WRITING ACROSS THE LINES

a study of selected novels by

Joyce Mansour, Vénus Khoury-Ghata, Andrée Chedid and Leila Barakat

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of identity and power in the novels of Joyce Mansour, Andrée Chedid, Vénus Khoury-Ghata and Leila Barakat. Well known for her startling and provocative poetry, Joyce Mansour was one of the few women writers to contribute to the Surrealist movement. She died in France in 1986. A versatile writer, Andrée Chedid has won a number of awards for her plays, novels, short stories and poetry. Vénus Khoury-Ghata, probably better known for her poetry, continues to write in French and participate in the promotion of la francophonie. Leila Barakat has published four novels set in the Middle East, and has a doctorate in Comparative literature. The four novelists are from Egypt and Lebanon, countries and cultures which lie between the Orient and the Occident. While Arabic is the official language of both countries, these four novelists have written in French; communicating across the lines separating one gender, culture, race and language from another. This thesis argues that language is constantly altered by its referent and that the four authors have used their novels to not only challenge power structures in place, but to transcend them.
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Introduction

The literary process is a complex network of relationships. At the basic level, there is a reader, a writer and a text. The three interact to produce a literary experience. As literary theory has explored the role of these three elements and as attempts were made to define author, text and reader, the relationship web has widened and its complexity has opened up new areas of focus. The text is part of a wider text, a literary history that belongs to the society and language of the people who have produced it. The author is restricted and empowered by society; personal literary history and experience also play their role. The readers arrive at the text with their own literary background, expectations, knowledge, experience and cultural heritage. The protagonists also have an identity that is separate from the text, while contained within it, influenced and moulded by the reader, writer and text. Imagery, plot, structure and language also exert their own power within the network of relationships.

The role of the critic has been debated as this network of relationships has come under scrutiny. Various literary theories have promoted one entity in this relationship over another, naming the centre of literature as lying in the hands of the author, the text or the reader. Placing the author at the centre of literature resulted from a belief in a single meaning, a universal truth, and the power of language to communicate that single meaning. Authors were seen as constructing a world with an unalterable reality; the job of the critic was to discover that reality. In *Image, Music, Text*, Roland Barthes removed the author from this central position, writing ‘la naissance du lecteur doit se payer de la mort de l’Auteur’.

Nous savons maintenant qu’un texte n’est pas fait d’une ligne de mots, dégageant un sens unique, en quelque sorte théologique (qui serait le message de l’Auteur-Dieu), mais un espace à dimensions multiples où se marient et se contester des écritures variées dont aucune n’est originelle. Le texte est un tissu de citations, issues des milles foyers de la culture.

The critic’s or reader’s job was then to examine the systems or codes of texts, in

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order to disentangle them, not to decipher them. In other words there is no true meaning, but multiple meanings.

Barthes comes to the conclusion that the ‘essence of writing (the meaning of the work which constitutes it) is to prevent any reply to the question: who is speaking?’ Placing the reader at the centre of the literary act, Barthes suggests that readers have a creative role. As Culler puts it

Against the ‘readable’—works that conform to traditional codes and models of intelligibility—he set the ‘writable’—experimental works that we don’t yet know how to read but can only write and must in effect write as we read them.3

Derrida and the radical deconstructionists took this one step further. With the text at the centre, the reader and writer are viewed as almost random variables that are extraneous to the text. The hero of the literary saga is left dancing with mirrors, confined to circular arguments until, as deconstruction would have it, “all reading is necessarily misreading”, and the text “has already annihilated the ground” on which it stands, through its dissemination “into an indefinite range of self-conflicting significations”.4

Critics of radical deconstruction theory have responded by stepping away from an abstract discussion of the nature of language and have looked at the external factors which determine meaning. Meaning implies a communication, between a reader and author, through language. Who the reader is determines what is understood. How words are placed together is determined in part by the author’s intention, in part by the author’s intended reader and in part by the structure of language itself. Literary theorist Raman Selden points out the particular problem he has with Russian formalist and structuralist approaches to reading and writing:

We are not supposed to ask which institutions produce what competences and what power enforces a particular competence, any more than we should ask about the history of the chess pieces when we try to understand how the game is played.5

If the external issues of power are not taken into account language is a game, however more recent theorists have suggested that the power dynamics of institutions have a profound effect on both language and the expression and formation of identity through language. Reader response theories, psychoanalysis,

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3 Culler, Jonathan D. Barthes. Glasgow [Strathclyde]: Fontana Paperbacks, 1983, p10


5 Selden, p347
Marxist and feminist criticism, dialogic and reception theory have taken an alternative stance to pure structuralists and formalists, arguing that linguistic sequences, structures and codes are only part of what makes up literature and that the ordering of these structures and words, the choices made as to what words are used and the meanings which are given them are more than a mere game, but are involved both in reflecting and prescribing the way in which society and individuals are organised and structured. The structures and power dynamics involved are the string which ties language and literature together and they must be examined in order to shed light on meaning, as well as possible ways of writing and reading. Furthermore, these dynamics allow for the interactive nature of a text within a culture, both as prescriptive and descriptive.

Each theory has opened up new areas of interest and insight and yet no one theory appears to survive without being integrated with other schools of thought. One of the central problems has been that while structures may govern language and literature, an individual and unique production requires a theory which encompasses both the notion of individuation and connection, cultural identity and the identity of the individual. Iain Wright, in his essay *History, Hermeneutics, Deconstruction*, highlights the

> falsely polarized alternatives which have blocked and bedevilled hermeneutics from Schleiermacher to the Yale poststructuralists.7

He argues that the German literary theorist Gadamer, who developed a particular branch of dialogism, charts a difficult middle course between the view that there is an objective reading which gives

> a uniquely correct interpretation of the text, and the view that art (for instance) can be understood as ‘the variety of changing whose object is each time filled subjectively with meaning like an empty mould’ (or Barthes’ ‘empty sight’?).

For Gadamer it is the tension between “the text and the present” that is the central concern of literary criticism: it is the connection “between those ideas [the concepts of the past] and one’s own thinking”,8 which are in dialogue. Because Gadamer is particularly concerned with looking at the way in which we read old texts from cultures in the past, his focus is on the ways in which knowledge and world views change with time. Thus a reader brings to a text written in the past their own frame of reference, born of their own time and culture, as well as all that reader knows, or

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7 Ibid, p93

8 Ibid
ideally could know, about the values and knowledge of the culture and people who produced the text. What makes Gadamer’s theories interesting in relation to this thesis is the idea of combining knowledge and values external to the culture of the time in which the text was written, as well as the knowledge and values of the reader’s time in order to elucidate and expand the text, and bring to light new theories and patterns of thought. When the concept of past and present is removed, the notion of a dialogue between two cultures emerges. This dialogue is not a deconstruction of the text into meaningless syntax, but a variety of meanings which are reflections of culture, time, place and the landscape of the individual’s mind as revealed in their reflection on that culture, time and place. It is the notion of the individual which has posed the greatest problems for proponents of dialogism. If creativity demands a unique way of thinking and perceiving, then it is not a simple reflection of culture, time and space, but is composed of an individual’s response and unique perception of that culture, time and place, and as such adds to the culture, time and place, creating new signs and symbols. The reader is then engaged not only in attempting to find the veracity or authenticity of an account, but rather in attempting to discover the dialogue the author has undertaken with their own culture, time and place, and whether that dialogue can bring anything to the culture, time and place of the present.

In viewing literature as a method of communicating,

a book’s “borders”—its packaging, format and the contexts in which it is read and published—as inseparable from its more apparent content. Not only an author...part of the text...but so its editors and readers....every book, every reading, is laced and surrounded with circumstances worth considering, border crossings within the text as well as at its edges.⁹

The various centres involved in literature have their own power, just as in any human relationship. Without the reader, the text exists but is inactive; without the text the reader is inactive; without the author there is no text; without the hors-texte, culture and society, the reader, writer and text are meaningless; without language, both structure and semiotics, there is no text. According to the privileges afforded each role, there is a shift in the power and influence exerted. The politics of writing, the power issues that develop within this web of relationships, have become a central focus for literary theorists, as feminist and postcolonial writers challenge texts with the hors-texte. Widening the field of the network turns the dialogue into a conversation between many voices, multiple centres.

One thing that is certain is that all literary theories are concerned with what language actually is. In answer to this question I am inclined to agree with Heidegger, in that

Man can represent, no matter how, only what has previously come to light of its own accord and has shown itself to him in the light it brought with it.

Language speaks that it, as showing, reaching into all regions of presences, summons from them whatever is present to appear and to fade.¹⁰

Timothy Clark argues that Heidegger’s view of language as re-presentation both depends upon and dissimulates language as a mode of appropriation, bringing things to being and being to things. It is dependent because without the appearances effected in the more primordial evocation nothing could appear to become subsequently the object of any representation. It dissimulates insofar as the instrumental conception of language as a means of communication perpetuates, not only the illusion of its own non-dependence upon a more originary presentation, but also the dichotomy of subject and object, an antagonism whose basis in a common ‘element’ (apparentness in general as it were) is effaced.¹¹

In the world of language it is the word which speaks things into being; however, in the physical world things exist without the aid of language, and without presences language is nonsense. Does nothing exist for the pre-lingual infant? Language is not the means of bringing things into being then, but more the process of giving things a conceptual reality in order that in the absence of the thing its concept can be evoked in another plane of reality—the conceptual. Diprose and Ferrel use the metaphor of mapping to describe this element of language:

Mapping, as representation, is inextricably caught up in the material production of what it represents... It is the realization that something real remains to be represented that persuades us that there is a production at work, even in the most self-evident facts about the world.¹²

It is through the understanding of ‘the fictionality of what it [society] assumes to be real, as well as the reality of its fictions’¹³ that the influence of literature on the hors-texte can be examined and vice versa.

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In this thesis I shall examine the way in which the interplay of identities has been portrayed in the work of four novelists, Joyce Mansour, Vénus Khoury-Ghata, Andrée Chedid and Leila Barakat. The texts and *hors* texts of these four women writers highlights the power relationships involved in a literary moment. This includes not only the balance of power between the interpretations of reader and writer once the text is written, but also the power that culture, society, language structures and literary tradition exert over the individual who is attempting to tell her own story. Mansour, Khoury-Ghata, Chedid and Barakat all live between cultures. In particular I shall be looking at the way in which the power play of this relationship operates within the texts. I will be focusing on the way in which the texts explore the question of autonomy, or the power of self-authorship, and the tension between individual identity, national identity and gendered identity.

The problem of individual creativity within a culture-specific structure, which language is, has been addressed by the French psychoanalyst and literary theorist Julia Kristeva. Kristeva builds on the theorist Jacques Lacan who saw language development as part and product of the formation of a child as an individual and as part of a society. Kristeva’s theories have been used by feminists as well as criticised by them; however her notions of the margin and disruptions of the patriarchal order have become an entrenched part of feminist literary theory and criticism. Kristeva combines psychoanalysis and linguistics to explain the tension between subjective and objective readings, between the individual as a part of society and as a unique creature, separate from others. Language is described as having two purposes: in the first place to communicate and in the second to individuate. She argues that the child in the first stages of life experiences a connection to the mother, experiences life as rhythmic and repetitive. In order to control the environment around it, the first stage toward language is the recognition of separation, that in order to get one’s needs met one must communicate desires. This aspect of language serves a second purpose; it also provides the individual with a way in which to order and structure the chaos outside which is potentially threatening to the child. Once it is ordered and structured, named and classified, it can be manipulated, predictions can be made, and the outside world can to some extent be controlled. Kristeva calls this the symbolic modality of language and associates it with the father in a patriarchal society, for the structure of a patriarchal society depends upon the role of the father as centre and hence the fixed point upon which the structures of definition hang.

The second modality of language is the semiotic that begins in the early phase of a child’s life when the child is connected to the other in a continuum, controlled by its
libidinal drives which are without gender or difference. The semiotic modality seeks to disrupt and alter the fixed nature of language. Kristeva connects the identification of the child to the other as being a result of its initial connection to the mother as primary care giver and source of life. For Kristeva the Œdipal crisis brings about the separation of the two aspects of language into the male and female dominated parts; however she asserts that both men and women use and need both aspects of language, just as both aspects of language are dependent upon each other. Depending on the purpose of a text, one or other of the modalities is to the fore; however the semiotic without the symbolic is meaningless babble and the symbolic without the semiotic cannot grow and develop to explain change and alternatives. When the semiotic enters the symbolic structures it disrupts and revolutionises language. When those who do not belong to the centre which governs the structure of the symbolic enter the symbolic in order to communicate another alternative structure or centre, they disrupt the centre but must also become a part of the structure in order to be understood. With regard to feminism, then, Kristeva argues that there is no separate female language, but rather disruptions which destabilise the structure of the symbolic and hence the power structures and hierarchies in place, while simultaneously conforming to them.

In terms of the authors studied within this thesis, the women writers are constantly crossing from the external world of their own culture’s symbolic order and the symbolic order of the French language. They move from disruption to conformity, interacting between their desire to say what they want to say and the desire to say what can be understood. Moreover, as women, they move between the patriarchal structures of the symbolic and the semiotic world of the mother. The desire to return to the mother is a desire to return to the place of connection, the place where “I am understood”. This desire can be translated to the desire to return to one’s place of birth, as well as a return to the past. While working quite separately from Kristeva, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard underlines the importance of the return to the place of birth for the materialisation of the images of the subconscious.14 The place of your birth is linked, in both Bachelard and Kristeva’s work, to the semiotic.

Khoury-Ghata, Chedid and Barakat have all returned in their novels to their countries of birth; however, as many authors have found before them, there can be no real return to the place of one’s childhood, no return to the past because of the vagaries of time. It is only in the ability of the authors to return to the place of their

early childhood through semiotic devices, that the author achieves a world in which they are understood. Chedid and Barakat in particular, both seek a physical image for identity. In their use of the imagery of place, particularly the return to the physical images of their childhood and infancy, the authors have established a constant link in the semiotic which may not be so constant in the physical world. However in order to write that world, there is the need to anchor the semiotic in the structures and language of the symbolic. Interestingly both Barakat, in *Pourquoi pleure l'Euphrate* and Chedid, in *Le sixième jour*, use the river as a semiotic device. For Barakat the river is also a woman who will link the past and the future together for the main protagonist in the book. The river is connected, fluid and in flux; belonging in the semiotic it does not obey the laws of fixity and structure, and yet it is able to navigate a course through the structures of city and town, to be a constant feature as well as a constantly changing one. It is the semiotic within their writing, contained within the river banks yet not under control and with the potential for releasing the death drive.

Kristeva has linked the domination of the semiotic with the domination of libidinal drives, the strongest of which is the death drive. In Barakat and Chedid's work the river is constantly connected to death: Hamadé, in *Pourquoi pleure l'Euphrate*, is in danger of being seduced by the call of the river/woman and finds himself walking out into the water, seeking to lay claim to the river, but in fact in danger of destroying himself. In Chedid's work death is always accompanied with a switch to the semiotic; her writing takes on a poetic rhythmic quality which has been present in earlier chapters but which only comes to the foreground as a song or dance of death. In *La maison sans racines*, Chedid combines a grandmother and a child in the journey back to her homeland. The older woman wants to take the child back to the country of her own past, Lebanon, as the granddaughter has been raised in America. The grandmother refuses to see the threat that this country of her past could be to the child. For her the past is a place of understanding and connection; it is the place of the mother. The grandmother is in many ways reliving her own childhood through the grandchild and as she drifts further and further into the past, the book constantly shifts time structures, escaping the symbolic order, until the climax of the book in which the child is killed by a sniper's bullet as she runs to the arms of her grandmother. The return to the past is accompanied by a threat to the present.
The movement into the semiotic undertaken by both Chedid and Barakat is noticeable as distinct in their writing because it contrasts so sharply with the symbolic, structured and conventional nature of the majority of their writing. For both Chedid and Barakat the semiotic is ultimately portrayed as a triumph which dances in the face of death, and there is not a conscious link in their writing between the death drive and the semiotic, even if it is there for the reader to discern.

Khoury-Ohata and Mansour, on the other hand, use the semiotic throughout their writing and it is this which gives their writing a surrealistic aspect. However it would appear that both Mansour and Khoury-Ghata are very much aware of the potentially destructive and psychotic effects of an over-attachment to the semiotic. Khoury-Ghata writes in *Le fils empaillé*, *La maison du bord des larmes* and *La maîtresse du notable* about a young poet who moves further and further away from society and its structures, until he is finally so removed from reality that even poetry deserts him. However she does not advocate the absolute rule of the symbolic order which is so rigid and tight that not only does it stifle the semiotic, but it is also frozen into inactivity due to an inability to know the formulas for every conceivable possibility and the necessary words for confining and defining the external world. Khoury-Ghata’s novels appear to affirm Kristeva’s assertion that the two modalities need to be in constant dialogue, the semiotic disrupting the symbolic, but in balance, as a process.

Mansour’s own negotiation between the symbolic and semiotic, the language of the mother and the language of the father, is a violent journey, in which her life is threatened. It would appear from her writing that the border between the semiotic and symbolic, as structured under patriarchy, is a battle ground. Disruption is almost impossible without enormous risk to the self, and so writing swings wildly between the two modalities. For Mansour, the threat is not one or other of the modalities, but rather the journey between them, the negotiation of the corridor as the writer’s mind crosses from a structure which threatens to crush her and a fluidity which threatens to drown her.

