rather than to residence in Palestine itself: "while the land as mother was responsible for the reproduction of Palestinians until 1947, the rape disqualified her from this role. It is now fathers who will reproduce the nation" (45). Likewise, after her rape Hurra cannot produce any more children. She "was sure as birth followed death she would not have another child" (19).

Historically speaking, the image of the silenced and raped Hurra resonates with stories of the Palestinian women raped during the *Nakba*. Historical records and official archives of the *Nakba*, as well as testimonies revealed decades later by those who lived it, speak about the rape of Palestinian women by Zionist guerrilla groups as a military ploy to empty the land of its native people, for whom honor was more important than land. The link between the 1947-48 rapes and Ruhiya's rape implies a shared element resulting from the persistence of the woman-as-ground logic. As long as the woman is thought of as ground for identity, community and belonging, her body can be violated by conflicting forces over identity, whether these forces are nationalist, as between the Palestinians and Israelis, or gender, as between men and women of the same nation. Gedalof reminds us that "if women are discursively and strategically positioned as the ground upon which competing identity claims are contested, then, there is no doubt that, in contexts of ethnic conflict they can and will be used by both their attackers and their self-proclaimed defenders" (98). While the Zionists capitalized on Palestinian women's bodies through rape, Palestinian nationalist discourse violated women's experience of rape by projecting

it onto the land, relegating the actual women victims to the background. In this nationalist appropriation, as Isabelle Humphries and Laleh Khalili point out, “an important and devastating element of women’s experiences and memories of the *Nakba* is made abstract and placed in the foreground of the nationalist discourse, while its concrete details and personal horrors are pushed to the background by both relations of gender and discourses of nationalism” (223).

Not only have these rapes remained officially unacknowledged, but they have not even been spoken about among the Palestinians themselves until a much later time. It was not until the 1970s that these stories were confronted in the Palestinian nationalist consciousness, leading to the emergence of the nationalist slogan “land before honor.” As Fernea points out, the expression reverses the earlier logic’s preoccupation with honor, manifested in its slogan, “honor before land” (23). Many Palestinians have considered their society’s ages-long notion of honor as located in the female body as a vulnerable cultural element of which the Zionists took advantage to empty the land of its people. The vulnerability of such a notion of honor was demonstrated in 1947-1948 when thousands fled their homes for fear of rape by the Zionist armed forces (Fernea 23).

Just like the stories of the rape of Palestinian women have been ultimately confronted and spoken about, reorienting the course of Palestinian nationalist history and discourse towards an ideology of struggle and resistance to reclaim the land that has been lost, Hurra’s and Ruhiya’s stories, the novel implies, need to be revealed instead of covered up, and the reasons behind the loss of the two women should be dealt with. The Palestinian nationalist discourse that appropriates its women by insisting on seeing them as ground on which the nationalist community is to be erected represents a violation of

women, not unlike the rapes committed during the *Nakba*. The latter were possible because women were considered the ground and place of men's honor. Addressing the appropriation of women in both cases can possibly give way to acknowledging the repercussions of notions of community based on the grounding, rather than activating, of the feminine and the maternal. Such an acknowledgement can eventually lead to more egalitarian and flexible reconfigurations of both individual and collective identities that are not based on the Law of the Father and its clear-cut distinctions and binaries.

*The Honey* does not leave the urgency of confronting and re-conceptualizing the notion of honor and its gender and community implications for us to ponder in a future time. The novella rather enacts different possibilities within the story, as Hurra's rape and honor are revisited by both Asrar and Radwan. The secret-keeper, Asrar, denies that she had promised Ruhiya not to tell her secret: "She made me promise not to tell what I saw. 'Cross your heart and swear on the Qur'an.' I didn't" (73-4). Indeed, she tells us Ruhiya's story, as well as Hurra's rape story. From Asrar, we find out that Radwan, too had tried, through his spirituality, to undermine this consequential notion of woman as a basis and a ground of honor and community. Although surrounded by social pressure to avenge the violation to his and the village's honor, after Hurra was found dead, he insists on his spirituality as the only way to deal with his crisis, which for him is not his loss of honor but his loss of Hurra herself.

Whereas both his village and the Bedouin tradition initially foreground what happened to Hurra as a disgrace to his name and honor, Radwan's attitude mourns the loss of the human life, their love, and the violation of divine law. In response to a Bedouin man urging him to avenge Ruhiya's death and implied rape, Radwan declares,

“My wife is dead, and you are speaking with a poetic voice. Don’t you know that nothing will avenge her death” (78). Since one of the most salient functions of the ideology of honor is to uphold the structure of the patriarchal family (Fernea 22), allowing Hurra’s death/rape to remain unavenged would undermine the community’s male power. It is the community, the Bedouin finally admits, that is at stake: “We can investigate what happened, we can find a way to reconcile the community” (79). Radwan’s spirituality-based honor, however, enables him to dismiss the man’s pleading, asserting that the violation, whether that of rape or murder, is done against God’s law and therefore the reconciliation has to be made with Him: “Sir, I don’t mean to offend you, but the only reconciliation to be made is with God, and I will make it my duty, for as long as I breathe, to achieve it” (79). Radwan’s mourning over his loss of Hurra reiterates his family’s appreciation of human life, being a manifestation of the Divine. His emotions echo Hurra’s unconditional love for Ruhiya and foreshadow the latter’s preservation of Yehya’s life through her call to the prayer.

### **Yehya: from Being to Becoming**

*The Honey*, thus, does not reject women’s role of preserving and reproducing the nation but rather insists on redefining it as perpetuating and reconfiguring individual lives and preserving bodies, rather than sacrificing them for the collective body of the nation. This sacred notion of the human life underlies the sense of community shared by Hurra, her husband, her daughter, and eventually by Yehya. Indeed, Yehya retreats from his mission to experience the notion of home as becoming and a work-in-process, which helps him restore his previous proximity to the human and the Divine alike. Ghandour’s refugee, Yehya, eventually returns to his community and birthplace, but only after he

comes to understand that home is synonymous with, as Gedalof puts it, change, exchange, negotiation, interaction, difference and movement (105). After his retreat from Jerusalem, Yehya embarks on a long journey embodying these elements. When he has learned these meanings, he reclaims his pre-indoctrination egalitarianism and spirituality.

This becomes possible only outside the holy city's walls. Right until then, Yehya's fundamentalist nationalist discourse— which appropriates women's real roles through the trope of the woman-as-nation— still dominates his consciousness. While still in Jerusalem, Yehya continues to relegate Ruhiya's significance secondary to the nation, epitomized in the holy city. Bidding the city farewell before he disappears into the desert, he speaks to Jerusalem as if it were the one who called to the prayer, conflating Ruhiya, thus, with the nation: "The divided impossible city that sang to me at dawn, we are under siege" (43). Only when he is outside the holy city, symbol of the nation, does he return to his previous egalitarianism and spirituality. In the desert, he becomes part of its larger population of creatures, human and nonhuman. Hence, his whereabouts are revealed to Asrar by a desert animal that searches for him. "I had walked without seeing him for miles" a large iguana tells Asrar, "along a tarmac road, past the Bedouin tents, until I reached the canyon monastery embraced between its cliff walls" (75). There, he lives with the desert monks in imitation of Christ: "At night they sit together at a long table and dine on rice soup and fresh dates" (73).

Yehya attains a state of becoming by replacing his nationalist hierarchical and binary logic with egalitarian thinking that deems various origins valid. "I learned the language of the tongue, of the throat, of the lips and of the drum," he thinks as his journey takes him further east and north, giving him access to new forms of knowledge

(106). Similar to his pre-indoctrination state, this knowledge brings him closer to both the land and the divine, while still in this world and on earth: “My body was strong, I was ready for my tribe. Like a heavenly tree I was reaching for the soil. The Pine and the Sandalwood, the Cypress and the Palm, the Cedar all inside me” (106). To be ready for his tribe and nation, he has to be connected to both, heaven and the soil, rather than departed from one for the sake of the other. It is important to notice that the different kinds of trees he holds inside are associated with different soils, lands and countries, which undermines the traditional nation as marked by limited boundaries. Not only traditional boundaries are undermined but all other “facts,” except for that of the Divine: “I leant against the date palm and closed my dry eyes. I sense God everywhere. I can’t tell him from another” (107).

With the attainment of Ruhiya’s spirituality, Yehya’s journey comes full circle, as it makes possible his reunion with Ruhiya, in a similar fashion to their previous relationship: “We stood on the side of the hill overlooking al-Ahmar the way we had when we were children, with my blood running through her and her voice running through me” (107). This spirituality, similar to Hurra’s, Radwan’s and Ruhiya’s brings about a better appreciation of the human, in which the Divine is manifested. The result is a new ethical system where forgiveness takes place of revenge. “Perhaps,” he tells his sister at the end, “I will go back to the monks, and ask for a prayer for my father” (107). This, Ruhiya tells him, is the ultimate reward and ultimate prize. Having arrived at the outskirts of the village, she reassures him: “‘Yehya, they have waited for you, and I have guarded them.’ But I didn’t believe her until I saw for myself the oasis, swarming with particles of gold” (107).

## Conclusion

Postcolonial feminists have had various approaches to the problem of positing women as the ground for imagined communities. They challenge, first hand, the association of women with place and argue for women's 'right to travel', as nomads, as citizens, as women (Gedalof 107). And yet such approaches only by-pass the opposition between being/belonging and becoming, from which other binaries emerge, and, more importantly, "foreclose on the possibility of the alternative formations of community that could help resolve conflicts bound by the logic of narrow identity politics" (107). Sarah Ahmed suggests that part of refusing what we are is to challenge the way in which reproductive work is interpreted as "the stasis of being" (*Uprootings* 101). Likewise, Ghandour uses the *Nakba* narrative, which epitomizes the association of home with being, to iterate a different story of home and belonging, in which both are synonymous with becoming and work-in-process.

*The Honey*, therefore, is an example of what can be considered a new trend in the Palestinians' attitudes to the *Nakba* that sees it not as a site of memory and remembering but an occasion to move forward. Palestinian academic and film maker Omar Qattan reflects on the different functions of the Palestinians' memories of the *Nakba*:

It is as if the act of inheriting, of preserving and taking pride in what is left to you, is also a heavy burden from which we somehow must liberate ourselves. If we think of this process collectively, particularly as time is passing us by and the past slipping further and further away, we need to think of memory no longer simply as assertion and testimony, but as the point of a new departure. (204)

In order to demystify certain aspects of the *Nakba* narrative, Ghandour writes a Palestinian myth but one whose protagonists are antiheroes, women, and children, whose

driving power is religious syncretism, pop art, and spiritual and human love, rather than the ideology and cultural purity of traditional nationalism. The latter can only result in more patriarchal hierarchies and limited notions of home and belonging as sameness. A new status for women, thus, is concomitant with a more dynamic vision of the nation, for at the heart of all notions of community, as well as women's roles, is the concept of reproduction or identity, which if continues to be understood as repeating the same, little change can be foreseen on the horizon.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Knowledge and the Reconfiguration of Modern Arab Identity:

#### The Andalusian Model in Radwa Ashour's *Granada*

By writing *Granada*, Rawda Ashour places herself in a group of diverse writers, among whom are Salman Rushdie, Tariq Ali, and Amin Maalouf, who reactivate the Andalusian imaginary for presentist concerns (Gana 244). However, whereas these writers' employment of al-Andalus, by and large, draws upon the Andalusian convivencia narrative of coexistence,<sup>1</sup> Ashour's does not. As a matter of fact, *Granada* does not even refer to a very crucial historical moment that officially marked the end of the Andalusian conviviality, which is that of the expulsion of Granada's Jews. Although the Jews were expelled from Granada in 1492, the year from which the novel's events start, there is a palpable absence of any allusions to the event. Ashour's novel, thus, does not concern itself with the Andalusian model of conviviality.

In his article on the historical development of the modern Arabic writing of al-Andalus, "Nostalgia, Arab Nationalism, and the Andalusian Chronotope in the Evolution of the Modern Arabic Novel," William Granara contends that writing Al-Andalus in modern Arabic literature may be read as an "extensio animae" (extension of the mind). According to Granara, the concept, suggested by Saint Augustine in Book XI of *The Confessions*, describes the process by which "both the past and the future are created by and proceed from that which is perpetually present" (59). In modern Arabic literature, therefore, "the process of writing Al-Andalus involves a dynamic of memory, sight, and expectation that determines the form and conveys the seminal messages of the text" (Granara 60). That said, Granara notes that Ashour's *Granada* "presents a radical

departure from the politics and poetics of nostalgia, assigning to Al-Andalus a new historicism and wider spheres of representation of the present” (63). Granara elaborates on the nature of this departure as he notes:

The temporality of the novel is quite unique in the modern Arabic literature of “remembering Al-Andalus,” in that the obsession with the glorious past, with the Muslim conquest and the Golden Age of the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba, is diminished by the powerful sense of the now, the actual moment when the nostalgia for paradise lost is silenced by the political immediacy of defeat and survival, not obsessing on what was but what is, and more importantly, what will be. (67-8)

Based on this analysis, Granara contends that Ashour’s novel looks towards the future—what will be (68). The Augustinian formula of memory, sight, and expectation operates within the text, then, as a “present-to-future temporality,” of *Granada*’s vision of al-Andalus, which “distinguishes this novel from its predecessors, stripping the novel of the conventional romantic-epic dimension and giving it an unequivocal modern quality” (68). In Granara’s view, the novel’s allusions to the Age of Discovery and the shift of locale to the new world are exemplary of this forward temporality.

This chapter explores the dynamics of the characters’ identities as another similarly important terrain echoing the novel’s temporality. The chapter suggests, however, that the novel’s identity dynamics establishes a three-dimensional temporality that is simultaneously grounded in what was, what is and what will be. As this reading of the novel shows, the ways whereby the characters reiterate their identities in the present and navigate their futures originate in their previous experiences and the various forms of knowledge mediating them. The forward look in *Granada* is, thus, contingent on the characters’ perpetual interpretation of their experiences by means of their previous knowledge. This cognition-experience relationship is generative of new knowledge and

new identities, inevitably directed at the future. The novel's notion of identity is one that bridges the gap between essentialism and postmodernism, for while the characters' lives are occasioned by fixed social elements and historical circumstances, their identities undergo constant processes of verification informed by various forms of knowledge that guarantee their regeneration.

The historical dimension of the novel is implied not only by these identity dynamics but also by two central thematic concerns, unraveled by these dynamics: the Andalusians' high intellectualism and their ability to transform loss into new forms of community. Therefore, the most functional characters in *Granada* turn out to be those able to maintain a sense of community in the face of the multiple displacements. More importantly, they manage to do so by constantly reinterpreting their experiences, a process that renders their identities neither fixed nor completely unstable. As Paula Moya proposes in her "realist theory," identities are "neither self-evident, unchanging and uncontested, nor are they absolutely fragmented, contradictory, and unstable, as they undergo continuous verification through the continuous interpretation of experience over the course of one's life" (795). It is this subtle reenactment of the above Andalusian characteristics that allows Ashour to signify simultaneously from within the past and the present Arab histories, which share episodes of cultural, psychological and physical displacements as well as resistance to different forms of oppression, especially within the context of modern Palestinian history. This chapter manifests that by employing a realist identity politics that foreground the relationship between experience and knowledge, Ashour moors the "sight" of this impoverished present to *both* the past/history and the future.

Poet, literary critic and historian Salma Khadra Jayyusi identifies similar elements in the Andalusianan nostalgia of some modern artists and intellectuals. While for many modern-day Arabs and Muslims, Jayyusi notes, al-Andalus represents a lost paradise whose mention instigates constant grief, a few, as the Pakistani poet Muhammad Iqbal, have seen it as a manifestation of human ability and resilience, especially when emanating from “religious and altruistic passion, the passion that inspires people to build and sustain great principles, the fervour that moves them to celebrate God’s name, or art, or perfection” (Foreword xvii). Implied in Jayyusi’s statement is the notion that human ability and resilience are both nature-and-context bound. Indeed, it is this human ability and resilience that instigate Radwa Ashour to employ the Andalusianan imaginary, especially as these qualities bear the mark of the Andalusian high intellectualism.

### **Between the Sign and Its Reduction**

Manifesting the novel’s reconciliation of essentialist and postmodern notions of identity is the human-being-as-a-sign trope. As defined by Saussure, the linguistic sign comprises the signifier (the physical, written or verbalized, part) and the signified (the meaning), and the relationship between the two is arbitrary.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the identities of the novel’s characters are marked and shaped by two sets of elements that can be said to correspond to the two parts of the sign and whose relationship is highly contextual. The various experiences Ashour’s characters go through are informed by their gender, sex, class, and ethnicity, which can be thought of as the signifier part of the sign; however, their identities (understood as the way they make sense of their lives and the world around them) are ultimately determined by the meaning or knowledge mediating these experiences.

From the beginning of the novel, Ashour foregrounds the notion of the individual as a constructed site of signification similar to the sign. The novel opens with Abu Jaafar, the patriarch and papermaker— whose extended family Ashour depicts over two generations— trying to explicate the meaning of an unusual spectacle he witnesses one day, shortly before the fall of his hometown, Granada, the last Islamic outpost in the Iberian Peninsula. As he stands outside his bookshop on the dawn of one day, Abu Jaafar spots a naked woman, who passes by him, oblivious to his presence and even his words as he tries to talk to her: “He went toward the woman, took off his woolen cloak, and wrapped it around her body. He asked her name and where she lived, but it seemed as though she could neither see nor hear him” (1).

Despite the lack of speech between the two, the sight of the woman does communicate possible meanings to Abu Jaafar, which confirms the individual as already always signified in language, discourse, and culture. However, being centered around her body only, the initial meaning the woman imparts is far from being definite; it is rather confusing, leaving the patriarch in a state of apprehension and gloom. Long after the woman leaves, and “in spite the wintry chill and the howling winds that shook the walnut trees lining both sides of the road, Abu Jaafar remained standing by the door of his shop until the sun released its pale yellow rays and exposed the street’s prominent features” (1). For days, he remains speechless and preoccupied; like the woman, he neither looks at, nor responds to, his interlocutor. When his protégé, Naeem, tries to interrupt his preoccupation “Abu Jaafar didn’t respond, nor did he look in Naeem’s direction” (3).

Abu Jaafar’s reaction to the woman’s sight on that early morning grows from sadness and disturbance, to “foreboding unease,” to pessimism, as the context

surrounding the woman grows larger. In other words, Abu Jaafar gains a better and a more nuanced understanding of the meaning of what he saw only when further context becomes available: “The day went on and the phantom of the young woman remained fixed in his mind. He was disturbed and saddened by it, but it was not until the following day when he heard the news of the meeting at the Alhambra that a foreboding unease took possession of him” (3). As only a part of the woman-as-sign structure, the young woman’s body informs her encounter with Abu Jaafar without reducing her to it. Her ultimate meaning is located within her social and historical contexts. Therefore, when Abu Jaafar hears the rumors of the drowning of the Arab resistance leader against the Spanish invasion, Mousa Ibn Abi Ghassan, the image of the woman returns to his mind and acquires more meaning within the new story. Implying the woman’s status as the effect and subject of history, similar to Ibn Abi Ghassan, Abu Jaafar wonders, in response to the news about the Arab leader: “Could the naked woman then be a credible sign ... like a vision or an omen?” (3). This implication becomes more obvious as both the woman and the Granadan leader soon follow identical trajectories in the novel. A few days later, Naeem tells Abu Jaafar the news of a woman whose naked corpse had been found in the same river where the resistance leader had been thought to have drowned. The latter news finally confirms the sense of disaster the events surrounding the young woman only insinuated. “Then there’s no escape” Abu Jaafar says definitively (3). The definitiveness of the significance of the woman’s story suspends Abu Jaafar’s consciousness of his surroundings; when “Naeem stared at him inquisitively ... Abu Jaafar remained silent, explaining nothing of what he just said” (3).

Implied in this allegorical incident with which the novel starts is a manifestation of the embeddedness of identity and signification within their cultural, historical and social contexts, rather than within a certain fixed difference. By situating the woman within her historical context, as the way to account for her identity, Ashour undercuts essentialist notions of women according to which they are, as theorist Stephen Heath contends in *The Sexual Fix*, “readily pinned to and identified with their sex, their bodies, a biology” (314). The novel implies early on that regardless of their sex, women, exemplified in the Andalusian women, like their male counterparts, signify from within their socio-political and cultural contexts. Such a context-specific concept of identity results in what Judith Butler calls a “release [of the female subjectivity] into a future of multiple significations, to emancipate it from the maternal or racialist ontologies to which it has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear” (“Contingent” 16). At the same time, Abu Jaafar’s reading of the woman as a sign is also in line with the Andalusian millennial expectations and the circulation of eschatological prophetic traditions about the future of Al-Andalus and its link to the judgment day. According to Justin Stearns, the spread of these expectations and traditions underlines the “Andalusians’ awareness of the precariousness of their position in Iberia” (365).

Shortly after these incidents, the city’s Arab leaders accept the rules of capitulation that are soon to be followed by new laws prohibiting— at first in public, then in the private sphere— the manifestations of Granada’s Arab and Muslim culture, which proves consequential for the novel’s characters. Being a fervent advocate of Arabic knowledge and learning, Abu Jaafar is the first to suffer the psychological impact of the

new laws, the most devastating of which for him is the ban on Arabic books. The only other sight that turns out to be equally, if not more, disturbing than the woman's is that of the burning of books, which implies again the similarity between the words/signs of books and the human sign. The sight of the Castilian guards burning the Arabic and Islamic books sets Abu Jaafar in a state of disbelief and shock that suspends his awareness of his surrounding, including the presence of his cherished granddaughter, Saleema. Not unlike his state upon seeing the phantom woman, Abu Jaafar "watched this specter, then turned his eyes away. He looked back again and muttered something that nobody could understand. He was completely oblivious to Saleema's hand that was pulling his, as her nails were digging into him" (43). Here, too, Abu Jaafar wonders about the larger meaning this spectacle has: "Could it be that God was abandoning His pious servants?" (44).

However, rather than continuing to allow for different possibilities that the very nature of the relationship between the signifier and signified dictates— which is what his response to the sight of the women at the beginning of the novel implies—this time Abu Jaafar internalizes his rhetorical question, becoming convinced in the one possibility suggested by it. His attitude represents a reductionism of the sign to its physical part, the signifier, an act the novel depicts, here and later, as highly consequential. Not only does this reductionism eliminate the signified meaning of the sign but undermines the arbitrariness of the relationship between the sign's two parts. It is this relationship that has become the basis for constructionist theories of identity (Weedon 125). By reducing the sign to its physical part— the written words, and hence the books— Abu Jaafar mistakenly takes the burning of books for an irrecoverable erasure and loss of knowledge,

meaning, and identity altogether. In his view, unlike nature, signs are nongenerative. As he looks at the books burning,

his mind screamed out in silence ... this was not a forest whose seeds were carried off by the winds or drenched by the heavens rains, growing wild on its own. This was not Granada's Vega, a field that the farmer's cultivated year after year ... and when it suddenly catches fire before their very eyes they respond, 'There is no power or strength save in God.' (44)

By contrast, in the rest of the novel, Ashour adopts, both through characterization and metaphorically, a constructionist notion of identity central to which are the processes of regeneration and re-signification. As Butler maintains, "the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency" ("Contingent" 12). One of the most salient manifestations of Ashour's insistence on the *unfixity* of signs—including the human sign or identity—their resilience, and perpetual transformation, is the image of the woman phantom Abu Jaafar later sees emerging from the river. As Abu Jaafar stares into the water of River Genil, "the phantom of the naked woman appeared as though coming out of the water toward him" (7). She soon vanished and "reappeared on the surface of the water ... until she covered the entire surface of the river" (7). Like the river, then, the humans and their identities, are not purged with the elimination of the physical aspects of their existence. On the contrary, the less physical aspects of our beings, be they acquired knowledge or inborn genius, continue to signify beyond death, cultural and ontological erasure. As the analysis that will follow shows, the knowledge-based subjectivities in the novel are continually renewed and renegotiated, and even more so during the critical times they undergo.

Among the different methods employed by Zionism to erase the existence of the Palestinians as a people on their land is its conception of Palestine as a natural,

“nonhistoric space in which no Other was present” (Swedenburg 47). As Ted Swedenburg puts it, the Zionists “*could* perceive ‘natives’ who, like trees and stones, formed part of the virginal, natural space—but not an Other. These natives did not constitute any particular social group (namely ‘Arabs’), for the ‘vision of natural space, of landscape, is a correlative of the absence of otherness” (47). Even when the novel’s people are erased in such a way, they still come back as individuals in their own right, and unlike the landscape within which they are depicted, they come back to signify and produce meaning. This emphasis on signification, and on the processes of producing and being produced by knowledge, has been very central to the Palestinian history, and especially so as a response to the Zionist attempt to depict the Palestinians as Biblical remnants and noble savages inhabiting a primitive time (48).

In contrast with the novel’s first scene, the scene of the books burning implies an essentialist mode of interpretation that turns out to have a similarly psychologically and ontologically reductive impact on Abu Jaafar. Not only do the sight of the books burning and Abu Jaafar’s reductionist understanding of it leave him in a state of utter despair, but they also cost him his earlier faith and foreshadow his death. The same night following the burning of books, Abu Jaafar dies but not before denouncing the faith at the heart of his Islamic religion: “That night, before retiring to his bed, Abu Jaafar said to his wife: ‘I’m going to die naked and alone, because God has no existence’” (45).

The novel depicts the deviation from an understanding of the sign and identity as an arbitrary and contingent relationship, between meaning and a more physical and constant part, as the premise underlying all essentialisms. Abu Jaafar’s reductionism of his era’s political signs foreshadows later reductive acts of interpretation committed by

the Spanish legal and military institutions against the Arab women in Granada and the Native American women in the Americas. Here too, the reductionism of these women gives way to tragedy and death, as will be discussed later.

It is fair to say that Abu Jaafar's response to the burning of books does not reveal an abrupt shift from the initial more nuanced understanding of the complexity of the sign; it is rather the denouement of his constant oscillation between two contradictory lines of thought. Even prior to the burning of books, Abu Jaafar's political attitude and thinking fluctuate, allowing for an allegorical reading of his character and attitudes as being simultaneously presentist and historical. Implied in Abu Jaafar's thinking are two contradictory ideological lines between which he oscillates: his Andalusian intellectually-oriented mindset and another less rationally conceived thought that leads to uncertainty and ultimate despair in God and the human. The first aspect of his identity translates into a belief in the human ability to signify through the pursuit of knowledge. Therefore, he insists on providing his grandchildren with education, despite his friends' warnings about the dramatic political, cultural and economic changes that make of his plan a major risk: "Friends and acquaintances of Abu Jaafar warned him about what it would cost to educate both his grandchild ... These are not times for Islamic scholars and judges, nor for Arabic manuscripts, for that matter. Spanish is the language of the future" (35). However, Abu Jaafar "would listen to them and not say a word" (35-6). With the Andalusian long history of learned men and women in mind, he continues to have high hopes for both of his grandchildren: Saleema and Hasan. He would say to the little boy,

Granada has fallen, Hasan, but who knows, some day it may return to you, even by way of your own sword, or perhaps you will write its story and record its glories for all time ... I see you ... as a great writer, like Ibn al-

Khatib, and your name will be synonymous with Granada and memorialized along with it in every book. (35)

This statement is more in-line with the first impression we have of Abu Jaafar early in the novel, as it implies an awareness of the multiple possibilities education and knowledge can unfold. His hopes for Saleema are no less grand: “Abu Jaafar, who never revealed his innermost thoughts to anyone, harbored a fervent hope that Saleema would become like Aysha bint Ahmad, the pride and joy of Cordovan ladies and gentlemen alike, who surpassed them all in intellect, erudition, and culture” (35). From Abu Jaafar’s perspective, then, knowledge underlies all identities.

It is this Andalusian identity, grounded in a notion of the human as constructed in knowledge, that enables Abu Jaafar to rightly decipher some of the human and discursive signs produced in 1492, generating an accurate understanding of the crisis and, more importantly, a better way of dealing with it. Through this constant interpretation by means of newly acquired knowledge, Abu Jaafar accurately comprehends the magnitude of the disaster. After he hears the town crier announcing the articles of the new agreement with the Christian leaders, he rightly concludes that Granada’s Muslim king would go away and “no one else ... would replace him except Christian kings” (6). Despite such a grim conclusion, Abu Jaafar he does not despair but rather pursues Hasan and Saleema’s education. Being grounded in the constant reinterpretation of signs, Abu Jaafar’s position then gives way to a realistic understanding of history as well as to his conviction in the possibility of agency.

Abu Jaafar’s optimism, however, is undermined by a simultaneous denunciation of his knowledge-based perspective, leading to a misreading of history. Shortly after

concluding, using accurate knowledge, that the political history of Arab Granada is over, his attitude turns into one of denial, first of the very same conclusion he had just made and eventually of God's power: "His insides convulsed at this thought and he quickly dismissed it from his mind, closing the door on it, and replacing it with concise facts and logical reasoning" (6). However, what Abu Jaafar believes to be logical reasoning is no more than wishful thinking, emanating from knowledge pertaining to the past rather than the present. Right after he foresees the end of Muslim Granada, he recalls a line of failing Muslim kings who, nevertheless, had managed to keep the Christian invasion at bay. He then "concludes" that all is going to be well this time around. Rather than assessing the moment from within its own context, as he previously does to account for his sight of the woman, Abu Jaafar here misplaces the present and its signs within the past, leading to a misinterpretation of these signs. Forsaking true logic and reasoning, he goes on thinking, "Who knows what will happen tomorrow? He's not the first of them, nor the last. They've all come and gone, may Granada remain safe and sound, with God's permission and will" (6). Abu Jaafar's oscillation between contextual and reductive readings of history leads to a blatantly contradictory thinking that makes him simultaneously anticipate the possibility of getting outside help while realizing the impossibility of his reckoning. "It's too late for help," he ponders right before the occupation. "It's too late. But it will come from our people in Egypt, Syria, and North Africa. They will come, by the command and will of God" (18). Even his dedication to his grandchildren's education, the manifestation of his Andalusian identity, gradually becomes tinged with his reductionist understanding of signs and history, an understanding responsible for his increasing denial and ultimate despair:

He liked to imagine that everything that was happening was only a fleeting nightmare, and that it was impossible that God would abandon His servants and forget them as though they never worshipped Him .... He imagined days to come in which the Castilians would withdraw to the north and leave Granada to live in peace .... (36)

The narrator makes a point by using the words “imagine” and “dream” to describe Abu Jaafar’s underlying motivations: “His dreams had not abandoned him, so why would he abandon his dreams?” (36). This word choice highlights Abu Jaafar’s abandonment of his earlier logic, which foregrounds the role of true knowledge, rather than the imagination, in mediating experience, shaping identity and facilitating agency and regeneration. The novel, however, reinscribes these knowledge-based possibilities through the depiction of other characters, the best manifestation of which is Saleema.

It is at these moments of wishful and dreamy contemplation that Abu Jaafar’s attitude bespeaks some of Ashour’s presentist concerns. Concomitant with the patriarch’s seemingly religious standpoint is a pan-Islamic position that echoes modern time’s pan-Arabism: “If we reject the treaty and hold our ground, then help will come to us from the shores of North Africa, from Egypt, and even from the Ottoman Turks” (11). This attitude is especially parallel to the moment in history when Palestinians facing *Nakba* felt there was hope in other Arab states coming to their aid. Ashour exposes Abu Jaafar’s pan-Islamism as irrational and self-deceptive: “He was telling himself over and over again that Granada was safe and that it would survive. He jammed his mind with words, and extended his hand through the netting to his soul, stroking its wet feathers and its quivering body, soothing and caressing it, singing it to a soft lullaby to rock it to sleep” (7). Ashour critiques this past-based, and therefore limited attitude, further by attributing it to other male characters who ironically use it to justify a defeatist position. Abu

Jaafar's God-centered position, which, for him, calls for steadfastness, is used by members of Granada's Arab community to argue that surrender, rather than hope and resistance, is their only option. Attributing the Arab defeat in Granada to a divine will, a man says to Abu Jaafar, "may God be pleased with you! We don't have the privilege of choosing one thing or another. It's our fate, so how can we choose?" (9).

As Abu Jaafar grows more fixated on the past and its limited knowledge, he literally loses touch with life, becoming more or less ghost-like. He first grows "more taciturn as he shielded from those closest to him the inner turmoil he was suffering. He barely slept, and when he did it was never more than an hour or two. He would get up and pace around the quarter until its doors are opened. At the moment when they did, he would leave" (21). By losing faith in the agency of the human being through knowledge, Abu Jaafar's life turns into a communion with the dead, rather than the living. Almost on a daily basis, he visits the city's cemeteries and converses with his late parents, son, and friends: "He would leave the house and come back without talking to a soul, and when it was absolutely necessary to do so, he said only what had to be said" (22).

Ashour's depiction of Abu Jaafar re-inscribes her warning against partial visions that situate identity and agency within fixed discourses and limited knowledge frameworks. Another unfavorable image is that of the Granadans under the impact of a specific moment in history. Upon hearing the terms of the surrender treaty between Granada's king Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad and the Christian kings, the Granadans "avoided looking at one another in the eye, and they tilted their heads to hide their broken reflections and trembling eyelids" (6). Whereas the image depicts the impact of political reality on people, it implies that this impact is only an outward effect that does not

necessarily define identity. On the contrary, the novel espouses a notion of identity that is in-line with Moya's theory, which re-inscribes people as subjects of history's *multiple* discourses, meanings and forms of knowledge.

### **Reconciling Essentialism and Postmodernism: the Constant Verification of Identity**

As Moya suggests, "the social facts of race, class, gender and sexuality function in individual lives without *reducing* individuals to those social determinants" (793). This is the case because the experiences these social facts produce are "inescapably conditioned by the ideologies and 'theories' through which we view our world" (793). Indeed, the philosophical, cultural and religious discourses and practices of al-Andalus *constitute*, rather than simply reflect identity and experience in the novel. Hence, rather than being essentially determined by social location and experience, which can be communal, producing collective identities for mass communities, identity is ultimately shaped by the varied theoretical stands a community's members reveal in response to the stimuli of experience. In Moya's analysis, it is the way we interpret and gain knowledge from these experiences that ultimately determine who we are. This is true of the most agential characters in the novel who, by means of their inborn genius and/or their Andalusian and Arab knowledge— *constantly* interpret their personal and historical experiences and crises producing new meanings as well as individual and collective identities. The less successful characters, by contrast, are those adhering to and fixated on one line of thought or a single course of action.

Being the granddaughter of the Granadan bookbinder and papermaker (Abu Jaafar), Saleema's education and upbringing feeds on the Andalusian intellectualism, registered and preserved in the country's history and in the books of her grandfather's

library and bookshop. As the Granadan version of a Cordoban model her grandfather hopes she becomes, Saleema's identity is inevitably shaped by this legacy. However, in no way is it fixed and unchanging; as she goes through various trials and tribunals, Saleema draws on this legacy in interpreting her life's experiences, a process that results in her gaining further knowledge about herself and the world, and hence a new identity. Throughout the different stages of her life, Saleema's identity is constantly shaped and reshaped in light of her incessant knowledge-based (and knowledge-producing) interpretations of her experiences. Both naturally inclined and socially oriented towards learning, Saleema is a perpetual seeker of knowledge. Her story, thus, is the best manifestation of the knowledge-mediated experience dictating the instability of identity. Indeed, the regenerative aspect of the cognitively-mediated identity, which eludes Abu Jaafar under the pressure of the ongoing events, is the very theme of the novel. *Granada* depicts this cognition-triggered identity instability and verification as indispensable for her characters' physical and psychological wellbeing and agency during the personal and communal crises through which they go. Inaction and disintegration, by contrast, are associated with the characters whose identity and behavior are fixated on a singular interpretation of experience. It is important to note that the novel's identity undertones do not represent a purely theoretical engagement on Ashour's part; they are, rather, reminiscent of the Andalusian ability to transform loss into life-and-community-perpetuating elements, which manifest in the novel through Saleema, Maryama and Naeem, whose identities yield wit, intelligence, science, stories, and humor that attend to the wellbeing of the human body and soul.

Undeniably, elements of physical, social and political realities (gender, sex, class, and foreign invasion) do occasion Saleema's experiences variably, but it is her intelligence and the Andalusian gender, cultural, and intellectual discourses that ultimately shape and reshape her identity and subjectivity, which make her the quintessential Andalusian woman. From the beginning, the novel sets up its characters' identities as being constructed in both nature and the Andalusian culture. Neither one, it also becomes clear in the novel, guarantees traditional (gender) identities. By contrast, within both—human nature and Arab culture in Al-Andalus— a reversal of roles is rather more likely. This is best exemplified in the identities of the brother and sister, Saleema and Hasan, whose social roles and experiences, first as children, then as adults, are variably informed by their social location (class, gender, race, and sex), innate qualities as well as their interpretations of the experiences this location produces for them. Although two years Saleema's junior, but more physically active and amiable, Hasan is in charge of the domestic chores; it is he who is "sent to the town's public ovens, carried the trays of fish and flat loaves of bread, who waited and paid the oven attendants and returned with the cooked food" (25). On the other hand, Saleema, who had inherited her grandfather's blue eyes and "her father's bright, attentive look, his intelligence and vivaciousness" (27), is more inclined towards mental work and activity that are further enhanced within her knowledge-oriented Arab culture. Saleema's dissociation from traditional gender roles, then, is informed by both these natural qualities as well as by the Arab cultural and intellectual history in al-Andalus and beyond, to which she has access, as the granddaughter of a Granadan learned bookmaker. This constituency accounts for her family's stated and implied approval of her lack of a traditional feminine identity.

Although concerned about her granddaughter's domestic deficiencies, Umm Jaafar frequently laughs, comparing Saleema to the queen of Sheba, "who wanted to give orders and be obeyed and not take orders from anyone else. She even nicknamed her 'Sheba'" (25). Not surprisingly, either, Abu Jaafar thinks so highly of Saleema's abilities that he is "not concerned about her marriage, nor did he ever raise the subject with her" (35). He is rather delighted by her mental predisposition and offers her an equal education with her brother, insisting, as mentioned earlier, that they both continue it despite the economic hardships the family goes through following the conquest. This depiction of Saleema as a child not only explains the progressive cultural constituency of her identity but the inessentialism of gender identity. This fact is also reiterated in the depiction of the more traditional women in the novel, such as Saleema's mother and grandmother. Despite their roles as mothers and housewives, Umm Hasan and Umm Jaafar manifest that, rather than being essential, gender and sexual identities are mere social structures embedded in power formations and arbitrary interests. Despite the two women's unease with Saleema's lack of traditional femininity, they do not impose it on her. Therefore, when Saleema insists on following her grandfather and the other men to see the burning of the books, her mother does not object, simply asking Hasan to accompany his sister. Obviously, their unease does not go beyond a light banter, condoning rather than alienating Saleema's identity, for what else does Umm Jaafar do by nicknaming her granddaughter after the queen of Sheba? Likewise, while Umm Hasan describes her daughter by saying that she "has the qualities of a gnat, constantly droning, and useless in the house!" (25), she is *not* totally dissatisfied with her. As a matter of fact, Saleema's dislike for housework, which would normally qualify her for the role of a

successful housewife, seems to work in the best interest of her mother. This is the case since Umm Hasan's "intense attachment to her daughter made her shiver even at the thought of being separated from her, living far away with a strange man in a strange house" (35). Therefore, like Abu Jaafar, who is not concerned about his granddaughter's future, Saleema's mother "felt the same way, but for entirely selfish reasons" (35).

There is no denying that Saleema, and other characters as well (as I will discuss later) are the embodiment of what Patricia Waugh calls the "self-in-relationship," which acknowledges "the material existence and history of the self in actual human relationships, beginning crucially with those between infant and caretakers at the start of life" (14). To a large extent, then, Saleema's identity is premised on her immediate social context, at the center of which is her grandfather, who, influenced by the history of Andalusian women, overtly nurtures and complements her intelligence. Similarly influential are her mother and grandmother who covertly endorse her identity through their fluctuating and indecisive positions.

As Saleema gradually emerges as a speaking subject, her identity manifests its constituency in both this social reality as well as her cognitive engagement with, and interpretations of, the daily experiences produced by this reality. Following each one of these engagements, Saleema acquires knowledge that is not only about the world but about her own identity as well. For example, Saleema's conversation with Abu Jaafar about the discovery of the new world underlines the interplay among these elements of identity. Preoccupied with the news of the discovery of the Americas, Saleema asks her grandfather about the meaning of the expression "new world." His answer— that "it was recently discovered. Before now, we didn't know that it existed" (26)— prompts her to

reflect back on her own explanation in light of his answer, producing in the end new knowledge about and a verification of her own identity: “When I first heard the expression,” she tells her grandfather, “I thought that God created it only recently, and I imagined its trees were little trees and that all the creatures in it were tiny newborns. How stupid of me” (26). The experience and Saleema’s mental reflection on it result in not only knowledge about the world but about her yet-to-develop mind. This example manifests Moya’s assertion that “identities both condition *and* are conditioned by the kinds of interpretations people give to the experiences they have” (795).

As she deals with more profound experiences later in the story, Saleema reiterates further the importance of the continuous (re)interpretation of experience for identity’s regeneration. Ashour’s depiction of Saleema’s trip to the parade, for example, brilliantly foregrounds the role of social location in informing experience, while underlining the ultimate significance of the cognitive processes in forming meaning and identity. Here, Saleema’s “inferior” social status as a young Muslim girl, in an increasingly predominantly hostile Christian society, impacts her experience without totally reducing her to it. While stressing the importance of this political and social background, the parade scene reveals Saleema as a cognitively active young woman, both inside and outside the home. It is upon *her* desire that she and her brother, Hasan, attend Christopher Columbus’ parade, where “treasures” from the New World are put on display. However, her precarious social location, as a Muslim young woman within the newly established hostile Christian society, informs and shapes this experience. Therefore, it is not without the company of the older Naeem and Saad, Abu Jaafar’s two apprentices, that she is allowed to go. The intersection of Saleema’s sex and religious identity place her in such a

vulnerable position vis-à-vis the larger Christian society so much so that Abu Jaafar instructs Hasan, two years her junior, but in a less perilous position, as a male, to take care of his sister. “Watch out for your sister. There may be Castilian boys who don’t respect girls from good families. Be careful, and make sure you hold her hand. Don’t take your eyes off of her for one second” (26).

The cognitive component of Saleema’s experience at the parade proves to be the real source of knowledge about the world, rather than the parade itself. As Satya Mohanty argues, it is through the cognitive component of experience that we can gain access to knowledge about the self and the world (45). After seeing the humans Columbus parades as “treasures” from the new world, Saleema points out to her young companions, “It’s not a new world. It is just a different world, and that’s all there is to it” (28). Throughout her life, these knowledge-producing mental reflections continue to inform Saleema’s perspective about the world, people, and her own self. As her knowledge grows by time, drawing on the Arab philosophical and scientific legacy, Saleema’s cognitive reflections become more profound, producing an even more subversive knowledge and identity.

Similarly, the identities of the other young characters are the outcome of the complex interplay of their innate qualities (both cognitive and emotional), their social location, as well as the thoughts and ideas by which they make sense of their lives. More importantly, their agency is determined by their abilities to continuously reinterpret their experiences and produce new forms of knowledge and variations on their identities. For example, the experiences of Abu Jaafar’s protégé, Naeem, are mainly shaped by his inborn sentimentalism and romanticism. Despite his physique that makes him look younger than his real age, he easily and perpetually falls in love, “head over heels, living

in a world of perpetual passion” (24). At the parade, his romantic desire takes over him again, and, on the spot, he falls in love with a native American young woman he sees among the paraded captives and ventures after her, leaving his friends behind to look for him. On the other hand, Abu Jaafar’s other protégé’s, Saad’s impression and interpretation of the parade are informed by his own experience of exile and dispossession. A native of Malaga— an Arab city, whose people, prior to the fall of Granada, were besieged and starved to death before their surrender to the Christian conquerors— Saad recognizes his affinity with Columbus’ captives. On the way back from the parade, he conjures up his past experience, wondering “whether the Castilians attacked them by land and sea the way they did to the people of Malaga. Did they starve them to the point of forcing them to eat their own horses?” (30). The same parade, then, is lived and understood differently by the characters, due to their various mediating emotional and theoretical backgrounds. Indeed, Satya Mohanty confirms that, our “experiences do not have self-evident meanings, for they are in part theoretical affairs” (48).

In *Granada*, Ashour complicates the constituency and instability of identity beyond Moya’s theory, by foregrounding the role of natural qualities as elements that can either inform our experiences or determine them entirely. Experience and the knowledge it yields, however, mitigate the impact of these natural factors. Interestingly, Ashour acknowledges the role of not only natural human intelligence and emotions but also of the pre-Oedipal forces disrupting identity. In *Desire In Language*, Julia Kristeva stresses the role of these forces, which she calls the semiotic, in maintaining the heterogeneity of meaning, signification, and the signifying subject (140). Through the depiction of such

forces, the novel reiterates the incongruity of essentialist identities, especially gender. As Kristeva contends, these impulsive drives accompany signification regardless of the sexual or gender identity of the signifying subject, for they precede any social formations of identity (*Desire* 141). By shedding light on the pre-symbolic phenomena, Ashour seems to echo Caroline Ramazanoglu call for feminists to “go beyond discourse theories of identity and the subject in “theorizing feelings that have no discourses and in exploring the unspeakable” (qtd. in Kowalewski-Wallace 168).

Discourse theories of identity, one of which is Moya’s realist theory, fall short of explaining Saleema’s marriage story, which is informed by neither her social location nor thoughts and mindset. These elements would have dictated that she refuse Saad’s marriage proposal. On the contrary, she declares to her mother, who herself definitively rejected the proposal, due to Saad modest social status, that she “would never find a husband like Saad” (62). Not only the class and social differences between Saleema and Saad could have thwarted the young man’s proposal, but also Saleema’s own disinterest in marriage altogether. Therefore, her consent declaration shocks not only her mother but Saleema herself, who loses sleep, on the same night she makes her announcement, trying to reasonably explain her response. Although this experience is occasioned by what can be considered a semiotic impulse, Saleema still attempts to make sense of it by means of her ideas and ideologies, which do not foresee her future in marriage. She

tossed and turned that night. She lay wide awake, asking herself what made her respond so readily. The thought of marrying Saad never occurred to her before, nor of marrying anyone else for that matter. She was startled by his proposal, which she hadn’t expected or understood. But now she had to think about how to deal with this situation, how to think about it before giving her final answer, one way or the other. (63)

Saleema even considers going back on her decision, concluding that it was only intended to defy her mother's domination, implied in the mother's attempt to make the decision Saleema is supposed to make: "The sky wouldn't fall to the earth if she announced tomorrow that she didn't want to marry Saad or anyone else. But if it weren't for her mother's comments that provoked her, she may very well have said so" (63). Saleema's response is more or less a slip of the tongue, one of the manifestations of the semiotic, which underlines that "there is a resistance to identity at the very heart of psychic life" (Rose 91).

At the same time, this incident is reminiscent of Judith Butler's notion of the subversion of identity through its repetition. In *Gender Trouble* Butler argues that it "is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible" (145). By repeating her non-conformist identity, Saleema ironically produces a more traditional identity, that of the wife. Obviously, Saleema's acceptance of Saad's proposal is not subversive of the norm of marriage, at least not at that moment, but it is definitely disruptive of her own counter-marriage identity. Her act is, to use Butler's description of the subversive practices of identity, one that resists calculation:<sup>3</sup> "the only thing that makes a performance subversive is that it is 'the kind of effect that resists calculation'" (Sullivan 91).

Saleema's act is subversive of one among various identities and norms available to the Andalusian women, which is the norm of the independent woman who is unconfined by traditional gender roles, at the top of which are the roles of the wife and the mother. As literary and historical records reveal, Andalusian women's disinterest in marriage was not an atypical phenomenon. In her book, *Women in Andalusian Society:*

*from the Islamic Invasion to the Fall of Cordoba*, Rawiyah Shafi' confirms that many learned and famed Andalusian women preferred single life and the preoccupation with the different disciplines of knowledge and art over marriage (134). Among the various names of women Shafi' mentions is 'Aisha Bint Ahmad from Cordoba, the very same 'Aisah Abu Jaafar hopes Saleema will grow up to resemble. As Shafi' illustrates, this Cordovan poet and intellectual devoted her life to excellence in learning, poetry, and teaching that she never married (134).<sup>4</sup>

A variation on the norm of the unmarried intellectual woman would, ironically, mean a going back to the old norm of the wife. However, although Saleema ends up committing herself to her declaration and marries Saad, she does not adopt the traditional role of the wife of "a man who she would have to obey, serve, and bear his children" (Ashour 63). She rather continues to be independent, insisting on having things her way, a role familiar to many Andalusian women, who exerted a lot of power from within marriage. As María Viguera argues, women of Andalusian courts, in particular, had been known for their power and influence on the rulers and sometimes played subversive political roles, depending on their relationship to the rulers. Mothers and wives were particularly influential (717). Very often, though, they contributed to the prestige and social status of their families through their intellectualism as well as financial abilities and wealth, as many of them used the revenues of their property to endow public foundations (718).<sup>5</sup> Saleema, too, becomes her family's primary source of pride and prestige. Contemplating the family's high status, Hasan cannot but attribute it to Saleema:

One night in bed, Hasan thought about how pleased God must be with him... Even Saleema, whose defiance and choice of such a strange life caused him so much anxiety, began to fill their house in Albaicin with prestige and gratitude because she had the power of healing. (199)

Not only does playing a traditional wife role represent a deviation from a norm established by many prominent Andalusian women, but it is incompatible with Saleema's own identity and worldview. This incompatibility is conveyed not only in her shock at her own pro-marriage response, but in her detached and even disconcerted reaction to the ensuing rituals accompanying her initiation into married life, such as the bridal party at the bathhouse. Lacking the theoretical and experiential knowledge associated with this part of women's culture, Saleema feels at odds with the women's various acts, intended to pamper and celebrate her as the bride-to-be. She "remained seated without moving a muscle as her arms and legs were stretched out to let the henna dry. She glanced all around her and thought about herself and how little she understood of all this" (72). Although Saleema's sex informs and occasions this experience, dictating that she go through these celebratory rituals, her identity is, by no means, defined by either her sex or the experiences linked to it in women's subculture. As reflected in her thoughts and speech, Saleema's identity can only be verified from within its constitutive cultural elements, none of which is the feminine. Since at its center is women's bodies— rather than both body and intellect (the signifier and signified making up Saleema's identity), this experience, turns out to be doubly alienating. The women at the bathhouse, on the other hand, foreground this body as the primary signifier in Saleema's marital life. Admiring the bride's beautiful figure, the woman in charge of washing and pampering Saleema remarks, "I swear to God, your groom is indeed a fortunate man" (70). Saleema's alienation, during this celebration of her assumed femininity, manifests that gender identity is anything but natural and that it, and all social identities by implication,

do not exist prior to the practices making up identity. As Butler argues, “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (*Gender Trouble* 142).

This is not to say that the depiction of Saleema’s alienation, from an experience foregrounding the gendered body, implies a denunciation of the significance of the body in identity formation on Ashour’s part. It is rather the notion of the sexually-and-gender-defined body that the novel undermines. Instead, *Granada* promotes a politics that foregrounds the significance of the neutral (ungendered) body. Eventually, therefore, as Saleema turns to medicine, it is the wellbeing of the human body, regardless of its gender or sex, that becomes her preoccupation. By highlighting the body’s vulnerability to disease and death, the novel undermines, further, notions of identity that are limited to body politics. Drawing on the knowledge of Andalusian philosophers, such as Ibn Tufayl’s *The Epistle of Hayy Ibn Yaqzhan*, Saleema produces her own ideas about the world, people and their worldly concerns:

And even if they succeeded, what have they accomplished, since death lurks about, dispatching its emissaries to pierce the walls with fatal diseases, only to make its appearance to strike down and crush the body under the hooves of his stampeding horses? They haven’t succeeded, but merely wasted their lives and their minds. (141)

Saleema’s experiences, including those marriage-related, reiterate the dialectical relationship between body and mind or signifier and signified. Hence, Saleema’s marriage turns out to be anything but a mere physical union. Rather than being appropriated by the experience of a traditional marriage, Saleema’s marriage becomes yet another manifestation of the cognitively-based experience and identity. On the first days of their marriage, Saleema delineates their relationship as one that satisfies her

characteristic quest for knowledge. Having told Saleema his family history on the third night of their marriage, stopping at the happy days, Saad “had no desire to go on with his story, but Saleema’s persisted” (81). Therefore, for another three nights Saad continues the story of death, dispossession and enslavement that befell his family upon the fall of their city, Malaga. When Saleema’s mother and grandmother eavesdrop on the newlyweds, hoping to discern the reason for the couple’s gloom, it is the soft chatter of Saad’s story that reaches them.

Even within marriage Saleema continues to see herself primarily as a seeker of knowledge and a scholar, rather than merely a wife. Therefore, she feels dissatisfied with herself when she fails to enact this identity. “What kind of student is this,” she asks herself mockingly, “whose reading list includes a handful of books?” (140). Saleema’s need for more books implies an awareness of the prerequisites of identity, primarily the ability to reenact, perpetuate and grow through it, which in her case can only be possible through more study and learning. In her account of subjectivity, Judith Butler asks a question with similar implications: how “is it that a position becomes a position, for clearly not every utterance qualifies as such;” what qualifies as a position is rather the ability to “replay and resignify the theoretical positions that have constituted me, working the possibilities of their convergence (“Contingent” 9). Similarly, Saleema’s question exposes her inability to resignify her identity as a scholar and a scientist, due to the ban on Arabic books dictated by the Spanish Inquisition laws.

In the novel, the ban on books is indicative of the significance of intellectualism and knowledge for the individual and cultural identities of the Andalusians. Seven centuries after the fall of the Ummayyad capital, Cordova, the Maghribi historian al-

Maqqari could write of this period: “in four things Cordoba surpassed the capitals of the world. Among them are the bridges over the river and the mosque. These are the first two; the third is Madinat al-Zahra’; but the greatest of all things is knowledge” (qtd. in Hillenbrand 118). Likewise, so integral are books to Saleema’s identity that they supplant all other priorities. Therefore, even when the mere possession of books becomes a crime punishable by law, deterring her brother from getting them for her, Saleema still insists on obtaining them: “She complied with these miserable times and Hasan’s adamant decisions to protect the family, and then she did not comply, whispering to Naeem the titles of books she wanted, or discreetly asking a woman who know someone who knows a third person who can bring her a certain book for which she will pay a year’s worth of earnings” (140).

Saleema’s preoccupation with books, reading, and science proves them as indispensable for her, which is not unlike the satisfaction and pleasure the Andalusian intellectuals found in pursuing different disciplines. About this contentment, the eleventh-century Andalusian jurist and theologian Ibn Hazm says:<sup>6</sup>

The pleasure of the intellectual in his rational discernment, of the religious scholar in his knowledge, of the sage in his wisdom, and of the legal expert in his interpretive judgment is greater than the pleasure of the eater in his food, the drinker in his beverage... the acquirer in his gain, the player in his game and the commander in his decree. (qtd. in Cachia 307)

When Saad complains about Saleema’s preoccupation with medicines, potions, and brews, she pleads with him, revealing a sense of urgency similar to that in Ibn Hazm’s words: “If you want, I’ll move them somewhere else, Saad, but I beg you not to ask me to give it up. I need to do this, and I need the books you’re making such a fuss about. I must have them” (118).

In the post-*Nakba* Palestinian history, Palestinians experienced a similar erasure of the physical signs of their existence in Palestine. This erasure, though, has failed to eradicate the Palestinians' relationship with and right to their land, because in no way can this erasure include the non-material aspects of belonging, among which are memory and emotions. In his elaboration on the various Israeli methods of effacing and erasing the physical and historical evidence of the Palestinians' presence in Palestine, Ted Swedenberg describes a "ghostly presence of Palestinians [that] still haunts the sites of the state's narrative" (70). He elaborates that despite

the constraints imposed by the colonizing movement that has expelled their compatriots, drastically limited their access to land, and severely constrained their efforts to build national institutions, Palestinians living under Israeli rule assert their own history and presence in the land of Palestine: against Zionist mapping, a shadow cartography. (71)

Palestinian literature, cinema, and popular history abound with stories of Palestinian refugees' return visits, during which they turn up at the doors of the previous homes they left unwillingly, asserting their right to enter (Swedenberg 71). Even more interesting are stories of Jewish settlers who had a difficult time staying in the Arab houses, "for every night they would be awakened from their sleep by the clatter of rocks at their doors. They would get up and look but no one would be at the door" (70). Both Palestinian culture and history assert that while the physical aspects of the nation, its signifiers, might be necessary, they are not totally indispensable for manifesting the Palestinian identity. This is due to the fact that equally important to the meaning of the sign, including the national sign, is its signified meaning, which, unlike the physical signifier, cannot be easily erased.

Saleema's imprisonment experience is another manifestation about the centrality of meaning or knowledge for the interpretation of experience and the formation of identity. Accused of witchcraft and heresy, Saleema finds her imprisonment unbearable, not for the physical pain she has to endure there, though, but for its being poorly mediated by knowledge: "Saleema was terrified as she sat alone in her cell because she didn't understand what was happening" (219). Even when the court's accusations are read to Saleema, they still remain unintelligible, for they imply an opposite logic and contradictory thinking from her own. Being based on the interpretation of her medical practice as witchcraft intended to harm people, the accusations represent a reversal of logic that leaves Saleema in a state of incomprehension and disbelief: "Was this a nightmare, Saleema thought, that shoved her into an absurd game directed by three strange demented men?" (218). Nonsensical are the accusations for her that "Saleema not for a moment harbored any illusion that the judge might be a man of integrity, with the sufficient knowledge and learning to weigh the fact judiciously" (219). Against the accusation of witchcraft and of people's resentment for her "evildoing," Saleema reflects on her obsession with people's health and wellbeing, which is incompatible with the very nature of these accusations:

She read books, treated the sick, and deliberately disregarded the injustice of the Castilians. When she walked through the markets, she didn't concern herself with the shops like other women did, but rather with the face of a woman she prescribed a remedy for but did not heal, and she would examine the face and symptoms, and run them through her mind and think of a treatment. (224)

Similarly incomprehensible is the Israeli legal system for the Palestinian people, as it consistently incriminates their acts of resistance as terrorism, punishable by long-term

imprisonment, torture, and transfer, while justifying the Jewish settlers' and Israeli soldiers' killings of Palestinian worshippers in the middle of prayer and of children in their classrooms as unfortunate accidents.

### **Transforming Loss:**

As more dramatic events unfold, the characters' constant reinterpretation of these events turns out to be the only guarantee of an agency that counteracts and even transforms the effects of the cultural genocide and community disintegration into the much needed community-and-life-sustaining elements. This transformation is parallel to another quintessentially Andalusian characteristic, which is the ability to transform and reconfigure loss, epitomized in two Andalusian human and non-human landmarks: the Andalusian first Umayyad prince, Abdelrahman I (*al-Dakhil* or "the incomer"),<sup>7</sup> and Alhambra.<sup>8</sup> As Nouri Gana articulates,

If the glory of Al-Andalus is attached, at least in its early beginnings, to Abdelrahman, then it becomes patently clear that it is partly the work of the competing forces of exile, nostalgia and homecoming—all of which Abdelrahman experienced firsthand but transformed them, along with himself, into a productive mix that redounded to his own and Al-Andalus' greater benefit. (242-3)

Similar to Abdelrahman's transformation of his exile and loss into the building blocks of a new nation and a lasting civilization is Saleema's transformation of her personal losses into life and community sustaining elements. In dealing with the most profound events in her life (the deaths of her first newborn, her grandmother, and the gazelle that was Saad's engagement gift to her), Saleema questions and reinterprets her religious and philosophical knowledge, producing a new understanding of herself and the world. The new knowledge ultimately results in her new identity as a physician.

Saleema's transformation reiterates again the possibility of subversion from within identity. As Paula Moya argues, it "is in [the] process of verification, that identities can be (and often are) contested, and that they can (and often do) change" (795).

Saleema's cognitive engagement with her losses proves beneficial in both the short and long runs. By reflecting philosophically on the death of her newborn, Saleema "forgot her own sadness, which disappeared behind a curtain of questions seething with indignation and denial" (111). Her attitude is the opposite of her husband's, "who resigned himself bitterly to the loss of his son, grew more and more depressed each day" (113). As a matter of fact, the whole household, we are told, "was turned upside down, from the joy of birth to the sorrow of death" except for Saleema: "Only Saleema was beyond sadness and joy, consumed by burning questions" (112). Saleema's reflection is even more significant in the long run, for its ultimate trajectory is her new identity as a physician, tending to the ailing bodies from both her community and outside of it. Although concomitant with this internal interrogation and questioning is her temporary withdrawal from Saad and the rest of the family, this detachment turns out to be nothing but a stepping stone towards a new stage in Saleema's cognitive maturity as a physician, dedicated to helping people: "The women of the neighborhood came asking her advice about curing one illness or another" (115). This identity reconfiguration turns out to be what her community needs the most, for "her treatments cured the body and the soul," especially that she never refuses "a request for help, even if there were means to pay for her services" (199). Additionally, in return for Saleema's commitment to the community, "people lavished their money on her when they had it, and ... their affection when they

had no money” (199). The material *and* psychological reward of Saleema’s new identity manifestation is, thus, mutual.

Unlike her grandfather, Saleema’s skepticism and questioning upon the death of her beloved ones results in new configurations of identity, due to her ability to navigate different elements of her Arab culture. For example, she combines women’s medical knowledge with that of the most eminent male scholars and philosophers, such as Avicenna and Ibn al-Baytar.<sup>9</sup> She “immersed herself in reading books, mixing herbs, and concocting blends, ointments, and potions. At first it was only the books that held her attention ... Then she took great interest in asking women savants for the ancient remedies they used to cure different kinds of pain” (115).

It can be argued that it is Saleema’s ultimate identity transformation into community-sustaining elements that makes her significant for Ashour’s presentist concerns. This is the case because her response to loss does not stop at the cognitive and intellectual level but transforms into a new identity and a material practice that advances the community at a tangible, practical level. Whereas Saleema’s multiple losses can be understood to stand for the Arabs’ cultural, political and military losses in modern history, her response is unidentical with the Arabs’ reaction to theirs. Unlike them, Saleema transforms and reconfigures the emotional and even mental deadlock into new knowledge and a new identity:

Saleema was now so bullheaded certain that illness was in the body. But the thing that subordinated the body to it, that animated it, what could it be, from where did it come, and where did it go? These questions tormented her, but she never lost her resolve. She brought these questions into the realm of her daily research on the many diseases that afflict the body. She would stalk them and produce an array of effective weapons, seeking inspiration from her books and burying herself in her experiments. (141)

Saleema's ability to transform loss and pain into forms of life and community is not merely a figment of Ashour's imagination or a wishful thinking on her part. Not only the Arab history in al-Andalus and "realist" theories of identity dictate this depiction of her identity, but also other theories of identity. Julia Kristeva has long recognized the role of suffering in manifesting the instability of identity, or what she calls the "subject-in-process." It is in creativity and suffering, she argues, that the signs of language and the signs of subjectivity are put into process ("A Question" 352).