While Mansour’s writing is arguably the most violent of the three writers’ works the narratives of war in Khoury-Ghata’s work points to a world governed by the semiotic, where the structures in place have collapsed and can no longer fix, define and control the concrete world, but where the concrete world itself becomes so uncertain that the language structures are destabilised by it and disrupted. The black humour in Khoury-Ghata’s work often stems from the instability of language structures. One of the best examples in her work is the disruption of the formulaic,
structured Lord’s prayer, which is a symbol of the structure and order of the church, by the South American Latino music making its way up the staircase of the building and into the home of the Lebanese family,

Nos prières et les tangos de la Comtessa se rejoignaient à mi-chemin des deux maisons, se mêlant jusqu’à ce qu’on ne puisse plus dissocier les paroles saintes de celles qui ne l’étaient pas.

«Je vous salue Maria de la Plata
Votre nom est dans nos cœurs brisés
Vous êtes bénie entre toutes les femmes des bas quartiers...
Maintenant et à l’heure de notre mort.
Olé.»

Any attempt to fix an identity, to find safety within the symbolic or within the semiotic is portrayed as an exercise in the ridiculous, not because language is without structure, but because the structures which underpin it have fallen apart. When society falls apart, language falls apart and so to do the individuals within the society and in their use of language. Identity, order and structure lose their meaning and the psychotic babble that Kristeva views as resulting from an overpowerful semiotic urge, becomes the only language relevant to the disintegrated surroundings. In this context the tendency can be to swing too far over into the symbolic, as with the father figure in Khoury-Ghata’s work, who becomes obsessed with the structuring and ordering of language, with formula, so as to escape the chaos in society. Her writing is concerned with the way in which national, cultural and individual identity interact with identity as produced by language.

In order to examine the interplay between the identities in the work of the four novelists, I take my own position in this interplay of relationships. My focus in this study will determine how the text is read. Theories of identity formed within feminist and postcolonial schools of thought will be used to explore the power dynamics in the novels studied. In the small world of the text these two political notions open up the text to the wider implications of the personal as political, and the intimate as public.

Power itself has received various definitions. Azza M. Karam comments on Gramsci’s theory of power, which includes coercion and consent in its definition:

15 Khoury-Ghata, Une maison au bord des larmes, 1998, p.139
Gramsci emphasizes the point that all power issues from a relationship, an interaction between two parties. Power is conceived as a dialectical interaction between unequal parties, one dominant and one subordinate, in which both parties have active roles to play. With the idea of hegemony, Gramsci explores the interplay of coercion and consent which forms the dynamic of relations of power...Power...is portrayed not as a possession of dominant groups, nor as the execution of force; it is, instead, the ongoing creation of a relationship which encourages the complicity and consent of the subordinate partner or partners.16

I take exception to this definition of power, for consent and complicity both point to a choice between submission and rejection, whereas the choice which exists in the relationship of the dominated to the dominant is often one of a choice between two or more submissions. The consent to one form of domination is the rejection of the other(s). Duress and brainwashing, not to mention drug-induced states of compliance, are examples of concepts which remove choice altogether or diminish the capacity to choose. For the purposes of this study I choose to look at power as located in the luxury of choice. The more restricted and constrained the choice is, the less power there is. In situations where individuals participate in a hunger strike, there is a suggestion that those on the hunger strike have taken power into their own hands, have made a choice to reject the attempted domination of another group. However, within this analogy there are many centres of power operating. Foucault argues:

Power is not to be taken to be a phenomenon of one individual’s consolidated and homogenous domination over others, or that of one group or class over others...It is never localised here or there...And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation.17

Power here is viewed as a force with its own structure and momentum, through which individuals pass. Is it perhaps, then, those with access to the map of that system, those who have knowledge of its swings and roundabouts who manage to dominate. Power is manifest not only in the relationship between two parties. Power is exerted over an environment, so that the individual’s capacity to order and structure objects is also a power. I would suggest the metaphor of planets, where individuals and objects, as well as theories and notions, all have their own orbits and gravitational pull. As they come into contact with one another, the gravitational pull can cause one “planet” to enter the orbit of another; in other instances it can

cause a collision and disintegration; in others repulsion, or a change of course. Power depends on the nature of the objects and the influence they exert. Within the world of literature there is a constant shift in the balance of power. ‘Who controls the story?’ is a question of central concern in this study.

This study sets out to examine the work of four women living between cultures. All have identities located in Lebanon and/or Egypt as well as France. Due to their geographic and ethnic backgrounds the women in this study share a basic identity within the Lebanese and Egyptian worlds. The fact that they have lived in France and have chosen to write in French in no way lessens their relevance to the wider stories of the countries to which they belong. Lebanon has an extensive diaspora; one would be hard put to find a family that does not have several of its members overseas. Egypt has not only had its own diaspora, it has also been a destination for European, African and Middle Eastern immigrants and travellers.

Egypt and Lebanon have a shared history as well as their own specificities. Trade between the Egypt and Lebanon can be traced back to the 4th dynasty of Egypt, predating 3000 BC. At that time Lebanon made up the majority of what was known as Phoenicia. It is certain that there has been a regular and extensive exchange of ideas, people and culture between those two countries since that time. Lebanon provided much of the wood used in Ancient Egyptian constructions. Lebanese and Egyptian mythology and religion were incorporated into Greek and Roman mythology and religion. In this century Egypt and Lebanon have emerged as leading cultural and literary centres.

Education today is not compulsory in Lebanon, yet Lebanon has the highest literacy rate in the Arab world. Egypt has made considerable advances in education: in 1997 89% of female children in the relevant age group were enrolled in primary and secondary schools. It is certain that this move toward education for women in Egypt will lift the literacy rate which stands at less than 50% of the adult female population.

Lebanon and Egypt have long been regarded as centres of publication in the Middle East and North Africa. Lebanon’s association with publication is one of the oldest in the region: the first printing press in the Middle East was set up in Lebanon, and it was in Lebanon that the Koran was published for the first time. Both countries have publication houses which have a readership throughout the Arab World.

Lebanon and Egypt, both centres of commerce and trade, formed a port for knowledge between the “East” and “West”. France has had a long history of contact
with both Lebanon and Egypt, and has been aggressor and ruler. The northern part of Lebanon was largely Christian from the 7th century onward. At the end of the 11th century Lebanon became part of the Crusaders' states of both Tripolis and Jerusalem and the Maronite Church accepted papal supremacy. Following the fall of the Crusaders the Mamelukes took control of Lebanon. The Mameluke State was largely controlled by Egypt and Syria, both centres of resistance against the crusaders. Because of the close links in faith between the West and the inhabitants of Mount Lebanon, both Egypt and Syria carried out punitive action against Lebanon. Nevertheless Mount Lebanon, a primarily Christian centre, was allowed a relative measure of autonomy under Mameluke rule. In the 16th century the Ottomans took power. Despite the Mameluke and Ottoman rule, 15th and 20th centuries Lebanon evolved its own political system in a country divided among Maronite, Druze and Shi'a. The silk trade became the basis of the Lebanese economy during this time, encouraging further European interest, and trading colonies were established along the coast of Lebanon.

French colonies were the most important of these trading posts and the French established direct relations with the Maronite people in 1649. Relations between the various communities in Lebanon deteriorated as the increased influence of the French widened the Maronite power base. Egypt, Britain and the Ottoman Empire became involved in the ensuing power struggle and when the Druze won control of Lebanon in 1860, the French armed forces entered Lebanon and intervened. This resulted in autonomy for Lebanon under a Christian governor to be appointed by the Ottoman ruler. The governor was to rule with a council made up of representatives from other communities in Lebanon. When the Ottoman Empire fell in World War I the allied forces placed Lebanon under French military administration. In 1936 a Franco-Lebanese treaty of independence and friendship was signed, but it was not ratified by the French government.

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In 1941 the Free French and British troops occupied Lebanon and proclaimed the independence of both Lebanon and Syria. Yet it was not until 1946 that French troops withdrew and Lebanon became wholly independent. However, the withdrawal only took place after two serious incidents. The first occurred in 1943 during which the Lebanese president and almost the entire Lebanese government were arrested for not bowing to French control. It was followed by a similar crisis in 1945.

Egypt has had just as complicated a history of foreign invasion and domination. Since ancient times Egypt has had many rulers, passing under Greek, Libyan, Cushite, Persian, Macedonian, Roman, Mameluke, Ottoman, French and British rule. French interest in Egypt began with the first crusade. The Frankish king of Jerusalem, Baldwin I, raided Egypt in 1118 and invaded the Delta. Raids and attempts to wrest control of Egypt from the Fatamid Caliphs followed but the Crusaders were unable to seize control. Egypt became the centre of Muslim resistance to the Frankish Crusaders and was central to the fall of the Crusader Empire. Saladin, head of the Moslem forces, appointed his sons as rulers of Syria and Egypt once the Crusaders were defeated. The sons quarreled and Saladin's brother took control of both countries. Under a single ruler relations between Syria and Egypt strengthened. However, the Crusaders continued their campaign against Egypt. It was not until 1249 that the last Crusader assault on Egypt was carried out, under King Louis IX of France. Mameluke rule was then established and was in place until 1517. It was followed by Ottoman rule. The French never lost interest in Egypt, however, and when Charles Magallon, French consul in Egypt in the 1790s, recommended the occupation of Egypt, Napoleon Bonaparte became obsessed with the idea and in 1798 the French army landed on the outskirts of Alexandria. Under the guise of "rescuing" Egypt from Mameluke rule and "restoring" Islam, Napoleon's troops advanced up the Nile, driving out the Mameluke rulers and finally establishing a military government in Cairo. He then set up the first Arabic and French printing presses in Egypt and established an Institut d'Egypte that attracted the intelligentsia of Egypt and aroused the interest of the West in Egypt and Islam. However, Bonaparte's hold on Egypt was tenuous and, facing opposition from Britain and the Ottoman Empire, the French were forced to withdraw from Egypt in 1801.

Civil war followed, and a period of Mameluke rule ensued, but the Mameluke power base was shaky and faced serious opposition which led to its collapse. In 1805 Mohammed Ali established rule under the Ottoman Empire. Mohammed Ali formed an army, which received a large part of its training from French officers. In
1820 there were no fewer than 35 foreign commercial houses in the port of Alexandria. The importance of the trade links with Europe ensured that the ruling minority was on the whole a French-speaking elite, who became increasingly influenced by French culture, and politics. In 1848 Mohammed Ali was succeeded by his son who was anti-French and the European influence waned. However, following his death, in suspicious circumstances, in 1854 his uncle, Saïd, took over power. Saïd spoke French and cultivated French friends. During his reign the French language became the language of the Egyptian elite. Saïd was not financially competent, and it was during his reign that the Egyptian debt to France and Britain grew. His French-educated nephew succeeded him in his turn, and while the British came to occupy Egypt during his rule, French culture and society remained a great influence. French-speaking graduates from universities in Beirut proved vital in the intellectual life of Cairo, influencing Egypt's cultural and political life.

In the end it was financial ruin that led to the British occupation of Egypt. Britain, supported by France, occupied Egypt from 1883 through to 1892. 1892 marked a change in politics with the appointment of a new Pasha who was a nationalist and a Francophile. The nationalist movement was heavily dominated by Francophiles and as British power waned there was renewed interest in the French language. In 1896 the French moved forces back into the Nile, and relations between France and Egypt deteriorated once again. However, in 1898 the French withdrew from the Nile, ceding power to the British who were given special status in Egypt, without Egypt becoming a formal protectorate until 1914. In 1922 a monarchy was established in Egypt and Britain declared Egypt independent, while still retaining a military presence in Egypt, and retaining a high level of power over political affairs. Britain continued to struggle for control over the Sudan and it was not until after World War II and the Suez crisis that Britain finally withdrew.

France’s support of Britain in this struggle against Egyptian independence had cooled relations between France and Egypt. French commercial houses were shut down and Europe finally lost its power base in Egypt. Nevertheless France had left behind a French education system and a large group of French speakers. This French-speaking group was formed from not only the Coptic population in Egypt, but also from wealthy families with commercial links in Europe, and those Syrian and Lebanese immigrants who had a French education in their home countries.

France and Lebanon are countries that have been through many different challenges to identity and culture. It is a highly questionable Western viewpoint to see the
history of colonisation merely in terms of Western imperialism. The imposition of French rule is but a link in a succession of imperial powers. In both countries, the period of Western dominance was preceded by a long history of upheaval. The Roman and Ottoman Empires had a more lengthy and entrenched rule over the two countries than the French, and the indigenous languages of both cultures have been lost due to the succession of ruling powers from outside cultures who imposed their own languages on the two countries. For some minorities Islamic nationhood is as much of an imposition and a form of imperialism as French rule, and more threatening as it is not recognisably foreign, but closely attached to the region and to the religion of the dominated populations. However, it is true to say that the withdrawal of Western political power has not meant the withdrawal of domination in the areas of technology, education and attitudes of superiority that are expressed by the French metropolis. For nations that are young in their newfound identities, the postcolonial hangover is an ever-present reality.

Edward Said looks at the 'post' of post-colonial with some irony:

The experience of being colonized therefore signified a great deal to regions and peoples of the world whose experience as dependents, subalterns, and subjects of the West did not end—to paraphrase from Fanon—when the last white policeman left and the last European flag came down. To have been colonized was a fate with lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair results, especially after national independence had been achieved. Poverty, dependency, underdevelopment, various pathologies of power and corruption, plus of course notable achievements in war, literacy, economic development: this mix of characteristics designated the colonized people who had freed themselves on one level but who remained victims of the past on another.19

Values and assumptions held by the dominant powers have been assimilated into much of the dominated groups’ thought. There can be no return to a glorious past, real or imagined, there can only be the establishment of a new identity and voice. The tightrope walk of writing into the French literary canon hinges on the notion of identity. The identity of the individual, in this situation, is heavily connected to national identity, for as the Orient breaks into the Occident an interplay of power eventuates in which language, notions of nation and identity are all involved.

Writing from one culture into the language and literary history of another culture immediately places Mansour, Chedid, Khoury-Ghata and Barakat in the position where their identities must interact with a historically dominant and established canon if they are to survive. Fanon, in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, argues that language is not a neutral structure, but that in so far as it defines and confines perceptions, it is a vehicle and manifestation of culture:

Writing into the dominant language and literary tradition requires the author to either submit to or confront the assumptions of the dominant voice. In many cases there is movement between these two positions. Confrontation of ideas often requires the author to submit to the centre, for if there is to be communication between reader and writer there needs to be a constant translation of realities between cultures.

In Cartographies, Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces, language is viewed within the metaphor of mapping.

In the metaphor of cartography, to draw a line is to produce a space, and the production of the space affects the line. The map describes a territory as the compass describes an arc; the lines on the map produce borders beyond which things are seen to be different. Yet the difference of the ‘outside’ also defines what is ‘inside’ the border.21

There is a clear division in the western mind between the first and third worlds. Even in this post-colonial time the boundaries are still drawn. The imperial map is now drawn in terms of economic power and powerlessness. In her book, Re-Orienting Western Feminisms, Chilla Bulbeck makes the observation that, while Western academics might use multi-culturalism and post colonialism to retreat from the new realities of global power, ... postcolonial writers who adopt the perspective of those who have been colonized realize the battle is not yet won, colonial is not yet post.22

This continued imperialism on the part of developed countries reinforces the binary opposition of “them” and “us”. The women in this study have to deal with the centre of this power structure when they attempt to write from the East into the language and literary history of the West. Arab novelists who choose to write in French are choosing to write for an external audience. Their difference places them in the margin of that audience.

The separation between the East and West is not total, however. There is no clear demarcation line. Chilla Bulbeck challenges the notion of a line separating the inside from the outside. She notes:


there is no pure east and west. People, goods, ideas and texts travel backwards and forwards across the borderlands...[there is a] tension between commonality and difference. ²³

One does not have to search too far back in history to find a vast body of knowledge and thought that came to the West from the East, including Christianity, which was then itself colonised and used to subjugate the very countries from whence it came. As the power dynamics in the world shift, so too does the literary focus. Indian novelist Kamala Markandaya wrote:

At one time there were the accepted metropolitan areas, in the West, and there were the colonies and later the Commonwealth. On the whole the Commonwealth looked to the metropolis for its standards, and the metropolis, confident of its values, was content that it should. But now there are fewer certainties. A good deal of soul searching is going on. The Commonwealth has its own thesis to put forward, and the metropolis is willing to listen. In this climate I cannot share the gloomy views for Commonwealth literature expressed elsewhere.²⁴

While Markandaya is speaking about English literature, the same could be said of French literature. The authors in this study have chosen to write in French and publish in France. As a result their readership will consist, for the most part, of the metropolis. While their own knowledge of the French language empowers them to write their realities, their realities may not always fit comfortably into the accepted canon: much of who they are and what they know must be translated into the dominant language. There is a constant tension between writing into the canon, and writing against the canon.

The women in this study highlight the difficulty of borders. All four authors spent the greater part of their childhood in Egypt or Lebanon, yet Mansour, Chedid and Khoury-Ghata have spent most of their adult lives in France, and Barakat moved to France for her University education. Their writing crosses the borders between East and West. Their choice to occupy a history without a single residence presents them with numerous challenges and questions regarding nationhood and identity within the structure of language.

The growing population who occupy territory in the “betweenlands” has led to the formation of a relatively new concept. As the boundaries between nations and cultures are challenged there is a movement away from the notion of difference


toward the notion of fusion. Post-colonial theories are gradually moving toward the notion of a “global village”.

This concept has grown out of the advances in transport, as well as improved information technology and communication systems. Telephones, radios, televisions and the Internet have reduced distance to the push of a button. Or have they? For those who control what information is available, for those who have access and control of this technology, it is easy to believe that the world is a smaller place, a “global village”. For those without power in this new technological world the outside just got larger and more threatening. Fusion with other nations is in danger of becoming the absorption of smaller groups by larger groups. Ignatief suggests that the idea of a cosmopolitan world, much like the one contained within the notion of a global village, is only for those with the luxury of choice:

Between the hungry and the sated nations, there is an impassable barrier of incomprehension...Sated people can afford to be cosmopolitan; sated people can afford the luxury of condescending to the passions of the hungry. But among the Crimean Tartars, the Kurds and the Crees, I met the hungry ones, peoples whose very survival will remain at risk until they achieve self-determination, whether in their own nation state or someone else’s.²⁵

Under the guise of the global village white Western imperialism is reasserting itself. Just as French and English travellers through Africa, Asia and the Middle East sent home tales of their journeys, invading privacy, and imposing Western value systems on the cultures they encountered: so now do television documentaries, internet studies, satellite fly-overs, films and tourists.²⁶

An additional challenge to this concept of world citizenship is the reality of civil wars, which have broken out throughout the world. Elazar Barkan and Marie Denise Shelton discuss the notion of the global village in their book, Borders, Exile, Diasporas. Their focus is on Diaspora, on people who move between countries, and so their disagreement with “the vision of a postmodern world populated by individuals who are no longer citizens of specific countries but humans sharing a common culture” lies in the reality of the “contradictory vision of an utterly heterogeneous world marked by fragmentation, mutilation, and irreconcilable differences”.²⁷


Placed geographically in close proximity to the African Arab world, the Middle Eastern Arab world, Israel, Central Africa and Europe, Egypt and Lebanon represent not only meeting points between cultures, but also lines of division. It is at these lines of division that dialogue between differing points of view occurs. While women’s Francophone writing in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia could well have been included in this study, it is the meeting point of East and West, of French, English and American influence, of Arab and non-Arab that places Egypt and Lebanon at the centre of the question: ‘How are we to live together?’ and equally, ‘How...can we live with difference?’28 Both Egypt and Lebanon have had periods of civil war and national uprising, responding to the issue of difference with the solution of destruction of that which is different. Yet there is a large group of intellectuals within Lebanon who see peace and the survival of Lebanon as grounded within difference. For them the question is not only ‘How can we live together?’, but ‘How can we survive if we are not together?’, and similarly ‘How can we live without difference?’ The war in Lebanon is symptomatic of a problem occurring throughout the world. With the collapse of large empires, newly formed independent nations search for a national identity. The search for a national identity often pits religious and ethnic groups within the nation against each other. National identity is challenged on three fronts by individual identity; minority groups with a desire for political representation and/or a separate nation; and transcultural movement, which highlights the ‘impurities of all cultures and the porousness of all cultural boundaries in an irrevocably globalized, interconnected, and interdependent world’.29

Mansour, Khoury-Ghata, Chedid and Barakat have chosen to become part of a minority culture within the larger culture in France. In so doing, they are moving across the national, cultural, social, literary and racial boundaries which are the lines of fragmentation, and yet they are also participants in the vision of a global village. In their discussion of the relationship between identity and place in the book Borders, Exiles, Diasporas, Cultural Sitings, Barkan and Shelton suggest that the problem of movement between cultures results in a divided and multiple identity:

Transplanted, the individual is transformed; the “I” is no longer a speaking subject with a clear history and a distinct voice but rather becomes a composite product of historical antinomies and contradictory impulses. Such are the apparent paradoxical, 28 Ang, Ien. “The Uses of Incommensurability.” Signs v23, no.1 (Autumn), p57

but not incompatible, explanations of the world in contemporary intellectual discourse.30

While Barkan and Shelton see the individual as a composite product, Barakat’s novels highlight the fragmentation which can occur within the individual when the apparent paradox becomes a lived experience of fragmentation.

This experience of fragmentation is met by the individual with an impulse toward the creation of a culture which is not fixed in place or race, but a culture of diaspora. Chedid’s novels tie in closely with Barkan and Shelton’s notion of diaspora:

Dissociated from the historical experiences of a defined group of people, it becomes a universal nomenclature applicable to displaced groups of people...A global middle voice emerges in the postcolonial context which incorporates the critic as the participant subject of the discourse on identity...Diaspora is a culture without a country, ironically the exact antithesis of the internal coherence and integration implied by the notion of national culture. Diaspora is about choice.31

Chedid’s novels speak of sub-cultures of people who are without a country, who find a home in each other’s company, rather than within boundaries of race, age, society, language and geography. However Chedid, like Ignatief, also sees the suffering that can occur to those who have no choice. Rather than attack the idea of a cosmopolitan perception of life, however, Chedid is opposed to the removal of that choice and the things that stand in the way of people crossing borders and boundaries. If the aftermath of colonisation means that diaspora is experienced as exile rather than a choice, writing provides the author with the opportunity to create a space within that culture. Anne Donadey analyzes the concept of writing as home in her discussion of Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar. Sebbar describes writing in French as empowering, for she is entering the French space, occupying and transforming French literary territory. Sebbar finds her imagined community in the space of writing.

The lack of a land to call her own, her home, makes her take writing as her territory, a territory inscribed in the French language.32


Due to the power structures in place, however, the crossing of national boundaries is a political movement, which challenges not only the new centre, but also the centre left behind. The choice to write in French is also the choice not to write in Arabic. Choosing to write in French and publish in France suggests the expectation of a French readership, a dialogue with the other, and a challenge to the Western canon, of which France is a part.

Postcolonial feminist theories have opened the debate on the issue of the position of the “white woman” in regard to non-Western women’s writing. Rey Chow comments that

Vis-à-vis the non-Western woman, the white woman occupies the position, with the white man, as investigator with ‘the freedom to speak’... What has become untenable is the way Western feminism imposes its own interests and methodologies on those who do not inhabit the same sociohistorical spaces, thus reducing the latter to a state of reified silence and otherness.  

White women were warned of the danger of falling into the trap of “universalistic pretensions... emanating from mainly white, middle class scholars” which have come under attack for “displaying racist and ethnocentric tendencies”. Non-Western women became a marginalised group within the discourse of white Western feminism. Where the group was acknowledged it was critiqued as a homogeneous sub-category requiring pity or condescension from its ‘big sister’, white feminism. Zeidan points out how this marginalisation has been manifested in attitudes toward the Arab world. He notes that there were apparent contradictions in the discussion of women in the pre-Islamic period due to a ‘mistaken conception of “Arabia” as a homogeneous society and a failure to recognise the existence of separate tribal entities with widely differing philosophies in many areas.’ He gives a clear example of this division by pointing out the patrilineal nature of the Meccan clan, as opposed to the matrilineal nature of the Medina clan. Chilla Bulbeck, in her discussion of the assumptions made by Eurocentric feminists with regard to the Orient, uses other distinctions, such as religion, nationality, class background and

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geographical location in order to fragment and challenge assumptions surrounding
the position of women in the Orient.

As a white woman writing about non-Western women, I have been led by
comments such as these to question my own position in relation to the texts. To
place myself within the basket of white women is to homogenise and stereotypify
my own position. I am white, but experienced that whiteness in a very different way
from this perceived person that is the white female middle class reader. I was born
and grew up in India, and experienced my whiteness as otherness. To be white was
to be constantly visible and excluded, to represent and to carry the shame of
colonialism, and the “woman of loose morals” as portrayed by Hollywood. On
coming to New Zealand my whiteness included me in the white middle class of
New Zealand, and here I found myself constantly trying to make the Indian part of
my identity visible in order to disassociate myself from the superior “we” which
makes racist comments and jokes and ‘doesn’t understand those foreigners’. For my
whiteness apparently invited the comment “But you’re one of us” from other white
middle class people who wanted to separate me from my relationship with India,
and the non-Western woman. It was in the context of diaspora as a culture that I
found a ‘we’ I identified with, an identity of difference. To read only white
women’s texts, and furthermore to read only those texts written by white women
who are exactly like me in order to ensure there is no further imperialism on my
part, is to perpetuate the silence and the otherness of those who inhabit a different
sociohistorical space. Furthermore the sociohistorical space of the four women in
this study is not completely non-Western, just as my own sociohistorical space is
not entirely Western. Maintaining a precarious balance between imposing my own
interests and methodologies on the text and reading to understand the dynamics
within the text is a difficult task. At best what I am undertaking is a dialogue with
the text, asking questions of it, and searching the text for a response.

In looking at the process of self-criticism I return to Barthes’ theory of signs:

toute critique est critique de l’œuvre et critique de soi-même; pour reprendre un jeu de
mots de Claudel, elle est connaissance de l’autre et co-naissance de soi-même au
monde...si la critique n’est qu’un meta-langage, cela veut dire que sa tâche n’est
nulement de découvrir des «vérités», mais seulement des «validités»...Ainsi peut
s’amorcer au sein de l’œuvre critique le dialogue de deux histoires et de deux
subjectivités, celles de l’auteur et celles de critique. Mais ce dialogue est égoïstement
tout entier déporté vers le présent: la critique n’est pas un «hommage» à la vérité de
«l’autre», elle est construction de l’intelligible de notre temps.37

Barthes' rejection of any truth of the past, or the truth of the "other", lies in his desire to find a *universalité*. Barthes rejects the notion of reading for comprehension, other than for the recognition of that which is the same as one’s own reality, in order that the critic may impose his own text over the top of it. The dialogue is not a dialogue but a monologue in a new setting. Zhang Longxi suggests that recognising the Other need not entail a sameness, but rather a recognition of difference without a mythologising of the Other:

To de mythologize the Other is not to become self-alienated in adopting alien values, but eventually come back to the self with rewarding experiences...Gadamer emphasizes that...universal viewpoints are not absolute, “not a fixed applicable yardstick, but...the viewpoints of possible others”. That is to say, to know the Other is a process of Bildung, of learning and self-cultivation, which is neither projecting the Self onto the Other, nor erasing the Self with what belongs to the Other. It is rather a moment when Self and Other meet and join together, in which both are changed and enriched in what Gadamer calls "the fusion of horizons".

Edward Said challenges the notion of identity as ontological, and suggests that if we no longer think of the relationship between cultures and their adherents as perfectly contiguous, totally synchronous, wholly correspondent, and if we think of cultures as permeable and, on the whole, defensive boundaries between polities, a more promising situation appears. Thus to see Others not as ontologically given but as historically constituted would be to erode the exclusivist biases we so often ascribe to cultures, our own not least. Cultures may then be represented as zones of control or of abandonment, of recollection and of forgetting, of force, or of independence, of exclusiveness or of sharing, all taking place in the global history that is our element. Exile, immigration, and the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can therefore provide us with new narrative forms, or in John Berger’s phrase, with other ways of telling.

Kandiyoti points to an alternative view of white women’s scholarship on non-Western texts:

In Europe this internal critique [of white, racist and ethnocentric feminism] coincided with non-European migrants’ and ethnic minorities’ demands for their rights to cultural distinctiveness and was punctuated by events such as the Salman Rushdie affair in England and the *foulard* debate in France. The policies of multiculturalism and identity politics in the West thus exerted a significant influence on feminist theorizing.

In writing from the East into the West there is a challenge to the centre of Western hegemony. As the text of the East is read in the West it enters and disrupts the universalist pretensions of white Western culture. It is in the process of being read

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and entering the debate that transformation occurs. Silencing occurs when the reader refuses to read, or refuses to enter into a dialogue with the text.

Barthes argues that literature is neither an author nor a message, but a system. However, he allows that the critic and author use a language that does not “descend du ciel” but is part of the culture of its time. One must then ask why there is a refusal to study that product in order to question our own time, as well as to find answers to the questions that text was asking of its own time? Moreover, if the metaphor of the map as system or structure is used to describe literature then the town-planner will read that map differently from someone who wants directions to the nearest school. It is not the map that has altered, nor what the two people see. What is different is their particular focus, the purpose of their reading. Critics of Western theorists are proposing alternative views of reading, not only of language, but also of culture. A true dialogue is to do exactly what Barthes rejects, it is to attempt to not only hear the other, but to allow the other to alter our focus, to read the map, not West to East, but East to West. Moira Gatens views this resistance to dialogue as a fear of recognising another voice and another body.

To recognize another body is to be open to dialogue, debate and engagement with the other’s law, and the other’s ethics.41

The relevance of the way in which the structure and system of signs have invalidated the experiences of women and minority groups has meant that critics are questioning the systems and signs themselves, and the whole structure of language is being challenged.

Kandiyoti links the argument about the white woman’s position to the argument surrounding the question of “women” as a viable category. As white women were charged with having marginalised women of other nationalities and backgrounds, questions arose as to whether the oppression of women was universal and, furthermore, questions arose as to what constituted gender. As postcolonial theorists exploded the binary opposition of East and West, feminist theorists began to question the opposition of male and female. Does biological difference determine our role as women, or is gender a socially constructed phenomenon?

Radical feminists invoked the notion of patriarchy as a timeless, universal system of male domination perpetuating the oppression of women as a group through the control of their sexuality and procreative capacity...the main criticism raised against this

The notion of patriarchy was that it tended towards a biological essentialism that provided little basis for an understanding of historical and cultural variations.  

In *The New Feminist Criticism*, Elaine Showalter charts a three-part process that women move through within discussion of emancipation: the feminine, the feminist and the female stage. The feminine position is that of the woman who believes what she has been told about herself and has assimilated those ideas into her identity. The feminist position is the stage of revolution whereby all that the patriarchal centre has told women about their identity is rejected. The female stage is one in which women examine who they are, autonomously and independently of the male centre.

In response to the question of female identity, non-Western women writers have challenged the structures which have classed women as a homogenous group. Taking that argument further, the notion of a group, homogenous or otherwise, has been challenged. Jane Gallop, Cixous and Irigary have responded by saying that women’s biology is different and so our experience of life is different and as a result women do write differently. French theorists Cixous and Irigary argue that women need to express themselves in a distinctly feminine voice, arguing that female sexual experience and biology point to another language, “écriture feminine”. Between these two positions lie those who see the first and middle position as still intact and suggest that any discussion of gender that women undertake needs to challenge the power system in place under a united front. Rather than use the word “sex”, or the essentialist terms of “man and woman”, which immediately point to biological difference, theorists argue that the term gender should be used, for gender covers both biological differences and “any social construction having to do with the male/female distinction”. Hodda El Sadda voices this position in her discussion of feminism in “Women’s Writing in Egypt”:

> It is unlikely that the debate over the definitive differences in women’s writing will exhaust itself so long as the basic problem of gender discrimination persists. Nevertheless the force and magnitude of the feminist movement in the West has extracted an acknowledgement of two central issues: first, that there is such a thing as women’s writing that has been systematically marginalized and hence needs to be

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given adequate critical attention and second, that women's writing is potentially capable of projecting representations of the world and of experiences that are different from those emanating from male authors. 46

Hoda El Sadda points to the entrenched refusal of the "male-dominated critical establishment" to recognise the "specificities of a woman writer's vision":

Such critics condemn women writers for producing 'women's literature' and only commend a woman writer for rising above the petty prejudices of her sex and the narrow confines of her subjectivity in order to soar into the realms of the 'universal' and the 'objective' and write about the world from the point of view of all 'mankind'. The point is, of course, that terms such as 'universal', 'humanity' and 'mankind', far from really encompassing both men and women, actually represent a world view dominated by a male perspective on culture in which women are marginalized and denied participation or expression. To gain recognition in the literary cultural scene, women are required to assimilate and reproduce the dominant male discourse, i.e. to write from the perspective of men or 'mankind'. 47

It would appear, then, that in opposition to the 'universal' of mankind there is the 'universal' of womankind. However, what is suggested here is not a universalisation of women, but rather that women, placed in the position of Other, use all their variety within their position in the margin to disrupt that centre. It is the disruption of universalisation which unites them, not the universality of their disruptions.

For the woman writer who attempts to participate in this interplay of identities the challenges are compounded, and yet this very challenge adds an exciting dimension to a study of their work. The women in this study can in no way represent the Arab woman, per se, nor even the Lebanese or Egyptian woman. However, as Bulbeck goes on to note:

women's studies does not and cannot (in my opinion, although this is contested by some postmodernists) dissolve into endless differences. Patterns must be sought, lines of distinction drawn, or nothing much can be said. 48

While recognising the distinctive backgrounds and writing of the four novelists in this study, it is necessary to recognise the power struggles of identities that the writers share. Their background in the Arab world, as well as their decision to write in French requires some discussion of the literary and cultural histories which surround their texts.


One aspect in which both Lebanon and Egypt have identities closely linked to each other and separate from the West is in their position in the Arab world. The Arab world, however, is not a fixed homogenous world. While the political movement for Arab identity has been centred on Islam, not all Arabs are Moslem for there are large religious minorities within both countries. Nor would it be fair to say that Moslem society is a fixed entity. Islam has as many faces as it does believers, and yet there are basic precepts that are held in common by the overwhelming majority of Moslems and which have been incorporated into the laws of many Arab states. Islam is itself full of contradictions where women are concerned and much of the feminist debate in the Middle East has centred on the relationship between women and Islam.

The early movement for women’s rights in the Arab world focused on the question of education for women. Arab feminists have long debated the prophet Mohammed’s own position concerning women and literature. Many of those who encourage education for women point out Aisha and Hafsah bint Umar, the prophet’s wives, as examples of learned women, praised by Mohammed for their understanding of the Hadith and encouraged in their education. Yet, one of the Hadith Aisha transmitted urges men not to take women to places of learning and to prevent them from learning to write. The taboos are not only bound up in society, but are also heavily linked to the religious emphasis placed on the Arabic language itself within Islam. Because the Arabic language is considered sacred, and women are not believed to be the spiritual equals of men, women’s writing has been frowned upon, to the point of being considered immoral. For much of the Arab world, education is seen as dangerous in the hands of women. Layla Ba’labakki, an important Lebanese Arabic writer, recounts her own struggle for education:

I came from a conservative family which considered women’s education a crime. When I finished my primary studies I had to go on a hunger strike for three months so my father would let me go on with my education.