Revealing similar abilities to reinterpret and reconfigure their experiences, Saleema's sister-in-law and Abu Jaafar's protégé, Maryama and Naeem respectively, manage to forge new relationships across gender, age and religious boundaries. Historically, too, the alliances formed among the Andalusian population of exiles and immigrants from various ethnicities transformed their exile and loss into a new viable community (Gana 242-3). Energizing this co-existence and human regeneration is a desire for knowledge and learning that is intensified, as Robert Hillenbrand points out, by the Andalusians' sense of isolation from the rest of the Muslim world and its lively intellectual life in the east, with whom the Andalusians could enter into a dialogue only in the cultural and intellectual spheres (117). Similarly, by constantly applying their mental faculties in dealing with their losses, the novels' characters forge new relationships and alliances that sustain them as individuals and a community.

The best two examples for this community-building ability are Maryama and Saleema, who despite their ostensible differences in personality, social role, and

strategies, both capitalize on the agency ensuing from an identity embedded in knowledge. Unlike Saleema, Maryama belongs to a lower social class. However, like her, she is not fully trained to perform a traditional wife's role. Despite the social facts of her belonging to a lower social stratum and her being a little more predisposed toward housekeeping do not dictate her identity by any means. Just like Saleema— who manages to reinterpret her losses, transforming them into community-sustaining knowledge that attends to people's bodies and souls— Maryama's wit and intelligence safeguard the community physically and psychologically.

Additionally, her personality and strategies reiterate the two aspects of the novel's notion of identity, as grounded in both knowledge and practice. While enacting what can be described as identity's performativity, Maryama's strategies confirm the entanglement of performance and knowledge. She is another manifestation of the incongruity of the essentialism/postmodern division regarding notions of identity. Using her wit, she frequently masquerades as the Other by appropriating the knowledge about her Arab community to gnaw at the new repressive political and cultural reality. In one of these instances, Maryama comes across an Arab boy in the city's market chanting the Islamic feastday prayers, banned among other manifestations of Arab culture. By impersonating the identity and language of an anti-Muslim Christian mother, Maryama manages to save the boy from the persecution of the Castilian law: "She ran toward the boy and slapped him across his face ... grabbed him ... and started to scream at him in Spanish, 'Didn't I warn you about playing with the Arab children? Now here you are learning sinful things from them!'" (145). She even carries her act further by asking the Castilian passersby for advice on how to protect children from the "evil" Arab people and their children (145).

Maryama's ability to mimic the Spanish discourse about the outlawed Arab and Muslim culture is reminiscent of Luce Irigaray's concept of mimesis. According to Irigaray, mimesis enables a woman to "resubmit herself ... to ideas, in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible', by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible" (317). By referring to the practices of Islam as sinful and her own people as evil, Maryama reiterates and makes more visible the anti-Muslim logic and law, but only in order to undermine and suspend it momentarily.

Similar to Saleema's community-sustaining knowledge, Maryama's acts not only save the lives of her community members but create new relationships, which reinforce a sense of unity and identity in an otherwise endangered community. This is an inevitable outcome of the favors she does to total strangers, who feeling indebted to "her for helping them or their children out of a difficulty" (Ashour 144). Such a "situation would sprout an acquaintance and a visit that always blossomed into affection" (144). Additionally, Maryama's performative acts of the Other's identity have even a more subversive impact on people's psychological wellbeing, as these acts tap onto the power of laughter, humor and storytelling:

Her natural intelligence always came to her rescue with good, quick thinking that transforms the bitterness the weak feel when subjugated by the powerful into uproarious laughter... Why not, since every story about her filled them with joy and entertainment that filled the drudgery of their lives with humor and laughter. (142)

Although different in many ways, both Saleema's and Maryama's roles confirm the embeddedness of agency in constant cognitive engagement with experience, be this engagement based on inborn intelligence, learned knowledge or both. The novel thus

blurs the difference between the essentialist and constructed elements of identity as long as both guarantee mobility and multiple significations rather than fixity, especially in times of crisis. Therefore, the two women's identity trajectories are similar. Just like Saleema's knowledge and education lead to her frequent identity transformations, Maryama's intelligence renders her identity versatile and unpredictable. "Maryama" the narrator points out, "was famous throughout the neighborhood for her amazing surprises" (142). Maryama gives expression to what Julia Kristeva describes as "the need to steer between stable identities/positions, which become forms of religion on the one hand, and the complete dissolution of identities on the other" (Oliver 8). This strategic identity mobility proved feasible and instrumental for the Muslims' survival in al-Andalus for a long time, especially after the country shrank to the city-kingdom of Granada. In this later episode of the Arab rule in Spain, Granada itself epitomized this unyielding synthetic spirit as its Muslim kings adopted different strategies and positions toward their Christian neighbors, which enabled them to remain the sole Muslim presence in the Iberian Peninsula for over two and a half centuries. Mahmoud Makki notes that when what was left in Muslim hands was no more than a tenth of the former area, its rulers were able remarkably to survive in the midst of Christian sovereigns for over two and a half decades, "thanks to the efforts of a leader who, with his descendants, reorganized it, saved it from their powerful neighbors and skillfully preserved it over the following periods" (77). Makki elaborates that at the heart of this skill is the leaders' conduct, which was a "mixture of force and diplomatic action, which permitted them to a delicate balance with the surrounding powers" (78).

Very often Maryama's frequent reinterpretation of their historical crisis proves indispensable for Saleema's social role and identity. It is Maryama who saves Saleema's books from confiscation. When Saleema fails to come up with a plan to rescue the banned Arabic books, Maryama spends the night and day thinking until she comes up with one and carries it out with precision. Moreover, when Saleema is taken away by the Office of Inquisitions for no apparent reason, it is Maryama, who finds out what the accusations directed at Saleema are, using her skills of good scheming, masquerade and storytelling. On the other hand, Hasan and Saad's position, Saleema's brother and husband, is not different from the attitude of the now old woman, Saleema's mother, who only, "clapped her hands in frustration and repeated over and over again, 'There's nothing we can do!'" and "walked around with her head held low" (210). Hasan and Saad, the novel makes it clear, "felt the same thing, not in words, but through that hopeless look in their eyes" (210).

The only exception to this helplessness is Maryama, who is the only one who "racked her brain to think of a strategy, some way out" (210). Again, Maryama succeeds in undermining the system by temporarily adopting a different identity, allowing her to find out what is happening with her sister-in-law. She "poked and prodded and made inquiries until she stumbled upon a Castilian woman whose husband worked as a secretary at the office of Inquisition" (210). By fabricating a story about Saleema's mistreatment of her, Maryama manages to win the Castilian woman's sympathy and convince her of inquiring about Saleema's whereabouts so Maryama can have her moment of revenge: "If only I knew exactly what she did so that I could tell my husband and he'll know the truth about his sister. And then he'll realize that in all my quarrels

with her I was the victim and she was the troublemaker” (211). Obviously, like Saleema’s, Maryama’s response to history is anything but passive acceptance, as she constantly uses her strategies to circumvent its impact on her family and community. For example, by telling stories, she also manages to distract Saleema’s daughter from asking for her imprisoned mother: “Whenever Aysha asked for her mother, Umm Hasan burst into tears. Maryama, on the other hand, thought up ways to keep the little girl occupied. She would tell her a story or invent a new game” (209).

Similar to Saleema, too, in dealing with crisis, Maryama draws on the various elements of her identity: her religious, sexual, and gender identities. When Hasan ponders banishing his brother-in-law, Saad, lest the latter collaboration with the resistance jeopardizes the family’s safety, it is Maryama who dissuades him from carrying on with his intention by means of her Muslim identity and knowledge:

Maryama gave him a long, hard stare without saying a word. She stood up and calmly went off and brought back a Quran. She set it in front of him and placed her right hand on top of it. ‘Listen to me well and watch, Hasan. This is the book of God, and I swear upon it. I swear to Almighty God that if you bring up this subject with Saad, either openly or by dropping hints, I will leave this house before him and I promise I will never set foot in it again as long as I live. (209)

Despite his earnest intentions, Hasan subsequently heeds Maryama’s request. Maryama also uses her sexuality for the same purpose of warding off the disintegration of the family. On top of threatening Hasan with leaving the house, she withdraws from her bedroom and spends the night in her mother-in-law’s instead (209). Both Saleema and Maryama are reminiscent of the Andalusian women’s power and independence, which, according to María Perry, got only more fortified following the Spanish conquest and the Inquisition laws, as the Muslim women became the primary preservers of their

communities' cultural and religious identities (10). Their independence is evident in the fact that many of them maintained their Islam even after their husbands' conversions (Fuente 174).

Agency and the formation of new models of community are not the women characters' achievement alone. Like Maryama and Saleema, Abu Jaafar's protégé, Naeem participates in forming new relationships, both before and after the fall of Granada, by drawing on various resources rather than on one fixed theoretical or practical position. Among these resources are what seems to be an innate romanticism and sociability, which along with other elements, are responsible for his ability to forge multiple social relationships across generational, religious, and racial boundaries. Therefore, Naeem perpetually seeks human connection, whether in the form of love or friendships. Additionally, once Saad becomes his new co-worker, he seeks to befriend him despite the latter's detachment. In his first meeting with Saad, Naeem attempts to engage his new reticent co-worker in conversation by asking him all the questions of which he could think. When mere sociability fails, he draws on his repertoire of memories, which can be thought of as a form of knowledge. Hence, he does not hesitate to divulge to Saad his most personal memories and insecurities along with life story. Like Maryama, he uses storytelling to secure existing relationships and establish new ones: "When Naeem realized he was getting nowhere with Saad, he began to talk about himself" (13).

In his story, experience appears again as being knowledge mediated. Naeem's experience of being deprived of a real family as a child translates into a strong appreciation of human relations. This appreciation defines his identity and other

experiences later in life. Undeniably, Naeem's social reality as an orphaned child occasions many of his life experiences. For example, it occasions his becoming Abu Jaafar's protégé and dependent, after the old woman who raised him dies. "The only person he remembers," he tells Saad, "is the old woman who raised him, and when she died he had nothing but the streets, that is, until he met Abu Jaafar" (13). However, it is the knowledge he acquires from this social reality that defines his identity and shapes his other experiences. So strong is Naeem's regard for human relationships that their discontinuity represents his worst fear, which he reveals to Saad in one of their first conversations: "You know, Saad, I'm not afraid of roaming the streets, at night, nor of stray dogs, nor of the head of the city police... What I do fear, though, is Abu Jaafar falling ill or something bad happening to him" (13-4). Additionally, Naeem's appreciation of relationships informs his encounter with Saad, dictating his use of various tools to win the latter's friendship. Therefore, not only does he tell Saad his life story, but also uses rhetorical devices, such as humor, to achieve the same purpose:

Abu Jaafar took me off the streets and brought me into his home. He asked his wife Umm Jaafar to bathe me. As soon as she poured the hot water over my head, I screamed at the top of my lungs.... The more I raised my voice, the more she scrubbed my body harder and harder, until I thought I was going to die right in front of her! She spent the whole day washing me. (14)

It is this relationship-centered identity that leads to a lifelong friendship and a genuine companionship between Naeem and Saad that when the latter loses his job, Naeem gives up his own for him. The only time when Naeem acts against this egalitarian nature, compromising his close relationship with others, is when his bond with Saad is jeopardized. Not being aware of the real reasons behind Saad's sudden departure, Naeem

experiences an emotional crisis that leaves him indignant for a while. Having just found out about Saad's departure, Naeem "left the house with his thoughts and emotions in turmoil. He was livid and frightened, and he didn't understand a thing. Had [Saad] taken his advice and left Saleema to punish her? ... But why punish him? What did he have to do with it?" (130). Not too long after this, he returns to Abu Jaafar's house, storming into Saleema's room.

Naeem's sociability and stories prove even more advantageous as they provide the knowledge others need to reinterpret and thrive in the new historical reality. His work for a Castilian priest after the fall of Granada gives him access to different forms of knowledge that informs other people's experiences. In his new job, Naeem turns the priest's conversations with his friends on the political situation into stories that turn out indispensable for his late boss's widow, Umm Jaafar, in various ways. They first enable her to alleviate her loneliness and make the best of her old age: "were it not for his wonderful anecdotes, she would find herself passing her days and nights alone, talking to no one and no one talking to her" (122). Additionally, these stories provide some sort of rational that helps Umm Jaafar to restore her faith, something Abu Jaafar fails to do before his death. More specifically, they enable Umm Jaafar to find the "divine justice that had eluded her and filled her with a doubt that at times appeared to her in the voice of Abu Jaafar after the burning of the books" (120). In one of these reassuring stories, Um Jaafar finds out from Naeem about the deaths of the Castilian kings' children, so she surmises: "A defeat in war was not harsher than the loss of a child. Truth had shown its face, and in that she found some inner tranquility. And so whenever Naeem came to visit her, she wanted to hear more about his stories" (120). Using the information in Naeem's

stories, Umm Jaafar manages to interpret and understand the history she is living in her own way. This is especially the case after Naeem recounts to her the stories of the madness of the new queen: “When Naeem departed and after much thought, Umm Jaafar found an explanation to all these unjust laws in that whoever enacted them was a madman... Were it not for Naeem, God bless him! She wouldn’t have understood a thing” (122). Similar to Maryama’s, Naeem’s stories provide the necessary knowledge that helps others verify their identities and produce knowledge about their experiences, and ultimately buttress their endangered social fabric:

She only had to take a quick glance at Naeem before Umm Jaafar knew he was bringing her a juicy bit of news. He would approach her, flashing broad smile that he adjusted with pinpoint accuracy and control. But then he would lose control and the smile led to a shimmer in his eyes and the divulgence of his secrets. (123)

### **The Pitfalls of Fixity**

In contrast with this cognitive resourcefulness, manifest in the various scientific and narrative forms of knowledge produced by the characters, are the fixed standpoints of Maryama’s and Saleema’s husbands, Hasan and Saad. In light of Ashour’s presentist concerns, Hasan and Saad’s positions render them as mere mouthpieces for limited ideological positions similar to those that characterized the modern Arab nationalist thought following the third defeat of the Arabs in wars with Israel in 1967. In the aftermath of this defeat, Anour Abdel-Malek rightly notes that two realities emerged: despair and “an armoury of criticism” as well as armed struggle respectively: “Everything indicated despair. And then, from the heart of the night, there came a gleam of hope ... resistance organizations charged with the co-ordination, definition and pursuit of a campaign of armed national liberation” (19).

Rather than subjecting their experiences to constant interpretation, Saad and Hasan uphold single theoretical positions throughout the novel, causing the family several losses and setbacks. Whereas Hasan's unfaltering abiding by the imposed Christian laws safeguards his family physically, it adds to their distress psychologically and emotionally, which is what Saleema's and Maryama's strategies, by contrast, undermine. As Hasan insists on strictly abiding by the anti-Muslim laws in order to protect the family, he ends up driving his brother-in-law, Saad, away from home for the latter's involvement in the political resistance. Moreover, he himself suffers psychologically the impact of his unwavering position, both before and after Saad leaves. He confesses to his brother-in-law that his own position has long lost him his peace of mind and with it the ability to sleep. "Do you think I don't care?" he admits to Saad, "Do you think all this doesn't weigh heavily on me and tear me inside out? I can't sleep at night" (133). After Saad leaves, Hasan becomes more depressed, which impacts the whole family, including the children. Those "were unaware of what was going on even though they bore the brunt of their father's quick temper, his scolding and spanking that was not his usual way" (131).

Ashour critiques her characters' singular positions by stressing their incoherence. Like his father, Abu Jaafar, Hasan's disposition vacillates between a flawed rationalism and faith. This is especially characteristic of his twofold notion of responsibility. To Saad's amazement, Hasan insists that the family's safety is his responsibility whereas the community's safety is God's. When Saad asks him what should become of the nation if everyone fears only for his own family, he replies, "God is our supporter" (132). Moreover, unlike the women's subjectivities and positions, which result from their

engagement with real-life situations and their respective forms of knowledge, Hasan's position of utter acquiescence to the Spanish rule is detached from reality: These "days accustomed him to latch on to a scrap of hope or a flicker of light.... He held on to it, looking forward, selling illusions to himself before selling them to his friends and family.... But what came after that was the gloom and the dark abyss of a drowning man" (183).

Lacking a real basis in knowledge, Hasan's attitude reveals nothing but an absence of subjectivity and agency. Guided by this tenuous hope, he marries his three daughters off to young men from the nobility of the faraway Valencia, where Muslims still have their religious freedom. By doing so, Hasan assumes that his daughters will be safe and free to practice their religion. Shortly after that, history proves his logic wrong, as the same laws and restrictions enforced in Granada are applied to Valencia. Again, Hasan's misreading of history adds to his family's suffering, for instead of being a cause of happiness to the family, the daughters' marriages in a faraway place turn out to be a mere pointless separation from the family. Of this end and the flawed logic behind it Maryama does not fail to remind Hasan, reprimanding him for his shortsightedness: "You sold my daughters, Hasan. You said, 'I will marry them off to faraway Valencia so that they can live secure in their religion, their land, and the vast wealth of their husbands.' But now they had no religion, no land, and no wealth" (183).

Even Hasan's attempt to amend his mistakes proves futile, leading to further disintegration. When he tries to inquire about his daughters' wellbeing in the midst of the escalating civil and factional strife by sending them letter after another, all he received back is one oral reply: "Things are not going very well, but we are all fine. You have

become a grandfather to six healthy and happy grandchildren” (184). Brief and barely informative, the letter does little to quench Maryama’s thirst for information about her daughters. Although it is only the second part of the letter that Hasan is able to relay, hiding the bad news, the message still brings about more sadness and disappointment for its lack of enough information. When Maryama and Umm Jaafar ask for details about the children’s names, sex, and for which of the daughters they are, Hasan can only say, “I don’t know” (184). As a result, Maryama spends the next few days and nights crying (184).

A realist identity theory that situates cognitively-mediated experiences at the heart of identity and subjectivity can also account for Saad’s identity and attitude after the fall of Granada. As a child, having lived the traumas of the death and enslavement of his family and of his own dispossession, Saad’s militant response to the Castilian rule of Granada bespeaks the cognitive impact of those early traumas. So strong is that impact on Saad that he turns out to be the opposite of Hasan’s submission and denunciation of all forms of resistance. Therefore, when Hasan expresses his dissatisfaction with Saad’s political resistance while living in the family house and endangering the safety of its household, Hasan refuses to compromise his political stance, preferring to leave the house and the family instead. The conversation between the two reveals their unfaltering positions, which turn out to be consequential to both of them:

“What do you want, Hasan?”

“I want you to refrain from dealing with the freedom fighters.”

“And if I don’t agree?”

“You must agree because you’re not living by yourself.”

“Then I’ll go away and live alone. Will that give you any peace of mind, Hasan?” (133)

Unaware of its theoretical basis, everyone is astonished and troubled by Saad's decision to leave the family. Therefore, when Saad tells Umm Jaafar that he is going away, she expresses her shock and incomprehension: "Going away? Where and why?" as the "thought never occurred to" her (128). Saad's identity remains unintelligible even to his lifetime friend Naeem, who, as a result of Saad's departure, goes through a phase of shock, sadness, and anger. His language in response to the news is the best manifestation of this state: He went away? What do you mean, he went away? Why? How could he leave and not say anything to me, without taking me with him? What am I supposed to do now?... You must be lying to me. What happened to my friend? Did he die?" (130). Even when the reason behind Saad's departure is explained to Naeem, little does this explanation do to dispel his comprehension. When Hasan tells Naeem about Saad's political resistance, Naeem "listened without interrupting, except for one time, 'Saad never said any such thing to me,'" (131). Still in shock he attempts to double-check the factuality of what he just heard, asking Hasan, "Did he really say all that?" (131). Obviously, in contrast with Naeem's and the women's identities, which sustain human relationships, Saad's disrupts his friendship with Naeem, making him feel betrayed by his friend's departure and secrecy: Naeem "went back taking quick steps thinking all along how and why Saad kept all of this a secret from him, and why he went away without coming to say good-bye... He went over to the side of the road, sat down on the ground, and burst into tears" (131).

Like Hasan's position, Saad's proves more consequential to his own life, as his failure to balance the demands of nation and family ends up costing him the latter. By joining the Muslim resistance for years in their mountainous hideout, Saad misses crucial

moments in his family history. Not only is he not there when Saleema is taken away by the Inquisition Office, but he also misses his daughter's first years, a fact that torments him when he finally returns home: "He thought about how he now had a daughter, not a seed that grows in her mother's stomach day after day, not an infant you watch nursing and crying, smiling and taking those first word or sentence, but a complete human being who knows her name and how to say 'yes' and 'no'" (207). Only after Saad starts to suffer the repercussions of his single-mindedness, which also ends him in jail for his resistance-related activities, does he accept a notion of identity as a constant regeneration and reiteration of its theoretical bases, rather than as a fixed position. In jail, Saad can finally see Saleema as both a signifier and signified, meaning and body. He can even envision her signifying without the mediation of her body and voice. Her identity finally manifests to him as being shaped by meaning, intellect, and ideas, which guarantee her being a subject-in-process:

In prison Saad saw Saleema more clearly than he ever saw her before. He envisioned her face and her figure, and a slight bend in her torso when she walked as though she wanted to race her own steps by any means. In prison he heard her voice as she talked, as she laughed, as she yelled in anger, and even as she didn't utter a word.... And he saw her as a woman who would approach and give but then turn away for no reason. (182)

Having gone through various life experiences mediated by different types of knowledge, the characters respond to their shared history differently. Moreover, based on the nature and quality of their knowledge, they either fail or succeed in confronting their common plight. We are reminded, here, of the validity of Satya Mohanty's assertion that

experiences are crucial indices of our relationships with our world (which includes our relationships with ourselves), and to stress their cognitive nature is to argue that they can be susceptible to *varying degrees* of

socially constructed truth or error, and can serve as sources of objective knowledge or socially produced mystification. (50-51).

### **Necessary Masquerade:**

Ironically, the unfixity of identity resulting from its mediation by thought and knowledge takes a literal form in post-conquest Granada. As Arab and Muslim culture and lifestyles become unlawful under the Castilian rule, the adoption of a provisional identity (a Christian one) becomes a matter of survival for Granada's remaining Muslims. As a result, the novel's characters end up leading a double-life, in which they secretly practice their culture in the private sphere while in public "they conducted themselves in the manner prescribed by the authorities and the Office of Inquisition" (Ashour 145). The various names the characters acquire reiterate their multiple identities. As L.P. Harvey notes, from 1525 or 1526 on nobody could openly live as a Muslim in any part of the Iberian Peninsula, as Islam became a clandestine religion and the Muslims were forcibly converted to Christianity to be referred to in later history as Moriscos and no longer as Muslims (222). More importantly, the 1567 edicts, through which Ashour's characters live, "concerned themselves not only with religious observance but also with the Moriscos' distinctive cultural characteristics. They were obliged to abandon their Arabic language, their distinctive dress, their marriage customs, their hygienic practices (baths), etc., etc." (Harvey 224). However, as history confirms, this identity multiplicity was soon to be considered as threatening to the rising Spanish nation-state as its Muslim predecessor, and therefore was eliminated through the expulsion of Spain's Muslims in 1609 (Harvey 201). For about four decades, before the expulsions, the compliance with the 1567 edicts had been very closely enforced. More than ever, the new regulations and

restrictions depicted in the novel stand in a sharp contrast to the identity fluidity epitomized in Saleema and Maryama. This contrast is highlighted in a particular scene where the ban on the Moriscos' multiple identities verges on the point of absurdity and incomprehension: "the town criers made the rounds announcing more restrictions added to the already existing ones.... All families must leave their door open on Fridays, Sundays, holy days, and feast days, to make sure that only the sanctioned practices are followed" (184-5).

These laws' emphasis on observing the Moriscos' daily practices, as a way of ensuring their true conversion, implies a notion of identity as synonymous with its physical elements (signifiers), to the exclusion of meaning and thought. Indeed, it is the ideas, thoughts, and ideologies making up identity that elude the legal system of the novel's Christian rulers. This is especially the case whenever women are concerned, as their bodies are understood as the only signifying site whereas their ideas and intellect are rendered irrelevant to their identities. What this results in is a reductionism of the sign, similar to what Kristeva calls an "obliteration of the density that constitutes [the] sign ... and consequently the speaking subject" (*Desire* 126-7).

As human signs, both Saleema and the native women of the Americas are reduced to mere signifiers (bodies) with no signifieds (meaning). Saleema's trial underlines her persecutors' preoccupation with the physical elements of her identity, such as her look and voice. The possibility of her identity and subjectivity being located in her intellect is beyond their comprehension. Although scientific books are found in her possession, they are dismissed as evidence of her intellectualism and training in medicine. Instead, her medical practice, behavior, and personality, all delineated through her *body language*, are

attributed to an external power (the devil), rather than to her intellectualism. Therefore, more incriminating than any other “evidence” is Saleema’s unfeminine behavior, which, considered subversive by the court, is used to incriminate her with witchcraft and heresy and ultimately to sentence her to death. “The accused did not cry,” declares one of the persecutors, “she did not plead for mercy, nor did she lose her composure. This can only confirm that she is a consort of the devil” (222). For the Castilian court, only witchcraft can give women Saleema’s strength and power of will. Earlier, the inquisitors remind Saleema, by way of an incriminating evidence, of her unjustifiable strong personality in dealing with people: “You once told somebody, ‘Do not speak to me in that manner,’ and you gave him a look that made him writhe in pain all night long” (216). Saleema’s untraditional female identity is doubly incriminating, for it proves her defiance, as both a Muslim and a woman, to an all male and anti-Muslim court.

A similar reductionism of identity characterizes the Europeans’ outlook towards the native women of the Americas, who are allowed signification through their bodies only. The body as a sole signifier takes a literal form as the Europeans respond to its physicality only, which is made up of ‘flesh’ that is devoured literally and sexually. During their first days in the newly discovered world, Naeem and Father Miguel, the priest Naeem works for, witness the bodies of the native American women and children being hunted down, raped and consumed. A particular scene in the novel confirms that, for the Castilian soldiers, the native people are no more than mere flesh that is devoured literally. On one of his first days in the new continent, Naeem witnesses the execution of a native woman after the soldiers snatch her baby away from her and throw it to a hungry

dog that instantly devours it. On other occasions, the Castilian men would hunt “their prey until they prevailed, clawing at their flesh and raping them” (163).

On the other hand, Naeem’s experience with the native women is totally different, as it is informed by the thought system associated with women in his Arab and Muslim culture. Therefore, for him, the nakedness of the aboriginal women does not propel a carnal act but rather triggers similar images of women in the Muslim imaginary: “he was more taken by the women than the lush greenness of the trees and the austere darkness of their imposing trunks. Naked women like the virgins of Paradise!” (163). Rather than seeing their bodies as mere flesh without a concomitant meaning system, Naeem applies to the women the Muslim concept of honor associated with the female body. Therefore, he “would pass by the bare breasts, the slender bodies, and those ravishing eyes without staring. He averted his eyes as though these women were members of his own family whose honor he could not violate” (164). It is identity’s ability to signify apart from its physical signifiers— including the sounds of the linguistic sign and the body of the human sign— that allows Naeem to communicate with the native woman, Maya, without resorting to language. Despite her different language and body, Maya still communicates her identity to Naeem. “She looks strange and her language is strange” Naeem imagines Umm Jaafar saying upon seeing Maya. “But,” he contemplates, “... she’s a good woman, kind-hearted and beautiful” (195).

Historical writings by the first Arab travelers to the Americas, however, reveal a more nuanced representation of the American Indians. For example, Nabil Matar maintains that the journal of the Arab Catholic priest, Hanna al-Mawsuli, which constituted the first account of Spanish America to be written in Arabic, reveals not only

his familiarity with Christian European writings about America, but his adoption of the European discourse on those writings (185). Al-Mawsuli, notes Matar, “used The European discourse as the lens through which to view the New World” (186). Although, like Naeem, al-Mawsuli frequently compared and contrasted what he saw among the Indians with his native society and land, and although he described Spanish violence against the Indians, “he did not commiserate with them, but seemed to position himself firmly on the Spanish side” (188-9).

### **Conclusion**

By comparing the human being to the linguistic sign, which has physical signifiers and signified meaning, Ashour prepares her readers for Saleema’s end. The parallel materializes to Saleema herself on her way to be burned at the stake, as she wonders, “Weren’t human beings inscribed sheets, strings of words having meaning that, when put together, connote the whole that a person signifies?” Saleema’s question brings the novel full circle with its first scene, when Abu Jaafar interprets the sight of the naked woman as a sign that carries meaning beyond its physical appearance. The answer to Saleema’s question is Ashour’s depiction of characters whose identities are shaped by various meanings and cognitive abilities, be they inborn or acquired. Identity’s constituency is what reverberates in Saleema’s mind in the last moments of her life, as she conjures the image of her grandfather, “who inscribed the first words in her book ... who announced that he would provide her with an education just as he would for Hasan, and who whispered to his wife that Saleema would be like the educated women of Cordova .... And so it was inscribed” (224). At the same time, Saleema contemplates the inborn elements of human identity—especially intelligence— that when combined with

an array of meanings and ideas produce people like Saleema and a legacy like that of Al-Andalus:

They were going to sentence her to death, so why didn't her insides roil with dreaded fear, or why didn't she cry out in anger and fury? ... Perhaps it was something altogether different, that she decided without any forethought not to humiliate herself by screaming or begging, or even crying out in fright like mice in their trap. She would not add insult to injury onto herself. Intelligence in human beings is a noble quality. Pride in themselves is sublime. (226)

The identities of Maryama, Saleema, and Naeem, are constantly constituted, verified and reinscribed— to use Saleema's word— through the multiple ideas and ideologies that mediate their experiences of loss, death, and cultural, religious, and physical displacement. It is this constant reinscription that underlies these characters' agency vis-à-vis the turbulent times they go through. It is also what promises agency for their offspring. As Saleema's sentence is being read to her in front of the throngs of people who gathered to witness the execution, Maryama tells Saleema's daughter a story. Despite her preoccupation with Saleema's fate, Maryama cannot refuse the little girl's request for a story, which implies a sense of hope and life despite the atmosphere of catastrophe and loss with which the novel ends. Despite the annihilation of both the human and linguistic signs in the novel, agency and subjectivity are located in the human intellect and its unstoppable ability to signify. Therefore, the novel ends with Maryama's story: "Maryama looked into the face of the little girl and she took a long breath. She let it out and continued her story" (229).

Unlike Granara's contention that the characters depicted "do not fit neatly into the conventional molds of archetype and traditional values, but are in fact constructed in accordance with the prevalent now/future tense of the novel's direction" (69), this chapter

has demonstrated that while this might be applicable to some of the characters, it is not true about all of them. Saleema, for example, is a living echo of the high intellectualism of al-Andalus, which shaped and informed the identities of many Andalusians, men and women. Elements of the Andalusian resilience and ability to transform loss also permeate the novel, shaping the trajectories of its characters' identities and subjectivities.

In *Granada*, thus, Ashour manifests a vehement understanding of the value of, to use Patricia Waugh's words, "construing human identity in terms of relationship and dispersal, rather than as a unitary, self-directing, isolated ego" (12-3). The Andalusian identity, as depicted in the novel, is anything but fixed and unified. It is rather a continuous process of regeneration in the face of drastic historical changes, whose depiction in the novel resonates with a similar modern Arab history of loss, displacement, and exile. The novel's depiction of identity makes it all the more relevant for present-day Arabs' search for identity in the face of these challenges. What Ashour achieves here, beyond what other re-inventions of the Andalusian imaginary have done, is a complex concept of identity that is necessary for the conceptualization of the modern Arab identity and visions of agency.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ***Uninventing The Nation, Returning The Repressed:***

#### **Hoda Barakat's Reconstruction of Lebanon in *The Tiller of Waters***

“To write the story of the nation demands that we articulate that archaic ambivalence that informs modernity.”