Zeidan links the debate amongst Muslim intellectuals about women’s education to contact with the Western world.

The position of women in Islam has been the subject of heated controversy among Muslim intellectuals ever since they were exposed to modern Western civilization.

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Before that exposure, Muslims seemed to be content with the traditional social norms that shaped their lives.  

The postcolonial feminist faces the dilemma that her own emancipation in the area of education was instigated by a culture that imposed its own attitudes and value system upon the society to which she belongs. However, much of the real change that occurred came about not through the imposition of Western ideals, but rather by the awakening of the Muslim mind to the possibility of change. Zeidan is quick to point out that the impact of the French on Arabic culture was not great:

For example, although the French invasion of Egypt (1798-1801) provided an opportunity for some Egyptian intellectuals to see first hand some aspects of French science and the French way of life, nonetheless, the French occupation did not make a profound impact on Egyptian customs and manners partly because French rule lasted only for a short period and partly because traditional customs and manners were so deeply rooted in Egyptian life, especially because they were associated with Islam.  

While Zeidan holds the belief that the French occupation of Egypt did not largely affect Egypt’s society and culture he contradicts himself by pointing to the influence the perceived position of French women had in the introduction of education of Egyptian women. He argues that education for women was a concept which was debated within the framework of Islam, rather than in the west/good, east/bad dichotomy. He argues it was only those who were in the margin of their own societies, including those already linked to France through their religion, that were directly affected by French education:

the successful establishment of girls’ schools in Egypt was achieved, in fact, by Western missionaries. The first school was set up by French nuns of the order of Bon Pasteur (1844), followed by the American Mission School (1856), and the sisters of the Italian Franciscan Order (1873); all of these were established in Cairo (Taymur 1952: 49). Most of the female students were Copts, because, for religious and cultural reasons, Muslims hesitated to take advantage of the opportunity (Cooper 1914: 165-6).  

Leila Ahmed links the move toward education of women in Egypt to the example of Turkey. The education of women in Turkey “came about as part, and to begin with apparently as only casually and incidentally a part, of the Ottoman’s attempts to modernize Turkey”. In this move toward modernisation Europe was the new

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54 Ahmed, Leila. ‘Feminism and Feminist Movement in the Middle East.’ Women’s Studies International Forum v5, no.2 (1982), p154
technological power base and if the Ottoman rulers were to maintain any power within the political arena it was to Europe they looked. So while Zeidan may argue that the education of women in the Arab world was not an East/West issue, the West certainly impacted upon the East, if only to open up the debate within Islam, and to present the position of alternatives for women. Furthermore the wider debate of feminism which has included the right of women to have access to education is viewed as a Western movement and critics of feminist aims use this argument to silence and attack women seeking emancipation.

In Lebanon, the Christian population is much larger than in Egypt, making up 30% of the population, as opposed to 6% in Egypt. The desire within that population to establish a separate identity from the surrounding Muslim world is a dominant concern in that group. In educating their daughters, Lebanese Christians are making a statement of identity. Women’s education is no longer a central issue in most of the Arab world. In Lebanon the literacy rate for women is higher than that for men: in 1995 80% of the male population as opposed to 90% of the female population were literate. Although the literacy rate for women in Egypt remains low and ‘it wasn’t until 1925 that women were able to go onto secondary school, and in 1928 to go through to University level’, the opportunities for women are improving with the support of the state. What women are educated in and how they use that knowledge are still a concern, however. Where writing is concerned, many of the traditional taboos remain within the Arab psyche and women still face the dilemmas these taboos present.

The question of nationality is an issue for the four women in this study not only because of the postcolonial question, but also because they belong to minority groups within their own countries. Whereas in Egypt there is an overwhelming presence of Islam, Lebanon has been divided by a war over national identity. Khoury-Ghata, Chedid and Mansour all have a Christian background, whether it was through education or family. Barakat wrote the first Druze novel in French. The Druze religion, while usually placed under the umbrella of Islam, is also viewed as a secretive sect, leading to persecution at the hands of the more dominant Islamic groups, the Shi’as and the Sunni. Ethnic minorities and religious minorities are present who may not feel the same close connection to the Arabic language as those

in power and those in the majority groups. Individuals may also feel exiled from
their own country and language because of a difference in world view and value
system. In the second half of the twentieth century the shift of power moved from
France to another, and often just as oppressive, power structure. Independence
brought with it the new dilemma of establishing a national identity. Many
minorities and individuals felt that they were silenced and excluded in the new
identity of the country. As the influence and power of France recede and new power
structures establish themselves, using French rather than the language of the new
power centre is an expression of rejection of the new centre. The Christian minority
in Lebanon, for example, may well feel more affinity with the French literary
tradition and language than they do with the Arabic.

As Zeidan points out, the choice of language is not just an aesthetic or religious
matter. The practical aspect is also present. For the book to be read it must be
published, and to be published it must follow the traditional form. Compounding
this situation, the Arab novel is a fairly new form and Arabic as a language is very
tightly bound by the rules of tradition. Joseph T. Zeidan has done extensive study
on Arabic novels written by women and comments that he wanted to look at those
novels in Arabic exclusively. He explains:

Arabic literature is subject to the rules of a tradition that holds the classical Arabic
language to be sacred (meaning that changes in the formal language are discouraged).
This creates quite a challenge for women writers who, if they are to find their voices,
must change this patriarchal language that marginalizes them and at the same time
must make the language acceptable enough to be published and read by a significant
audience.56

For those educated in the French tradition, the task of taking on the established rules
and religious restrictions of Arabic literature without the necessary background may
well seem insurmountable. The French colonial period established the French
language in the countries it colonised through the imposition and the foundation of
a French education system. Egypt, to a lesser extent, and Lebanon have retained
French schools and universities and many writers have been educated in the French
literary tradition, Arabic being treated as a marginal language. As a result many of
the writers who write in French do so because it comes more easily to them than to
write in Arabic. It is interesting to note here that, when confronted with the French
canon, Arab novelists who chose to write in French elected to do so within marginal
literary movements, and Surrealism in particular. As this movement was itself a
movement of rebellion against the traditional canon and the dominant forms of

56 Zeidan, Joseph T. Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond. Albany: State
University of New York Press, 1995, p2
expression, those in the margin found a form ready to be moulded to their own voice.

As the issue of education recedes, the issue of feminism as a Western tactic to undermine national identity in the East is heightened. Nationalistic struggles, following independence from Eurocentric imperialism, are closely tied to women's identity. In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* this problem is discussed in relation to African women writers

whose representations of their societies and of patriarchal oppression— are seen as conflicting with the processes of decolonization and cultural restitution. 57

Women who may, as individuals, wish to reject their own society's objectification of themselves, can be torn between this and their equal or even greater desire to be part of their national identity. Traditional culture is under threat from Western technological and economic hegemony. In order to retain and preserve a national identity in the face of this threat, many women are silenced in terms of their own desire to transform the traditional roles given them.

As feminist thought tackled these issues a concept arose within Arabic literature, which saw these two struggles as not necessarily in conflict, but part of the same struggle. Zeidan comments upon this alteration in the way these issues were viewed:

In general, the struggle for women's freedom and the national identity were being linked in a way they had not been before—they were no longer simply parallel, but were interdependent struggles. ... [I]n fact, in the face of the national crisis and the need for solidarity, some of these writers ceased to look upon men as the primary oppressors. Instead, they saw both men and women as being oppressed by existing political and social conditions and constantly threatened by hostile foreign forces. 58

Kirsten Holst Peterson also raises the possibility of this linkage in her discussion “First Things First”:

The ‘first things first’ discussion as it appears in the writing of Ngugi and Buchi Emecheta is a good example of the complexity of this situation. Ngugi's ideological starting point seems to me to be ideal. ‘No cultural liberation without women’s liberation.’ This...is a more difficult, and therefore a more courageous path to take in the African situation than in the Western one, because it has to borrow some concepts—and a vocabulary—from a culture from which at the same time it is trying to disassociate itself and at the same time it has to modify admiration for some aspects of a culture it is claiming validity for. 59

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59 Kirsten Holst Peterson, “First Things First, Problems of a Feminist Approach to African
This view is an optimistic one, however. For many writers the reality is very different. Struggling to gain recognition within their own nations, feminists often face the criticism of joining forces with the Western imperialists. It is not so much a matter of what the women writers choose to place first, but rather that in choosing feminism at all they are criticized for betrayal. Azza M Karam details the stereotypes that surround feminism in the Arab world:

that feminism basically stands for enmity between men and women, as well as a call for immorality in the form of sexual promiscuity for women. Moreover, some former and present day religious personalities (e.g. Muhammad Qutb (1991) and Muhammad Al-Sha'rawi (1992) among others) associate feminism with colonialist strategies to undermine the indigenous social and religious culture. In the opinion of such thinkers, colonizers used the 'woman question' as a tool with which to attack Islam and portray it as oppressive and backward. Hence, the association of 'feminism' with abuse of Islam. These stereotypes and associations have proved remarkably enduring. Not so much because of the limited grain of truth they encompass, but because such ideas appeal to preexisting imagery and are effective tools in the attempt to discredit any means that legitimize and justify women's attempts to gain control over their own lives.60

De Groot adds the slur of "elite decadence" to the list of betrayals with which Arab feminists are charged:

the impact of public propaganda which is populist, nationalistic and anti Western, as well as religious, connects gender rules not only to Muslim loyalties and practices but also to self-assertion against foreign influence and elite decadence.61

The ability of the four women in this study to move between France and Egypt and/or Lebanon, their education and ability to be published place them in the frontline of these attacks. In many ways the opposition they face is more than the opposition that Western women writing about the Arab world would face.

Writing and sexuality are woven together in Arab literary tradition, as they are in European tradition. As women write about their lives for a foreign audience they are revealing the intimate of one culture to the public of another. In this context the act of writing becomes a literary unveiling. Thus the authors in this selection have to confront the idea that they are in some way dishonouring their society by revealing themselves to a foreign public.


If Arab women are to write, it is a breaking of taboos. To confront the veiled suggestion that to write as a woman is to form some kind of literary peep show and transvestism, women must also confront the traditional role and place assigned to women in their own societies. Within this framework, it is often the sexual taboos that are challenged within women's writing.

This last suggestion points to the way in which the private and intimate content of a book becomes political. The Arabic literary tradition is closely related to the political. Where the Western reader may only see the journey of an individual, the Eastern reader will see a political message. Zeidan emphasises this difference:

the development of the novel in Arabic literature has taken a somewhat different course than in the European and American literature, in part because of the highly political role of literature in Arab culture. Function is at least as important as form, which means that honing the fine art of narrative fiction writing has not been the sole aim of the writers—they have also worked to comment on and change society, and there has been much more pressure on them to accomplish this through writing than Western readers might imagine.

Once the private world enters the public world, it becomes a national concern. Where tradition and honour are bound tightly to the role of women in that society, a woman's actions and writings become political and a matter of social concern. The debate surrounding women authors raises issues about the role of women in the world of literature, and in turn raises issues surrounding the role of women within society.

Because the press in Lebanon has been relatively free of censorship, a large number of authors facing persecution in their own countries have found avenues for publication and a reading public there. Women writers have often also found a refuge in Lebanon from persecution they face in their own countries. The censorship of women writers is a fact that many Arab women writers face. More often than not censorship is carried out on the basis of obscenity. The Egyptian writer Nawal-el Saadawi has faced such censorship because of her outspoken stance on women’s issues. This led to her arrest and imprisonment, as well as the stifling of her literary voice in Egypt. Her work continued to be published in Lebanon, however, and she herself spent time in enforced exile there, away from the controversy surrounding her. For Leila Ba’albaki, however, publication in Lebanon

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and her own position as a Lebanese woman was no protection from a court case charging her with indecency because of the sexual nature of her writing, although it was less than explicit. It was in the mid 1960’s that Ba’albaki was put on trial for her book *Spaceship of Tendernessness to the Moon*, charged with obscenity. Evelyne Accad points out that this was unusual as Lebanon has a ‘long tradition of freedom of the press’. She lists several reasons why Ba’albaki was singled out for attention, the first being that the woman protagonist played the role of conscious sexual instigator, the second that ‘a woman had written stories with sexual content’ and thirdly that Ba’albaki was politically active and so may have been a target because of her political involvement.\(^6^4\) It would appear that to write in Arabic and as a daughter of the country makes the author more vulnerable to attack, for to write about the same content in French or English largely removes the issues from the Arabic literary arena.

In both traditional Lebanese and Egyptian society the honour of a family is tied very much to the conduct of the women members. Regardless of the woman’s volition, if her virginity is lost before marriage, or sex occurs outside of her marriage, she must be sacrificed in order for the family to retain its dignity. Accad, in her discussion of Ba’albaki’s lecture *We Without Masks*, notes that

> Arab morality, both Moslem and Christian, has created an impossible social dilemma by making the body simultaneously vile and sacred.\(^6^5\)

Zeidan also notes:

> [Arab women writers] had to come to terms with their ambivalence toward their own bodies—symbols of their individual existence, but also constructed as objects by their culture and therefore simultaneously limiting to them as individuals.\(^6^6\)

In order to reclaim their identities in a complete fashion the position of the body has to be reconstructed, and the power to author their own sexuality taken. Rather than being the object of the male gaze, women take the position of both object and subject of the gaze. Authoring their own bodies, the women in this study have reclaimed their power of self-authorship.


To write is to reject the traditional role of women, and the act of writing is as a result a challenge to the identity of women. When a woman writes she is not only breaking out of a role assigned to her, but she is also breaking society’s taboos, she is either redefining the word ‘woman’, or she is redefining her identity as woman. The breaking of the taboo surrounding female authorship becomes a sexual act, which has its own ramifications for those women who choose to write.

Zeidan points out the very terms used to describe literary mastery in Arabic are sexual:

It is significant that the word for literary excellence (fuhulah) was derived from fahl, which originally meant a sexually superior male...This term, fuhulah, which has been used throughout the history of Arabic literature, was singled out as a target by the Iraqi female Nazik al-Mala‘ikah...[who] denounced Arabic as a sexist language that belittled women in its vocabulary and grammar.  

For a woman to write she is not only challenging tradition and culture, but she is also breaking her gender role, much as if she were going out in drag.

The French literary language has its own sexualisation of writing. To write in French is not to escape this linking of body and text. French feminists Irigary and Cixous have based their feminist writing on this central theme of body as text, and have sought to create a new language and literary tradition in which the female body is not objectified or ignored, but where it speaks with multiple voices. All four authors in this study have challenged the construction of the female body in its traditional roles and in all cases have challenged the silencing of women in the assignation of these roles. In writing into the French canon they disrupt not only the male literary canon, but also the Western feminist canon which views Arab women as sexless and veiled, and in an inferior feminist position. Through an account of the issues facing Arab women novelists the Western reader is made aware of the complexities of the Arab world and the ground that has already been taken.

In his study of women writers who write in Arabic, Zeidan states:

novels published in Arabic are read mostly by Arab audiences and are [thus] more likely than other novels to be written specifically for Arab readers and to have noticeable effects on Arab culture and politics. This, in turn, means that they more directly comment upon and attempt to affect the status of Arab women and of Arab women’s writing in the women’s own cultures.  


This position is valid within its own framework. However, this study aims to examine women who have chosen to write their realities for an external audience. This has its own ramifications within the women's own cultures, both the Eastern and Western, and for the identity of the women concerned.

In her book, *The Harem Within*, Mernissi writes about the frontier that separates men and women, 'on the one side there are the powerful, and on the other side the powerless'. The question is asked, 'how will I know which side I am on?' and the answer given, 'If you cannot get out you are on the powerless side.' The stories of the women protagonists in the novels in this study are attempting to cross the frontier, to move into the position of freedom. In many situations this attempt to gain individual freedom pits women against their own societies, which are also an integral part of their identities. Evelyne Accad highlights this dilemma in her study, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers*:

> The characters discover that in their struggle against a single custom or a particular oppressor, they are in fact facing the complex and total interrelationship between their own beings and the society that has shaped them. The resulting internal conflict often results in the suicide or fragmentation of the women characters in these novels.70

For Khoury-Ghata, Mansour, Barakat and Chedid their movement across geographical, linguistic and cultural frontiers compounds the tension. In order to take control of the text and communicate their realities there is a wrestling with external identities, each one holding its own power over the text and the author. Much of this struggle is portrayed within the novels. In this study, I shall attempt to show the way in which this interplay of identities is incorporated in the work of these four authors. The power to name one's own reality, to construct one's own image of the body, the power to move across the boundaries which separate East and West, male and female, the power to be the subject of one's own naming are integral parts of the interplay of identities within the novels in this study. The creative response of the four women novelists to the challenges they are presented with is the focus of this study. Writing against power structures within the East and the West that would silence them, the four women in this study have found their own distinct voices. To use bell hooks' phrase, these women have "chosen the

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margin” and “have found that it is not a site of domination but a place of resistance.”

Chapter 1

Joyce Mansour

Joyce Mansour, while of Egyptian origins, was born in Bowden, England. Mansour's parents planned her birth in England so that she could carry a British passport, thus easing travel between Europe and Egypt. She grew up between the two cultures, 'vivant la moitié de l'année en Égypte', where she attended school. During her teenage years she was educated in Switzerland and later graduated from Cairo University before travelling to France. Mansour moved to France in her late twenties, publishing her first collection of poetry, *Cris*, in that same year, 1953. This collection caught the attention of the Surrealists and she joined the Surrealist Group soon after, becoming particularly well known for her poetry. She died in 1986 in Paris. She was married twice, her first husband dying while she was still young.