— Homi Bhabha (177)

“God has blessed us with shortsightedness. And sometimes with opaque darkness.”

—Hoda Barakat (66)

In *Constructing Lebanon*, Elise Salem argues that “Lebanon’s very emergence as a modern nation-state, contingent upon the vicissitudes of European politics during two world wars, was reflected in local narratives of identity and belonging, fictions derived from realities and myths that sought to link the territory with a people” (1). Huda Barakat’s *The Tiller of Waters* complicates this project of linking the territory with a people by revealing that notions of the national subject and history, on which this project is based, are arbitrary and artificial constructs. More importantly, Barakat situates these constructs within the formations and illusions of modernity and its universalist thought systems. Miriam Cooke refers to the illusory aspect of the Lebanese state as recognized by Lebanese women writers: “It was up to the women to take matters into their own hands. They were beginning to come out against the system, undermining it and showing it to be built on sand” (*War’s Other Voices* 170). Although Cooke does not name modernity as the reason behind these shaky foundations, she talks about what can be described as a universal modern condition concentrated in Lebanon that many believe to have led to the war. “Indeed,” she writes, “many thought that Lebanon was a harbinger of

things to come. In a world grown violent, some viewed Lebanon as this century's natural tendency pushed to its extreme. It was a foretaste of the holocaust to come" (*War's Other Voices* 164).

The shared problematic between nationalism and modernity that allows Barakat to situate her critique of the first within the second is a process of Othering through which both modernity and nationalism try to assert themselves. As Partha Chatterjee maintains nationalism "seeks to represent itself in the image of the Enlightenment and fails to do so. For Enlightenment itself, to assert its sovereignty as the universal ideal, needs its Other; if it could ever actualize itself in the real world as the truly universal, it would in fact destroy itself" (qtd. in Bhabha 293). Unfortunately, the relationship between nationalism and modernity on the one hand and each one's 'other' is not peaceful but one based on repression and violence. Cooke rightly notes, "For its maintenance, nationalism needs enemies within as well as without who must be excluded or whose difference must be neutralized. Nationalism, therefore, is a kind of imperialist ideology that imposes uniformity on geographic areas which may be infinitely extended" (*War's Other Voices* 165). In similar terms, Barakat presents modernity and its contemporary political and economic configurations as contested and ambivalent phenomena, grounded in repression and violence. Dipesh Chakrabarty figuratively describes the relationship between all three: violence, modernity and nationalism as he says, "The door by which one enters citizenship or a nationality always has a *durwan* (gatekeeper)—himself usually only partially admitted to the rites of equality—posted outside. His job is to be mean, to abuse, bully, insult, and exclude, or to humiliate—even when he lets you in" (*Habitations* 31).

The novel implies that the Lebanese Civil War, the time in which Barakat's novel take place, is the ultimate physical embodiment of the violence and repression and Othering of the nationalization and modernization projects in Lebanon, since there "is no act of human cruelty that is not accompanied by a certain lack of identification<sup>1</sup> (Chakrabarty, *Habitations* 140). Similarly, Saree Makdisi foregrounds the cultural and political crises of the Arab world (at the top of which are its wars, including the Lebanese Civil War) within the context of modernity, considering the latter as a cause and a symptom of the current status: "If one can speak of an Arab modernist tendency at all, one can do so only, I think, in the context of some of the recent cultural and political transformation and fragmentation, a context of cultural crisis that this tendency helped not only identify but *produce* (273).

Barakat exposes the existing Lebanese state as a poor invention, and therefore she proceeds towards *un-inventing* it, allowing in the process for the return of marginalized discourses, subjects and peoples repressed by both modernity and nationalism. More specifically, the novel shows that national history and identity, similar to personal history, are in fact multiple and opaque, which makes them at odds with modern thought patterns that try to homogenize and refashion them in the form of a unified nationalist subject and history. Barakat interrogates these and other modern constructs (such as freedom, capitalist economics, scientific knowledge) and exposes them as illusions that are prone to dissipation. The novel reclaims, instead, an ethical world based on modesty and balance that can be at the heart of the formation of the subject and the country, for these traits beg a political life that equally includes everyone. For all these reasons, the novel is an example of postcolonial writing that, as Chakrabarty argues, depicts

the modern as inevitably contested, [by] writ[ing] over the given and privileged narratives of citizenship other narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamed-up pasts and futures where collectivities are defined neither by the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of 'tradition.... Yet they [these dreams] will recur so long as the themes of citizenship and the nation state dominate our narratives of historical transition, for these dreams are what the modern represses in order to be. ("Postcoloniality" 388)

Indeed, the novel enacts the return of that which is repressed by modernity's and nationalism's discourses by gnawing at these discourses' privileged and given status, ultimately erasing one world and writing back other repressed histories of peoples and individuals who live through rather than repress, or fanatically idolize, difference. The novel's stories represent the resistance of different voices to the erasure and repression enacted by nationalism and modernity. Cooke refers to a similar repression that makes a coming back in the disguise of the Civil War: "Beirut opened herself up to the evil in the world and did not stop until she was sickened by it and became a victim. But because she is a woman, and her victimization, her rape, brought shame on the family, she was not healed but hidden. Her hurt was repressed. It was bound to return" (*War's Other Voices* 17).

### **This History That Is Not One and the Principle of Proximity**

Drawing on both the country's history and the history of one Christian family living in Beirut before and during the civil war, Barakat implies that the Lebanese national history and identity are imaginary and opaque constructs, not unlike the family history the novel's protagonist, Niqula, attempts to assemble. More specifically, the Niqula's attempt to comprehend his family's history and *homogenize* his knowledge of is similar to the construction of national and cultural identity, as both are based on erasing

and silencing certain stories, histories and identities. Finding himself trapped in the civil war-torn center of Beirut, Niquila takes his father's fabric shop for a home, wherein he reminisces on his family's history, his previous attempts to construct this history out of his mother's inconsistent and multiple stories, the various fabric anecdotes he inherited from his father, his love for their Kurdish maid, Shamsa, as well as the latter's versatile narratives about the Kurds' national history. Parallel to Niquila's memory journeys are his trips into Beirut's underground, where he sees a physical manifestation and evidence of the city's multiple histories, preserved as different layers and levels of the ground. Unlike nationalism's fixed narratives, both Niquila's actual trips and the women's stories he recalls testify to the notions of multiplicity and unfixity at the heart of identities and histories, both individual and national. It becomes clear from this investigation of various histories that nationalism, to use Ernest Gellner's words, "is not what it seems, and above all not what it seems to itself ... The cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical inventions. Any old shreds would have served as well. But in no way does it follow that the principle of nationalism ... is itself in the least contingent and accidental" (56).

The novel starts out by foregrounding the similarity between Beirut, particularly modern Beirut, as the land of dreams, and the unreal or illusory. "It's an illusion. It is only an illusion that you see," Niquila's father, Jirjis Mitri, says to his wife, Athena (1). Jirjis's statement dismisses Athena's claim that she could see the shore of Beirut from the family's location in the middle of the sea, as they head towards Greece from Alexandria in search for a new home for themselves and their cloth trade. Although Jirjis says these words in reference to that occasion, to mean literally that they are too far from the shore

to see Beirut, the words could be understood to be descriptive of Beirut itself being an illusion. “From a distance,” Athena says to her son, Niqula, decades after they settled in Beirut, “it looked so lovely. It looked like a landscape of dreams” (1). Beirut, the reader comes to realize through Niqula’s stories, is “lovely,” but only from a distance. Up close, however, as Niqula moves into the city’s center, both above and underground, the modern Lebanese nation-state turns out to be, not unlike other modern configurations, nothing but an illusion and an arbitrary construct. Additionally, national history, culture, and identity, the building blocks of nationalism, are not very different from our constructions of personal histories, which are replete with processes of appropriation, reconstitution and forgetfulness.

After hearing his mother’s story, Niqula embarks on a process of testing its validity. His attempt to understand and construct his family’s history through the mother’s variable stories reveals the complexity and multiplicity of history and the arbitrariness of the human reconstruction of it, facts that turn out to be true about national history as well. As Athena tells the arrival story in different versions, Niqula grapples with these versions of his family’s past, and later with his country’s. Going over his mother’s version of her arrival to Beirut, Niqula expresses his confusion over her different versions of how the family ended up in Beirut when they are headed to Greece. The family’s history is revealed to Niqula in a way that can be best described in Chakrabarty’s words to account for his attitude, as a modern subject, towards his own past as well as his country’s, underscoring thus the parallel between the past:

But the past also comes to me in ways that I cannot see or figure out—or can see and figure out only retrospectively. It comes to me as taste, as embodied memories, as cultural training of the senses, as reflexes, often as things that I do not even know that I carry. It has the capacity, in other

words, to take me by surprise and to overwhelm and shock me.  
("Postcoloniality" 46)

It is not without some "stretch of logic" that he manages to make some sense of his mother's story. By doing that Niqula ends up negotiating his modern reasoning and his mother's romantic rendition of their arrival to the city of her dreams, finding a middle ground between them. For example, Athena tells her son that as the ship carried them to Greece on a stormy day, she was able to convince his father of heading to Beirut instead of Greece, after she saw the shore of Beirut. She remembers that as she said that "her hand [was] raised to shade her eyes from the sun" (1). In response to this story, Niqula imagines another version that reconciles his mother's story and what he believes really happened: "I never asked her how it was ... that the sunshine could have been so brilliant if stormy waves were forcing the ship close to shore. Perhaps, I told myself, the storm had struck out at sea but the sun persisted in shining on its verges" (2).

Similarly enigmatic is the country's past, which, too, cannot be fully comprehended without the use of non-traditional knowledge. To account for Beirut's turbulent past, the Mitris have to utilize, in addition to logical reasoning, different knowledge systems, including some rendered obsolete by the scientific discourse of modernity. Trying to decipher Beirut's frequent destructions, and by implication its latest civil war, Niqula can only recall his grandfather's explanation, which combines myth and superstition. "My grandfather used to say that a city built by Saturn—as the ancients told it—will not flourish long ... this is the life that a city can expect when it is created under the influence of Zuhā— Saturn, the forbidden star" (27-9). Even more incomprehensible is modern history, which, paradoxically, can sometimes be explained by non-modern means, such as superstition. For Niqula's father, such events as the atomic explosion, the

explosions of Israeli bombs over Beirut, the sinking of the Titanic happened “only because the weather was gorgeous, a night shimmering with stars, an ocean quietly submissive to the vast ship’s oil, the air still in its black lull ... That is when the Lord launches His fatal blow” (94). By making the grandfather, one with the modern scientific outlook as will be discussed later, the one to convey this nonmodern viewpoint, the novel here does not undermine reason as much as challenge what Chakrabarty calls “the propaganda of Reason,” which equates modernity with the possession of the scientific outlook and ignorance with superstition” (*Habitations* 25).

Whereas official history is based on repression, the history Niquila manages to envision of his family is not. The discrepancy among the stories that makes Niquila incapable of accounting for them by means of reason alone does not render them invalid though. Instead, negotiation and amiability are the protagonist’s and his father’s moral code, with which they cope with Athena’s difference. “But her many narratives,” Niquila declares Niquila, “a trice different each time, left it to me to envision what scraps of truth might be behind my mother’s tales” (2). Through the example of the relationships among husband, wife, and son, Barakat suggests a kind of gender and social relations— and by implication national relations— that acknowledges and lives through difference, rather than suppresses it. *The Tiller* recognizes difference and proceeds towards accommodating to, instead of eradicating, it, by allowing its characters to negotiate their way between, to use Chakrabarty’s terms, identity and proximity, as two modes of relating to difference. Whereas identity is a way of relating in which “difference is either congealed or concealed,” which happens when it is “frozen, fixed, or it is erased by some claim of being identical or the same,” proximity means that “difference is acknowledged and

negotiated rather than erased or reified” (*Habitations* 140). “There are women of silk” the father tells his son in acknowledgment of Athena’s difference, “she is a woman of silk. When you’re older, you will understand” (3). The Mitris’ way of living with Athena’s difference is an act of proximity, which is the opposite of and remedy to the “historic deafness to the call of the other ... constitutive of ethnic distance as may be more explicit elements of violence” (Chakrabarty, *Habitations* 147). Niqula’s father, in particular, always striving to please his wife, sets the example for his son in the practice of proximity (3). His sensitive treatment of his wife comes at the expense of the traditional alignment expected in patriarchal societies with the family’s patriarch, in this case Jirjis’ own father (Niqula’s grandfather) who talks to him at length of Beirut’s lore, warning him about falling into the “trap of Beirut’s temptations, not to one day consider it his cherished destination just because it had once been the land of his ancestors” (3). Jirjis’ attitude towards his country of origin, however, is dictated by his romantic attachment to Athena. Therefore, when she “decided that they would live in Beirut he did not object, despite all he had heard from his father” (3). He also does not oppose her when she dresses their son in girls’ clothes and instructs him in operatic singing (3).

### **Destabilizing Notions of the Modern Subject**

In the process of Niqula’s attempt to understand his family’s history, the human subject, too, emerges as the very opposite of the unified gendered subject of modernity and the modern nation-state. The novel destabilizes the gender binary and traditional models of parenting as conceived by patriarchy. This critique of the patriarchal monolithic conceptions of identity entails a critique of the modern subject one of whose political forms is the nationalist. Carole Pateman argues that the very conception of the

modern individual belongs to patriarchal categories of thought (219). Hence, the story is narrated from the point of view of Niqula, whose identity dislodges gender expectations.

Additionally, the novel depicts examples of parenting that, too, do not easily meet traditional expectations of the family seen central to the construction of civil society in the nation state. Cooke rightly notes that women have always been considered “the bastion of tradition, men the adventurers into modernity” (*War’s Other Voices* 147). However, Niqula makes it clear from the beginning of the novel that it is his mother rather than his father who is disappointed by, first, his being born a boy instead of a girl, and later is disappointed with his inability to fill his father’s shoes at home and in the family’s fabric shop. Ironically, the romantic aptitude Athena presumably has acquired from her singing talent does not reach beyond the realm of singing, as her unsentimental treatment of her only son shows. She represents a non-traditional model of mothering that allows her to express her disappointment with Niqula both as a child and an adult, whereas the father is the more affectionate of the two. In a departure from the traditional portrayal of the patriarchal family, in general, and of the Arab society in particular, Athena is the source of the family’s suffering rather than its male members. Moreover, when it comes to modernity, it is Jirjis who is the more traditional of the two.

Athena is a good example of the unfixed subject with the “multiple, shifting, and often, self-contradictory identity, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds, with language” (de Lauretis 9). She does not comply with the rules of the social order that demand the use of symbolic language. Very often her language defies traditional ways of understanding and comprehension. “If you did not look at my mother directly,” Niqula tells us, “you would not hear her when she spoke. If you did hear her, you would not

understand what she was saying unless you were gazing full into her face” (6). At the same time, Athena’s language is reminiscent of women’s space which is “the space of the Other the gaps, silences, and absences of discourse and representation, to which the feminine has traditionally been relegated” (Showalter 36). Paradoxically, it is Athena’s voice— which is barely audible in conversation, so as to parody this silencing and erasure— that is central to her self-representation as an operatic singer. However, the two parts of the paradox function similarly as manifestations of women’s space. Men’s space, on the other hand, is “systematic and hierarchal, a realm in which ‘everyone takes his assigned position’” (Salvaggio 277). Athena’s voice highlights the exclusion of the subaltern from symbolic discourse and formal representation, and by using her voice as art, she attempts to signify from the margin rather than the center. Therefore, she does not mind the fact that Beirut did not have the opera house she hoped for. Her attitude bespeaks her embracing her marginal position as an artist within dominant culture. By insisting on her marginality both as a woman, through her low voice, and as an artist, Athena, like Kristeva’s dissident artist, challenges the language, laws, and conventions of linear time that have excluded women in particular and the subaltern in specific (“Women’s Time” 193).

By working from within their marginal position, Kristeva’s dissidents can give “voice to each individual form of the unconscious, to every desire and need. Call into place the identity and/or the language of the individual and the group ... Proclaim that we reveal the impossible” (“A New Type” 295). This last potential is especially relevant to the novel: by functioning from within (and only because of) their marginal positions, the characters manage to reveal what has been made impossible by modern life and its

configurations. Interestingly, Barakat speaks of silk in similar terms, as the impossible Kristeva describes. There is no knowledge,” Niqula tells the family’s maid Shamsa, “but that which stands firm on the pinnacle. There is no knowledge but that which can see the two opposite sides together... But is it not the case that to remain at the pinnacle, and to see the two sides together and simultaneously, is an exercise in impossibility?” (134). However, both silk and its human embodiment, Athena, testify to the possibility of this impossible situation: “And to stand at the pinnacle of cloth is to stand within silk. Within the eye of the needle. And so my grandfather said to my father: Do not marry that woman. And do not return to that city” (134).

The possibility of attaining the impossible from the pinnacle is also applicable to Niqula. Due to his blurred gender identity— being simultaneously masculine and feminine— histories, stories, and worlds deemed forgotten or non-existent by the discourses of modernity and nationalism are revealed. Not only does Niqula lack obvious signs of masculinity, but his primary preoccupation, both before and after the war, is stories. During peace he resists co-optation through storytelling and in war by remembering these stories all over again. Niqula’s storytelling is not just a reactivation of his family’s heritage, but as identified by postcolonial theorists is an act of resistance. As Chandra Mohanty reminds us, “Resistance is encoded in the practices of remembering and writing” (7).

Not only Athena’s speech but also her conceptualization of time resists the modern concept of time as linear. She talks to her sister as if she were living with them. Referring to this tendency of his mother as well as her dissatisfaction with him, Niqula tells us, “much of the time she repeated a single phrase: He sees nothing but what he

wants to see. She would go on and on in that vein, as if still talking to her sister, as if her sister were still there in the parlor and had not left us long before” (6). Athena’s attitude foregrounds the importance of space-time rather than temporal time, as a significant element in her experience. Her time is what Kristeva describes as “women’s time,” which rejects the temporal dimension of women’s experience and focuses instead on “the space generating and forming the human species” (“Women’s” 15). She is the dissident woman artist, who challenges linear time through her stories and singing, creating her own imaginary world or space-time that resembles the real world but departs from its linearity and hierarchy. Through her art and stories, she does what Kristeva believes individual women should do: “provide themselves with a *representation*” that depicts and creates their experiences in order to alter their symbolic representation as mothers (“A New Type” 208), hence, Athena’s untraditional mothering model and rejection of housekeeping. They both represent her disavowal of the concept of women’s time as being occupied mainly by homemaking. Instead, the realm of the imaginary and creativity, through storytelling and singing, constitute her primary preoccupations. Through Athena, Barakat ponders the potential of aesthetics and narrative for the subaltern, especially women.

However, Athena’s desire to sing in an operatic public performance does *not* attain fulfillment. Her frustrated attempts expose, by implication, the embedded alliance between nationalism and the colonial legacy, as both lead to Athena’s disintegration. Beirut causes the first disappointment by not having the Opera House of which Athena dreams. Her Armenian singing teacher, Prof. Kevork, who represents the colonial legacy and Western knowledge systems, causes further disappointment. Not only does he seem

to make up the story about an imminent operatic performance in which Athena will be given the premier of role, but he also insists on Athena's mental illness, using Western medical knowledge. Eventually, Athena's repressed longing for operatic singing makes a comeback, in the form of an obsession with silk, the perfect and natural material. She would visit her husband's fabric shop, go into its basement, where the silk swatches are held, and wrap herself in silk. In the novel, silk also embodies the secrets of the universe. Niqula tells Shamsa that the "great Sufi Jalal al-Din al-Rumi says that in the rhythm of working with cloth lies that which organizes the universe. Were we to understand the great secret it unfolds, the very foundations of the cosmos would crack and all existence would sink into fatal chaos" (Barakat 148).

However, equipped with European scientific knowledge in the form of a study entitled "Women's pathological erotic infatuation with fabric," by a French physician, Kevork tries to convince Jirjis Mitri, the fabric expert and trader, that Athena is mentally ill for her infatuation with silk. "I came to you," he tries to assure Jirjis, "only after obtaining a copy of this doctor's study by way of my sister's daughter, a dentistry student in Paris" (161). Jirjis, however, discredits Kevork's diagnosis with his own knowledge and long experience, correcting the French doctor's scientific knowledge and his indiscrimination between silk and other fabrics: "If you knew, Kevork, what silk is, then you wouldn't even hope for a cure ... it is not fabric, Kevork. It is the only filament that we do not fabricate, that is born complete, perfect, pure, offered up exactly as it is" (161-62). Jirjis's explanation and knowledge about silk is also valid from a Sufi perspective, which equates silk with the secret of the universe, and hence the creator. As part of his silk story, Niqula tells Shamsa that the great Sufi Jalal al-Din Rumi says, "In the rhythm

of working with cloth lies that which organizes the universe.... It is the rhythm of woven silk... the silken thread with its distinct echo, that might pull us nearer—if only illusorily—to this dangerous secret by compelling us to attempt its explanation” (Barakat 148).

Despite the study’s false premise and the French doctor’s enigmatic life, which ends with his suicide, Kevork insists on its credibility, using a highly gendered language to describe its findings: “So, Jirjis, it is not a vice. It is an illness that only strikes women and it is nothing like our illnesses—men’s illnesses, our sexual diseases” (162). Kevork continues to explain why Athena’s infatuation with silk is an illness, reminding Jirjis repeatedly of a possible cure that will be discovered in *France*: “But, when the appetite takes her she must be alone, in the dark, and have no trace of a male there in front of her” (163). For Jirjis, however, Athena’s fascination with darkness is another manifestation of her identity as a woman of silk. “The silk moth lays eggs only in the darkness...,” he tells Kevork refuting the latter’s claim. “Only in darkness and moisture does the thread come off the suffocated corpse” (163). Still discrediting Jirji’s explanation, Kevork breaks in, “Do not talk like that, don’t say such things, Jirjis. Maybe the doctors are still working on it, in France ... I told my niece to write me” (163)

Athena’s infatuation is part of her perpetual search and longing for balance and perfection, and when she fails to achieve her dream of singing, her repressed passion returns in the form of an obsession. She is similar to the atlas silk whose balanced structure gives it the name of “magic squares” that become “‘satanic’ if they manifest any flaws, no matter how slight or innocent they may seem” (171). A few months after this conversation between Jirjis and Kevork, the latter commits suicide and then Athena’s

passion for silk weakens as she moves on to another aesthetic form, that of narrative and stories (165). Athena's journey from one art form to another manifests Kristeva's assertion about the importance of aesthetic practices in maintaining personal and societal equilibrium (Brophy 35).

Niqula too reflects on his deviation from what is considered 'normal' social behavior. He remains indifferent when the fighting reaches the city center and a meeting is called for by the leading merchants to discuss the consequences on the business and merchandise. He does not even bother check on his fabric shop as other shop owners do: "I had not even gone to look at our shop, not even caught a distant glimpse of it. I did not share Abd al-Karim's tense gloom. I felt guilty about my indifference..." (13). He also does not show the usual signs of mourning upon the death of his father although prior to the death he envisions himself doing that, as if social behavior were a script that could be rehearsed in advance (14). This doubleness is in-line with the alienation he has always felt: "That is the way it is with me sometimes. I can be walking along next to my own body as if I am observing it" (15). At his mother's death, though, he does not feel the same embarrassment he had felt for not showing physical signs of grief upon his father's death, now that the social fabric that provides the illusion of reality and normality has disintegrated due to the war.

Through the depiction of Shamsa and the Mitris— mother, father and son—*The Tiller* attempts to instill an alternative notion of the subject that acknowledges the *real* individual instead of an abstract notion of him or her as a citizen. The nation as it is currently conceived and circulated is "an abstraction, an allegory, a myth that does not correspond to a reality that can be scientifically defined" (Mariategui 178-88). A

representation of actual national subjects, such as the Mitris, produces what Radhakrishnan calls, “a critical and deconstructive knowledge about nationalism,” for it “is on the basis of such knowledge that postcolonial subjects can produce a genuinely subaltern history about themselves and not merely replicate ... the liberal-elitist narrative of the West” (86).

Part of the novel’s critique of the notion of the modern nationalist subject is its gnawing at the matter of factness with which social behavior is dealt. Barakat exposes the arbitrariness of social constructs and behavior by highlighting their double standard. Society is stricter with women when they breach socially defined moral and ethical codes. Niqula’s father is angered not by the femininity of Hanoun, who is a male family friend, but by Hanoun’s sisters’ becoming belly dancers (15). By situating the novel’s critique of patriarchal formations within its critique of modernity and modern capitalism, the novel exposes the interdependency of the two. *The Tiller* functions as

a locus of indeterminacy which undermines fixed meanings and authoritarian ideological positions, which in the one case are explained in terms of the totally administered world of modern capitalism, and in the other are attributed to an entire Western [as well as Eastern] cultural and philosophical tradition rooted in patriarchal interests, a tradition that has sought to control meaning and repress difference. (Felski 5)

Furthermore, modernity’s ambivalence and contested nature underlies Niqula’s grandfather’s different loyalties and commitments. He represents modern scientific discourse and its other(s) combined, wavering sometimes between what are considered binary opposites: modernity and tradition. For instance, he tries to admonish his son from succumbing to the lore of Beirut by drawing upon scientific data and information. “The city is heading toward earthquake,” he warns his son, “I was told so by the Englishman,

the professor from Leeds University ... Beirut sat atop a fault that slipped five millimeters each year. According to current geological research ... that was a major rift” (8). Despite his scientific objectivity, the grandfather embodies, for his son, the long gone riches of the past. Jirjis Mitri, therefore, summons back his father’s words for hours at a time, “to fetch [the] grandfather for his grandson in an era of such singular stinginess” (8). At the same time, it is he, the grandfather, at least according to Athena’s story, who objected to his son marrying her for fear that she would become an artiste (7). In this context, the grandfather represents patriarchal tradition. The novel’s contradictory images of the grandfather demonstrate the opaqueness not only of individuals but also of culture, an opaqueness that needs to be considered when nations are constituted or (re)imagined. Nationalism and nation-states, on the other hand, try to gloss over this nature, relegating those contra-culture elements to the periphery. In his call for acknowledging “those practices of the past that seem undesirable but that apparently refuse to die” in an otherwise modern world, Chakrabarty notes, “There are parts of society that remain opaque to the theoretical gaze of the modern analyst...It is also in this literal sense, then, it seems to me, that cultural practices have a dark side. We cannot see into them, not everywhere ... What exist out there are translucent at best. Beyond a certain point theory cannot see” (*Habitations* 45-6).

### **The Return of the Repressed**

The inability to see brings us back to the illusory nature of the modern and its configurations, including its material ones, which, being illusory, dissipate easily. Niqula’s inability to show “normal” social and emotional behavior corresponds to a similar lack of commitment to the modern material world. For example, Barakat makes

clear the nonchalant manner with which he gives up his apartment and possessions. Having found out that his apartment was claimed by strangers during his two-month stay with Hanoun and that his only hope would be to talk to the youths at one of the roadblocks to reclaim the apartment and maybe the money that had been there, Niqula stands leaning against a wall outside his building for hours after which he simply starts off, “swinging the bag [of bread, cucumbers, and cheese] back and forth as if I were just a man taking a pleasant stroll along the Corniche on a fine day off from work” (19). Niqula’s attitude towards his material possessions and symbols of his citizenship makes him a good example of the ideal citizen or subaltern who “is no longer the citizen in the making. The subaltern here is the ideal figure of the person who survives actively, even joyously, on the assumption that the statist instruments of domination will always belong to somebody else and never aspires to them” (Chakrabarty, *Habitations* 36).

Chakrabarty acknowledges that this is an ideal figure that does not resemble actual members of the subaltern classes; however, positing this figure could change the way we think about social equality and the state as the main instrument for enforcing this equality, for it allows us to ponder Chakrabarty’s questions: “What would happen to our political imagination if we did not consider the state of being fragmentary and episodic as merely disabling? What kind of (modern) social justice would one envisage as one embraces the fragment?” (*Habitations* 35-36). By raising these questions we can envision totally different social orders that are much needed in zones fraught with conflict over identity. Interestingly, Chakrabarty suggests a radical change in the way we see the nationalist subject that he can only express it in Heideggerian terms: “the capacity to

hear that which one does not already understand” (36), a statement that is significantly reiterated in the novel in different ways as I will discuss later.

By being the ideal figure of the subaltern, Niqula does not engage in the process of Othering when he is asked. By contrast, the gist of recollecting about violence, particularly war violence is the exposition and portrayal of the process of othering, “of how humans create absolute others out of other humans” (Chakrabarty, *Habitations* 141). However, by recognizing the shared human condition in the Mitris’ and the Kurds’ stories as well as in the fabric stories, the novel focuses on the opposite of Othering—that is the mutual recognition of the other’s humanity, which precedes Othering (142-3).<sup>2</sup> The novel enacts a counter repression to that of modernity and nationalism. It is a repression of the process of Othering that justifies violence and war, where each “person, Becoming-Enemy, recognized and defined him/herself in terms of the Becoming-Other” (Cooke, *War’s* 27). By walking away instead of reclaiming his apartment, Niqula refuses to engage in this process of Becoming-Other and rejects the idea that the “enemy was everywhere, the battlefield was everywhere. The war was everyone’s war” (27). Barakat emphasizes the process of recognition by making the new people occupying the apartment, or at least some of them, a woman and a child: “For a moment I thought I had gotten the floor wrong and so I started to retreat quickly to the landing. But just then I became aware that a woman holding a child in her arms stood inside facing me” (18).

Likewise, when other characters engage in political discussions, Niqula merely listens. Barakat steers away from any attempt to make sense of the war and its discourse, for such an engagement implies a legitimating of the conflict whereas disengagement renders empty all justifications. Barakat plays on the power of discourse of war, which

Cooke articulates as follows: “Although it is war that gives rise to the story of war, war would not properly exist without its recitation: ‘War imitates the account of war which imitates the war’” (*War’s* 27).

The modern is just an illusion, lacking distinction and differentiation, with no history or stories and therefore prone to disappearance, similar to the synthetic fabrics that replace true fabric in the Mitris’ shop. Modernity is the Age of Diolen.<sup>3</sup> It is “only after long and painful thought” that Jirjis decides to stock these new fabrics in the first floor, relegating the “true cloth” to the lower floor (22). It is also the lower floor of the store that Niqula takes for a home, after losing his apartment. Having found himself with no home, Niqula turns their fabric shop into a non-traditional home, the first floor of which is now burned and its contents little heaps of ashes and mounds of molten synthetics. Interestingly, it is these burned fabrics, “plastered across the metal trapdoor that gave access to the lower level,” that Niqula goes on “assaulting” with “the aid of a truncated iron rod. On the ground floor Niqula lives like a new Adam for years. During this time, he reminisces about his family, Shamsa (his Kurdish maid and love interest), and travels to the city’s underground, revealing all along the city’s past as well as the cloth stories that he learned from his father.

Additionally, it is the lower floor of the shop (the one containing true cloth) that Niqula turns into a charming verandah where he replants trellised vines he removes from neighbors’ walls, ferns, sumac trees and laurel (34). More importantly, the cheap fabrics are the first to burn in the fabric shop during the war, turning into “mounds of variously shaped pebbles, oddly looking in their hues and rounded shapes” (22). The fabrics—whose arrival into the shop Niqula describes as an “invasion,” happening in spite of his

father's will (33)— burned as fast as the names of shops and the names of their owners faded from memory. Niqula's forgetting prerogative of the names of some places and people is an act of erasure that counteracts the global economic system's erasure of past histories and cultures. Niqula's forgetfulness reflects a selective act of erasure and forgetting, for whereas the near past, the pre-civil war Beirut, seems to have vanished from his memory, his knowledge and memory of the history of fabric and its sensibilities sound fresh and replete with details: "the life I live now endowed me with time and leisure such that I could review the lessons I learned from him [his father], which took place in my head of the lessons I learned in school, only a few traces of which have remained with me" (9).