English was Mansour's first European language, she is reported as speaking French with an English accent, yet it was in French that she chose to write. This mixture of cultures and loyalties is a common feature amongst Francophone writers from countries other than France. They belong neither completely to the East, nor to the West. Mansour's identity lay in her difference, for while her identity crossed several cultures it belonged to no single one. Mansour describes herself as "une femme étrange", both strange and foreign.

It is this meeting of cultures, the ability to stand on the edge of both, that gives Mansour her most powerful images. Her writing is tight with puns and word play. To appreciate her work fully the reader must be aware not only of French, but also of English meanings and associations. Judith Preckshot titled her discussion of Mansour's narratives *Identity Crises*, and, starting with two lines from Mansour's work:

Si dieu est un cerf volant  
Qui diable est George Sand?

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Preckshot sets out to explore the multiplicity that is Joyce Mansour:

behind which mask(s) will we discover Joyce Mansour, English-born Egyptian but French language poet and prose writer? As the term of comparison in George Sand implies, Mansour will not be defined other than through a writerly persona that integrates bi-national, dual-linguistic and double-gendered characteristics.75

Mansour has commented that her work is largely autobiographical; however the scenarios that she writes are larger than life, mythical and fantastic. Although it would be risky to read too many parallels between her life and her writing, it is possible to discover, from the recurring tensions and images in her work, the issues and struggles Mansour faced in writing.

Mansour's primary struggle was that her identity as a woman apparently debarred her from the literary centre. She wrote in the early days of the feminist movement; however feminist literary theory had not evolved into the vast body it is today. As a result women writers often worked in isolation, or within male-dominated circles. In joining the Surrealist movement Mansour was no exception, for the Surrealist movement was largely dominated by men. The following quotation illustrates the particular marginalisation Mansour was up against. In his book on Surrealism Audoin remarks on Mansour’s arrival in the Surrealist movement:

Mais tous les yeux sont tournés vers une jeune voyageuse nouvellement débarquée d’Egypte. Elle est d’une beauté suprenante;...Cette jeune femme est l’un des grands poètes qu’a accueillis le mouvement surréaliste[... ]cultivant une pointe d’accent anglais du meilleur ton.76

Audoin comments on Mansour’s youth, the fact that she is foreign, on her beauty and her accent in the same breath with which he mentions her poetry. The focus on Mansour’s gender and her background detracts from her poetry and places her outside the centre of Surrealism. In her book *Subversive Intent* Susan Rubin Suleiman speculates on the emphasis which is put on Mansour’s foreign background and gender:

The second conclusion one can draw from the history of Surrealism’s relation to women artists and writers is that as the movement grew weaker and more embattled, it became more welcoming to women, especially young women from other countries. It is striking to note how many of the “Surrealist women” are not French [... ] One might speculate that the competition from foreign women was less threatening to the French male Surrealists’ egos than competition from within the French “family”.77

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75 Preckshot, Judith. “Identity Crises: Joyce Mansour’s Narratives.” *Dada/Surrealism* 18 (1990), p96
Mansour began her career as a writer in the late 1950's, joining the Surrealist movement when it was indeed in need of “young blood”. Barnet points out that this late arrival was marginalising in itself, yet another obstacle Mansour had to contend with in order to establish a position as writer within the movement:

Ces dernières seraient doublement marginalisées, en premier lieu par les hommes surréalistes, mais aussi par leur “jeune” âge même, puisqu’elles constituaient en quelque sorte la deuxième vague du surréalisme.  

In France Surrealism had begun to wane as a movement, rifts between Breton and other Surrealists had occurred and the “revolution” had lost its momentum. Breton, a major figure throughout the Surrealist movement, took a great interest in Mansour. This may well have been because of his interest in the Egyptian myths, for:

le mythe égyptien neutralise plus ou moins l’hégémonie de la mythologie grecque que Breton trouve regrettablement écrasante.

Once again it was her Egyptian background which threatened to take the focus away from her actual writing. Mansour herself struggled with the labeling of her work:

N’en déplaise à Breton, Mansour refuse pour ses écrits le label de “conte oriental”, car elle démythifie l’image même de “la Femme Orientale”, dont la nature fictive de mirage est expressément soulignée, ne serait-ce que par l’insistance sur le côté allégorique, que révèlent les majuscules. Tous les accessoires trop attendus du décor touristique sont illusoires et seront évités, renvoyés à leur nature fictive: 
Je me sauve à toutes jambes[...]
Je ne suis plus qu’une image sur l’arrière-train du serpent travail
La Femme Orientale du récit.
Il n’est pas d’usage en Orient de s’occuper des détails, moins encore des cèdres du Liban, des bayaderes, des fromages blancs enrobés de feuilles de vigne et sapoudrés de poudre de riz, des femmes.

Mansour’s attachment to the Surrealist movement poses a very real problem. Did her loyalties to the movement, with all its hostility towards women, mean that her voice as a woman would be totally obscured? As Judith Preckshot put it:

the liberation promoted by Surrealism largely excluded women, and only perpetuated stereotypical images that continue to condemn them to the time-honoured role of

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Surrealism had become an opportunity to rewrite history, not herstory. It was an opportunity for men to write about all their desires and fears freely. This lack of self censorship meant that women were frequently subjected to indignities within the male Surrealist work. In Surrealism the woman was the observed, the means of inspiring men to attain the "marvellous"; as gateway to another world, woman became object. Raaberg highlights the problem in her discussion of women and Surrealism:

The problem arises out of a situation in which the concepts and principles that focused Breton and other male Surrealists on the female also limited their capacity to view women as independent, active subjects. The Surrealists conceived of women as man's mediator with nature and the unconscious, femme-enfant, muse, source and object of man's desire, embodiment of amour-fou, and emblem of revolution. The concept of "woman" objectified by male needs was in direct conflict with the individual woman's subjective need for self-definition and free artistic expression. The woman writers and artists who chose to work within the framework provided by Surrealist principles thus found their situation marked by contradictions inherent in these very principles.82

Female beauty was what was valued, female sexuality feared.83 As a result sexually active women were portrayed as the female praying mantis who devours her victim after the sexual act. Their bodies were objectified, and so robbed of any real power. The male artists gagged, mutilated and cut up the women portrayed in their art and writing. Madeline Cottenet-Hage asks of Surrealist women artists:

How were they to respond to images of the female body dismantled, dismembered, aggressed, turned inside out, recomposed to please men's wildest erotic fantasies? And when not pulled apart, portrayed nude and coy as in Magritte's famous collage Je ne vois pas...dans la forêt, in which a female icon stands in lieu of the word femme.84

Joyce Mansour found that as a Surrealist writer she was provided with the foundation for rebellion and experimentation, that being une femme étrange was an asset, not a hindrance. The irony was that it was this same movement that reinforced the patriarchal traditions of women as:

81 Preckshot, Judith. “Identity Crises: Joyce Mansour’s Narratives.” Dada/Surrealism 18 (1990), p95
82 Raaberg, Gwen. “Surrealism and Women.” Dada/Surrealism, Iowa City, IA (Dada). (1990): 18, p2f
servants, helpers in the forms of child, muse, virgin, femme-enfant, angel, celestial creature who is their salvation, or erotic object, model, doll—or she may be threat of castration in the forms of the ubiquitous praying mantis and other devouring female animals.85

The question is whether or not Mansour would be able to write within Surrealism, and still retain her identity as a woman. In Mansour’s case this struggle is compounded further. How was a woman, a woman who was an outsider in terms of race, language and ambition, to enter this world of brutality that treated her as a victim?

On first reading, Mansour appears to follow the Surrealist tradition of the brutalisation of women. Women characters in her work are raped, murdered, silenced, and driven mad. This brutality against women is a common feature of myth and literature. Yet Mansour’s characters question these roles, leading the reader to also question the literary and mythical histories which have assigned them. Mansour uses the fantastic dream world of Surrealism to take the reader through to the other side of literature and into its image world. The literary world is explored through the imagery which has been used to describe it and it is revealed as sexual, violent and disturbed. Mansour journeys through literature and myth, subverting images and questioning the place of her own identity within this world. Mansour uses the tools of Surrealism to dismantle the patriarchal model of literature both outside the Surrealist movement and within. Suleiman discusses the trope of the margin:

If as this trope suggests, culture is “like” a space to be mapped out or a printed page, then the place of women, and of avant-garde movements, has traditionally been situated away from the centre, “on the fringe,” in the margins. One difference is that the avant-garde movements have wilfully chosen their marginal position, the better to launch attacks at the centre, whereas women have more often than not been relegated to the margins: far from the altar as from the market place, those centres where cultural subjects invent and enact their symbolic and material rights.86

The marginal position which Surrealism occupies offers the same opportunity for both men and women to launch attacks on the centre. However, it requires a subversion of Surrealism’s own centre in order for women to participate in this activity. In her study of Mansour, Prassinos and Deharme, Marie-Claire Barnet puts forward this idea of the subversion of Surrealism from the female margin:

Il est aussi problématique de généraliser les différentes intentions de ces diverses écrivaines surréalistes, mais on peut proposer une hypothèse, qui permet de réfléchir


au statut de ces artistes: il paraît probable que le surréalisme des femmes créatrices, s’il se voulait précisément subversif, passe par une révision des nouveaux clichés de la subversion, par une subversion de la subversion surréaliste “masculine”.87

The double marginalisation of women within the Surrealist movement paves the way for a double subversion. Suleiman views this subversion of the Surrealist centre as an opportunity for women to find strength within the margin:

I want to emphasize a more positive and empowering aspect of the woman/avant-garde/marginality trope for female subjects. [...] there is a way in which the sense of being “doubly marginal” and therefore “totally avant-garde” provides the female subject with a kind of centrality, in her own eyes. In a system in which the marginal, the avant-garde, the subversive, all that disturbs and “undoes the whole” is endowed with positive value, a woman artist who can identify those concepts with her own practice and metaphorically with her own femininity can find in them a source of strength and self-legitimization.88

Mansour was placed firmly in the margin both of mainstream literature and the Surrealist movement, yet she fought back in her writing. Her work is often described as erotic and violent, for Mansour’s own exploration of the role of women in writing would appear to be both thrilling and terrifying, as in it her identity was both found and threatened. This dichotomy is manifested in an internal struggle which is powerfully portrayed in her writing.

Mansour’s writing is not the conclusion or advancement of a theory of literature. Her writing is the process of creating text. As a result, Mansour’s relationship with literature is played out as she writes. The interest that I have is in discovering how Mansour tackled patriarchy in so far as it excluded or subjugated her in literature. American theorist Showalter sees feminist writers as using four models of difference: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural, in order to create their own identity separate from the patriarchal norm.89 These models of difference have been used by patriarchy to exclude and suppress women; feminism uses them to protest the exclusion, liberate and re-appropriate female power. I intend to read Mansour’s prose work in the light of feminist theories of patriarchy and its power structure, in order to explore the way in which Mansour deals with patriarchy in the four areas Showalter identifies.

87 Barnet, Marie-Claire. La femme cent sexes ou les genres communicants: Debarde, Mansour, Prostinos. Bern: P. Lang, 1998, p106
These four areas are by no means a complete picture of feminist activity; for example the traditional notion of family is a central focus of women’s concern, and is not entirely dealt with under the umbrella of culture. However, these four areas do provide a basis for discussion which covers the mind and body of the individual and moves on to encompass interaction between individuals and the wider world. As all four areas interact and combine to form a sense of self, the divisions I have drawn are artificial and any discussion of a particular aspect will include reference to the others. As it is Mansour’s writing that is being examined with reference to literary tradition and the Surrealist movement, the four models of difference will simply provide a framework within which Mansour’s work will be discussed. Furthermore, while I have found Showalter’s categories helpful in structuring the process of subversion and rejection that Mansour undertakes, Mansour’s work is the focus of this study and as a result my interpretation of these four areas may at times differ from Showalter’s.

The division of power under patriarchy is based upon biological difference. Regardless of how feminist theorists choose to fight patriarchy, patriarchy is essentialist: it is at the point of birth that the sexual differentiation is made based on purely physical attributes, and from there roles are assigned and value and power handed out accordingly. The body is an issue that the feminist writer must deal with. For the Surrealist writer this is intensified by the interest which the Surrealist centre took in the female body as object. Often described as an erotic writer, Mansour was specifically concerned with the problem of anatomy as textuality. The body takes on a very central role in her imagery. In Mansour’s work the sexual and literary world intertwine. The image for one becomes the image for the other. Barnet comments on Mansour’s sexualisation of the text in her discussion of desire:

Luce Irigaray has souliigné la pauvreté du langage pour évoquer le sexe de la femme. On voudrait rajouter les limites pour réécrire le sexe de l’homme. Les excès de langage saturent mais ne semblent pas venir à bout de ce “désir du désir sans fin” mansourien, désir de dire le désir. S’il y a désir, soulignent Mansour, Prassinos et Deharme, il y a désir de dire et d’écrire.  
Le désir est donc abordé de plein front et de plein fouet dans l’œuvre de Mansour, mais il semble lié inextricablement au désir d’écriture.

The characters in the text embody the conflict of a woman writing within the predominantly male Surrealist movement. Feminists such as Gubar and Gilbert

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have argued that patriarchy has labelled women’s roles in creative arts as limited due to their anatomy. In patriarchal metaphors surrounding literature, the message sent out to women is that to write is masculine, that the pen is male, a phallus. Women are the art work, not the creators. Hence one speaks without thinking of the seminal mind, or the virgin page. Susan Gubar quotes Pound and Derrida on the subject, describing the pen as penis, the hymen as page. She goes on to uncover the resulting difficulties women face in flouting the image and its underlying ethos:

identifying the author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation

... Clearly this tradition excludes women from the creation of culture, even as it re-ifies her as an artifact within culture. It is therefore particularly problematic for those women who want to appropriate the pen by becoming writers.92

Women are viewed as close to the text, unable to be objective. One response has been for women to embrace the notion of woman’s body as text, and, rather than allowing that to set limits on how they write, they gain much of their imagery from their bodies, and write more autobiographical accounts. Inner creativity is exposed through pain and the shedding of blood; childbirth is used as an image for writing, rather than as an argument for why one should not write. Showalter warns, however, that this often means that women become synonymous with wounding and blood, reinforcing the image of woman as victim. Patriarchy has made women’s bodies the battleground for power; the challenge for feminists is to redirect the male gaze to the text.

In a short piece of autobiographical prose, Illusions de vol,93 Joyce Mansour explores the struggle she has in attempting to be a part of a movement which would exclude her. The search is not only for her own identity as a writer, but also a search for a role model, an attempt to find a literary mother. The narrative begins with the description of a lover:

mon amour image haletant de tout ce qui ne m’appartient pas, mon amour séducteur

bien plus présent que le réel.94

As with the whole narrative, this extract can be read as sexual discovery. The subtext however, speaks of a love affair that may also be read as a love affair with literature, with writing. Mansour enters, as does the narrator in Illusions de vol, with


enthusiasm. She enters ‘au galop’ but at the same time ‘myope’. The beginning of this journey is toward ‘le virage menteur’, the path she undertakes is introduced as false.\textsuperscript{95} The old man, perhaps her muse, speaks to Joyce, the name of both protagonist and author, about his passion, his secret work:

\begin{quote}
Oui, j’inventais. Je jouais avec mon désir, je l’habillais de chiffres, et c’est ainsi que, comme dans les rêves, mon désir se mit à voler, à dépasser les arbres; que les épaules des chercheurs s’estompèrent sous les ailes...\textsuperscript{96}
\end{quote}

This close link between writing and the sexual act is expressed here by the sage, who sees writing as giving his desire letters. The creative act he appropriates for himself; he invents. It is the act of the male, the creating phallus. Even in speaking to Joyce the sage addresses her as “jeune homme”: it is as if he cannot speak about his creation to her unless it is done by treating her as a subordinate male. As her teacher he can only teach Joyce what he has and knows; he cannot teach her how to be a woman:

\begin{quote}
Tâche de comprendre. Jeune homme je ne connaissais pas la nature de cette violence, de ce typhon ..., de ce besoin impératif qui éclatait dans ma tête tel un hoquet de boue; je travaillais, j’imaginais, je désirais.\textsuperscript{97}
\end{quote}

It is the “typhon” he cannot understand. Mansour clarifies that these powerful, potentially destructive forces are given female names in America, that the typhoon is the female image which he cannot grasp. It is this need to cope with the female storm that drives him to write, to create the many phalluses. He is afraid of the interior instinct, the fear driving him to control it. It is however the phallus that Joyce cannot grasp in order to fly. It is no wonder that Mansour understands his wish to fly; yet the work he produces, the phallus, she cannot comprehend. The phalluses lie in their velvet cases, feathers glued on to them, made out of plastic and jade. Joyce regards them with incomprehension. The room is described as cold; it is uninviting for her; she will now remain in opposition to the old man. It is the relationship that is glacial. Where then is the woman in this creation?

It is when the phalluses are put away that Dorothee appears.\textsuperscript{98} Apart from Joyce the narrator, Dorothee is the only other name mentioned in the piece of prose. The lover


\textsuperscript{96} The use of her own name serves to strengthen the autobiographical nature of the passage.


and the ‘savant’, both male, are not named. Dorothée is given only one sentence, and yet because she is named the reader is obliged to take notice of her as central. Her name means ‘gift of God’; she is not made, but created. She represents the female giftings that are instinctive. The image she uses is much more attractive than that of the typhoon, suggested by the savant. She surges up out of the water, rather like Venus rising from the waves. It is as if she is coming to life, effortlessly, a powerful contrast to the inert phallus that has been the life’s work of the wise man. The phalluses are cut off from the body. In being held up for adoration the phallus has in fact been castrated from the body. It lies in a velvet case, protected, but as if in a coffin, something dead, preserved for people to come and look at. In contrast the female body surges up out of the bay, out of the alive and womb-like sea, whole. It is adorned with water, not feathers and glue. The image of the woman’s body as whole, not a bust, not a body with no arms or legs, is in stark contrast to the usual image of women as presented by the Surrealist males. It cannot be without some humour that Mansour reveals the ‘fetish’ of the phallus in Surrealist terms, adorned with feathers, but unable to fly.