Landmarks of the city's civil life are totally obliterated and not even the workings of memory could help restore them. Trying to find his way back to the fabric store, his new home, Niqula follows a mental map of the city center as he remembers it, and although he manages to recognize some of its landmarks now and then, he still gets lost (48), and ends up in the city's underground (66). Seeing the failure of his attempt to put his memories of pre-war Beirut to use, Niqula decides to invent new maps of the city and to name places all over again (61). Seamus Deane argues that the "naming or renaming of a place, the naming or renaming of a race, a region, a person, is like all acts of primordial nomination, an act of possession.... All the various names ... are indications of the uncertainty, the failure of self-possession, which has characterized the various relationships and conditions to which the names refer" (18). Niqula's renaming of Beirut's landmarks implies his attempt to possess the city's vanishing past. The initial failure of self-possession implied in this process, however, is not Niqula's as much as the

nation's. Furthermore, the significance of naming here can also be read as a counterprocess to the postmodern pluralism, which the cultural counterpart to global economy. Such pluralism, Deane argues, "refuses the idea of naming; it plays with diversity and makes a mystique of it; it is the concealed imperialism of the multinational, the infinite compatibility of all cultures with one another envisaged in terms of the ultimate capacity of all computers to read one another" (19).

The obliteration of things modern heralds the return of repressed worlds. At the top of the list is nature, whose rapid growth over the city Niqula cannot understand: "How was it possible?" he wonders. "From where had all of this fertility come to the land: where had the asphalt gone?" (25). With the return of the natural world, the coming back of other forms of life becomes possible. Niqula easily slips into a primordial mode of life that raises questions about the reality of his earlier existence; he wanders the deserted streets with a makeshift knapsack in which he would carry what he "hunted, gathered, or was lucky enough to find" (45). In the midst of this new primitive life, what becomes clear to the protagonist is his inability to differentiate between what belongs to the previous modern life from what belongs to its antithetical present. Hence, linear time is interrogated again, and in contrast with modernity's evanescence, the natural asserts its permanence to Niqula's bewilderment. "Raised in these narrow alleys," he contemplates,

I no longer knew whether the medlar tree whose fruit had now been nourishing me for weeks had stood near the Antabli fountain for as long as the souq had been a souq, or whether it had grown and borne fruit in my absence... in the concerto of this garden of Eden that the Lord had set aflame to conquer the destruction, to obliterate it and triumph over it. To return sovereignty to the soil. (25)

The war creates the potential for a total obliteration not only of the modern but of civilization as a whole. Contemplating the practicality of revealing himself to a pack of dogs that has taken the deserted city for a home, Niqula is skeptical about whether his appearance will scare them at all, as this act would have done before the war: “Who knows, I said to myself, maybe they would react by running away. In some corner of their memory must linger residue of images of their submission and obedience to us” (103). Although these examples testify to the devastating power of the war, they seem to be a mere intensification of and a natural consequence to the preceding state of cultural degeneration Niqula’s father lamented.

#### **“New” Knowledge Systems**

Barakat’s depiction of the ununified and fragmentary identities of Athena and Niqula gives way for the alternative knowledge systems and discourses the novel reclaims. Indeed, Chakrabarty correlates the fragmentary subject with such forms of knowledge as he argues, “we conceptualize the fragmentary and the episodic as those which do not, and cannot, dream the whole called *the state* and must, therefore, be suggestive of knowledge forms that are not tied to the will that produces the state” (*Habitations* 35). The novel is suggestive of other knowledge forms that are pushed to the periphery in the modern discourses of nationalism and the nation-state. The exclusion of these forms of knowledge is a consequence of the problematic inherent in nationalist thought, which “in agreeing to become ‘modern’, nationalist thought accepts the claim to universality of this ‘modern’ framework of knowledge” (Chatterjee 11). Therefore, the dissipation of the modern civil society leads inevitably to the return of the repressed.

In his new life, Niqula reacts to the world by using outdated means of knowledge and perception, such as pure instinct and intuition, which become his only means of survival. Basic survival skills turn out to be all he needs to escape the dogs that take over the abandoned souq: “I spit onto my hands to check the direction of the wind, so that I could place myself where my scent would not blow toward them” (49). Coming out of the city’s underground and realizing his proximity to the shop, Niqula is still gripped by utter fear, whose only explanation, he reckons, must be intuition: “In moments I would be at home. What are you afraid of, I asked myself, when night is still slow to fall? I wonder if it was my intuition. I wonder if I was afraid even before I knew the source of my fear. Had I somewhere heard the reason for my fear before my eyes actually picked it up?” (48-9). Soon, Niqula’s thoughts and feelings are validated by the appearance of the dogs.

Both modernity and nationalism (and its wars) subjugate the body, the first through its body aesthetics and the body/mind binary and the second by eliminating it. By contrast, Niqula’s survival becomes dependent on using his body to the fullest. He manages to make sense of his new world as well as his old knowledge of fabric by means of his body parts and senses. His experiences render the mind/body binary obsolete. In the shop, he goes over the old lessons and experiences he has learned about fabric through both recalling their stories and then turning the knowledge they impart into a lived experience. His theoretical knowledge of fabrics takes a physical form, as he literally embraces the bolts of cloth, something he used to do as a child, which implies the cyclical nature of knowledge. He takes off his clothes and wraps himself in the length of fabric, breathing in its fragrance and hearing its rustle from inside: “I would press it against my skin, against every part of my body, to resuscitate my own intimate memories

of that particular fabric in every detail” (36). Niqula’s experience in the abandoned city center re-inscribes the body and senses, alongside intellect, as knowledge producers.

Having lost his way in the darkness of the city’s underground, he resorts to utilizing these bodily tools, the only means that comes to his aid:

I knew that I must be close, for the air had grown warmer and less stagnant. My eyes soon made out a faint light reflected at the feet of the low walls far in front of me. I began to walk quickly, my mouth open so that the sound of quick breaths into my nostrils would not bury the sounds that my ears were picking up ... I began walking cautiously, my arms outstretched to touch the wall. I walked a curved path a few steps and sensed a decline under my feet. (67)

Niqula’s encounter with the dogs and later his relationship with one of them is another manifestation of the return of the repressed. It also allows Barakat to parody the war, so as to undermine any attempts to assign it grandiose meanings. Therefore, in a departure from more traditional representations of the civil war, wherein the sniper is an imminent threat, Barakat replaces the sniper with the pack of dogs Niqula encounters and tries to escape from. Hence, the war is reduced to a battle between these two: Niqula versus the animal. When the dog finds his way to the first floor of the shop, Niqula remains for days on the ground floor, ponders his options: “I will never get out of this place. I will stay hidden for a week or more until he forgets about me, gets bored, despairs of my coming out. Then he will know that I am cleverer than he is, far cleverer” (92). It is not until a few weeks later that Niqula finally decides to come out and see if the dog is still waiting for him. Once outside, he “lets out some cries to test whether he was close by” (101). Similar to other women writers about the war, Barakat asserts that the “civil war was not a revolution, it was a farce” (Cooke, *War’s* 103). In another manifestation of the return of the repressed, Barakat also parodies the civil war’s

warriors' fight for control over more soil. This happens in a particular scene wherein Niqula attempts to mark off his territory—to keep the dog at bay—in the same manner a dog does that: “Then an enchanting idea came to me. I filled my stomach with water and sat waiting for it to reach my bladder ... I pressed on until I reached the Rivoli, continuing what I had begun at my verandah, that is peeing a few drops every twenty or thirty steps ... to define a circle that would be my own territory” (101).

Also Shamsa, the Mitri's Kurdish maid and Niqula's love interest, learns by using her senses and intellect. After he told her the story of linen, Niqula says, “Now you really know what you are wearing. Your body knows it, and moves forward inside it ... progresses in a knowledge that we have begun to find together” (60). Hence, both body and mind are involved in this learning process. Through this type of knowledge that gnaws at the mind/body binary, Shamsa's senses become finer, and only then does she communicate her Kurdish history to Niqula. Knowledge that attends to both body and mind is one that leads to more knowledge and communication.

More appreciation of the human, body and mind, is revealed in Shamsa's stories of her Kurdish people. Like nationalist discourse, these stories speak of the female body, but not as the ground on which the nation is erected nor as a symbol of the nation's purity. In these stories, the body is part of the non-nation being, an end in itself. Reflecting the centrality of the body, apart from the nation, Shamsa tells Niqula, “We walked so much when we left our land that I was almost one with the air. Now I gain weight so that I may settle, so that I can feel the presence of a homeland” (72). In line with this context, the emphasis on preserving the human body is a recurring motif in the novel's stories about the Kurdish people. These historically marginal people (the Kurds)

made linen that assisted in sealing wounds, imparted tenderness, and consorted with the heat of the skin (56), and so when struck by fever, Niqula “stayed for days in a cocoon of linen,” until he recovered (61). He, thus, benefits from the Kurds’ knowledge while reiterating the cyclical nature of knowledge.

Being centered on the human being’s wellbeing, the Kurds’ sense of community is equivalent with survival, which makes it similar to humanist nationalism. As defined by Cooke, humanist nationalism means that for “those who are humanist nationalists, there is no single polity but multiple fragmentary projects that continually disassemble and reassemble and regenerate themselves because, above all, they foster survival” (*Women* 290). Homeland and stability are anchored in the wellbeing of the body rather than the nation. Nationalism and eliminating the human body, the Kurds’ stories imply, are incompatible. Therefore, Shamsa’s grandfather refuses to join the Kurdish rebels and participate in what he sees as an “unclear war, fighting that looks like ... revenge” (74). Twice does he turn away proposals for joining the rebels. For him, the nation as composed of *individuals*, comes first. By contrast, “[s]tatis nationalists place the state first and the nation second” (Cooke, *Women* 270). His pacificism, nonetheless, ends with his death at the hands of the Turkish nationalists he had refused to fight. That was when the Turks “hanged all the chiefs of the Kurdish tribes” (74). Not too long after that, his son—Shamsa’s father—leaves his tribe for the sake of the family he wants to have. “My father,” Shamsa tells Niqula, “lay my grandfather in his grave and before the mourning period ended we were walking toward another land” because, as her father tells her mother, “Here we will never see sound offspring or felicity” (81).

Through the Kurdish people's stories, Barakat questions the viability of nationalism as a means of achieving promises of progress, advancement, and wellbeing. Within this context, Shamsa suggests the incompatibility of revolution, one of nationalism's forms, and advancement. "My father never did know how to read or write properly," she tells Niqula, even though his own father had been a student of the most learned Sufis: "But his son—my father—never achieved anything close to his father's learning, because of the wars and revolts" (75). Tracing the genealogy of her people to different dissents that qualify the Kurds as strong and fierce people who do not compromise their freedom, Shamsa reiterates, "But we do not like war or mortal combat" (84). "To this day," she concludes her people's story, "we reside in our courage and freedom, in our solitude and in our free flight over lands owned by others" (85). She thus redefines freedom.

The novel tells of other stories that, too, reclaim to the human body its sanctity. This is the case because "the body and the voice often become the sign in post-colonial written texts for alter/native cultures which can only exist within the written as a disruption or a gap, simultaneously unbridgeable and yet bridged by the written word" (Aschcroft et al. 322). In the novel too, Shamsa's body and Athena's voice are signs that stand for such alternative cultures and people. By re-inscribing the body and senses, the new knowledge system allows for a new perception. "Woman of velvet," Niqula tells Shamsa, "you must never come to a halt before the apparent meaning of words; you must never stop at the outer skin of things" (98). Niqula's various roles in life embody the different positions from where seeing opposites might be possible. At the beginning of the novel he is Christ-like. Carrying thorny roses to his mother each night he and his

father stay out late, he contemplates: “I could feel the roses’ thorns and the pointy stems of the big flowers pierce my hands and arms. I offered this agony of mine as penance, along with the sufferings of our lord Christ ... He who suffered, who was crucified, and who died for my sake, to absolve my sins” (155). With the war’s onset, his pool of signification expands beyond Christianity to include the prophets at large. Wandering the streets of Beirut, he ponders, “With my bundle and thick stick, after all, I knew that I had become like the prophets, walking wherever I pleased and desired” (61). Niqula’s primitive life in the deserted streets of the city invokes Adam, the earliest of the prophets, which underlines the cyclical nature of history rather than its linearity.

Not only Niqula’s life course but his and Shamsa’s stories reiterate the cyclical nature of knowledge and the importance of this nature in connecting people and revealing their proximity. Shamsa passes on her family’s knowledge about plants that they had learned from the Frankish priest, to Niqula (76-7). Moreover, both Shamsa and Niqula include parts of each other’s stories into their own narratives, braiding them into one story. Like Shamsa who repeats parts of the fabric stories, Niqula includes the Kurdish history she tells him into his narrative (98). And just like Niqula declares earlier that there “is no knowledge but that which can see the two opposites,” Shamsa teaches Niqula a similar lesson, just when he thinks he has learned the lessons of plants, underlining again the cyclical nature of knowledge:

I remind you now of mandragora, because knowledge does not reside only in things that easily show their plain utility, but also in what lies locked within the secret of this usefulness ... How [the mandragora] tells its secret to whomever it chooses, and kills the ignorant one who uproots it unthinkingly? How it oscillates between poison and elixir, between death and tempestuous pleasure, between manifest presence and concealed absence? (111)

This cyclical account of knowledge, history and stories is also implied in Niqula's and Shamsa's interchangeable roles as storytellers and listeners. Just like Niqula figures as a storyteller and a teacher, so does Shamsa. Neither one, thus, is given a fixed position.

Along the same lines, Shamsa's stories of her people reveal the uncanny similarity between the two families and their histories, the Lebanese and the Kurdish. This similarity starts with, but does not stop at, their shared pursuit of the land of their dreams. It is no coincidence that Shamsa's father says to his wife, "No. What you see is just an illusion. You are imagining it all, dreaming of the fogs of winter, the low clouds. The country that we will reach is always green, but we are still outside of its merciful borders" (73). His words echo with an unmistakable similarity Jirji Mitri's words to Athena at the beginning of the novel, assuring her that what she sees is nothing but an illusion. Niqula refers to this similarity as inseparable from the knowledge these stories impart. Addressing Shamsa, he asks rhetorically, "Do you see how all of the stories resemble each other, how they come together, whatever their origins?" (130).

Ultimately, the two protagonists' unofficial narratives and histories supplant official history and discourse and assume their role in fashioning new communities. Through storytelling, Shamsa and Niqula become members of the same community of listeners and storytellers. It is through the fabrics' stories that Shamsa becomes attracted to Niqula, and when the stories end, she disappears. The protagonists defy their subaltern position not by thinking and imagining the state, as Gramsci believes the subaltern should do in order to transcend the condition of subalternity, but rather by thinking outside of it. In Gramsci's view, the "subaltern classes, by definition, are not united and cannot unite until they are able to become a 'State'" (52). Through the mediation of informal narrative

and oral histories, the protagonists transcend their national differences so much so that they become one and the same. Describing his love for Shamsa, Niqula says it is as “if I have become enamored of myself, not of you, and I don’t know how to stop the wheel of my own loss” (110).

Shamsa is not only capable of attaining the ultimate knowledge, but acts as producer of counter-narrative and counter-knowledge. Her Kurdish oral traditions and unofficial history are depicted as compatible with hegemonic discourses. For example, she confirms the accuracy of the oral Kurdish history she heard from her mother by referring to the testimony of her educated cousin: “All of this was confirmed by my cousin, once a student” (73). Shamsa’s mother’s unofficial history can even compete with formal history, as when she insists on the accuracy of one story, in spite of its contradiction with official discourse, reclaiming it as a source of knowledge and empowerment. Equipped with experience rather than formal education, the mother tells her educated nephew, “We called him Shaykh Boldo and he answered with warmth. Tell that to your French priest ... Shaykh Boldo came to us then, and lived among us until he was speaking our language” (76). Theorist Paula Moya highlights the political significance of experience for the subaltern:

oppressed groups may have epistemic knowledge .... ‘a special advantage with respect to possessing or acquiring knowledge about how fundamental aspects of our society (such as race, class, gender, and sexuality) operate to sustain matrices of power ... The key to claiming epistemic privilege for people who have been oppressed in a particular way stems from an acknowledgment that they have experiences—that people who are not oppresses in that same way usually lack. (136)

Shamsa’s cousin’s version of the story undermines his aunt’s experience while revealing the alliance between his formal knowledge and colonial knowledge systems:

“Shaykh Leopoldo Solidini, aunt. I read it in a book about our people that a French priest wrote” (76). This episode implies disillusionment in the role of a formal education modeled on the colonial legacy in the nation and state building. Highlighting the relationship between education and nation-states, which are a Western concept, Chakrabarty argues, “Nation states have the capacity to enforce their truth games, and universities, their critical distance notwithstanding, are part of the battery of institutions complicit in this process” (“Postcoloniality” 384). The critique of official knowledge can also be read as an attack on the notion of nationalism as a whole, which is as Benedict Anderson makes clear is first and foremost constructed in and through language. As Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities*, nationalism has always been grounded in Babel, for it is a product of what he calls “print-capitalism” (49). “Nationalism emerges when languages get into print and are transmitted through books, allowing subjects to identify themselves as members of the community of readers implied by these books” (During 126). This fact leads to a problematic in national identity that highlights its constructedness. As During suggests, “an identity granted in terms of the signifier ... is an identity that necessarily cannot be communicated. It would seem to be written into the fate of nationalism as print-capitalism that national identity is conferred in the form of its own death warrant” (126).

In light of the contested nature of nationalism and national history, the Lebanese nation and cultural history proves contestable as well. In sharp contrast with Arab nationalist modern history, the novel alludes to the downfall of the Ottoman Empire as something lamentable (98), for back then hierarchy was preserved and social status was marked: “Before the lamentable downfall of the Ottoman Empire, to possess a velvet

garment was to possess the sign of entrée to full adult life” (98). On other hand, the image of Salah al-Din the Ayyubid departs from the celebratory narrative of him, propagated in official history: “But it was Baldwin himself who died in Beirut, before it was surrounded by Salah al-Din the Ayyubid. And whatever the sieges of Baldwin and the Egyptian navy had left behind was plundered. Salah al-Din had its venues cut down, and its olive trees too. Its monuments were destroyed” (28). By contrast, modern Arab nationalist discourse depicts him as pre-modern Muslim hero who repelled the Crusaders from the Muslim Mediterranean.

Moreover, Niqula’s fabric stories provide alternative world and regional histories that acknowledge the subaltern people’s place in history. For example, the Kurds and Cops figure as the first linen weavers in the region, who in “weaving, spinning, twisting, and polishing fibers ... found their independence and practiced a pacifist resistance” (58). Barakat, thus, writes into the Lebanese and world histories what is usually left out when national histories, including the Lebanese, are re-imagined. This rewriting exposes official history as a construct that is anything but one. The Kurds, on the other hand, acknowledge the multiplicity of their history, through various myths of origins. As narrated by Shamsa their genealogy draws upon different historical and mythical sources best manifest in their name. The word “Kurds,” Shamsa tells Niqula, means “the repulsed,” in reference to the mythical story that links the Kurds to the beauties King Solomon had repulsed for copulating with djinnis (82-3). At the same time, the word Kurd in Persian means the brave hero and originally a wolf or a wild cat (83-4). Shamsa’s different names— Shamsa, Hatawi, and Suryash— reveal her Arabic, Kurdish, and mythical origins (82). By passing on the multiple histories of their Kurdish people,

mother and daughter stand for an alternative notion of the nation or rather a non-nation notion of being.

Similar to the genealogy of the Kurds that has multiple origins, Niqula's fabric stories draw upon various cultural, religious, and linguistic systems: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and pagan, Arab and non-Arab. Whereas the story of creation is attributed to an African myth in which the Lord, the Word of Creation, "was a breath that brought into being the fibrous plants and animals that produce the fur and down in which we covered our skins of old" (127), the semantics of the word "spinning," are based on the Arabic language (128). As the Arabic language indicates, the making of fabric and speech (and remembering by implication) are linked. This is the case since the Arabic word for "spinner" means also the "one who 'makes' speech," (128), and so to "break or cut that thread, dyed along alternating lengths ... is to break the relationship of day to night, to fall into the void, into nonexistence and oblivion" (129). This is the case because the loss of the thread can mean the loss of words, which ultimately leads to oblivion.

The multiplicity and richness of histories, origins, and stories that Niqula's and Shamsa's narratives unfold are juxtaposed against the stinginess of the modern age. This contrast best manifests in the true fabric stories. Since the new fabrics have no origin or history, their manufacturing has put an end to the recounting of fabric stories. This is why Jirjis sorrowfully complains of his modern customers' reticence and the vanishing of personal interaction in his trade (34).

This waning of human relations is *only* intensified by the war into a total loss of humanity. The correlation between the war and impoverished human relations is represented in the novel's minimalist war landscape wherein even the actual war agents

are absent. Occupied only by Niqula and a pack of dogs, the abandoned city center symbolizes “the void ... nonexistence and oblivion” into which humanity falls into, once the stories and histories of its pasts are lost (129). In relation to this context, Chakrabarty rightly correlates the eruption of violence to the absence of the social: “Both fictional and autobiographical depiction of violence that was nothing but social consign it to a time and space marked, paradoxically, by an assumed death of the social,” (*Habitations* 142). Significantly, similar to the novel’s context, in which the commodification of fabric is reflected at the social level, degenerating into war, Chakrabarty calls this loss of humanity *thingification*, of which commodification is a special case (142).

### **Multiple Stories and The Nation that Is Not One**

Niqula’s prehistoric reincarnation culminates with his trips to the city’s underground, where history’s cyclical nature, opacity and multiplicity are best seen. The motif of the underground stands for the repression of these by the official national discourse and history. Twice does Niqula find himself suddenly underground. The frequency and suddenness of these trips imply the cyclical nature of history and its tendency to overlap with the present (65).

More importantly, once underground, Niqula comes upon the *various* histories making up Beirut’s past. Instead of one relic, Niqula becomes gradually aware of multiple historical layers relating to the city’s Phoenician, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Arab periods: “I went on, bewitched by my memory of my paternal grandfather’s words. A city that does not advance in time but rather in accumulating layers, a city that will sink as deeply in the earth as its edifices tower high ... How many cities lie beneath the city, papa ... grandfather ... how many cities lie there to be forgotten?” (66). This

multiplicity delegitimizes the exclusivist notions of history, identity, and culture adopted by nationalist movements. As Seamus Deane puts it, “Insurgent nationalisms attempt to create a version of history for themselves in which intrinsic essence has always manifested itself, thereby producing readings of the past that are as monolithic as that which they are trying to supplant” (9).

Just as important is these trips’ highlighting the past’s opacity, implied in the darkness submerging the city’s underground layers of past eras: Descending from one chamber in the city’s underground to another, Niqula ponders: “I walked on, led by the magic of the darkness, and by what I saw without truly seeing, what I saw by the light made by the illusions of my brain, or by the glow of the white stone walls, or perhaps by a real light coming from the other world above” (65). It is with regards to the past’ partial inaccessibility to us that we can interpret the similarity Niqula draws between the human psyche and the past. Being both opaque and fraught with enigmas, he could not tell them apart: “I wonder: am I descending through the layers of this city, or am I plunging down, down to submerge myself in the deepest layers of my own illusory thoughts?” (66). The parallel is a succinct articulation of the Mitris’ history and Beirut’s history at the beginning of the novel.

Barakat also underscores the opacity of Beirut’s history symbolically. During his underground trips, Niqula comes upon the body of a girl buried inside a jar. In both unintentional returns to the underground, Niqula finds himself next to what he starts to call the amphora girl; however, neither encounter helps to unfold her story, and throughout the novel, she remains an enigma, similar to the city’s past. Additionally, the fact that in the first time, Niqula mistakes her for a child, and then he sees her more as a

young woman echoes Lebanon's image as depicted by Lebanese women writers during the war (Cooke, *Women* 281). According to Cooke, these writers saw Lebanon as both a nurturer mother and a child that needs nurturing (281):

In tandem with women's global politicization and invention of women-specific strategies of resistance and opposition, women, and particularly the school of writers who I call the Beirut Decentrists (Cooke 1986), propounded a nationalism that was rooted in an individual nurturing relationship with Lebanon. *It was through a dynamic reciprocal relationship that they belonged to the Lebanese nation, one they defined sometimes as the extended village or even family, because they adopted a quasi-maternal responsibility for the people and, above all, for the land of Lebanon.* (281)

Niqula's experiences underground reflect postmodern and postcolonial perspectives towards the past. As Linda Hutcheon argues, postmodern aesthetics acknowledge the paradox of the reality of the past as it problematizes its textualized accessibility to us today (14). Post-colonialism, on the other hand, "without denying history's textualized accessibility, focuses on the reality of a past that has influenced the present" (Brydon 142). Similarly, the novel problematizes history's accessibility to us while highlighting its cyclical nature, which affects the present. Although too opaque to be retrieved and understood fully, the past still provides a safer site than the present. It is to the city's underground that Niqula escapes when chased by the dogs, which makes him wonder: "It surprised me that I did not feel especially afraid. I felt no dread about going on and going deeper" (66). It is there too where he surrenders to a deep sleep. The same numbing sleepiness, along with feelings of safety and security, take over him as he finds his way back to the jar woman for the second time (69). The acknowledgment of the past's opacity, and by implication the present's, is indispensable for a better

understanding of the postcolonial condition. Based on this premise, Chakrabarty believes, different forms of knowledge can have a better chance of co-inhabiting our life:

To open ourselves to histories [that do not easily fit our categories] would require us seriously to grant our social life a constant lack of transparency with regard to any one particular way of thinking of it. This is no ground for the rejection of Enlightenment rationalism. It is rather to be secure in the knowledge that investigative procedure embodying this rationality gives us only partial hold on our lives—and that too through necessary, much-needed, yet inevitably poor translations. (*Habitations* 37)

Likewise, although the underground seems safer, it is dark, causing Niqula to become temporarily numb and blind. Therefore, each trip underground ends with Niqula tracing his way back to the surface/outside. Nevertheless, Barakat continues to complicate the past/present or old/modern binary through Niqula's constant movement between the underground and the surface, the inside and outside. His movement might also stand for the national ambivalence towards these binaries.

It is in relation to the city's past as embodied in its underground that the war is reactivated. If there is a real sense of war in the novel, its source is not Lebanese, but rather the Israeli presence on and beyond the Lebanese soil. The first live depiction of armed conflict does not involve the Lebanese factions, this scene we witness as an aftermath, in the form of the ruined and deserted city center. A real sense of war is rather associated with the Israeli army, which seems to endanger both the city's present and past. It is when Niqula is underground that he hears the Israeli tanks rumbling overhead, causing the earth to shake and dirt to fall over his head (68), threatening thus to erase the long Lebanese history and evidence of its cultural multiplicity. At the entrance to the city's underground, Niqula finds an unexploded Israeli missile, which represents even a more obvious threat. This depiction of an Israeli danger to Beirut's multiple pasts implies

a negation of the Israelis' being part of this past. The danger the Israelis pose to the city's underground is reminiscent of modern colonialism's threat to the colonized people's national culture and history. As Fanon reminds us, "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it" (210). Instead of the civil war, the real threat to the Lebanese nationhood seems to be the danger of erasure of which the destruction of the city's past would be the most consequential part. In a similar situation to the erasure of the fabric stories, the erasure of this past would herald the city's ultimate fall into oblivion.

Positing the Israelis as irrelevant to the city's past renders them out-of-place, unidentifiable, and totally alien for Niqula. Hearing them talk, Niqula can recognize neither their identity nor language: "What was I hearing? What language was that? Who was talking, above me? Which devils were these?" (68). This foreignness is more obvious when juxtaposed to Lebanon's multiple histories that extend back in time. Niqula's following questions highlight their lack of historical presence in the land even more by negating their belonging to the remainder of the city and beyond: "What people had filled the land beyond the center city limits, and now drove their rumbling armored cars across it?" (69). Equally alarming are the changes the Israeli military invasion inflicts on the country's present. Subsequent to the appearance of their aircrafts and explosions, "rain came down gray" (87). There is also the possibility that Niqula's death is caused by the Israeli military invasion that planted explosives and missiles in the ground and polluted the natural resources. "Who killed me," Niqula speaks from beyond his death, "For I did not die a natural death ... I did not eat any poisoned plants, nor did

the dogs take me as their prey” (173). More likely though are the other possibilities: “Was it stray bullets that felled me ... Or was I blown up by one of the landmines left by the soldiers who passed along the seashore one day, cursing and shoring in a language that I realized later was Hebrew?” (173).

### **The Failure to Atone: The Ultimate Decline**

Niqula’s death, however, is by no means the novel’s denouement. As a matter of fact, the latter begins much earlier, with Niqula’s first sign of deterioration in the form of forgetfulness. As discussed before, while emphasizing the importance of true knowledge, the novel acknowledges the difficulty of attaining it. Niqula declares earlier, “to see the two sides together and simultaneously, is an exercise in impossibility?” (134). This declaration foreshadows the end of his relationship with Shamsa. In the aftermath of Shamsa’s disappearance, Niqula admits regrettably that his father and he do gain this knowledge but only in hindsight. “All we learned, he and I, seemed to come at the wrong time ... It passed across us as if we had the transparency of silk,” Niqula laments after losing Shamsa (166). He loses Shamsa, it is implied, because he forgets to apply what he preaches, to be at the pinnacle and to see Shamsa’s other side, the Sufi master in her, who can precede him to the ultimate knowledge. Although Shamsa’s name is reminiscent of a historic Sufi master, Shams, who had a big influence on the great Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi, Niqula thinks of Shamsa as his student, capable only of receiving his teachings:

But I began to teach Shamsa velvet before the battles began. From the shop, I brought her the most beautiful velvet fabrics we had. Large swathes, which I would not reveal to her all at one time. Instead, for each one I told her a story—a velvet with every lesson—and she ascended with me in each level of pleasure, as the disciple of a Sufi master ascends. (72)

Shamsa's potential is undermined by her status in the modern world as a servant. It is Niqula's forgetting that she originally belongs to a different hierarchy stemming from her people's distinctive history. Niqula thus commits what his father warns about all along—that is the loss of hierarchy, which ushers in the ultimate decline.

With Niqula's continued forgetfulness of good taste and the ability at distinction and selection also aborts the subversive potential of Niqula's primitive experience, turning it into a state of decline, not unlike the modern cultural and aesthetic decadence that causes his father's sadness and death. Niqula watches his body gradually deteriorate. He then makes another confession, implying the collapse of his previous hierarchical taste: "Now, though, I can hardly stop eating, as if whatever I swallow does not stay for any amount of time in my stomach and cannot fill it. I have experimented, chewing and swallowing things I never got close to before, plants or crawling things that cross the floor or birds that fall into my traps. Almost nothing repels me" (138). This final stage of Niqula's return into a primitive state of living is the ultimate embodiment of the return of the repressed, which is the mirror image of the modern decadence. Pondering his bodily changes, he finally recalls his father's words, now with a better understanding of their meaning and the cause of his degeneration: "These are the marks of deterioration ... It is the disgraceful flaw of not being able to exert mastery over an appetite as cavernous as the mouth of an immense well, an inability to prefer, to select, to sort, to classify according to suitability and quality. It is the indiscriminate appetite of the cancerous cell in its voracious blindness" (139).

This unrestrained appetite is the opposite of his earlier calculated desire for Shamsa. Trying to find out if she will be the first to initiate a kiss, Niqula labors to restrain himself from being the initiator. The strenuous attempt is a combination of desire and intellect, where every movement is pre-calculated: “no movement of my head. I work my brain to reckon the distance do that I will not bring my head forward unawares, so that it will not move of its own accord, without my willing it. So that my upper spine will not betray me” (126). In contrast with modernity’s notion of excess, the novel implies the benefit of continuous longing, which is a fundamental principle in Sufism, where “the destination is the journey itself ... The longing itself is redemptive and is progress” (Keshavarz).