However, Joyce does not mention Dorothée again. The reader is not told any more about who she is. It may be that Joyce is aware of her as a strong contrast to the male literary canon. Dorothée is a glimpse of the possibility of ‘writing the body’. This possibility is something that Joyce is aware of, but that she cannot realise, that she ignores because there is no wise woman to tell her how to write. There is no female literary canon, only a new-born woman, rising unbidden from the bay. It may also be that Dorothée is the natural creation of Joyce’s mind; the struggle is not in calling Dorothée out of the water, but in writing her. Joyce must avoid trying to collapse the ‘typhon’, to encase and display the female, as the wise man has done with the male.

She returns to their discussion as she muses over her inability to take flight:

mais ce jour-là, crise de paludisme: je ne voulais pas bouger, je me refusais à marcher dans le noir vers l’avion immobile mais déjà en puissance de vol. J’aime voler dans les rues comme une femme de mauvaise vie; prendre, violer, salir l’objet futile; surprendre par derrière, prendre par surprise. Comment faire pour me lever, quitter la molle banquette, remettre mon manteau, marcher, m’avancer comme un journal intime, mot après mot les longues jours, vers l’arpenteur des mirages: l’avion? Tout à coup les mots ‘joy-stick’ percèrent la brume.


In this small passage Mansour writes about her search for creativity, for writing something intimate to herself, and yet she is aware that in taking the ‘plane, in flying/stealing, she will be a wicked woman, that in taking hold of the joy stick she will be leaving the moral world, that she is also stealing from man, that she is stealing a phallus.

The image of flying is one of great freedom, but also of risk and exhilaration. The word “voler” does however also suggest that the activity is a forbidden one. The very word “voler” in the French shares the meaning “to steal”, and this pun is played upon. Is Mansour carrying out a clandestine activity in flying? Mansour closes the piece of prose with the question, “Suis-je toujours kleptomane?” Does the action of taking up the pen carry with it the accusation of theft? Will Mansour ever be able to take up the pen without being “kleptomane”? In finding a phallus in her name (“joy-stick”) has Mansour any more right to the control stick, the pen, than any other woman? The English pun may be just one more example of her stealing from other languages in order to discover her identity:

Evidemment. Joyce: “joy-stick”

All these questions are asked in the close of Illusions de vol. The reader is asked to participate in this struggle, to read alongside Joyce Mansour as she writes. This is the “journal intime” that she is struggling to continue:

Comment faire pour me lever, quitter la molle banquette, remettre mon manteau, marcher, m’avancer, comme un journal intime, mot après mot le long des jours, vers l’arpenteur des mirages.

The aeroplane becomes the vehicle to the interior imagination, the flight the creative process, the pen the joy-stick. Joyce Mansour cannot fly this plane, cannot achieve the written work, reveal her mirror image, enter the imaginary unless she has control of the pen, unless she takes up the joy-stick and allows the “voleur” to see the other, ‘autre que tu n’es; envoûtée par le faux, autant que par le vrai’. It is an act of subversion, a journey to the other side: ‘je pars au galop, sous les voûtes

But in order to write it, one needs the aeroplane, language, the metal framework. ‘Voler’ in the street has its female precedents, ‘les femmes de mauvaise vie’.106 This is something she can understand, but flying in a ‘plane frightens her; using the text, language, using words, this is what frightens Mansour.

If taking up the pen poses problems for Mansour, revealing her interior is even more problematic. Cottenet-Hage discusses the ‘artist’s desire for the inner reality, for the world of the imagination, and at the same time a fear of what this reality contains and at what cost it may be revealed.’107

How can a woman create without great cost to herself? How can she give birth without the other, without penetration that causes her to lose what is inside her? How can she create without man destroying her creation, or appropriating her inner self for his own destructive creativity? In The New Feminist Criticism there is a discussion of Isak Dinesen’s short story The Blank Page. In this discussion two points are made that are equally well brought out in Mansour’s imagery surrounding women:

These bloodstained marks illustrate at least two points about female anatomy and creativity: first, many women experience their own bodies as the only available label for their art with the result that the distance between the woman artist and her art is often radically diminished; second, one of the primary and most important of the metaphors provided by the female body is blood and cultural forms of creativity are often experienced as a painful wounding.108 Blood, the wound and the woman often join to become one.

In Marie, ou l’honneur de servir Marie is in love with an assassin who beats her and abuses her. The assassin says, ‘Tout est faux, énigme dans la femme ... mais il y a un nom pour cette énigme et c’est blessure’.109 He then goes on to name his own

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Even in naming these roles Mansour is questioning the assumptions that underlie a great part of literature. She points out that the male in this world is not the civilised artistic creator, but the creative destroyer. Marie asks of herself:

Pourquoi mon corps est-il satisfait quand, meurtri, blessé il rampe sous les langues pernicieuses du fouet?¹¹¹

Marie questions the role assigned to her in the story. In the pun between the ‘tongues’ of the whip and the ‘tongues’ of the male language, the woman is lashed in order to discover her interior. The woman remains to be whipped. Marie’s submission is hard to understand. Reading the violence between Marie and the assassin as a portrayal of the literary world produces an answer, for it is only when the assassin whips her with his tongue that Marie exists. She cannot write herself. She is not satisfied by masturbation; it is the assassin who makes her bleed and hence reveals her inner being. Without him she is a muse without a poet. No one else is there to write her.

In *Le cancer*¹¹² Mansour uses the image of a tumour to reveal how creativity often costs a woman her life: the tumour is fed at the expense of her life. Clara, the female protagonist, is loved by her mute servant, for the disease that is slowly taking over her body. As her interior slowly eats out her exterior, Clara dies. The mute servant adores this interior, feeding it, loving it, to the exclusion of all else. Mansour reveals how this slowly kills off the woman, that unless she exists as a whole she will die. Once Clara is dead the servant stabs the cancer, a sexual image. He uses his knife/tongue/penis. Once she is silenced his tongue is loosened, and he takes for his own the small crab found near her body:

et le petit crabe trouvé incompréhensiblement près du cadavre; certain jours j’ai l’impression qu’il me ressemble.¹¹³


¹¹³ Mansour, Joyce. “Le cancer.” In *Prose & poésie: œuvre complète*, edited by Joyce Mansour, 83-
The crab is the astrological sign of Cancer in astrological charts, the cancer has been liberated from the woman, but its liberation has meant her death. The creative remnant of her “cancer”, the small crab, is now owned by the servant. In Le cancer Mansour not only raises the issue of sacrifice that women face when they create, she also reveals the male obsession with possession and ownership of the product of this labour as a perversion.

Man uses his penis to enter the woman, the imaginative interior world. Yet this entrance also poses a problem for the male. When the female force is given power the threat of being devoured enters the male psyche. The frightened male feels a need to conquer the woman in order to penetrate her without fear for himself. In Ça the young adolescent writer acts sexually as a female for his mother. While she is alive he is de-sexed. Even when he is making love to Saignée as a man, he is described as being like a crater, a sexual image closer to the female rather than the male genitalia. It is only when he leaves his mother drowning that he can use his penis. As his mother requested, he wears his sex as others wear ‘le deuil’."114 Yet, once married, while she is still alive he does use his sex to silence his mother, to “keep her quiet”.115 When the penis is used to penetrate and then to block, there is no chance of a woman voicing her desire, of speaking, or of devouring, for she is being subjugated.

Cottenet-Hage speaks of the ‘artist’s desire for the inner reality, for the world of the imagination, and at the same time a fear of what this reality contains and at what cost it may be revealed’. She sees Mansour’s female bodies as:

inner empty space which can only be filled/ reassured by the violent appropriation or absorption of the body of the Other....loss in Mansour is associated with the absence of penetration. There is no more desolate image in Mansour than that of the senile female body condemned to emptiness.116

This is not at all how I read Mansour’s imagery. If one continues to read sexual activity and writing as interwoven images for each other, a different focus can emerge. There is more anger and bitterness than eroticism in the work of Mansour. In Marie, ou l’honneur de servir, Mansour describes Marie as the victim who does

89. Arles: Actes Sud, 1991, p89


not escape because she is afraid of being found. When Marie does escape, she does not know how to lead a life which does not entail her servitude to the male assassin. Without the penetration and wounding, the woman cannot create. The sad image here is not that she is denied penetration, but that nothing is to come of this penetration. For while wounding is often associated with female creativity, physically in the act of sex and childbirth, and figuratively in the act of revealing the inner self, Marie will not have a child. Women are not portrayed as empty, but as constantly being emptied. There seems to be no way for women to explore their interior without being penetrated. However, the penetration that the male performs causes the male to feel as if he owns what comes out of the woman, and as it is her essence, her interior that comes out, the male feels that he ‘owns’ the woman. In *Le cancer* Clara makes love to the servant. She crushes him; it is she who takes the initiative, who is in control. However, once the act is over the servant says: ‘C’est ainsi que, suffoqué de bonheur, je deviens le Parfait Propriétaire’. In this exposure of the interior there is a consequent loss of self for the woman, a death: ‘elle maigrissait de jour en jour et la bosse s’agrandissait d’autant.’

The older women in her prose works do achieve sexual relationships; however there is no fusion from these acts, only penetration and emptiness for the woman. In fact penetration often results in emptiness. The sexual act serves to highlight the frustration of a woman trying to have a relationship with a man, when she is constantly being named as object. This frustration is repeated in *Marie, ou l’honneur de servir*. When Marie has escaped her assassin lover she meets another man who asks her to teach him how to write. She interprets this as a sexual image, and he touches her breast with his finger. Marie then tells him she will help him to learn how to read. The man answers, ‘trop tard, mes yeux se sont éteints à nouveau’.

The man is willing to write Marie as female body, yet he is unwilling to learn how to read from her. Having once seen Marie as a sexual object the old man cannot see her as teacher. The touching of her breast is an alteration of the Catholic blessing in which the forehead is touched by the forefinger. The locus shifts from the forehead to the breast. The blessing is altered to a sexual interchange.

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The male can theoretically search inside his own body for the blood with which to write. He does not, however, as he can empty the woman of her blood without shedding his own. Patriarchy has allowed women to be bled for their interior creativity, any power to fight back removed from them. Even the male canon is distorted in order to inhibit women’s creativity. In *Ça* Voltaire is wrongly quoted, and illogically provided as a reason to rid Julie of her wings:

Pour se protéger du sort le faux moine donna très fort dans les idées de Voltaire. “Tu n’es plus qu’une petite mare rouge,” hurla-t-il en baissant la tête, et Julie, délestée de ses voiles de papier mâché, plongea dans un hublot gorgée de sang.\(^{120}\)

Julie’s wings are made of papier mâché. This, coupled with the link made in *Illusions de vol* between writing and flying, suggests that it is the creativity in Julie that, once removed, destroys her. Papier mâché also suggests that her wings are the destroyed and re-formed pieces of paper belonging to another text. In creating with papier mâché in order to fly, Julie has come under the wrath of the *faux moine*. Mansour writes of the woman as thief as she takes up the pen, yet the male pen has been emptying, robbing women of their life-blood throughout literary history. Sexual acts, which could be acts of fusion, serve only to devour or destroy. If fusion is to be found and creativity is to be positive, leading to life not massacre, then the way in which sexuality is lived out must be altered.

The second model of difference used by feminist writers that Showalter highlights is that of language. Elaine Showalter discusses various feminist theories that have attempted to unearth a different language that belongs specifically to women. The problem is that, unlike a colonised people, women have no forgotten language to return to, nor do women speak a significantly different language from men. Showalter argues that the real role of feminism is to say what has been censored or silenced by patriarchy. Mansour was not only a woman, but she had the added opposition of belonging to a colonised people. Why did she not, then, choose to write in Arabic? Due to her western education it is not improbable that Mansour was brought up in the literary tradition of the West. The rules governing Arabic literature are strict, for Arabic is a language closely tied to Islam and its writing is considered sacred.\(^{121}\) In writing in French Mansour was liberated from the strictures that bound the Arabic language. Furthermore the Surrealist ability to shock was not appreciated in Egypt, and was finally banned: The Arab Surrealist journal, *Le Désir libertaire*, printed in Arabic, was banned from mails and bookstores in all Arab


\(^{121}\) Refer to discussion in introduction.
countries in the 1970’s.\textsuperscript{122}

As an outsider to French culture it is possible that Mansour found a liberty in being foreign which allowed her to break the taboos that would have been more difficult in the two cultures she grew up in. Writing in French was, as it were, a way of escaping censorship. However, this choice of language also came at a cost. In \textit{Illusions de vol} the reader is made aware of the tension between the freedom that comes with writing in French, and, on the other hand, the restrictions inherent in the decision to write into another language. Tied into the notion of writing as a male domain into which she enters as \textit{voleuse} there is a second layer of thievery that she is taking on, for Mansour is stealing the words of another language. The notion of flight also takes on the connotations of a journey across cultures, into another country. In writing in French Mansour is both stealing and journeying. As the narrator approaches her flight, as she begins her journey into literary production, she writes, ‘je me formulais en anglais mon dégoût subit du vol projeté’.\textsuperscript{123}

It is in French that she writes, in English that she formulates her distaste for the journey that she is about to undertake. The distaste that comes over her is a possible allusion to self-censorship. In English Mansour feels distaste for what she is about to do; in French she is able to take flight, to be intimate, to say what has been censored. However, this flight is not the carefree flight of a bird. The title itself, \textit{Illusions de vol}, suggests that there is no real movement into the other side. Mansour seeks legitimisation, an identity which can speak authentically despite the apprehension that she is using a language and words which do not belong to her. Mansour’s desire to take flight is coupled with a fear of flying. Once the taboos associated with breaking through the language and culture barrier are broken, it would appear that Mansour sets out to say all that has been censored, questioning the long history of silence which has surrounded female sexuality and desire.

In \textit{Iles flottantes} Mansour writes the story of a woman in hospital. At night a doctor comes and inspects her mouth, placing his toothpick inside her vagina, removing her teeth and the baby lying within. The sexual imagery is blatant. The scene is one of rape and abortion. At another level, however, this scene is about censorship and the appropriation of female creativity: the text centres on the woman’s ability to


speak. The mouth is the sexual locus as well as the locus of speech, not an uncommon linkage of images in Mansour’s work. The baby is an image of creativity, of the possibility of creative speech, things not yet said. The man appropriates this creativity for himself. The man removes not only the baby, but the teeth that protect it. This image of teeth as a locus of power, particularly that of speech, is echoed in *A la renommée de la tartine*, where Jan, the narrator’s lover, is lecturing and his teeth are described in some detail. His teeth are ranked and are an image for his own structuring of his power position. As the story progresses the woman protagonist finds the institution which she is in, built like his teeth, according to his patriarchal hierarchy. *Iles flottantes* ends with the woman commenting that the first thing that she will do on leaving the hospital is to order a new set of teeth. A mouth without teeth has had its power removed; it cannot fight, it cannot bite. The woman in the text is determined to get herself new teeth and so regain her power to fight, to say what has been censored. Mansour’s writing has teeth; she does not censor her work. She names women’s body parts, she voices female desire. Mansour describes this female voice in her description of Jules César in the throes of an orgasm:

> Les dents serrées, les cheveux dressés, elles s’insultaient dans des langues oubliées avec la voix cavernue qui vient du ventre.124

Women are revealed, as the Surrealist male feared them to be, as powerful, devouring, immense. In *Iles flottantes* Mansour likens the male penis to a *cure-dent*, toothpick, and speaks of the *immense vagin* of the woman.125 In *Jules César* it is the woman’s orgasm that produces waves of ants, the only thing to survive after the flood. Ants, a symbol of female sexuality, as well as a symbol of death,126 pour out of her body. This image of ants is a Daliesque image that Mansour has appropriated for her own. In doing so she has acknowledged his fear of women, and has chosen to perpetuate it. Where men have positioned the phallus as author of life, Mansour wryly has her male lead in *Marie, ou l’honneur de servir* announce that he is the creator of destruction:

> Tout homme est un meurtrier en puissance, mais moi, l’ours aux aguets, je suis celui qui crée. De moi viendra l’enfant de la rage, et ce jour-là, il n’y aura plus fin au

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This image of an assassin birthing the child of rage is picked up by Mansour and developed in *Dolman, le maléfique*. Despite the many role reversals in Mansour’s writing, the only male who has a child in her work is Dolman who has a child with the devil, and that child is war. It is with the male voice and in telling the male story that Mansour condemns them. Removed from notions of “honour” and patriarchal “justice”, war and assassination become murder and pointless destruction.

While the woman is often the bleeding victim, she is by no means lacking in power. In places where the woman is being victimised, it is the patriarchal structure that is causing the damage. The image of her power often lies masked by the ‘male’ narrator’s voice.

Rather than women being described in terms of the male sex, Mansour uses the imagery of female sexuality to describe men. Female “secrets”, the body women have been told to hide and be ashamed of, become a repeated image. The body that she writes about is ambiguous. The father in *Jules César*, for example, menstruates, a rather ‘intermède physiologique assez rare chez les paysans’. Thus the reader is often forced to question what exactly is a woman: do we menstruate through biological difference or due to a different way of thinking? Is the blood of women the stigmata that we wear as sacrificial victims? For in Mansour’s myth of the world it is Marie who has stigmata, not Christ, and the male figure is not the sacrificial lamb, but the assassin, the butcher. When the father in *Jules César* bleeds:

> Il savait que ce n’était pas que du sang et de la salive qu’il perdait; c’était son moi le plus intime. Il eut très peur pour l’avenir. 129

When the male begins to bleed, begins to let his interior be viewed, it is a feminine act. Revealing it also means losing it, and once the interior is lost, how can he learn to continue life?