Niqula turns out to be prey to the very concept responsible for the loss of hierarchy, which is freedom, described by Jirjis as the ultimate illusion. Deceived by his apparent freedom, Niqula gradually loses his ability to select and classify. His illusion of primitive freedom is the mirror image of the illusion of modern freedom and democracy. These, Jirjis assures his son earlier, have led to innumerable illnesses: the loss of hierarchy, of differentiation, of good taste, etc.:

we are at the threshold of a new and different era. We are on the threshold of an age of illusion, dictating that everyone must have access to all. Now, when a poor customer enters this shop she believes she has the authority of a veritable lady. She thinks that in moving through the streets and shops as her whims take her she has more freedom than she had before. (141)

The fabric stories are where the novel’s hierarchy theme can be seen the best. Not only does true fabric indicate high and refined taste but status and privilege, which have been upended in the age of democracy and modernity. These modern systems have paradoxically created new slaves “toiling inside gloomy factories” (98). It is in this era of

modern nation-states that Shamsa becomes a servant. Recalling her people's long history of myth, bravery, and freedom, Shamsa asks Niqula, "So how can we be your servants, my master? How can we be your servants?" (85).

The novel's nostalgia for hierarchy can be read as part of a romantic and reactionary rendition of the nation, one that aims at restoring order and stability and preventing the lustful pursuit of power, initiated by the loss of hierarchy. This atypical political vision takes its cue from the hierarchical world of fabric, at the top of which is silk. In this context, Niqula tells Shamsa, "Perhaps that is why the ancients restricted the wearing of silk to kings and sultans and saints and forbade it to everyone else. This was not tyranny but rather a shield against the lust for power, the illusions of might and the corruption they whet in individual minds and in society" (167).

Modernity then creates the illusion that accessibility means freedom. In reality, though, mass production leads to new kinds of slavery (60). Taking his cue from the significance of the butterfly's emergence out of its cocoon, Niqula explains to Shamsa the benefit of restraint as opposed to excess: "For a thing of beauty to attain plentitude requires the destruction of everything outside of itself" (167). To become a butterfly, the worm "must remember nothing about silk. To live the trivial, foolish, and rapidly fading life of butterflies, it must lay waste its entire past. It must forget silk" (152). However, by staying inside the cocoon rather than turning into a butterfly, perhaps "the worm is transformed into its own silk when it dies inside the cocoon. Perhaps it finds that life sufficient, there in the very meaning of its life" (152). In line with the conclusions made by other cultures about the danger of indulging things so perfect as silk, Niqula says to Shamsa that the Muslims declared women's wearing it in public, a forbidden act:

“*Haraam!* they said. It is forbidden ... to fuse two such perfect temptations, the summits of desire: the body of a woman and the fabric of silk. So passionate was their longing for that female body that its encasement in silk beyond the walls of home must be prohibited ... A source of chaos in the streets that brook no laws of mercy and compassion” (169).

The loss of balance and control also accounts for Niqula’s disillusionment with the manner with which he told his stories. Niqula tells his stories to Shamsa to make her stay. Once he tells her the last story, the silk story, she leaves and does not come back. Ultimately, he regretfully realizes that he himself did not comprehend that story, which teaches balance. On the contrary, he loses control, giving Shamsa all the love and telling her all the stories. Regretting his emotional indulgence, Niqula admits,

For you, I dipped from the sack of another, all the while filled with the arrogance of doers of good, almsgivers, and the openhanded. I fell a victim to my own poor scanty knowledge. The lessons of my upbringing deceived me; or I did not understand those lessons as I should have ... No one told me that I should count my possessions. No one counseled modesty, so that I would recognize the boundaries of my domain. (116)

Had Shamsa not found out the whole story of the silk, she might not have left. The qualities of balance and restraint resonate with comparable spiritual elements. For example, in Sufism the concept of “value in perplexity” privileges the lack of full knowledge. Not knowing can be a source of learning, “something that propels us forward into finding out” (Keshavarz).

Shamsa, on the other hand, proves more capable of maintaining balance. Pondering the reasons for her control and ability to stay away, Niqula asks, “Is it because you are wiser than me, and more modest, more adept at making your incandescent self a reality?” (109). She even tries to caution him of the risk of excess. “It is as if,” he finally realizes, “you want me to grow and mature through the successive days of my life— and

to become more humble as well” (109). Barakat tries to instill the qualities of modesty and balance not only as personal traits but as community ones. Simon During refers to the trait of shame as a pre-capitalist emotion (128). Similarly, other traits, such as the novel’s notions of balance and modesty are also pre-capitalist qualities that need to make a return into the country’s political, cultural, and social configurations.

### **It Is About the War After All**

Within the novel’s war context, Niqula’s decline also allows Barakat to comment on the nature of survival that was required of those who stayed behind, a survival that espouses responsibility. Cooke argues that women writing about the civil war made it clear in their writings that survival alone is not enough and that “each survivor must be made aware of this fact and its consequences” (*War’s* 143). During the first years of war, Niqula enacts some sense of responsibility by teaching Shamsa various lessons about hierarchy, balance and the danger of excess. However, his inability to apply these lessons to himself as well might also be understood as more than unfortunate forgetfulness. It can be argued that in a sense Niqula acts with maternal instincts, caring for the others and forgetting himself. He demonstrates what Sara Ruddick calls maternal thinking (Cooke, *War’s* 166). Cooke argues that the women writers who stayed in Lebanon during the war and wrote about the war in ways different from their male counterparts constantly confirm that “responsibility ... must be located squarely within oneself, for it is oneself that one must trust, and through oneself survive. Responsibility is not guilt or recrimination, but rather a creative concern to assure collective survival and consciousness” (*War’s* 102).

Niqula thus lacks a full sense of responsibility to the self that he could have acquired from a more masculine aptitude. Similarly, Cooke concludes that real responsibility can be attained through *balancing* male and female notions of responsibility, which can produce a “kind of selfishness of self-awareness ... to precede connection, because without the male sense of identity and rights, duties engulfed the personality and rendered it useless” (*War's* 105). In contrast with Niqula, Hanoun enacts a more balanced sense of responsibility. Through his maternal habits and feminine behavior, Hanoun takes care of Niqula during their stay together. At the same time, this companionship would not have been possible if Hanoun had not been concerned about his own survival, wellbeing and his need for company, which made him seek Niqula's companionship.

However, after Shamsa leaves, Niqula's earlier feminine responsibility is replaced by total indifference, which is highly condemned by the Beirut Decentrists, who compared it to blindness that is “punishable with death” (Cooke, *War's* 101). Indeed, death turns out to be what awaits the protagonist at the end. A little before that, Niqula describes his degenerate state as blindness: “how can you blame a blind person, who cannot see and so launches himself toward everything randomly? And because he cannot see a form, he cannot remember it” (139). As the Prophet Mohammed's epigraph at the beginning of the novel implies blindness is a natural human condition. However, it is one that is intensified by modernity's illusions and constructs. As Chakrabarty reminds us, “Shadows fall between the abstract values of modernity and the historical process through which the institutions come to be built” (*Habitations* 80).

During the earlier period of Niqula's stay in the abandoned city center, he experiences a symbolic rebirth that invokes both masculine and feminine imagery, bringing him closer to the image of the new citizen Barakat imagines. After bullets miss him, killing others at an armed barrier to which he ran when chased by the dog, he takes a bath in a pond by the Parliament Building. The symbolism of rebirth is underscored by the feelings of childhood that engulf him after taking the bath: "Coming out of the water ... I felt hunger pressing on my intestines, as I used to feel as a little boy after coming out of the bath" (120). The image also invokes the Mary's experience of childbirth as depicted in the Quran. Mary's image is brought into play in the scene following Niqula's symbolic baptism, wherein Niqula walks down the streets of the city naked and free, and then he comes upon a little date palm from which he eats until he is full, feeling happy and serene, as the Quranic Mary does after giving birth to Jesus (120-121). Barakat's depiction of Niqula here as a mother and child echoes the image of the jar woman, who, too, is both a woman and a child. Niqula's double-embodiment stands for Barakat's notion of the citizen's reciprocal relationship with the country. The citizen has to be simultaneously a giver and a taker, through this perception can responsibility to the self and others be achieved: "All who wish to consider themselves Lebanese must stay in the country and become an organic part of its regenerative soil. But who can plant such roots? People who feel together and intensely for something that is at once their child and, paradoxically, their parent, the source of their communal identity" (Cooke, *Women* 283-84).

Niqula's liminal space of primitive experience and his ultimate failure are also a critique of people's lives that continued as normal in the absence of war's immediate

signs.<sup>3</sup> Being the mirror image of the modern condition, war too has its own illusions that give the impression of a possible normal and free life. Celebrating his new life in the abandoned city center, Niqula ponders, “I live now as I always hoped to live. Nothing disturbs my equilibrium ... I *see* now what I truly want to see. The city did not betray me as my grandfather feared it would” (9-11 emphasis added). Soon, Niqula admits that he has been blind all along. Deceived by his freedom, he turns the previous battlefield into a domestic space, emphasizing thus his blurred gender identity as well as his civilian status. However, although it is true that war eschews binaries, but it does that in favor of the masculine and the militant, rather than in a way that dismantles the binaries of combatant/civilian and feminine/masculine altogether. As Elaine Showalter argues, war bends the gender lines in favor of masculine traits whose exaggeration, such as the long term repression of signs of fear, is behind shell shock in war (Cooke, *Women* 104). By contrast, Niqula exaggerates the feminine aspect of his identity, oblivious to the power of war. In the end he is vanquished because violence is unfortunately the ultimate victor.

Discursively, however, Niqula’s disembodied voice continues the story, and therefore the resistance, as he speaks from beyond his death. We then learn that the whole narrative was told by a dead man. Niqula’s voice wards off Barakat’s reactionary pronouncement about the danger of forgetting that hierarchical past and its stories, embodied in Niqula. Standing for that world, his story has to continue. What this disembodied voice articulates right after Niqula’s death, however, is not a triumphant ending. In the afterlife, Niqula represents the act of waiting: “And when I discovered that there was no one to be seen in the rows of seats, I chose a seat for myself and sat down to wait for the concert” (175). This act echoes his earlier waiting for Shamsa’s coming each

day during the first period of the war. Keeping in mind Shamsa's significance, Niqula's wait is one for the new non-nation being. It is also reminiscent of those who stayed in Beirut during the war waiting for the unfolding of a better future. As Cooke puts it, the "wait presupposes a future, something that is awaited" (*War's* 130). The wait, which many had to do during the war, especially women, was not enough; there had to be action: "The wait, the norm of war time existence, had to be questioned. Consciousness of the wait had engendered alertness and awareness to the present but it had also emphasized the emptiness of the anticipation" (130). Therefore, Barakat exposes waiting as futile and painful. Niqula admits the pain his wait for Shamsa causes him: "What do you do to me, Shamsa? ... What are you doing to me, Shamsa, when you torment me? You stay away, and then return with blithe phrases that you are perfectly aware of having selected for their buoyancy" (109). Furthermore, after his death, Niqula compares what he did his whole life, waiting and telling stories, to the pointless act of tilling water. Referring to the place he finds himself in after his death, Niqula says,

From time to time my dazzled eyes register a calm layer of water submerging this entire paved expanse. The sight makes me want to get up out of my chair and run in all directions. To till it well. Then I ask myself why should I want to return to that. Have I not spent my entire life tilling the water? Isn't that what we always did, father? (175)

## **Conclusion**

What Barakat attempts in this novel is part of decades-old search for a new civic identity that was triggered by the eruption of the war in 1975 and continues today. As the novel gnaws at essential elements of national thought, particularly national history, culture, the nationalist subject and modern knowledge systems, it implies the need to think outside the status logic. This cannot be done, the novel manifests, without

acknowledging the significance of the past. Through the fabric stories, which reveal the fabric hierarchal system, Barakat allows us to consider alternative experiences and modes of life rendered obsolete by the modern discourse of the nation-state. While acknowledging the past's opacity, *The Tiller* represents the modern political, cultural, and economic configurations as fraught with illusions. As is the case with other critiques of modernity, the ultimate effect of the novel is not a rejection of reason and rationality, but rather an acknowledgment of what is at stake in the processes of modernization and nationalization, such as the repression at the heart of these processes:

[T]he task is not to reject ideas of democracy, development, or justice. The task is to think of forms and philosophies of history that will contribute to struggles that aim to make the very process of achieving these outcomes as democratic as possible? How do we make the subalterns genuinely the subjects of their own history? (Chakrabarty, *Habitations* 33)

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A Home of Love: Deconstructing the Category “Muslim Woman”

#### In Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator*

“Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and a real bond with one’s native place.”

—Edward Said (xv)

Undeniably, as Said’s statement declares, love lies at the heart of one’s belonging to the homeland. Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator* is a literal manifestation of this statement, as it depicts its protagonist’s sense of belonging and bond with her native Sudan as being predicated on romantic love itself. This representation, which is in line with postmodern notions of place as a subjective entity, allows Aboulela to undermine the binaries of self/other, east/west, as well as home/exile and to destabilize the category of the Arab and Muslim woman. As Mohja Kahf argues, although there are variations on the narrative representing the Muslim woman in Western culture, the core narrative is that the Muslim woman is being victimized (*Western 1*). By positing love as central to her Muslim woman character’s subjectivity and relationship with her culture, native place, and society, Aboulela leaves no room for this Western representation, which, as Kahf underscores, is embedded in the history of Western representations of gender, of the self, and of the other, rather than in the real lives of the Muslim women (*Western 2*).

Similar to the other novels in this dissertation, then, *The Translator* depicts a fluid notion of home, which subsequently undermines fixed assumptions about not only place and belonging but also identity. Indeed, post-colonial theory of place foregrounds the

nonessentialist nature and interdependence of both place and subjectivity and by subsequently identity:

Place therefore, the 'place' of the 'subject', throws light upon subjectivity itself, because whereas we might conceive subjectivity as a process, as Lacan has done, so the discourse of place is a process of continual dialect between subject and object ... This was not a place which was simply there but a place which is in a continual process of being written. (Ashcroft 346)

The subjectivity and fluidity of place are iterated through the novel's protagonist's success to bring home into exile. In this chapter, I argue that the romantic relationship between the protagonist, Sammar, and the Scottish Rae is not merely an expression of inner feelings but a venue for Sammar to create a sense of home in the exile. In making this argument, I build on Lila Abu-Lughod's theorization of emotional language, in *Language and the Politics of Emotion*, as discursive practices embedded in power relations and the sociopolitical context:

We must understand emotional discourses as pragmatic acts and communicative performances ... in the public social world ... emotion talk must be interpreted as *in* and *about* social life rather than as veridically referential to some internal state....we should view emotional discourse as a form of social action that creates effects in the world, effects that are read in a culturally informed way by the audience for emotional talk. (Introduction 11-12)

As a pragmatic act, Sammar's selective language with her love-interest, Rae, is not a mere reflection of her feelings towards him per se but an attempt to create a sense of home and belonging, similar to those she loses with the death of her husband and childhood love, Tariq. Sammar's selective construction of her life story not only brings home into Aberdeen, Scotland, asserting the fluidity of place but dismantles the traditional image of the "Muslim Woman" as a victim of her culture.

Ironically, it is these notions of identity's and place's fluidity that are lost on Sammar when it comes to understanding Rae's identity. While Sammar's reconstruction of home and self helps her to restore a sense of belonging, it does so only partially. This is the case because it is based on purging what she thinks of as her difference. Similarly her relationship with Rae is based on her erasure of his difference, which brings the relationship to an end. It is not until Sammar comes to realize that difference is inseparable from identity that a real relationship with Rae becomes possible. In this chapter, I also argue that integral to the novel's reconstructed places and identities is difference. Post-colonial theorists and feminists, such as Trinh T. Minh-ha and Gayatri Spivak, stress the importance of difference for nonhierarchical cross cultural relations, including feminist alliances. In their work, they correlate the recognition of a shared identity between self and Other with an affirmation, rather than a transcendence, of difference.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Place of Her Own: A Home of Love**

From the beginning of the novel, Sammar's subjectivity is grounded in emotions and feelings rather than her in religious, cultural, or national contexts. All of these can be delineated in relation to her emotions, which undermines the Western hegemonic assumption about Arab and Muslim women's lives being centered around the culture and religion. In line with this context, Sammar's feelings are linked to her physical place rather than to elements of her culture. Therefore, the novel begins with a dream that embodies Sammar's anxiety about the rainy weather in Aberdeen, Scotland, and her meeting with her Scottish employer, Rae Isles, to whom she has recently become attracted. In the dream, Rae and the Scottish setting are interrelated, for the rain is

keeping Sammar from meeting Rae as planned: “She dreamt that it rained and she could not go out to meet him as planned. She could not walk through the rain and risk blurring the ink on the pages he had asked her to translate” (3). Sammar’s dream is, therefore, imbued with feelings of grief and anxiety: “And the anxiety that she was keeping him waiting pervaded the dream, gave it urgency that was astringent to grief” (3). These feelings are next revealed as an epitome of her alienation in Aberdeen:

She was afraid of the rain, afraid of the fog and the snow which came to this country, afraid of the wind even. At such times she would stay indoors and wait, watching from her window people doing what she couldn’t do: children walking to school through the swirling leaves, the elderly smashing ice on the pavement with their talking sticks ... Last year when the city had been dark with fog, she hid indoors for four years, eating her way through the last packet of pasta in the cupboard, drinking tea without milk. On the fifth day, when the fog lifted she went out famished, rummaging the shops for food, dizzy with the effort. (3)

Although this passage presents alienation as mediating Sammar’s relationship with her place, it does not posit it as an intrinsic quality of the place itself. It rather implies the relationship between Sammar’s feelings of alienation and estrangement and her not participating in the activities in which the others are involved, which seems to keep any attainment of a sense of belonging at bay. Significantly, practices, such as walking or casual daily encounters between people or groups, can give expression to what Tovi Fenster describes as “everyday belonging” that develops through men’s and women’s spatial knowledge of environments and their territorialization of them through daily interaction (243).<sup>2</sup> By only staying inside and not participating in people’s wintery activities, Sammar fails to territorialize her place and create and a sense of belonging, which exacerbates her outsider position and alienation.

Still, however, as the novel proceeds, taking us back to the Sudan of Sammar's childhood and early adulthood, it becomes clear that, in Sudan, territorialization, in the sense of a physical interaction with a place, is mediated by human relations. In Sammar's case, these relationships revolve around her romantic love for her cousin, and later to be husband, Tarig. Having started upon her arrival to Sudan for the first time, Sammar's love for Tarig becomes synonymous with her love for Sudan. The interchangeability of Tarig and Sudan is reiterated in almost every one of Sammar's recollections of either one. For example, when she ponders the possibility of visiting Sudan after her four-year stay in Scotland, the thought of home brings back her memories with Tarig and images of him in their native place: "To see home again. It was a chandelier on the ceiling of her life, circles of lights. To see again the streets where Tarig had ridden his bike ... To go to where everything happened, her aunt's house; laughter on their wedding, fire when she brought Tarig's body home" (33). Additionally, Sammar's life story, which she tells to Rae, starts with her arrival to Sudan for the first time, rather than with the first seven years of her life which she had lived in Scotland, because her arrival to Sudan also marks her first meeting with Tarig. Her life/love story reveals, to use a term borrowed from Rosemary Sayigh, its primordially that "displaces more usual beginnings such as birth or first memories" (45). "I was born here as you know," she tells Rae, "and my parents and I did not go back home not until I was seven ... The word 'until' as if she still could not reconcile herself to those first seven years of life without him" (4-5). As a matter of fact, she would rather pretend she had always lived in Sudan, so she would have met Tarig earlier: "In better times she used to reinvent the beginning of her life. Make believe that she 'was born at home in Sudan, Africa's largest land, in the Sisters' Maternity

hospital, delivered by a nun dressed in white. She liked to imagine that Tarig was waiting for her outside the delivery room, holding his mother's hand, impatient for her" (5).

Instead of the image of the Western image of the "escapee" Arab woman who strives to break away from her cruel culture and the oppressive Arab men (Kahf, "Packaging" 149), Sammar loves to imagine her life starting *in* Sudan and *within* its Arab culture that affects her from the first day. Had she been born in Sudan instead of Scotland, she tells Rae, she would have had a different name, "a more common one. A name suggested by her aunt, for she was a woman who had an opinion on all things" (5).

Personal names are employed in the novel as manifestations of a place's impact through the mediation of language. Rae's last name, for example, is reminiscent of the British Isles, their culture and politics. Sammar's name, as she tells Rae, is associated with the desert: "It means conversations with friends, late at night" (5). The trace place leaves on other linguistic expressions and ultimately on individuals is symbolically stated in the political manifesto of the Egyptian Islamist radical group, *Al-Nidaa*, Sammar translates for Rae: "The document was hand written, badly photocopied and full of spelling mistakes. It was stained with tea and what she guessed to be beans mashed with oil" (5-6). The written document with its stains and marks bespeaks the place and background of its authors.

Sammar's native place is no different. It, too, leaves its mark on people. Being the place of her first and biggest love, Sammar bears the mark of that love and its loss. Sammar's mark is not only psychological but physical as well. The death of the man who was at once her cousin, husband, and the father of her son leaves her in a prolonged state of mourning that affects her so much so that it has transfigures into physical pain with the

shape of a diamond whose four corners point to the areas of pain she frequently feels after Tarig's death. This imaginary mark and the feelings of love and loss of which it is a reminder are compared to other parts of her body, her hair and skin, which are covered reflecting her personal level of Muslim practice: "Her invisible mark shifted, breathed its existence. It was hidden from Rae, like her hair and the skin on her arms, it could only be imagined. Four years ago this mark had crystallized. Grief had formed, taken shape, a diamond shape, its four angles stapled on to her forehead, each shoulder, the top of her stomach" (4). However, the fact that she wears a head covering, a marker of her Muslim identity, is mentioned in passing, relegating the scarf secondary compared to her emotions. So although place affects a person in so many ways, Sammar's native Sudan impacts her the most through the love and romance she experiences in it. *The Translator* manifests that, for Sammar, love and home are interchangeable and therefore the loss of one signals the loss of the other. Therefore, for her the two losses are one and the same: "She had lived four years as if home been taken away from her in the same way Tariq had" (33).

The significance of place and more specifically social location in determining language, including the language of emotions, accounts for Sammar's emotional expressions. This is the case also wherein these expressions involve other people, besides Tarig and Rae, such as her aunt, who is also her mother-in-law. "I love your mother more than you," she teasingly tells Tarig, "hugging her aunt, kissing her cheeks, putting her head on her shoulder" (10). Sammar's love for her aunt can be understood as more than an excess of her love for Tarig himself; it is rather a manifestation of the implication of emotional discursive practices in social reality. As Abu-Lughod asserts, "discourses on

emotion, or emotional discourses for that matter ... are implicated in the play of power and the operation of historically changing systems of social hierarchy” (“Shifting” 28). Sammar’s marriage to Tarig situates her within another social group than her immediate family, and her love for her aunt is an emotional acknowledgment of this new affiliation and its hierarchy, at the top of which is her aunt.

The role of social context in determining and shaping emotional practices and discourses is also implied in the reason behind Sammar’s resistance to marrying an atheist. Although the Islamic prohibition on Muslim women’s marrying from outside their faith is what almost gets the couple’s relationship to a dead end, in this particular instance, it is atheism’s being alien to Sammar’s social background that makes it unbearable. In response to the remark of her friend, Yasmin, that Rae’s sympathies with Muslims do not rule out the possibility of his atheism, “Sammar put the iron down. Never in her life had anyone she cared about been an unbeliever ... always the faith was there. His existence never denied. It was unbearable to think that Rae was so unaware” (94). Sammar’s subsequent urge to find out his religious standpoint and wishfully thinking that he be not an atheist is predicated on the simple fact that she does not know a single atheist within her social context. Instead of relegating Sammar’s concern with Rae’s religion to Islam only, Aboulela situates it within her larger social context. By positing social context and experience as significant factors in shaping her protagonist’s life, Aboulela undermines the usually Western attitude that considers Islam “that totalizing concept to which everything that happens in Middle Eastern societies tends to be reduced” (Abu-Lughod, “Shifting” 33).

### **Place as a Palimpsest: Bringing Home to the Exile**

As Sammar's story unfolds, it becomes evident that not only place shapes language and consequently identity, but the opposite is true as well, as language in the novel constructs place where it does not exist. Following the dream with which the novel begins, Sammar meets with Rae at The Winter Gardens, which stand for the fluidity and constructedness of place. By featuring various habitats from the world over, The Winter Gardens inscribe place as a palimpsest alluding to different places lying in the heart of the foggy city, Aberdeen, with "[w]histling birds flying indoors, the grey sky irrelevant above the glass ceiling" (4). Moreover, the use of language to define and describe the gardens to the public emphasizes the role of language in creating this place: "The door to the Winter Gardens (an extended greenhouse in Duthie Park) was covered with signs. So, no prams or pushchairs allowed, sorry no dogs allowed, opening hours 9.30 till dusk" (4). Language thus not only helps define a place but actually contributes to its creation. Sammar notes of Britain that in "this country everything was labeled, everything had a name. She had got used to the explicitness" (4). The novel thus "does not simply propose a binary separation between the 'place' named and described in language, and some 'real' place inaccessible to it, but rather indicates that in some sense place *is* language, something in constant flux, a discourse in process" (Ashcroft 345).<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, it is through language that Sammar brings her home to the exile. More specifically, being a home of love and emotions, Sammar's Sudan can only be recreated through emotional practices and discourses. It is in this sense that Sammar's relationship with Rae needs to be understood—that is as a re-enactment of the home-bound emotions of love, acceptance and understanding. It is within this context also that her previous alienation and depression can be accounted for. After returning to Aberdeen, Sammar's

experience in this place turns out to be more traumatizing than Tarig's death itself. In Aberdeen, in place of Tarig's love, Sammar is Othered due to her cultural and religious difference, which turns her mourning into a state of depression and her place into an exile. In a conversation with a previous employer, the element that provides the occasion for this encounter is only Sammar's religious difference epitomized by her head-dress (*hijab*). Unable to find any common ground to initiate a conversation, Sammar's employer says, "'My boyfriend is Nigerian,' and paused as if that statement had a deeper meaning she wanted Sammar to grasp" (99). For Sammar, though, this statement is irrelevant and incomprehensible, making her feel "like a child who had stayed up too late at night and was discovering that in the adult world there were things she could not understand" (100). The fact that Sammar is in a state of mourning and grief over her recently deceased Tariq does not signify for the employer as much as Sammar's *hijab*: "Jennifer talked away fresh and brisk, reassuring her of how broad-minded and tolerant she was, not like so many people. 'For example,' Jennifer said, 'I have no problem at all with the way you dress'" (100). In such a context, where only her dress signifies, Sammar resorts to silence and sleep: "When Sammar finally spoke, she managed, 'Thank you,' and went home and slept. She slept deeply and continuously until the next day" (100).

Others are similarly alienating for Sammar, as they react to her Muslim identity with various shades of surprise: "surprise-sneer, surprise-embarrassed, surprise-bemused, surprise-disapproving. She had to be silent. Use her teeth and lips to keep silent" (45). In *The Translator*, the silence Arab and Muslim women are accused of is *not* generated by or within their culture, as the stereotype implies, but rather outside of it. The novel depicts this silencing as a tool of oppression contributing directly to Sammar's

psychological suffering, depriving her the ability to think, speak and even see, which reflects on her sense of place. Therefore, when Rae responds to her difference as “if he had given her a promise, never to be taken aback” by anything she said, she feels as if she is given a “permission to talk and think” (45), which ultimately gets her out of her alienating state and alters her sense of place. In contrast with other people’s attitude, which takes away her voice, vision and thinking ability, Rae’s attitude allows Sammar to retrieve these abilities: “The same manners which made her talk to him, made the world vivid for the first time in years” (6).

For Rae, Sammar’s difference is the grounds for locating their similarities, rather than for Othering her. Therefore, instead of alienating him, Sammar’s reference to her childhood in Sudan prompts Rae to talk about his own childhood experiences. While at Rae’s house, Sammar sits on the floor to look at a magazine article about schoolgirls in Somalia, and when “she looked up, Rae was watching her, a look in his eyes like kindness. Encouraged she said, ‘I used to wear a uniform like that in secondary school’” (17). In response to Sammar’s difference, Rae alludes to his own difference and hence his similarity to her: “They made us wear shorts even in the winter. It was awful, walking to school in the cold” (17).

Being grounded in acceptance, similarity and proximity, Rae’s attitude is reminiscent of Sammar’s home, which is entangled with and shaped by love. Therefore, at the end of Sammar’s visit to Rae’s, Sammar’s Sudan comes to exile, which underlines the notion of place as a construct of language and human relations. That night, Sammar experiences her first African night in Aberdeen. Outside Rae’s house, “Sammar stepped into a hallucination in which the world swung around. Home had come here. Its dimly lit

streets, its sky and the feel of home had come here and balanced just for her” (21). This is not mere engulfing feelings of homesickness, Sammar reminds herself, for this “had happened before but not for so long, not so deeply” (21). Now she finally restores the use of her faculties, Sammar experiences the arrival of home with all her senses: “She saw the sky cloudless with too many stars, imagined the night warm, warmer than indoors. She smelled dust and heard the barking of stray dogs among the street’s rubble and pot-holes. A bicycle bell tinkled, frogs croaked, the muezzin coughed into the microphone and began the azan for the *Isha* prayer” (21).

Sammar’s new sense of place, she realizes from the beginning, is bound with Rae’s language. Indeed, this time is different, she realizes, because the rules that kept her silent for long were being broken: “They broke when she said, in Rae’s flat, her fingers on the magazine, ‘I used to wear a uniform like that in school.’ The rules broke and burst her head in little bright pieces” (45). Moreover, the novel manifests that place as constructed in language and human relations is more real than geographical place, and so is language itself. Rae and Sammar’s subsequent conversations make Sammar all the more aware of the reality of fluid places and their language. “The landing,” she ponders as she speaks with Rae on the phone during the holiday break, “existed with the bicycles under the stairs and the winter sun seeping through the edges of the letter box. But all that was unreal, superseded. What was real was that she had been given permission to think and talk, and he would not be surprised by anything she said” (45). Just as real as this ability to talk is the new place it brings about. Therefore, when one of Rae’s students asks her later if she had been anywhere for the holidays (the time she spent with Rae over the

phone), she replies, “No,” but “felt that she had been away, far away to a place where she was content” (72).

After her first conversations with Rae, Sammar becomes conscious of the simultaneity of home and exile, which undermines their binarism. Place is, thus, underscored as palimpsest wherein different places concur. Following one of Rae’s phone calls, Sammar is engulfed again by the same feelings of being at home she experiences during and after her visit to Rae’s. Again, home comes back, blurring the spatial and temporal boundaries between Sudan and Scotland: “Where was she now, which country? What year? She climbed the stairs into a hallucination in which the world had swung around. Home and the past had come here and balanced just for her” (41). Home returns in its time and place, which transforms the stairs of the building wherein Sammar lives into other “stairs in a warm yellow light and sounds of a party, people talking and someone laughed” and she is in the middle of all this “offering glasses of something that was dark and sweet” (41). Rae, too, implies the simultaneity of place and time rather than their hierarchical relationship when he tells Sammar that, “he wanted to take her to places where she would forget and remember. Show her a bend in the Dee and she would see the Nile. Show her a house with a flat roof, a lighthouse that looked like a white minaret, castles where believers lived long ago, subservient to the climate” (57). The fact that exile, or the West for that matter, triggers memories of home undermines claims about their essential difference and blurs their binary opposition.

The fluidity of time and place do not pertain to exile only, a similar transposition occurs in Sudan as well. Contemplating her relationship with Rae before her visit to Sudan as part of a work trip to Egypt, Sammar anticipates that things she has come to

know about him will become a part of her life in Sudan. Exile, too, then, will be reconstructed at her home, in the form of her memories of Rae. These memories will be as real as anything else in her decades-long life in Sudan, occupying an equal space with older parts of it: "At home among people she had known all her life, she would remember things she had come to know about him" (35). Foreshadowing his impact on her in Sudan, she ponders, "she would remember his timetable, lectures, tutorials, the names of the Ph.D students whose theses he supervised ... The names of books lined up on the wall of his office" (34-35). As Sammar goes home, her expectations come true, even more so than she had expected. Not only Rae's memories come into Sudan but Aberdeen itself. Home and exile trade places again in Sammar's consciousness, manifesting Fenster's argument that "in many cases belonging is also associated with past and present experiences and memories and future ties connected to a place, which grow with time" (243). Undeniably, this notion of belonging modifies limited ideas of nationalist belonging to a particular geographical space.

As a result of this spatial transposition, different places making up Sammar's exile gradually lose their alienating connotations, acquiring instead the imprint of Sammar's new love relationship. With Sammar's above recollection of her wedding in Sudan being transposed into her Aberdeen building, the building's staircase is transformed: "She ran up the stairs that she had often taken a step a time, dragging her grief. Now the staircase had a different aura, a different light" (41). For Sammar, what her dialogue with Rae manages to do is more like a miracle: "Sitting on the floor of the landing, she thought that this was a miracle. Not only his voice, but that happiness could come here at the foot of the stairs, the same stairs that were, once, so difficult to

climb....” (51). In similar terms, Sammar now sees her apartment with new eyes, realizing the “ugly curtains, the faded bedspread ... She held these things in her hands, as if seeing them for the first time” (67). For the second time she gets rid of stuff, just like she did in her expedited evacuation after Tarig’s death: “Big black bags, putting things away, folding and putting things away in a bag ... But now there was no grief, no burning in her head and chest, she worked calmly, deciding what she wanted to keep and what she didn’t” (67). She finally transforms her “hospital room” into a meaningful space that carries the mark of the newly found love. She buys new curtains, which when she looks at, hanging, she realizes their similarity to the ones Rae had in a previous home. Reassured about her recuperation, she ponders, “She had unconsciously chosen these colours, the same colours he had talked about. His words were in her mind now, floating, not evaporating away” (69).

Sammar’s relationship with the public space also changes, to one that offers her the sense of everyday belonging she lacked earlier. Her various meetings with Rae in public can be described as informal daily practices that facilitate laying claim over or territorializing public space and thus generating everyday belonging. Additionally, unlike her previous seclusion, she now goes shopping, takes walks in the city’s streets, and participates in women’s activities. By pointing out the different stores and places Sammar visits or walks, the narrator implies Sammar’s knowledge of the place and her new sense of belonging: “The shops were beginning to open their doors. Sammar passed a newsagent, a sports shop, fishmonger, bakery. The grocer shop which sold halal meat was closed; it opened late in the day....” (66). Now she also does what others do: “Yesterday, she had been one of the people in search of bargains” (67). The fluidity of

place implies also the unfixity of place's difference. Like place, then, difference is fluid and relative. Sammar realizes this fact about Aberdeen's difference, which changed over time:

Things that jarred—an earring on a man's earlobe, a woman walking a big enough to swallow the infant she was at the same time pushing in a pram ... Now Sammar did not notice these things, did not gaze at them, alarmed, as she had done years before. Her eyes had grown numb over the years and she had found out, gradually, and felt reassured that she was not alone, that not everyone believed what the billboards said, not everyone understood why that woman kept such a large ferocious dog in her home. (70)

However, the ultimate manifestation of the end of Sammar's alienation is when her exilic place itself, like home, is internalized subconsciously. After her visit to Rae's home, she has her *first* dream about Aberdeen. Before that she always dreamt of Sudan only. This was "her first dream of the present, the first time this grey landscape had found a place in her sleeping mind. Four years and her soul had dived into the past, nothing in the present could touch it" (29). Now, then, home is no longer the only significant place. Sammar's dream implies exile's potential as a legitimate place for normal existence and future memories, similar to home. In this context, the narrator draws attention to Sammar's location when she laughs for the first time in years: "In the Winter Gardens, Sammar started to laugh" (24). There and then, she also begins to envision for the first time her reunion with her child, now that she is emerging out of her depressed state.

### **A Story of Her Own:**

With home and belonging being based on human relationships and language, and with Sammar's difference being what prevented her from attaining a sense of home earlier, Sammar's language with Rae embodies her longing for belonging and fear of

being Othered. Alarmed by others' alienating response to her difference, Sammar eliminates from her life story, which she tells Rae, all that might result in Otherizing her. She foregrounds her agency, thus, by refashioning her personal history, through modification and omission, into a new story that can sustain Rae's accepting attitude. Sammar's new story highlights the power and constructedness of representation, as well as the crucial role of mediating between experience and representation as the latter conditions our reading of the represented subject. Therefore, her story can be seen as a parody of feminist Orientalists' representations of Third World women, which are grounded in the feminist Orientalists' construction of what Chandra Mohanty calls the "Third World Difference."

And it is in the production of this "Third World Difference" that Western feminisms appropriate and "colonize" the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes in these countries. It is in this process of homogenization and systemitization of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of recent Western feminist discourse, and this power needs to be defined and named. (335)

As it turns out, what Sammar thinks of as her difference is not culture-or-religion bound per se but rather the emotions that can undermine the traditional image of the caring mother and loyal daughter, images that pertain both in British and Sudanese patriarchy, which undermines the essentialist notions of the third world women's difference.

During the first stage of their relationship she wonders "which part of the narrative to soften, to omit. How much of the truth could he take, without a look of surprise crossing his eyes? She had never said anything that surprised him before. And she wanted it always to be like that" (6). As a result of this appropriation, the first part of the novel depicting Rae and Sammar's exchange of their life stories unfolds two

narratives: one that Sammar tells Rae and one that she leaves out, which is similar to the froth that rises to the surface of the water when she boils chicken and which she has to remove because it is “granulated dirt the colour of peanuts, scum from the chicken that was better not eaten” (7). Inside her too, “there was froth like that, froth that could rise if she started to speak. Then he would see it and maybe go away” (7).

Sammar’s froth-like “difference” is nothing but her nontraditional mother model, which comes into being as a result of her mourning for Tarig’s death. She had said to her son, “I wish it was you instead. I hate you” (7). However, the story of these emotions does not make it to Sammar’s narrative of why she leaves her little child behind in Sudan. Instead, she tells the story as a manifestation about her aunt’s strength and compassion. “My aunt is a strong woman,” she tells Rae “a leader really. She is looking after my son now. I haven’t seen them for four years” (7). What actually happened, as she herself ponders, is that she “had given the child to Mahasen and it had not meant anything, nothing, as if he had not been once a piece of her, with her wherever she walked” (7). Sammar’s appropriation of the language about her emotions towards her husband and son is a good example of the pragmatics of emotions. As Abu-Lughod reminds us, “to have certain feelings or at least to express particular sentiments becomes a political statement, if not a political act” (*Language* 43).

Sammar’s appropriation of her conflicting emotions underscores her agency yet in another way, as it reveals her engagement in an active retrospection that results in a deepened consciousness and self-knowledge, characteristic of traveling women. As Aihwa Ong argues,

Changes engendered by emigration, marriage, divorce, and children leaving home make women reflect on their lives ... Such *examined lives*

*bred in the liminal spaces between cultures and societies* represent new imaginations about power and about the self, the kind of self knowledge that can modify metropolitan theories of postcolonialism as multiple victimization. (367)

Similarly, while constructing her story, Sammar goes through a process of introspection and ultimately self-knowledge. As a result, she becomes aware of herself as a complex construct of different, and sometimes even contradictory, elements of religion, culture, gender, sex, and motherhood. In one of these reflective moments, she describes her inability to take care of her son after Tarig's death as a loss of the motherhood part of herself: "She was unable to mother the child. The part of her that did the mothering had disappeared. Froth, ugly froth" (7).

Tarig's death also exposes the inessentialist nature of other parts of her identity, including her Muslim part. Even the latter undergoes some tribulations and questioning but not the total shedding other parts of her identity do. The depiction of Sammar's faith undermines essentialist representations of the Muslims' relationship with their religion, revealing it rather as a constant and complex process arrived at through hard work and resistance. Sammar experiences the difficulty of holding on to her faith first-hand upon Tarig's death. While preparing to return to Sudan with Tariq's body, no sooner does she remind herself of God's will, repeating, "Only Allah is eternal, only Allah is eternal" (9), than she wonders, "Why is this lesson so hard to learn?" (9). When she returns to Aberdeen, holding on to this certainty becomes harder, as doubt, anger and disbelief increasingly gnaw at her faith whenever she thinks of the way Tarig died: "It never made sense. A gentle old man blinded by the sun, killing Tarig. The ifs were snakes hissing, if Tarig had gone out a minute earlier, a minute later, if ... The ifs were poisonous snakes,

whispering. For years the ifs had tangled up her mind, tugged away at her faith, made her unable to walk up the stairs” (58). With her various identities falling apart in the absence of love, Sammar ends up living for four years in a state of self neglect and denial: “A chicken leg, three months old, sat in the fridge like rubber ... For years, Sammar had eaten such food, hacking away at the good bits and not questioned what she was doing, as if there were a fog blocking her vision, a dreamy heaviness everywhere” (67). Making up her subjectivity then is not her Islamic background, gender, sex, or motherhood but all these elements, previously held together by her love for Tarig.

### **Other Languages, Other Stories and Differences**

Just like Rae and Sammar’s relationship prove the fluidity and constructedness of place in language and relationships, Aboulela’s narrative questions other fixed assumptions of difference, such as essentialist notions of culture. Like Sammar, who appropriates and reconstructs her difference discursively through the story she tells Rae, Aboulela highlights the complexity and fluidity of culture, by using various discourses and languages that re-narrate aspects of Islamic culture. Nowhere can this be seen as in her presentation of the veil, where Aboulela translates it through the language of fashion: “She covered her hair with Italian silk, her arms with tropical colours. She wanted to look as elegant as Benazir Bhutto, as mesmerising as the Afghan princess she had once seen on TV wearing hijab, the daughter of an exiled leader of the mujahideen” (9). Unlike its image as a symbol of both the oppression of women and the backwardness of Islam (Ahmed 152), Sammar’s veil is a manifestation of her subjectivity and agency, as she associates it with fashion (and hence change), power signified by Bhutto and the public space of television. Therefore, once Sammar recuperates from her state of mourning and

depression, she buys more scarves. Furthermore, as pointed out earlier, Aboulela mentions Sammar's veil the first time in passing and only by rewriting it into Sammar's thoughts. Through this unobtrusive depiction, Aboulela gets away from what Mohja Kahf describes as "our era's obsession over the presence or absence of a veil" ("From" 40). This depiction of the veil also bespeaks the writer's larger strategy of "re-appropriating loaded Islamicisms from the lexicon of Western intolerance (Nash 30), as she does with the word "mujahidin." Through language and discourse, then, Aboulela constructs an alternative difference from the one of Western hegemonic discourse.

In the novel, Islamic traditions and practices are dislodged from their exoticizing Western representations to convey to the reader their natural and familiar quality for the protagonists. For example, the ritual of fasting is depicted as a practice serving different social purposes, the way it is for most Muslims, rather than as an exotic and strict religious ritual. Through the emotions and enthusiasm typical of teens, the novel depicts the young Sammar's and her cousins' experience of fasting: "Sammar remembered [Tarig] fasting Ramadan when he was twelve and still going swimming, riding his bike in the burning heat of the afternoon, defiant and a little crazy, wanting to prove he was strong" (32). Instead of presenting Muslim culture and its practices as alienating for women, the novel's depiction of fasting suggests them as a site for nurturing their subculture. Tarig's childhood defiant fasting practices were not limited to boys, Sammar recalls: "But they all had been like that, even the girls. Are you fasting? A cool yeah, or just a nod, deliberately casual, like it was not a big thing. Though later they would copy their mothers, my head aches, I can't bear it. I have lost weight, I can hardly eat at night" (32).

Other Islamic concepts are similarly dislodged from their stereotypical associations with fanaticism and fundamentalist ideology. For example, the Muslim experience of the Quran itself is rendered through children's words and thoughts. As a child, Sammar had the words of the Qur'an to recite in "treacherous streets where rapid dogs barked too close ... At night too, inside the terrifying dreams of childhood, she had said the verses to push away what was clinging and cruel" (102). Prayer, too, has to be adjusted in Aberdeen. On days when her officemate, Diane, was not in, "Sammar prayed in the room, locking the door from inside ... It had seemed strange for her when she first came to live here, all that privacy that surrounded praying. She was used to seeing people pray on pavements and on grass" (75). At the airport, it was time "to pray and the sadness that the sadness that there was nowhere to pray ... Sammar prayed where she was, sitting down, not moving" (132). With the days shorter in Aberdeen, fasting Ramadan, too, is different, "too easy, it doesn't count," Tarig used to tell Sammar jokingly. This depiction of Islamic practices reveals the fluidity of culture and religion by highlighting how they are practiced differently outside their original geographical homes.<sup>4</sup>

### **Difference as a Basis for Proximity**

The novel foregrounds not only the constructedness of difference within language and human relations but also its multiple appropriations, as difference can be used either as a ground for Othering or proximity. Indeed, as their first conversation manifests, Sammar's and Rae's differences bring them closer to each other, as they facilitate discovering their similarities through unraveling their difference. Subsequent conversations between the two about their different religions and cultures unfold their proximity even more. Highlighting the importance of recognizing and acknowledging

difference for true cross-cultural encounters is also Aboulela's re-writing of what Sammar believes to be her insurmountable difference, which she leaves out of her story. Whereas Sammar reveals a seamless story of romantic love that is more about Tarig and Sudan than about herself, Aboulela fills in the gaps with the subjective elements Sammar leaves out, producing a more comprehensive image of her. Postcolonial feminists have stressed the importance of revealing and accepting Third World women, including Arab and Muslim women, as subjects in their own right. As Rey Chow argues, Arab women need to be allowed to come forth "not as spectacles but in their contradictions" (104). Therefore, in contrast with Sammar's representation of herself, the novel's depiction reveals her as a subject in her own right, departing not only from stereotypical images of Muslim women but from traditional universal representations of mothers and children and from universal patterns of familial relations.

Aboulela's narration of Sammar's *real* story, mostly revealed in the form of Sammar's introspection, undermines the image of the passive Arab and Muslim woman within an oppressive familial structure even further by depicting Sammar's as a daughter who shuns her immediate family for the sake of her extended family. As a child, and out of her love for Tarig, Sammar "shrugged off [her] own family and attached [her]self to them [her aunt's family and future in-laws], the three of them" (7). These relationships interrogate the common assumption that familial ties and relations in Muslim culture encroach on individual freedom. Instead of the image of the Arab and Muslim woman as victim of her family and society, Sammar relates to her aunt's family in highly benevolent ways:

Tell him, she told herself, tell him of Mahasen and Tarig and Hanan.  
Mother, son, daughter. Tell him how you shrugged off your own family

and attached yourself to them, the three of them. Made a gift of yourself, a child to be moulded ... An obedient niece, letting Mahasen decide how you should dress, how you should fix your hair. You were happy with that, content, waiting for the day you would take her only son away from her.  
(7)

In addition, Sammar's real story allows Aboulela to undermine assumptions about the ahistoricity of culture, by depicting some of its characteristics as contradictory elements gnawing at the social structure positing and legitimizing them, and ultimately allowing change and agency. The novel highlights two cultural elements that work against each other in Sammar's life in Sudan after Tarig's death, leading ultimately to her ability to signify beyond them: maternal expectations and reverence for the elderly (represented by her aunt and mother-in-law at the same time). Sammar experiences Tarig's death as a total loss, and therefore she thinks that her only way for regaining control over her life and for social and economic empowerment is marriage. Although—as Mahasen says refuting Sammar's attitude— women's economic dependency is something from the past, Sammar still has to comply with her aunt's desires and will, as a sign reverence for the family's matriarch. When Sammar talks about her she hope to focus in life through marriage, Mahasen snaps, "*Your son is your focus*" (28), adding, "An educated girl like you, you know English ... you can support yourself and your son, you don't need marriage. What do you need it for?" (13). In the end, Sammar plays the two societal expectations— having to act maternally and having to follow Mahasen's will— against each other. She deliberately misreads her aunt's cue— as saying that she need to free herself from male dependency and take advantage of her education to make capital in the West— and decides to return to Aberdeen *alone*, without her son in tow. Sammar thus undermines society's pressure by heading it off with a variation. By

returning to Scotland to make a living, Sammar complies with her aunt's will. However, by going back without her child, she undermines the maternal ties and emotions on which the aunt's demands for Sammar's travel are predicated. The novel thus destabilizes the category of the Muslim woman not only by revealing the ways in which Sammar's life is complicated by class, culture, race and ethnicity as well as (neo)colonial powers, but also by the experiences of love, death, and mourning. Ultimately, we are urged to recognize that "Muslim women's experiences ... are, like all women's experiences, ambiguous and highly variable, marked by subordination and opportunity, mobility and immobility, security and insecurity" (Nagel 4).

From within Sammar's real story, Abouela also interrogated the Western notion of progress as commensurate with financial independence in relation to women's advancement. The novel shows that the two are not unconditionally aligned. Sammar's aunt employs the discourse of the assumed alignment between the two to benefit personally from Sammar's life in the West, or at least to benefit her grandson. Sammar's wellbeing is not necessarily what Mahasen has in mind. Right before her return to Sudan, Sammar gets a brief letter from her aunt with an attached list of things the aunt wants her to bring along, which makes Sammar think: "Her aunt must imagine that she was making millions, an expatriate like those who found jobs in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf" (87). The novel's questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions about women's status and advancement reiterates the call of the "narratives of postcolonial women [that] describe a political decentering that will be necessary in Western knowledge as it allows itself to be redefined by discourses from the geopolitical margins" (Ong 367).

Looking at Western knowledge from the margins allows Aboulela to depict many assumptions and misrepresentations about Muslim culture in a completely different light. The novel does address some issues in the “usual laundry list of the eternal grievances of Arab woman: the veil, polygamy, clitoridectomy, clausturation, virginity, forced marriage, frequent births, repudiation, and beatings” (Amireh 186) but from a different angle. For example, if there is a sense of subordination and lack of subjectivity in Sammar’s stories, it is only due to Sammar’s love for Tarig. Although Sammar’s recollections of the things that mattered to her as a young girl in Sudan revolve around Tarig, and hence expose Sammar’s lack of subjectivity, this is depicted as the result of an utter infatuation that obliterates the self in the other. Therefore, Sammar’s memories of her own childhood are more about Tarig than about herself: “Their house, where you imagined you would one day live, the empty square in front of it ... Tarig’s bike, Tarig’s room, Tarig’s singing with imaginary microphones, imaginary guitars” (7). Here the absence of the female subjectivity can only be explained within the logic of love rather than oppression and subordination. It is for the same reason that she “fails” to differentiate between her acts and Tarig’s: “Was it Tarig who always shaped designs in the dust with his feet? Or was it she? Shifted twigs, dented bottle tops, kicked around ...” (27).

The veil, polygamy, forced marriage, frequent births, marital relationships are readdressed and situated in different contexts that render their dominant representations incoherent. As discussed earlier, the veil is expressed in the language of fashion; marriage is the culmination of a life-long love and passion; polygamy is sought under emotional distress; marital oppression is replaced by an abundance of emotions. Alternative connotations about marriage are embodied in different parts of the story. In

one of these instances, Sammar remembers Tarig, when she had a miscarriage, “on his hand and knees mopping the bathroom floor, her womb that had fallen apart” (12).

### **The Trip: Further Deconstruction of Binaries**

The specificity of Sammar’s return to Scotland too undermines not only hegemonic representations of Arab women as living a life of oppression from which they need to be rescued but traditional women’s travel narrative as well. In *Women’s Travel Writing*, Janis Stout contends that the moment of women’s departure “entails a tension between the urge to break out, to shake the dust from one’s feet, and an equally powerful homing urge, an urge to construct and maintain and to value relational ties” (36).

Sammar’s departure, however, reverses and complicates this equation. Being propelled by Mahasen, it does not stand for a desire on Sammar’s part to break away from her past and present. It happens rather because Sammar is chased out of Sudan by Mahasen, who relentlessly lectures her about her need to improve her life and her son’s. Sammar, on the other hand, wants to opt for a very traditional, almost obsolete, role as a wife in a polygamous marriage. While undeniably interfering with Sammar’s free will and desire to re-marry, Mahasen ultimately helps her niece achieve self-realization. The relationship between Mahasen and Sammar also undermines the binary of self and community, as it implies that individualism is not always equivalent with self-realization or conflicting with communal identity and interest. Sammar’s society, embodied in her aunt, impels her separatism and individualism by directing them away from a flawed marriage.

Among the other dichotomies the novel undermines is the East/West binary, which is best embodied by Sammar’s cyclical movement between the two. With Tarig’s death and the loss of his love in Aberdeen, home lures Sammar into return whereas exile

becomes nothing but an alienating site. Therefore, her departure from Aberdeen is more of an expedited evacuation. She takes her past life in Aberdeen apart, “tearing letters, dropping magazines in the bin, a furious dismantling of the life they had lived, the home they made” (9). Assuming that the old place (native home) would give her peace, she reflects, “Strip, give away, pack. We’re going home, we’re finished here, we’re going to Africa’s sand, to dissolve in Africa’s sand” (10). However her return to the homeland reveals its dialogic relationship with her romantic emotions, which makes it no longer the same after Tarig’s death. With the absence of love from both home and exile, they become equally alienating, hence Sammar’s return to Aberdeen, where her life reflects her two exiles: the physical and the emotional. In Aberdeen, her place remains just that, a place rather than a space, for “space is place made meaningful or space is a practical place” (Fenster 243). She instead “lived in a room with nothing on the wall, nothing personal, no photographs, no books; just like a hospital room” (16).

By depicting the protagonist’s circular movement between home and exile, the novel continues to destabilize essentialist notions of place and difference, asserting that the latter is not solely a product of its location as much as a composite of variably constructed, and sometimes, conflicting, elements, including place. Aboulela thus rejects, what JanMohammed describes as the “conflation of identity and location” (97). This approach to place and identity has its significant implications for women, as it undermines attempts to divide their subjectivities along the East/West binary. This manifests true about the novel as well, as the educated Sammar, who spends part of her life in the West, imagines the possibility of adopting an outmoded female role as a co-wife. The older, more place-grounded, aunt seems to hold more progressive views than

her niece, as she reminds her of the outmodedness of this attitude: “In the past, widows needed protection, life is different now” (13). This statement inscribes Arab women as subjects of history, a fact that, as Amireh points out, is seldom acknowledged in Western representations of them (187). Neither is Mahasen restricted by social rules of propriety. Therefore, does not invariably stand for tradition. Referring to Ahmad Ali Yasseen, the prospective polygamous husband, she protests, “He started to talk to me about this and I silenced him. I shamed him, the old fool” (13). For her the man’s religiosity and piety are irrelevant to his marriage proposal. Underlying Mahasen’s attitude, at least seemingly, is a modern perspective of marriage as an enterprise based on intellectual and emotional compatibility rather than on any economic reasons or religious convictions. When Sammar interjects choking the words, “He’s religious ... he feels a duty towards widows” (13), the aunt responds, “He can take his religiousness and build a mosque but keep away from us” (13). Religious dogma thus is undermined as the sole reality governing the Muslim and Arab women’s lives (Lazreg 331).

The novel’s treatment of Sammar’s friend Yasmi gnaws further at essentialist assumptions that divide women along the East/West binary. Yasmin’s location in the West does not guarantee her a Eurocentric worldview. On the contrary, she, a secular Pakistani Muslim born and raised in Scotland, is more rigid than anyone else, as she consistently reflects a monolithic worldview about the Other. She categorizes people along the East/West divide, always “making general statements, starting with ‘we’, where ‘we’ mean the whole of the Third World and its people” (11). Yasmin’s hybridity reinforces the self/Other binary by using it as a claim of authenticity that legitimizes her representations of self and Other. “We are not like them,” she often says or “We have

close family ties, not like them” (11). Her attitude goes under what Amireh describes as the misuses of hybridity in producing knowledge about the Other, in which hybridity “becomes a strategy of differentiation” (186). As a result, Yasmin produces essentialist and ahistorical knowledge about the West. Her knowledge is the mirror image of the latter’s knowledge about the Otherized East.

### **Translation: an Alternative to Hybridity**

Sammar’s relationship with Rae finally gives her the opportunity to occupy two places and to experience the process of self-discovery, accompanying the occupation of in-between places. Such places, Iain Chambers maintains, provide the occasion for self-discovery as the experiences and feelings we carry with us from a certain place are simultaneously “sustained across encounters and clashes with other histories, other places, other people,” touched and shaped by these encounters (4). This in-betweenness, as experienced by Sammar and Rae, undermines the home/exile, East/West, and self/Other binaries even further, as it translates into a double-vision. Sammar begins to see Rae’s similarity to her, a realization that is made possible by their initial and mutual recognition and acceptance of each other’s differences: “First African night. She spoke first, for like him she was born in this wintery kingdom. Like him Africa was arrived at and loved” (45). Their stories of arrival to Africa exemplify the overlap between similarity and difference. Both arrivals shape each one’s relationship with the continent from that moment on, however, each in a different way. Sammar’s first arrival is marked by love and emotions, foregrounding and foreshadow her future subjectivity and relationships with her native country and its people. Her first childhood meeting with Tariq is also

surrounded by the excitement and exuberance of a child, visiting a new place for the first time:

It was the airplane, the airplane in the weeks before the flight. New clothes to wear on the airplane, a doll to keep her quiet, can she sit near the window? Can she open the window ... There were many people waiting for them in the car park of Khartoum's airport ... A woman burst into tears, men hugged her father, children stared at Sammar. (46)

Among these children is Tarig, who on the way home from the airport “could never be still, it was in his nature to be always jumping about, attracting attention” (46). Similarly, Rae's first arrival determines the nature of his subsequent arrivals: “A pattern was set from that first time. In years to come every arrival to Africa was similarly accompanied by loss or pain, a blow to his pride ... As if the continent demanded a forfeit, a repayment of debts from the ghosts of the past” (55).

Now that she is able to occupy two places simultaneously, without being Othered, Sammar is able to see things from multiple cultural vantage points. She examines her Arab culture against Rae's without being constrained by Yasmin-like claims of cultural authenticity. This especially happens when Rae spends the holidays with his ex-in-laws:

Culture-shock for Sammar. An old man in Edinburgh was allowing his daughter's ex-husband under his roof. This must be civilized behavior, an ‘amicable divorce’. Where she come from, the divorced spouse was one who ‘turned out to be a son of dog’ or ‘she turned out to be mad’ and were treated as such. No one stayed friends, no one stayed on talking terms. (38)

Sammar here occupies what Casey Blanton calls a “nomad position” that entails “[u]nfixing oneself so that the place cannot equal truth [which] allows one to embark upon a two-directional journey examining the realities of both sides of cultural differences so that they mutually may question each other” (111).

This cultural translation underlines the fact that cross-cultural and transnational experiences do not always result in cultural hybrids; very often a translation process occurs that allows for two worldviews to coexist without mixing. Rae, too, does a similar translation of Sammar's culture and religion. This particularly happens when he dwells on the Islamic meaning of speculating about God and identifies its secular equivalent. "In this society," he tells Sammar, "in this secular society, the speculation is that God has put up this elaborate solar system and left it to run itself" (42). Similar to Sammar's cultural translation, Rae's religious juxtaposition reveals an unaffiliated standpoint, as he does not align himself with either religious interpretation.

This cultural translation allows for a cross-cultural experience, the impact of which is not only a better mutual understanding but the creation of human moments and memories that transcend time and place. It is an experience that not only enlightens people's intellect but touches their emotions as well. When Rae tells Sammar that the secular concept of speculating about God means that God is out playing golf, she responds, "But why golf?" (42). "And he laughs for the first time that day" (42). In the same context, both protagonists describe the impact of their relationship on them as one of peace and safety. "You make me feel safe," Rae tells Sammar (64). She, too, describes the relationship in similar terms. The fact that both use the word "safe" reminds us of their similar status in society, as both feel out of place: he for his sympathy with and opinions about Islam and she for her cultural and religious difference. This instance underscores the embeddedness of the language of emotions within its sociopolitical context.

Sammar's status, as a translator, facilitates even further the juxtaposition of different perspectives. Her ability to put Islamic principles alongside Western secular ones proves enlightening at different levels. Rae's and Sammar's discussion about the translation of the Islamic Sacred *Hadiths*, or sayings, turns out to be illuminating not only for Rae but for Sammar herself. Before Rae's asking for their translation, Sammar was ignorant of their meaning and significance, so when unexpectedly Rae asks about the difference between these sacred sayings and the Quran itself "she was not prepared for that and faltered a little, saying that the book was upstairs and she would have to get it" (41). The occasion propels her to research and better understand her own religion, which culminates, interestingly, in a glimpse onto the Other. Hence, it is after Sammar translates into English one of these sayings, describing an important aspect of Islam's conceptualization of the human-God relationship, that Rae provides its Western secular equivalent (42). Sammar herself notes that "he made her think" (45), something that happens to him as well. Sammar points out that whenever they talk he asks her questions, and after she answers "he was silent, as if he was thinking about what she had said" (50).

These conversations represent real moments of mutual enlightenment, through which knowledge flows in both directions. Through such as a dialogue, both Rae and Sammar inscribe themselves as producers of, to use Donna Haraway's expression, "situated knowledge," knowledge that is partial and reflecting an awareness of the limitations of the location of its articulation.<sup>5</sup> As Amireh argues, only then does cross-cultural encounter represent an equal relationship, "with both learning about their differences, limitations and misconceptions, and moving towards mutual recognition, respect, sympathy, and a sense of the present relations that have obscured such mutual

understanding” (Amireh 192). This multiplicity of vision redefines the traditional relationship between East and West in which the “difference between self and Other is maintained as an opposition between knowledge and ignorance, change and stasis, feminist and victim” (Amireh 189). *Both* Rae and Sammar impart and receive knowledge, modifying the imperialist assumption that one (the West) always has the knowledge and the Other is the recipient.

The potential for Sammar’s in-between place is complicated and enriched even more by her Muslim identity, which provides a third vision apart from either culture, Sudanese and Scottish. Contemplating her reasons for not going out alone with Rae, she critiques her society’s sexist appropriation of the divine moral code. The Islamic, sexual ethic demands virtue of both men and women. Society, on the other hand, is more lenient with its male members in matters of virtue and honor while insisting on women’s reputation only. Sammar, by contrast, privileges the Islamic ethic of self-monitoring, over both Western and Eastern notions of individual freedom. Providing an ethic that transcends place, geography, and culture, Islam here figures as a venue for a third space and a third vision: “But idols’ powers are not infinite. They cover a place, a particular community and a time. Sammar watched Reputation lose its muscle, its vigour, shrink and frizzle out in this remote corner of the world. When idols fall, the path to the truth is uncluttered, clear. Who saw her, knew her, was with her all the time wherever she went?” (57). She, therefore, apologizes to Rae for her inability to go out with him alone. Her position, and the novel’s, distinguishes between culture and Islam, which are usually jumbled together.