Stories are told by Mansour that have been ignored by patriarchy. In *Jules César* the Roman emperor makes no appearance. There is, in fact, no ‘hero’. There is instead a wet nurse, a wet nurse called Jules César, a servant. It is her story that is told.

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While the young twin boys in the story believe that the story is of their childhood and entrance into adolescence, Mansour writes them out of the story, closing the book with Jules César as sole survivor of a flood. The young twin males are the patriarchal voices that state as truth the position that the servant woman has no life outside of the text as it relates to them:

 Ils la savaient sans ami; sa vie débutait à leur naissance. Il était évident qu’avant cette date, elle vivait sans habitation, utilité, joie ou mémoire. Une domestique.  

However, it is the servant who is central to Mansour’s story, and it is the twins who have no existence unless it relates to her. Léonie Miel, the servant-mistress-nanny in Napoléon, questions her role as a servant and the silence of her own voice in literature. Léonie Miel wants to shift from being the object of the gaze to the position of observer, the subject of the gaze. She asks:

Est-ce que je compte moi? Est-ce que cela importe ce que je vois, ce que je crois voir, ce que je suis?  

This is a single example of the way in which women in Mansour’s text question the roles assigned them. A woman reader may well question why Mansour’s female characters are subjected to so much violence. It could be concluded that she is, like Marie, simply hauling a wheelbarrow behind the assassin, full of the mutilated bodies he has collected. Is Mansour doing nothing more than repeating the brutality? It is in the questioning, in the voice of the women that we discover Mansour is aware of the injustice her female characters must submit to. It is the questions that subvert the male position.

At the time that Mansour wrote, psychoanalysis was a relatively new and exciting science. Freud’s influence on the Surrealists has already been mentioned, but it was his work on female hysterics which caught the attention of the Surrealists in a way which shaped their art, and the characteristics of the hysteric came to represent, not only all women, but women in their most natural, and therefore authentic, state. The stereotype of the female hysteric was used by the Surrealists to enter the marvellous. Female hysterics were studied, written about and used as the male muse. If the Surrealists were envious of women at all it was in that they saw them as a doorway into a new and chaotic world. The Surrealists wanted to disrupt the centre; hysterical women became the symbol of this revolution. In the introduction


to her book, *Feminist Fiction*, Anne Cranny-Francis discusses the tendency for early and mid-twentieth century writers to:

> [map] out the place of the feminine in society and culture, as that which is devalued, inferior, even depraved, disruptive, and potentially violent or revolutionary.\textsuperscript{132}

Suleiman makes the same point in her study on the avant-garde:

It has become increasingly clear that the relegating of \textit{women} to the margins of culture is not unrelated to the place accorded to “woman” by the cultural imaginary:

> “Woman, in the political vocabulary, will be the name for whatever undoes the whole” (Denis Hollier). In other vocabularies, “woman has been the name for the hole that threatens the fullness of the subject, the wild zone that threatens the regions of light.”\textsuperscript{133}

Women are already viewed as inhabiting a disruptive, chaotic world. The female hysterical brings these patriarchal beliefs about women into the forefront. In viewing the hysterical as the external or physical manifestation of the true inner chaos of a woman, the observer is sure he has grasped the essence of what it is to be a woman. Historically, medical practice has linked mental illness with the female anatomy. In her study on Freud, Young-Bruehl points out that Freud was aware of the fallacy of this link:

> The name “hysteria” the thirty-two year old neurologist wrote in 1888 ‘comes from the ancient word \textit{hysteria}, “womb”, and is a “precipitate of the prejudice, overcome only in our own days, which links neuroses with diseases of the female sexual apparatus.”\textsuperscript{134}

Showalter points out a possible reason as to why this thought became so pervasive: it was an attractive notion which maintained the male centre as dominant due to gender:

> The medical belief that the instability of the female nervous and reproductive systems made women more vulnerable to derangement than men had extensive consequences for social policy. It was used as a reason to keep women out of the professions, to deny them political rights, and to keep them under male control in the family and the state. Thus medical and political policies were mutually reinforcing.\textsuperscript{135}

This linkage of madness to the female sex had a second, perhaps more disturbing


\textsuperscript{134} Freud, Sigmund, and Elisabeth Young-Bruehl. *Freud on Women: A Reader*. 1st . ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 1990, p3

result. Because gender is determined by the different reproductive organs of the male and female body, madness became sexualised. Showalter cites cases of clitoridectomies being performed on women whose “madness” consisted of the desire to divorce their husband. Freud was unable to escape this link between sex and madness and it became a foundational premise for his theories, for while he shifted the focus away from the body to the mind, he did not alter the practice of examining women differently from men. Women were objects, men the subjects. Unlike Freud, the Surrealists were not in the practice of treating hysterics, but they wanted to use hysterics in order to push the boundaries of their own art. In his book André Breton and the First Principles of Surrealism, Franklin Rosemont describes the relationship between Freud and Surrealism without the gender politics coming into play, yet essentially makes the same point:

Surrealism has been greatly influenced by the discoveries of Freud and his co-workers; for many years, indeed, it was amusingly misdefined in a popular US dictionary as a ‘literary movement closely allied with Freudianism’. But recognition of the validity and significance of Freud’s work by no means makes of Surrealism an ‘offshoot’ of psychoanalysis. Whereas psychoanalysis leaves untouched, or even widens, the chasm between dream and action, Surrealism dismantles the barriers between these contradictory states and strives toward their dialectical resolution.  

What he fails to mention was that the Surrealist focus on the hysteric did not dismantle the barriers between male and female: women were once again the object of the male gaze. Showalter looks at the history of women as object in western scientific and artistic practice using the image of the women who were placed inside cases to be opened up and examined by male “explorers”. Her study is a disturbing account of the practices which preceded and were incorporated into Surrealism. She writes:

Men do not think of themselves as cases to be opened up. Instead they open up a woman as a substitute for self-knowledge, both maintaining the illusion of their own invulnerability and destroying the terrifying female reminder of their own impotence and uncertainty. They gain control over an elusive and threatening femininity by turning the woman into a “case” to be opened or shut. The criminal slashes with his knife. The scientist and doctor open the woman up with the scalpel or pierce her with the stake. The artist or writer penetrates the female case with

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sharpened imagery and the phallic pen.\textsuperscript{137}

The hysteric became the new “case” to be opened up and examined. Barnet describes the Surrealist fixation with the “hystérique” in the following manner:

\begin{quote}
le stéréotype...souligne à nouveau la problématique du regard des poètes, leur voyeurisme complaisant à l'égard du voyeurisme du corps médical. La jeune hystérique ressemble étrangement à une nouvelle poupée de Pygmalion ou de Bellmer, prête à être manipulée par le désir masculin. [...] Pour les artistes surréalistes, l'"hystérique" devient clairement la Chimère, l'écran sur lequel est projetée la construction "masculine" de l'Enigme féminine. \textsuperscript{138}
\end{quote}

When a woman in the Surrealist movement steps out of the role of object, to that of subject, she is required to participate in a practice in which she takes on the masculine role of subject and opens herself, her own case, that of her own sex. Mansour has difficulty with this role, questioning sexual difference, moving between masculine and feminine roles and at the same time rejecting what it means to write as a male, rejecting the new focus on women as psychological “cases”. Mansour is clearly fascinated with the notion of insanity. The narrative voice in her work is often that of a psychiatric patient, and from this place in the margin Mansour subverts the “normality” of those in the centre, the doctors and the nurses.\textsuperscript{139}

Much of Mansour’s writing is set in hospitals, hospitals that appear to be more for the mentally than the physically ill. In \textit{Iles flottantes} a sick woman lies in bed.\textsuperscript{140} She is obviously under surveillance and hears a male doctor discussing her condition. He comments that at least they have made her relax her legs. Immediately she tenses up and stretches her legs out stiffly, primarily because she does not want to be thought of as mad. While her mind seems detached from what her body is doing, the reader is at once uncomfortable about the way in which the woman is being watched, objectified. Mansour’s subversion of patriarchal analysis is mirrored in the woman’s physical protest. The reader feels the gaze of the male as intrusive, suffocating. The reader is aware that there is going to be no true revelation of the woman, for every revelation is a premature birth, a violent appropriation or a male

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\textsuperscript{137} Showalter, Elaine. \textit{Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin De Siècle}. New York: Viking, 1990, p133

\textsuperscript{138} Barnet, Marie-Claire. \textit{La femme cent sexes ou les genres communicants: Deharme, Mansour, Prassinos}. Bern: P. Lang, 1998, p104

\textsuperscript{139} Barnet, Marie-Claire. \textit{La femme cent sexes ou les genres communicants: Deharme, Mansour, Prassinos}. Bern: P. Lang, 1998, p115

Iles flottantes links language and madness further. The language of the patients is a sexual language, speaking through the body. This ties in with both Freud and Breton's belief that hysteria is the externalisation of inner thought or, to put it another way, the word become flesh. The body language used by the patients is understood by the medical staff even when their words are not. This is highlighted in the case of Mr Cooper who only speaks English and has, in order to be understood, taken to signing with his penis. The orderlies have made the effort to understand this language, where they could not understand his English. When he uses the language of the hysteric he is understood, and yet this empowerment means that he is hospitalised and shut away from the rest of society.

In the mythical work, Jules César, Mansour writes a scene between 'le père' and 'la mère', in which the mother goes mad. One symptom of her insanity is that she thinks that her husband “plantait des cadavres dans la cuisine”. In her madness she names the man as killer. Being a wife and mother has robbed her of her identity as a woman. This brings into question the assessment of madness. For the mother has lost her identity to the father. To cure the mother of her madness, the father takes her out to the mountains and licks her right to her navel, to her very beginnings. In using his tongue he calms her down. But when he has finished, he spits out a tooth. Mansour often uses the image of the vagina dentata. The vagina speaks, reversing the more familiar image of mouth as sexual tool. When the father spits out the tooth we are told it is a milk tooth. This robs the mother of her ability to become an adult, to eat adult food. She is robbed of her sexual power, and now lies still and quiet. His tongue/language has made her submit. Now he is safe; she no longer sees corpses in the room. However, the mother is not safe, she is not now recovered, she is even more like the corpses she sees in the room, and her death does eventually come at the hand of the husband. It is her madness that sees the truth of her situation. The wrong assessment and reading of her text means, in the end, her death.

Freud’s work had a great deal of influence on Surrealist work. Many of the techniques Freud used in the interest of science, such as hypnosis, free association and automatic writing, the Surrealists adopted in the pursuit of art. Freud came to be regarded as the figurehead of their work and is represented in various Surrealist artworks. What fascinated him fascinated the Surrealists. Mansour is no exception.

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In Ça Mansour wrote a short story of an ÒEdipal relationship that, at first reading, directly corresponds to Freudian assumptions, but there is a subversion of this modern day myth. Mansour tells the story from the point of view of the adolescent male, and it is with his voice that she reveals the holes in male psychoanalysis. What she reveals is that Freudian psychoanalysis is based on the male projection of woman, rather than an authentic woman. The narrative which is missing is that of a woman who is the subject and object of analysis, woman as she experiences her own life, her own self, rather than as she is experienced and viewed from the male centre. Theories about women are developed in the male frame of reference, and their existence beyond the male is ignored. Women in patriarchy serve to tell a male story, not the female reality. Saïgée is the object of the male adolescent’s desire and love. Bleed of her identity, she is there to form his. It is Saïgée who teaches him about his own manhood, his male sexuality. The more he discovers about himself, the less she exists separately from what is happening to him. When the boy grows up and begins a sexual relationship with his wife, she drowns, and in her dead face the man sees Saïgée. The death is not a literal death, but the death of the woman he has married and the birth of the male fantasy of woman. As the adolescent contemplates the rest of his life without Saïgée, the book ends with the telling comments, ‘plus de moi pour rêver de toi, plus de toi, O Saïgée, plus de vie’.

The boy says that he cannot live without Saïgée, but the reality is that it is her life that will end when he dies, regardless of what happens to the actual woman who lives behind Saïgée. Mansour protests at being analysed and examined by men, yet she offers no alternative analysis of woman other than the woman in revolt against the patriarchal projection of the female, or attempting to escape from it.

The final area that I should like to look at in relation to Mansour’s work is that of cultural difference. By culture I mean those roles and practices which make up a culture and define identity for those within that society. Of particular interest are the roles women are given, the ‘stereotypes’ that not only describe, but prescribe the position of women and men within patriarchy. The cultural or political model involves notions about language, the body and psychoanalysis. In a patriarchal model of humanity the phallus is the centre of power. The phallus is on the side of order, of ‘right’. Those with a penis are deemed by patriarchy to be inherently worthy of power, of political legitimacy; women are deemed to be ‘lacking’ or

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diminished and so come to power as usurpers and interlopers. In her analysis of patriarchy and language, Julia Kristeva states that the problem is not one of essence, but of position. Language is a reflection or reading of the power struggle. It simply responds to the separation between man and woman, rather than causing the division. The reason for assigning power under patriarchy is biological. However, the divide has extended beyond the purely physical because the assignation of power under patriarchy has repercussions across social, psychological and artistic areas of human activity, for if a woman is seen as diminished biologically, and therefore diminished in the phallic order, she is also seen as diminished developmentally. Hence the woman is viewed as not fully adult, she is a child.

In order to maintain the phallus at the centre of power, women are assigned roles that serve the phallic hierarchy. Women’s roles are then regarded as less important, as less central to life, for they exist only to serve the ‘higher’ male purpose. Women are never seen as independent of the phallic order, but are always viewed from the phallic central position. If women are described as lacking, it is only because they are viewed from the male centre of power, the phallus, and are therefore described in terms of what they are not, as ‘other’. Other is what does not belong to the male concept of order; women form the line between man and chaos, both protecting from, and forming, a part of the outside. In the female as written by patriarchy there is a split role, one on the side of chaos, one on the side of order: whore or virgin. Carried further, if women are not male, not phallic, they do not entirely belong to the side of order; they cannot be confined or understood fully. Patriarchy faces the problem that women are the possibility of unpredictability, of interruption of the patriarchal order. Therefore women are to be feared, to be mistrusted, to be subjugated.

Unsure of how to write the new woman, the woman away from the male gaze, Mansour explores the woman as written in patriarchal literature. Yet her writing is not simply an imitation, adding to the patriarchal depiction of women. Mansour’s depictions question assumptions, reveal inconsistencies and hint at an alternative picture. In Mansour’s work, woman is constantly written and named as victim, wounded and bleeding. Yet the writing of woman as victim does not serve to repeat the patriarchy that destroys women. Under the depictions of women as victims there are the constant questions that undermine the roles assigned. Myths are rewritten to expose their inability to relate to the woman reader, to tell the woman’s story, the woman’s reality. Jules César sets itself up, just by the nature of its title, in comparison with the historical tale of that name. Throughout the telling, allusions are made to a variety of legends, fairy tales and myths. It is no wonder that we meet
twins, a wood cutter, the wet nurse, and Lucie the virgin-girl in *Jules César*. What is unusual is the way in which the traditional stories are combined, exaggerated and distorted. This distortion serves to emphasise the horror that lies beneath the stories that society has come to accept, if not as a blueprint, then as an account of life as it has been lived.

Lucie, the virgin/girl, is introduced into the story as a parody of the virgins of legends. She is the virgin for whom knights go on quests. Yet Mansour portrays her as the daughter of a lunatic killer, bloodthirsty and lusty; her knights are no more than sexually excited adolescents. At their first meeting the twins are ‘immédiatement séduits’ and they remark how beautiful she is and comment on their own ugliness and vulgarity. Lucie’s advice is simple:

Il faut tuer pour être beau, tuer les yeux fermés, tuer avec violence, tuer, tuer, tuer.
Nous tuons tout le temps chez mon père; je vous apprendrai si vous voulez, dit la vierge. Et ses yeux brillants semblaient emplis de petites vagues. 143

In *Marie, ou l'honneur de servir*, the historical-religious-mythical ideologies that Mansour would have been aware of are held up for ridicule. As the woman creator of the text opens up the story of Marie, she begins by describing the gods of the world she sees. Opening as it does in a close alliance with the Christian/Judaic creation story, beginning with the same first words as the bible, ‘Au début’, Mansour’s story invites comparison. In her text there are two gods, one on earth and his twin brother in the sky: in the biblical version there is God in the heavens and man made in his image. For Mansour it may well be that she re-writes/reads this version as being god made in man’s image. The characters in this world owe their identities to these two gods. Yet behind both of these gods is Mansour. Mansour writes the origins of humanity as she sees them, in a new myth, that implies that the established version is male fantasy. Mansour writes the patriarchal world that she sees. Mansour does not replace the established version with a feminine myth. Her nightmarish world is violent against women, offering them little more status than beast and slave. Rather, Mansour subverts the male concept of order, of honour, of right. She exposes the patriarchal world to scrutiny from the margin, from outside the phallic centre. She also removes traditional images associated with the male Christ and gives them to the female Marie. The resulting distortion is like a journey through a hall of mirrors in an amusement park. As Marie enters the text the central woman of the two versions is confronted: Marie the virgin, the Holy Mother of the traditional biblical story, and now Marie the post-menopausal, silent beauty,

masturbating on the balcony. She receives stigmata from clutching the balcony in her lust for the assassin. Her wounds are caused by her sexual role, rather than her spiritual life. Her sister is called Anne, the name given to the mother of Mary in Catholicism. In Mansour's tale, Mary is re-made, without a mother. Just as Christ was born without an earthly father, now Marie is born without an earthly mother. The assassin is seen as a somewhat mythical creature, infinite and majestic: ‘le blason de l’infini brillait sur son front comme une fleur de chair’. 