The distinction between the two and the supremacy of divine law over human law and mindset are recurrent themes in the novel. Hence, she highlights the difference between the justice of the Islamic law, which stipulates a widow's mourning period as four months and ten days, and the harsher conditions humans impose on themselves, such as her four-year-long mourning: "Sammar thought, as she often thought, of the four months and ten days, such specifically laid out time, not too short and not too long. She thought of how Allah's Sharia was kinder and more balanced than the rules people set up for themselves" (69). Even when she reveals a non-Islamic perspective, she does that only momentarily and ultimately settles for her Islamic beliefs. Pondering how she came about to live in the West, she first considers the role of sheer luck, and then contemplates God's will and predestined fate, concluding that it is the latter:

She had been lucky. There was a demand for translating Arabic into English, not much competition. Her fate was etched out by a law that gave her a British passport, a point in time when the demand for people to translate Arabic into English was bigger than the supply. 'No,' she reminded herself, 'that is not the real truth. My fate is etched out by Allah Almighty, if and who I will marry, what I eat, the work I find, my health, the day I will die are as He alone wants them to be.' (73)

The novel's treatment of Islam, then, helps to create a third space that transcends individual cultures and fixed positionalities. Although Sammar seems to be aware at the moment of the incompatibility of place, culture and Islam, she fails to see this fact in relation to Rae's situation, expecting his conversion on the basis of his previous contact with and knowledge of Islamic places and cultures. Only at the end of the novel does she seem to grasp fully the transcendent aspect of Islam.

However, the novel underscores the difficulty of perpetuating this objectivity attained by transcending one's positionality and identity as defined against the Other.

Both protagonists tend to slip back into a central position, Sammar in her relationship with Rae whereas Rae in his political perspectives and previous relationships. Although it is on the basis of the acceptance of difference that the couple's relationship comes into being, Sammar shortly becomes fixated on Rae's similarity to her, viewing his difference, by contrast, as a threat: "They lived in worlds divided by simple facts—religion, country of origin, race—data that fills forms. But he doesn't drink anymore, she reminded herself ... and it had been another thing which made him less threatening ... not so different from her" (34). Early on she is attracted to him based on his difference from the others: "From the beginning she had thought that he was not one of them, not modern like them, not impatient like them" (34); his dark-enough skin, manners, previous life in Muslim countries, in addition to his specialization in Middle Eastern history make him look "out of place" in his own society (6) and thus more like her. Sammar mistakenly interprets this difference from others (or similarity to her) as sameness, when she should have taken it for what it is: not sameness but a similarity. Trinh T. Minh-ha underscores the distinction between the two (374-5). Instead of seeing the wholeness of his similarities and differences, Sammar sees them as binary opposites, feeling therefore alternately close and distant from him: "Sammar felt separate from him, exiled while he was in his homeland, fasting while he was eating turkey and drinking wine" (34).

Ultimately, for Sammar, Rae's similarity to her overrides and erases his difference altogether. This erasure of difference underlies her expectation of his immediate conversion to Islam and her subsequent disillusionment when he does not. Her attempt at intervening in Rae's life only reverses the direction of intervention between colonialist and neocolonialist systems, on the one hand, and the colonized, on the other, in which the

difference between the colonial power and the colonized or between self and Other is equivalent to the difference between knowledge and ignorance. Hence, knowledge, or rather more knowledge, about Islam is what Sammar think Rae needs to convert:

She thought of what she would tell him, all the things she would translate for him. He knew a lot. Like others here, this world held his attention and the scope of his mind. But he did not know about the stream of Kawthar, the day of Promises, or what stops the heart from rusting. And the balance he admired. He would not understand it until he lived it. (118)

Soon Sammar's assumption is revealed to be far from accurate, for when she approaches the subject of conversion, Rae seems to know exactly what she wants to talk to him about. "Is the *shahadah* what you want to talk to me about?" he asks her immediately (123). Her language explaining the *shahadah* for him presumes his total ignorance and her exclusive knowledge: "It's two things together, both beginning with the words, 'I bear witness,'" (123). Attempting to be clear and convincing, she ends up using a simplified language that implies Ra'e ignorance even further: "There were messengers before, Moses and Jesus and others. Every messenger comes with proof about himself, a miracle suitable to his time ... The Qur'an was the miracle that Muhammad, peace be upon him, was sent with..." (124). Although Rae himself fills the gaps left out by *her* lack of knowledge, she continues to act as teacher and a moralist. When she fails to explain why women and slaves were the first Muslim converts, he interjects, "Maybe in changing they did not have much to lose ... It was the rulers of Makkah who were reluctant to give up their traditions and established ways for something new" (124). Undeterred by her lack of enough knowledge, she asks him, "Now tell me if you believe or not" (124).

Even when he assures her that he *does* know the meaning of Islam to its faithful, she is still unable to frame conversion and faith outside the realm of factual knowledge. Finding him unresponsive, she asks, “Do you know what it means for us?” Despite his affirmative answer—“I know, I’ve always known” (125)—she still demands his immediate conversion, so that they can get married: “I imagined that we could get married today” (125). Even more, Sammar declines his request to have more time, accusing him of deceit and incompetence: “There really must be something wrong with you to have been divorced *twice*, not once but twice ...” (129). Sammar’s positionality then transforms the love relationship into a battlefield where neither one comes out victorious. “Get out of here ... Get away from me,” he finally demands of her (129). This confrontation preceding Sammar’s work-trip to Egypt, and ultimately to Sudan, represents a complete departure from her first harmonious conversation with Rae. This is due to the shift in the focus of their dialogue from an acceptance of difference to Sammar’s preoccupation with sameness. In her article, “Not You/Like You,” Minh-ha highlights the importance of dismantling the same/different binary in defining identity (374-5). In the same context, *The Translator* underlines the pitfalls of reductionist identity politics based solely on *either* similarities *or* differences, instead of the recognition of both at the same time.

When it comes to other people from the Middle East, Rae too reveals a similar positionality. Implied in this regression is the role of hierarchical power relations between East and West in shaping his knowledge and language. Occupying a powerful location as a Western academic expert in the Middle East and the Third World, he too oscillates between different positions towards the Other. In his relationship with Sammar, he seems

to acknowledge and deal with her difference more fairly, referring frequently to the significance of her background: “But if you go home, you would find it hard to come back and I would not have a translator any more” (29). He thus reveals his awareness and acceptance of her commitment to her people and country— that “she was heavy with other loyalties, full to the brim with distant places, voices in a language that was not his own” (29). However, he cannot totally escape the implications of his location as a Western academic. Rae’s location is reinscribed in part by his society’s power structure and its knowledge system, a fact that can be delineated by the significance of the epithet attached to him in the media. Despite his primary specialty being Middle-East history and Third World politics he is referred to as an *Islamic* expert, reflecting a typical imperialist thinking that jumbles the rest of the world into a single category called, in this case Islam. In Western hegemonic discourse Islam is synonymous with the ultimate Other and, therefore, is understood to stand for all the incompatible categories of Third World and Middle East, as well as their histories and politics.

Although he is resistant to this conflation, insisting that “there could be no such monolithic” (5), he still re-inscribes the same hierarchical binaries of self/Other, subject/object characterizing the East/West relations and interventions. Instead of treating his expertise as situated, and hence partial, knowledge, he plays the role of the Western expert who has the right to pass undifferentiated judgments about the Other. Referring to the Islamist *Al-Nidaa* group, Rae figures as the sole producer of knowledge about the group, implying not only his subject position but the group’s object status well. Whereas Sammar sees the humans and their feelings behind the manifesto, he sees only ideology. “It is sad,” she tells Rae. “There is something pathetic about the spelling mistakes, the

stains on the paper, in spite of the bravado ... You get a sense of people overwhelmed ... by thinking that nothing should be what it is now” (26). Echoing an imperialist thinking that conflates the rest of the world into a single group, Rae responds, “They are all like that” (26). He also renders the human-centered language with which Sammar describes them irrelevant, by switching the discussion to their ideology and logic instead of humanity and feelings: “They are shooting themselves in the foot. There is no resource in the Sharia for what they’re doing, however much they try and justify themselves” (26). Underlying Rae’s refusal to address the group’s psychological vulnerability is the Orientalists’ depiction of the Other as “less sensitive” and ultimately “less human” than them (Amireh 196).

Indeed, Rae’s language reveals a centralized discourse that perpetually reinscribes his subject position. In fact, he confesses that his interest in Islamist groups is part an objectification of them: “But really it would have been good for the department ... to prove ourselves useful to industry or the government to keep the funding coming in” (27). Despite his sympathies, he still operates from a centralized knowledge system that resists definition by the Other’s discourse, hence his anger when people expect him to convert. Such a conversion would place him in an equal object position, similar to the one occupied by the Muslims he analyzes, undermining the binary opposition underlying his relationship with them.

By expecting his immediate conversion, Sammar overlooks the power relations underlying Rae’s subject position, mistakenly taking his Orientalist knowledge for real identity. The novel, by contrast, intimates that Rae’s knowledge verges on being touristic: “he knew the Sahara, knew that most Arabic names had familiar meanings” (5), “knew

the letters of the Arabic alphabet, he lived in her part of the world” (6). Moreover, contrary to Sammar’s assumption that his knowledge is tantamount to a Muslim identity, Western epistemology re-inscribes it as politics. In a visit to the library, Sammar and Yasmin look his book up under politics. The book’s blurbs even establish him as a good rhetorician whose “arguments are bold, his insights provocative” (13). For Sammar, however, Rae’s Orientalist knowledge combined with his out-of-place appearance and attitude makes her reduce him to these differences, which almost thwarts the love.

Ironically, her Pakistani friend, Yasmin, does exactly the opposite. Whereas Sammar, blinded by her longing for love and proximity to the Other, cannot see the implications of Rae’s difference as a secular Western academic, Yasmin cannot see or even imagine any other identity beyond that delineated by his academic position. She, therefore, dismisses all that Sammar considers as possible signs of conversion. In response to Sammar’s reference to his different manners and niceness, Yasmin says, “Atheists can be as nice as anyone else. Being good or kind has nothing to do with it” (93). When Sammar still refers to the fact that he believes in the sacredness of the Qur’an like Muslims do, she responds, “That’s the way they do research nowadays. It’s a modern thing. Something to do with being Eurocentric. They take what each culture says about itself. So they could study all sorts of sacred texts and be detached” (93-4). Underlying her attitude is not only a concern with the Islamic law that prevents the marriage of Muslim women from non-Muslims but an identity politics grounded in difference as Otherness. “Go home,” she tells Sammar, “and maybe you’ll meet someone normal, someone Sudanese like yourself. Mixed couples just don’t look right, they irritate everyone” (93).

Rae's story of his travels to Africa exposes more salient examples of his subscription to a reductionist notion of difference that, this time, exoticizes the Other. The novel renders this approach reductive as well and highlights its consequences. For example, the fact that he has Muslim cousins in Egypt is for him an exciting and romantic idea. Moreover, by seeking the exotic Other in their relationship, Rae and Amelia, his first half-Spanish-half-English wife whom he meets in Morocco, are reduced to their difference and hence to mere exotic images that are ultimately deflated. In Morocco, and "according to the ladies, [Rae] looked exactly like an Arab" (60). Likewise, for Rae, "Morocco was [Amelia's] home, it was in her Spanish blood, her English spoken with a certain lilt—her attraction for Rae" (60-61). Once married, Amelia cannot take to the reality of Rae's unsettled life in Morocco. Rae, too, contemplates the repercussions of his pre-mature marriage: "Money worried Rae. His brain thought money, money, his heart hurt ... He got into debt and began to have nightmares about Moroccan prisons" (62). The ultimate manifestation of the relationship's flawed basis is the body of their disfigured stillborn baby. Both Sammar's and Amelia's relationships are faulty as they reduce Rae to his difference. Interestingly though Rae's difference does *not* signify the same thing for both women. For Amelia it exoticizes Rae whereas for Sammar it is what makes him similar to her.

### **Transcending Positionality Through Islam**

*The Translator's* two romantic stories manifest the susceptibility of identity politics based on fixed notions of difference and place. The novel, instead, inscribes difference and place as relative and fluid notions, representing only two parts of one's identity. While underscoring this fluidity, *The Translator* acknowledges the role of power

structures and relations in determining identity politics. Through stories of romantic love, the novel complicates assumptions about the transformative power of travel, hybridity, and liminality, by highlighting its protagonists' oscillation between two different positions. Aboulela's characters move back and forth between a territorialized or positional identity based on the self/Other binary and a more flexible and deterritorialized one that "presupposes a dynamic process of disowning places that come with overly determined claims and reowning them according to different (radical democratic) interests ... expresses a deliberate cultivation of a mobile consciousness [that] challenge[s] totalizing discourses in the name of culture, race, ethnicity, and nation" (Ong 368).<sup>7</sup> The novel thus implies the difficulty and complexity of perpetuating true cross-cultural relations and the need for mutual vigilance in order to keep reductionist notions of difference at bay.

The protagonists' vigilance and true understanding of each other is finally achieved when they transcend their positionalities. Sammar is able to do that at the end of the novel through her faith. Interestingly, her relationship with Rae brings her closer to a better understanding of many of its major principles, including conversion. After their argument, Sammar leaves to Egypt and then to Sudan, where she has the space and time to think straight and contemplate the meaning of conversion, realizing her mistakes in Aberdeen. Unlike her earlier position, she finally recognizes that people who draw others to Islam, do it "for no personal gain ... for Allah's sake ... with no ego involved. And she, when she spoke to Rae, wanting this and that, full of it; wanting to drive with him to Stirling, to cook for him, to be settled, to be someone's wife" (175). She now attempts to put her own interests aside and pray for his own sake, consigning the matter thus to the

divine: “If she could rise above that, if she would clean her intentions” (175). She manifests again that staying faithful is a real struggle, rather than an easy matter. Now her wishes for him to convert emanate from her appreciation of his goodness, a manifestation of true love rather than means for personal gain: “He had been kind to her and she had given him nothing in return. She would do it now from far away without him even knowing. It would be her secret. If it took ten months or ten years or twenty or more” (175). Her better understanding of conversion brings about a different meaning of love, one that prioritizes the other’s happiness rather than one’s self. Until she invokes her faith in dealing with Rae’s difference, it “had always been for herself, her need to get married again, not be alone” (175). When Rae converts and visits Sudan as a Muslim, he confirms to Sammar what she was oblivious to earlier: “I found out at the end that it didn’t have anything to do with how much I’ve read or how many facts I’ve learned about Islam. Knowledge is necessary, that’s true. But faith, it comes direct from Allah” (198). Rae’s declaration about the meaning of conversion perpetuates their cross-cultural dialogue, as it continues to decentralize knowledge and their positions. In other words, the realization that faith comes from Allah is arrived at by both from their different locations. The conversion becomes possible only when he no longer objectifies Islam and the Muslims he studies, when he seeks it for his own sake: “At the end it was one step that I took, of wanting it for myself separate from the work, and then it all rushed to me” (199).

## **Conclusion**

Despite the constant risk of slipping back into claims of authenticity, the protagonists’ dialogue is not without its advantages. Ultimately, Sammar gets to know about the meaning of real conversion and the incompatibility of identity and place. Rae is

also freed from the limitations of his positionality, realizing the situatedness of his knowledge about the Other and his similarity to them, two facts that evade him earlier, due to their unequal power relations. The novel's happy ending can best be understood as a manifestation of this reversal of the power relations within which the couple's relationship was embedded. In the novel, this reversal is possible due to the fact that place, identity, culture, and any other basis of difference are themselves not fixed entities but rather constructs of language and relationships. In light of these fluid notions, we arrive at a sense of home that is, as bell hooks describes, "no longer just one place. It is locations. Home, is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference" (qtd. in Massey 171-72).

## CONCLUSION

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. “Floods” is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared.

—Tony Morrison  
(119)

Although only two of the four texts discussed in this dissertation seem to revolve primarily around an individual, at least as indicated by the texts titles, *The Translator* and *The Tiller of Waters*, a close reading of the four novels reveal that even when the text is seemingly centered on an individual and that individual’s identity, it is the larger community as a whole that justifies and provides the occasion for the protagonist’s depiction. The interrelation between individual identity and agency and their collective counterparts is established through the protagonists’ ability, or lack of it, to interfere with a hegemonic entity, be it indigenous or foreign, and its prescriptive identity models. Whether the novels’ people fail or succeed depends on their ability to replay the very same elements constitutive of their individual identities. By the end of each novel, and each chapter, we come out with a different vision of home and belonging in light of what each novel says about the individual. A real interplay between the subjects and nation produces, I hope this dissertation has shown, a multitude of results and formations, which despite their discrepancies aim at attaining happiness, wellbeing, and dignity for the bodies and souls of the people inhabiting the novels.

In *The Translator*, the definition of home for the protagonist, Sammar, is highly subjective, being shaped by her attraction, love, and marriage to the love of her life, Tarig, from the moment she set her feet on the Sudanese land for the first time in her life at a very tender age. In a reversal of the nationalist trope of the nation as woman, Sammar's "nation" or home is a man. The novel makes it clear that conceiving the nation in gendered terms, whether as a man or a woman, is problematic and debilitating. Personal redemption and the possibility of better relating to the Other materialize when Sammar draws upon other aspects of her identity, particularly her Muslimness, part of which locates one's happiness in collective wellbeing.

*The Tiller of Waters* is similar to *The Translator* in that it, too, depicts a character who, not unlike his nation, fails to resignify and act upon his reservoir of multiple origins, stories, and histories. Similar to Sammar, Niqula is blinded by the excess of his two loves: for Shamsa and fabric. However, written from the civil war context, *The Tiller* ends on a darker note, and the moment of redemption and awakening comes to its protagonist only too late. Just like Niqula himself we are all left to wonder, who is to blame for Niqula's death? Is it his shortsightedness, his excess in love and elsewhere, or the war? Although both war and modern Beirut have their illusions, the war's has been more devastating for Niqula. Whereas during "peace" he manages to resist the appropriation of modern life in Beirut, he fails to escape the war's logic of killing or getting killed. Shamsa by contrast seems to be a better embodiment of her multi-origin history, which emanates resistance to hegemony, appropriation, and limitation. Therefore, when Niqula's stories, and the knowledge they impart, end, she leaves him. Being the bearer of her Kurdish people's history, culture, and identity, Shamsa still stands for her

nation and its history. However, unlike Niqula's Lebanese nation with each party making claims to pure originary history and culture, Shamsa's originates in multiple and contradictory past.

Shamsa is like *The Honey's* protagonist, Ruhiya, who while perpetuating her parents' legacy and the mystical sense of community it has created, she embodies multiple originary stories that transcend many boundaries and binaries, all of which are resignified in her call to prayer. However, Ruhiya's transgression of women's symbolic representation in her Palestinian nationalist discourse is contained and by defused by two forces: the omnipresent aftermath of the Palestinians displacement and dispossession in 1948 (the Nakba) and the notion of honor in Palestinian society.

In a seamless story about the controversial history of the Arabs in Spain and in the new world of the Americas, Ashour, however, engages in a similar construction of identity that drives its agency from the continuous reconstruction of its components. With the modern Palestinian history acting as a primary sub-text, Ashour too points out the dangers the invading (Spanish/Zionist by implication) power poses to Saleema's transgressive identity. However, in a sharp contrast with Ghandour's reiteration of the dangers to her protagonist's identity, Ashour excludes the societal and national threats Ghandour includes. Saleema's brother, Hasan, who stands for the national patriarch ends up accepting Saleema's identity, albeit for selfish reasons, as he has benefited from the social prestige and financial advantage his sister's status has incurred for the family.

### **No Binaries in Sight**

In our novels memory and remembering prove to be not only markers of good and effective writing, but indispensable for the articulation the novels' postnationalist visions.

Although this dissertation's topic is not memory per se, agency and redemption in the critical times depicted is more or less the result of the reenactment of identity's memory—that is the reenactment of the elements defining and shaping it. Hence, the inability to summon back and resignify these elements is viewed as a failure of memory and a forgetfulness that are perilous and consequential. Both the writers, then, and their characters remember and reenact past histories, dormant cultures, and the lives of marginalized people. Just like these processes are seen as markers of both good writing and new visions of community, forgetfulness is depicted as the result of excess, in emotions and desires, that impedes the characters' visions, muddles their memories, and obstructs their access to their reservoirs of resources; and it is not only one particular kind of emotions that is to blame, the unsuccessful characters are hindered by obsessive love (Sammar), both love and desires (Niqula), as well as indignity (Yehya and Abu Jaafar).

In the face of the destruction incurred by war and military occupation and their attendant erasures of life, reconstructing this life after its erasure or resisting this erasure in the first place starts in the work of memory. Surrender, loss, and the lack of agency, as a whole, become synonymous with forgetfulness. What is ultimately targeted in the processes of erasure is the individual. In resisting erasure, it is not the memory of place and time that is reclaimed through memory but the individual's very being and all the elements constituting him or her from elements grounded in time, both past and present. When one takes over the other, this signals a loss of an indispensable constitutive element, leading to loss, death and erasure. Therefore, when Niqula grows too enmeshed in the past he tries to retrieve to counteract the forgetfulness of the present, he commits a mistake, as he ends up forgetting the present.

While endorsing remembering (that leads to the resignification of identity) over forgetfulness, the writers refuse to see the two as absolute opposites. Therefore, they show sympathy for their characters who “fail” to remember. Yehya is redeemed and is given a rite of passage to a different sense of belonging at the end of which he restores remembrance. In the case of *Granada*, Abu Jafaar’s daughter carries on his legacy and moves beyond its limitations. Sammar, too, undergoes a similar awakening as previously noted. The most pessimistic ending is Niqula’s, which is meant to convey the overwhelmingly devastating impact of the war. Nevertheless, Niqula is given a disembodied voice that allows him to confront his shortcomings. While it is redeemable in all of the novels, remembering and resignification, too, being counter-hegemonic, are costly, which the characters, nonetheless, choose over falling prey to oblivion, whether as individuals or whole communities. Sammar accepts the possibility that her union with Rae might not happen in this life-time, and continues nonetheless to pray for his good. Likewise, Ruyiha opts for self-exile in the desert after she calls to prayer.

I hope that this dissertation has answered the questions it has raised at the beginning, and if it has not, at least not completely, my wish is that it has raised more questions about the directions contemporary Arabic literature, as a whole, is taking, regarding identity. Such questions would include: What other unofficial paradigms of identity are there in contemporary Arabic writings? What are the implications of a postmodern notion of identity for social change? Can these fictions cross the threshold of literary representation onto the lives they represent and effect social change there?

Although I use predominantly western theory, I have tried to balance that by contextualizing the novels within their respective cultural and political histories. As I

have become more conscious of the diverse and creative ways through which Arab women writers are articulating their postnationalist visions, I have grown more eager to investigate more works from other postnationalist literatures from both Arab and non-Arab regions and to include other genres, such as poetry and drama.

The different reconfigurations of the individual/collective identities in the fictions discussed in this dissertation emphasize again that feminist thought in the Arab world is not a monolithic ideology but rather reflects a large array of approaches and pathways taken by the individual Arab feminist writers. This dissertation conveys only a small portion of this array, one that locates individual and collective agency within multiple venues among which are Islam, mysticism, intellectualism and others. In her study of Arab nationalism as an imagined community, sociologist Fatma Muge Gocek, rightly points out that “the ambiguity of the boundaries of the nation becomes apparent in narration as social groups continually contest and renegotiate their interpretations of the past, present, and future” (5). This is best done in the four novels depicted in this study, as the writers foreground the concept of *multiple* identities and origins as a remedy for nationalism’s multiple limitations and ambiguities, positing the wellbeing of the human soul and body as their common creed.

Additionally, I believe that the works this dissertation has analyzes are significant within the corpus of Arab women’s writings for other reasons. Among these is the fact that while they stress the complexity of the postcolonial condition and the shortcomings of Arab nationalist thought and complicate those further by highlighting their intersection with personal crises, they, more or less, go beyond the depiction of oppression indiscriminately associated with Arab societies. Instead, they explore “new” paths to

salvation and redemption from the death, destruction, and havoc that can be incurred by nationalist and western hegemonic (mis)representations of identities, even if these paths can only now materialize in the imaginary world of their writings. It is also the nature of this redemption that adds to the significance of these works—that is their faith in the potential of the different cultures and possibilities these parts of the world still offer, particularly as embodied by the women. Although the importance of exposing all forms of oppression resulting from the multiple sites of domination (patriarchal nationalism, colonialism, neocolonialism) cannot be overemphasized, this goal should not sidetrack feminist writing from fulfilling one of its essential purposes—that is focusing on empowerment through positive representation of women. Echoing Elaine Showalter, Elizabeth Wilson warns against losing sight of this purpose, although here she has other feminist concerns acting as diversion: instead of “dwelling so obsessively on how femininity gets inside our heads, feminists should have thought more about how to construct a plurality of positive images of women” (249). Interestingly, it is through detailing the constituency and dynamics of these positive images, of both women and men, that our writers tackle larger issues in their characters (post)colonial world.

My argument has been that an understanding of the novels’ depiction of individual identities not only undermines the gendered nationalist narratives but gives us blueprints for different visions of home and belonging. Whereas the engendering of the nation is grounded in gendered roles played by the national subjects in order to preserve the nation’s pure origins, the sense of community and home depicted in the novels is reclaimed, during critical times, only through the characters’ *reenactment* of the *multiple* constitutive elements of their identities. Hence, the novels’ notions of individual identity

seem to reflect a postmodern sensibility that negates the essentialism of identity and insists on its constant reconstruction through the very act of enactment. Even when essentialism is there, it is acknowledged as just one element in a wide array of components whose interplay still leads to agency and transformation.

## NOTES

### CHAPTER TWO

1. A strand of the modern discourse on al-Andalus looks at part of the history of Spain during the Muslim era as a model of intercultural co-existence. However, recent studies reveal that the nostalgia pre-modern Muslims had for Al-Andalus is different from that of our time, which associates Al-Andalus with multi-culturalism and conviviality. Justin Stearns argues that it is certain that historians from the Nasirid period—Ibn al-Katib, Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Asim and others—had, rather, a longing for the country’s former military glory and political prominence (210). Stearns concludes, “readers of Muslim historians who wrote up until the seventeenth century will find that al-Andalus was a hybrid: a place of wonders, a land of *jihad*, with a close link to the end of days” (369). Even the Moriscos, the Muslims who were converted to Christianity after the Spanish conquest, losing not only their religion but culture as well, among whom real nostalgia can be found, described al-Andalus as a paradise and a new Jerusalem, emphasizing both its eschatological importance and its connection to *jihad* (Stearns 210).

2. Instead of the previous language theories that presupposed an essence to meaning, Saussure suggests that far from being a set of labels for already given meanings, the language system is composed of signifiers (sounds or written) and signifieds (meanings) and that the link between signifiers and signifieds is a *conventional effect* of language that has no external guarantee in the world of referents beyond language. Saussure first addresses this language theory in a series of lectures published posthumously in 1916 as *Cours de linguistique générale* (*A Course in General Linguistics*, 1974).

3. Despite Butler's insistence on the performativity of identity, her account of identity's subversion leaves some room for essentialism the kind of which Saleema's example demonstrates. This might be so because although Butler insists on the impossibility of repeating identity in the same way, which culminates in the subversion of identity, she does not explain what accounts for this impossibility. It is here, then, where the semiotic can be seen not only as a viable but indispensable identity component. It is here also where psychoanalysis and Butler's postmodern ideas of identity can find their common ground, for both approaches insist on the subversion of identity from within, be it the sub-conscious semiotic or an unnamed but, nonetheless, equally incalculable force.

4. Another famous example is Amat al-Rahman bint Ahmad. Yet a third example is Fatima bint Muhammad al-Lakhmi, who like many of these poets and educators received the same learning of their brothers. The obvious example, though, is that of Wallada bint al-Mustakfi, the poet who had a literary salon and whose poetry excelled that of her male counterparts. Although the famous poet Ibn Zaydoon was enamored by her and produced the best love poetry in al-Andalus about her, she remained unmarried all her life (Shafi' 144, 155).

5. Omnipresent was the mother of the petty king of Granada, 'Abd Allah. Two other examples are I'timad, the wife of the king of Seville, al-Mu'tamid, and the wife of the Cordovan Caliph, al-Mustakfi (Viguera 717).

6. Abu Muhammad Ali b. Muhammad Ibn Hazm (994-1046), best known for his love treatise *The Ring of the Dove* (1022), in which "he manages to echo the Platonic thought when he defined love as 'a conjunction between scattered parts of souls that have become divided in this physical universe'" (Cachia 312).

7. The Umyyad *emir* [prince] who escaped the Abbasid massacre of his ruling family in 750 C.E. and fled from Baghdad through North Africa to Al-Andalus, which he reached in 755 C.E. A year later, he became the founder and governor of Córdoba; he declared himself emir of the Iberian Peninsula and began to build the early glory of Al-Andalus, including the Great Mosque of Córdoba in 785, which was later enlarged by his successors (Gana 239).

8. The construction of the city of al-Hamra or Alhambra in Granada started after the fall of the Cordova. Rosa María Menocal argues that “the remarkably pristine Alhambra may be one of the only monuments built *avant la lettre* to monumentalize the inevitability of loss, and thus to nostalgia itself.” It was at a visibly terminal political decline that provoked the unprecedented clarity of artistic vision epitomized in the construction of Nasirid city (Menocal “Visions” 7).

9. Abu Ali al-Husayn Ibn Sina (d.1037), a philosopher of Persian origin who combined Aristotelian and neo-Platonic theories with Islamic mysticism. Ibn al-Baytar (d. 1248) was an Andalusian physiologist from Malaga.

### CHAPTER THREE

1. Chakrabarty makes this conclusion particularly in relation to studies of the violence of the Indian-Pakistani Partition, which, she declares are studies of the politics of difference” or othering.

2. Chakrabarty argues that recognition precedes othering because “it is humans who torture, rape, oppress, exploit, other humans.... The denial of the victim’s humanity, thus, proceeds from this initial recognition of it” (142-3).

3. Diolen is one of many synthetic fibers manufactured to replace animal and plant fibers.

4. This is a reference to the tower of Babel, which according to *The Book of Genesis* was built after the Great Flood so that people would not be scattered across the earth again. Back then people spoke a single language.

5. Other writers have criticized this attitude of indifference to the war and elaborated on its role in continuation of the war. One example is Hanan el-Sheikh's *The Story of Zahra*, whose protagonist falls tragically because she tries to apply to the war the rules of peace, indifferent to the war's logic.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

1. See Spivak's "The Politics of Translation" and Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

2. Fenster refers also to the other more traditional forms of belonging, maintaining that belonging ranges from the "formal expressions" associated with the different definitions of citizenship, the sacred dimensions reflected in people's and societies' national attachments to territories, and "also the 'everyday' nature of this sentiment that men and women develop in their daily practices in cities today" (242-243).

3. In *Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History*, Paul Carter discusses an important fact embedded in the relationship between language and place, which is the "impossibility of distinguishing the language of feeling from the language of description" (44). He maintains that place names in Australia do not match or resemble the place they name; rather the traveler's ambitions: "They [these names] were determined not empirically but rhetorically. They embodied the traveller's directional and territorial

ambitions: his desire to possess where has had been as a preliminary to going on ...  
Otherwise the landscape itself could never enter history” (48).

4. Emphasizing how cultures are practiced differently in different places has been the focus of many social sciences, such as anthropology and cultural studies. The recognition of culture’s fluidity has been an important element in the decolonization of Western hegemonic discourses on the Other’s culture. See Akil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond Culture: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7 (1991): 24-44.

5. In “Situated Knowledge: the Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Knowledge,” Haraway discusses the importance of positing knowledge as situated and partial. She stresses that knowledge producers should scrutinize their position or location and acknowledge the limitations inherent in this positionality. All knowledge, she suggests, is situational and therefore partial.

6. Historically Orientalists have appropriated their depiction of the other’s emotions to argue the other’s inferiority and their own superiority by casting the other as less simplistic, less sensitive and ultimately less human than them.

7. The second position has also been promoted by post-colonial feminists, as a remedy for First World/post-modern feminists’ positionality. A deterritorialized position would allow for “a critical consciousness of both east and west alike, operating thus outside the previous colonial hierarchies” (Ong 368).

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