Marie here plays the opposite role to the Marie in the Bible. She is without a child; the male sacrificial lamb is transformed into the brutal butcher. Not Christ but Marie becomes the sacrifice. Her desire for fusion with the Other, with the assassin, means that she becomes his victim. His penetration of her causes her to spill blood. The cross is a crossroad in her life where Marie chooses to be the assassin’s victim, rather than live a banal life. While she continues to live, she surrenders her autonomy and dies to herself in order to become that which he demands of her. Her choice does not save the world, in fact no one but the assassin knows that she still lives, so her sacrifice serves no purpose but her own desire. As Mansour attempts to incorporate a real woman within the Mary figure, the result is brutal chaos.

The one story that seems completely out of place in Mansour’s writing and at odds with the mythical setting of the text in which it exists, Jules César, is the story that Jules César tells of her life prior to the myth. The story itself shows a life completely different from the one she is living with the woodcutter’s family. It takes the reader out of the mythical, the grand tragedy of the end of the world, the world of woodcutters and virgins, and places the reader in the middle-class romantic tragedy of the woman whose husband dies on their wedding day. As a piece of surreal writing it reacts against the societal structure of the bourgeois household, against ‘normality’. But in writing in this way, Mansour also challenges the traditional roles that marriage imposes on the male and female. She sees the traditional marriage as the end of love, of sexuality and the end of identity.

In the imagery surrounding the birth of the twins in Jules César Mansour paints a morbid picture of domestic life. The twins enter life full of hunger, the parents and the wet nurse, however, are surrounded by death:

> Ils étaient nés ensemble à Sodome [...] Ils goûtèrent aux délices des sécrétions rénales continues, la liberté du nombril, les enfantait, cramponnés aux mamelles gorgées de miel de leur nourrice Jules César, ils se jurèrent avec des babilllements sucrés de boire tout le sang du monde. C’était des enfants normaux.

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The stereotypical coupling of motherhood and birth with gain and joy are effectively demolished by Mansour’s focus on the loss and fear of death which is attendant in the parents. The family unit has become a battlefield. The imagery of death which surrounds traditional family roles is mirrored in Jules César’s story of her wedding day, in which her husband dies. The wedding is played out as a funeral, in which the husband is placed in a hole in the earth. The sexual act becomes the image of death, as death becomes the image of sex.

As a picture of marriage this account of Jules César’s wedding day is a vivid portrayal of the traditional marriage roles. The husband, traditionally the ‘provider’, dies as soon as he is married, of financial atrophy. He smells of moth balls, and has been in hospital prior to their marriage: the reader is made aware that he has been dying for some time. His family are more interested in the coffin they have been able to supply, than in his death, ‘son cercueil aux chromes brillants faisait la fierté de la famille’. This coffin is an image for the wealthy, comfortable box they want to fit him into. The guests who come to their home sip coffee without seeing his dead body, without shedding a tear. It is as if they are unaware that he is dead. The only things that howl at his death are ‘la queue brisée du piano et les potiches chinoises’, one a Surrealist image for male sexuality, another an image of female sexuality.

Yet it becomes apparent that the death is not only that of the husband; Jules César has also experienced a death. It is not only male, but also female sexuality that is mourned. In the coffin lie both the body and the flowers, the latter a strongly feminine symbol lie next to the male body. These flowers are as stiff as the body they cover, and the mother of the bride attributes the smell of naphthaline to them. Jules César also tells us, ‘ma tête est morte avec lui’. Not her heart, but her head.


The ‘head’ of the house, and other such images describe the male as primarily ruled by the head; the woman is ‘emotional’, ruled by the heart. When the husband dies Jules César mourns the loss of her head. Yet the head is not vital to life. She continued and continues to live, “Car il faut continuer à vivre même sans tête”. Is her husband’s death any reason for her to die? While his death should have meant liberation, it means instead that she must enter adulthood, learn to look after herself. Yet in becoming a woman adult she becomes a servant, marginalised. At this same time she claims that she left her last milk tooth in her husband’s mouth and then prepared herself for the burial. His dying meant two things for Jules César. Firstly, it meant the end of her memories, the end of her thoughts. Her hands are still alive, they work, but any dreams, and thoughts for herself, are gone. Secondly, it meant the end of her childhood. She lost her last milk tooth and became an adult. These two cannot be separated from each other. Both are tied to each other just as they are tied to the death of this ‘lover’. She does not write of the husband’s death as “son enterrement”, but “l’enterrement”, which allows for the ambiguity that emphasises the double death. Coming into adulthood means a loss of identity, a change of roles.

Marriage is described as a contract between two people who are already dead, as the separation of lovers, rather than their joining. She is amazed that her body, a pile of ashes, continues to work to keep her alive, when she is sure she is already dead. As Jules César enters marriage she is to give up her identity to that of her husband, and her husband’s mother. She now wears, not a wedding dress, but a borrowed black dress, a dress of death, pleated with memories. The dress is an image for something that has happened to her, for the loss not only of her husband, but also of herself, of her identity, for the clothes she wears are borrowed, they were not made to fit her: the memories that pleat the dress belong to someone else. It is this image that also provides the insight that there is an injustice done, that death and weddings should not be joined, that love should mean life, but that it has come to mean death. This death is also seen as a death that involves both partners, revealing that the patriarchal society is damaging to men as much as it is to women.

It is, interestingly enough, the husband’s mother who leads the procession to the hole in which the husband is to be thrown. Women are perceived by many Eastern

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critics, including feminists, as the safe keepers of culture. It is in this domain that they are given their powers. It is they who teach the traditions to the next generation, they who are in charge of the moral guidance of children. This position of some power holds a sting, for their deemed responsibility is to be guardians of the patriarchal structure, to ensure that the cycle of dominance continues. Given the role of guardian they cannot be agents of change. In Jules César’s story it is the mother who organises the burial; she cannot escape the ritual that leads to this death of love and sexuality.

Mansour does not deal only with the mythical or the traditional role of women. Her writing also explores the role of women as presented in the literature of her contemporaries, those within the Surrealist movement, those of the avant-garde. She not only takes up the Surrealist search for a modern mythology, she also exposes and subverts the mythology of her time. Woman is frequently linked with war in literature. Their crimes are not the acts of violence themselves, but rather it is their sexual attraction which disrupts order and causes war. Georgiana M.M. Colville discusses the reinvention of the stories and images of the legend of Helen of Troy. This is the same Helen whose face:

\[
\text{launched a thousand ships}
\]
\[
\text{And burnt the topless towers of Ilium.}^{152}
\]

Helen comes to represent one of the two new views of women suggested by the Surrealist movement, not that of the femme-enfant, but that of the violent, sexual beauty, the hysteric. While women artists did portray these two views of women as Colville shows in her discussion entitled *Filles d’Hélène, sœurs d’Alice*, and saw themselves through the eyes of the male observer, there was, in Mansour’s work, a rejection of these roles assigned them in Surrealist mythology. Surrealism had appropriated the woman-myth already present in society and had in no way liberated or transformed that mythology. Women, although having very little say in the course of events in Europe, wore the shame in the condemnation that ensued. The transgressions they were most often charged with were sexual; in reaction their punishments were physical and aimed to de-sex the women. Certainly both men and women were shot. However, women were also frequently humiliated beforehand. Women thought to be collaborators had their heads shaved and were paraded through the streets. The shaving of their heads was an attempt to de-sexualise and

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de-humanise them, as the Nazis had done to their prisoners in the concentration camps. The attack on the women's sexuality was a punishment for 'sex crimes'. In literature the imagery surrounding the occupation of France extended this image, and the picture of the whore and the gestapo came to represent collaboration.

In A la renommée de la tartine, Mansour explores post-war literature. She does this through the eyes of a woman. The patriarchal text is set up as an institution through which the narrator travels while waiting for her male lover, Doctor Jan, who is giving a lecture in the building. Once again there is the sensation that the protagonist is being disobedient in wandering through these halls; that she is not supposed to be there. What she comes across leaves her shaken; she is surprised to be alive once she has left:

"Tiens, encore en vie?" marmonnait-il en manœuvrant la voiture. Je fus étonnée de le constater. 153

Seen from her position the institution is 'une maison de fous'. 154 Until she tells the story from the position of outsider, the man, her lover, sees the place as one of order, of restoration. Seen through her eyes there is chaos and madness. What does she see that threatens her so much? She has three major encounters. Each one is a picture of a woman from the literature of her contemporaries. The first meeting is with an old woman who has taken the place of her dead father in the hospital. She has taken his place, as once he is dead she has no other place to go. Having cared for him she is without a place for herself. This woman is crying and finally falls asleep, exhausted. The image of the father, the most dominant figure of patriarchy, has condemned this woman, through her service, to dependency. The narrator leaves her in the cloakroom. She will not accept her as her parent, will not allow herself to be condemned in the same way this old lady was. Read in the context of the Occupation, this woman has been placed in her father's death bed; it is she who will pay the penalty for the way he has lived his life; it is she who will answer for him. Women have come to represent in literature the image of France prostituted into the hands of the Reich. Women wear the shame of the father's guilt.

Once the narrator has left the woman in the cloakroom, she walks down the corridors until she comes to a door. She dismisses the idea that reason should rule intuition, and is immediately confronted with the symbols of reason without intuition, twelve Waffen SS 155. They are awaiting death. The room is set up like a

hairdresser’s. Things are to be put in order, to be cleaned up. The woman in this room is a beautiful, but unfriendly, cashier. Her beauty is that of a prostitute. The image is of France under the occupation: the cashier exposes her thighs, revealing her underwear. SS officers are on her chest and chin. She has seduced them, yet she will also be their assassin. Mansour sees the history of the officers as written on the cashier’s body; it is between her legs that she looks to see the action. When the woman clicks her knees shut, the action ends. History is rewritten on the body of a woman. It is she who must wear the shame. Even the SS officers are dressed as victims. However, Mansour continues to subvert the image. The officers are shot, their story unfinished. No explanations are to be heard from them. When the action is over, the narrator no longer wishes to be in the room: she is disgusted; the woman is no longer beautiful to her.

The narrator is expelled back into the corridor, rather as if she is being born; however, she finds herself in exactly the same place as she entered. The woman she has left behind with the dead officers, like the previous woman who has become her father’s surrogate, offers no positive model to follow. The narrator does not belong in either room or find a path in following either woman. The narrator then follows a black woman. Perhaps she will provide the narrator with an escape from these cliché images of women and the confining walls that are like the teeth of her lover. Yet the black woman disappears from sight melting into the walls, spinning and laughing and sighing with the mechanism of the Chambre Forte, ‘sa graisse, absorbée par osmose, semblait nourrir les murs et le mécanisme de la Chambre Forte’ 156. Black, and therefore everything that is opposite to the Aryan ideal that Hitler espoused, this woman is used as a commodity.

Throughout her writing Joyce Mansour struggles with the problem of her role as a creative woman. A variety of different images emerge as Mansour explores her role as a woman trying to enter the literary world. Does she, like Marie, haul the wheelbarrow of mutilated babies and women for the male assassin, as he plants his garden? Is she a kleptomaniac, stealing a phallus in order to write? Is she a sick woman, usurping the place of her father, looking for a pair of false teeth with which to continue her task of writing against men who have removed her own teeth for their sexual convenience? Or is she trying to enter the Chambre Forte under false pretences, where ‘they’ make ‘la confiture des dames’? 157 Victim, murderous officers may allude to the twelve disciples, their Christ, Hitler.


seducer, slave: in none of these images is there a position from which the author can write herself.

This journey through doors in search of a self is reminiscent of the Surrealist artist Dorothea Tanning’s self-portrait, *Birthday*. Hubert writes:

> Dorothea emerges in front of innumerable open doors disclosing only more remote doorways. This schematized labyrinth in the background can hardly lead to a festivity. It merely compounds into a single spectacle the many acts of transgression she has had to commit to attain her present stage of liberation.

This description of the painting highlights the possible strengths and triumphs of the artist. Suleiman, quoting from Irigary, points to a possibly different interpretation, one that serves as a warning, carrying the threat of violence inherent in Mansour’s story:

> “If woman is to put into form the *ulté* [Greek: matter] that she is, she must not cut herself off from it nor leave it to maternity, but succeed in creating with that primary material that she is by discovering and exposing her own morphology. Otherwise she risks using or reusing what man has already put into forms, especially about her: risks remaking what has already been made, and losing herself in that labyrinth.” A woman Surrealist, in other words, cannot simply assume a subject position and take over a stock of images elaborated by the male imaginary. In order to innovate, she has to invent her own position as subject and elaborate her own set of images...

Mansour’s journey through the labyrinth of male images, of the literary creation of woman, leaves her standing on the outside of the institutional, having only just survived the machinations of patriarchy.

Fearing that she too will be sucked into these teeth-like walls and join the fate of the black woman, the narrator shies away from the room. Yet she admits to the man crouching behind the door of the room that, ever since the age of twenty, she has tried to enter this room, its huge mechanism oiled by the body of the large negress, but she has been unable to get in. She has tried lying, cheating; she has tried to get in by hiding amongst those who do enter:

> —Vous... que fait-on dans la Chambre Forte? demandai-je à l’homme accroupi derrière la porte.

> —De la confiture de dames, me dit-il sans lâcher des yeux son journal.

> —Mais... vous...? Il me contempla longue ment: Ça se voit tellement?

> —Quoi donc?

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158 Hubert, Renée Riese. “Surrealist Women Painters, Feminist Portraits”, in *Dada/Surrealism*, 13, 1984, p79

For Mansour there is a strong desire to write, to get in the guarded places, the places forbidden to her. To use the analogy of writing in the margin, Mansour wants to escape over that line, get in. Yet the desire is coupled with the remark ‘j’essaie toujours, sans vraiment y croire toutefois; je ne suis pas dupe. Non. J’essaie. Voilà tout.’ While Mansour writes, it is always with a sense that she is writing against opposition; that, like the narrator, she is always on the outside, for Mansour is a woman and therefore an ingredient in the making of ‘la confiture des dames’. The mouth becomes a focus once more. As an image connected to the male, the teeth are the focus. The protagonist describes her lover’s teeth in detail. As with the walls of the ‘Chambre Forte’, his teeth, ‘dansaient devant mes yeux et m’empêchaient de m’orienter correctement’. Seductive, it is his ability to devour her that she is scared of and attracted to. The walls, the structure of literature, are like a nightmarish trap for her. At any time she could be sucked in and lose her identity to the institution in which women’s sexuality and bodies are used as the scapegoat for all that is unpleasant. And she is non-European. Will her racial heritage mean that it will be her body that is used to oil the mechanism? Her lover lectures and his words are like ‘un couteau beurré sur une belle tartine’.

The tartine is feminine, the knife masculine. As a butter knife it does not cut, but slides over the woman, its power to destroy hidden. The spectators listen to the images, listen to his buttery words without realising the knife can cut. The apparent beauty and structure of the male canon appears distorted, chaotic and dangerous when viewed by the woman. Literature has this ability to seduce women into a certain view of themselves and the roles they have in society. In exposing the hidden violence within the story of woman as seen by man, Mansour exposes the knife beneath the butter. In order to escape the images which could entrap her, Mansour has created her own world of imagery which powerfully subverts the patriarchal world as she moves through it. It is her vivid imagination which finally

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lets her through locked doors which she cannot get through any other way:

La porte de l’ascenseur est fermée à clé. La porte de l’ascenseur ressemble à une porte d’armoire à glace. Drôle d’hôpital, dites-vous? Chaque clé ouvre une porte différente mais la miennne ne s’ouvre jamais autrement que par la force de mon imagination… et encore.\(^{164}\)

Early on in this discussion of Mansour’s work I referred to Barnet’s description of Mansour’s work as writing the desire to write. Preckshot has referred to Mansour’s work as the portrayal of an identity crisis. Between these two views lies my own conclusion. Barnet poses a question at the beginning of her study of Mansour. She writes:

Mansour mêle tant les “je” d’un narrateur bisexué ou bisexuel, tout à tour masculin, féminin ou d’un genre double, trouble, elle mélangé tellement les acteurs des scènes sadomasochistes, les actifs et les passifs, les victimes et les vampires, le plaisir et la douleur, qu’on finirait par s’égarer, si l’on disait son univers en deux parties, deux sexes, deux pôles de raison et de déraison … l’imprécision de sa prise de parole, de son écriture, devrait être le signe de son émancipation des catégorisations rapides, du concept essensialisant “masculin” et “féminin”. Question à suivre.\(^{165}\)

Mansour does cross boundaries, her writing is transgendered; however gender is not crossed arbitrarily, in many cases it is not a sign of Mansour’s emancipation, but a sign of her struggle with the strictures of “des catégorisations rapides”.

The communication that Mansour undertook in her texts is not so much a communication between men and women, it is a communication between the multiple selves of Mansour. In their discussion of the history of women and madness in literature, Gilbert and Gubar look at the concept of women writing about women, and thus themselves as a relationship similar to that of the mirror image, whereby a complex network of identification evolves over the relationships between:

heroïnes and their reverse mirror images and, more importantly, a second mirror relationship between the fictional heroine/madwoman dichotomy and the female author. The woman author’s ambivalence towards creativity, her “anxiety of authorship” is the main issue of madwoman.\(^{166}\)

Mansour does battle with the “fictional heroine/madwoman” of both the Surrealist


\(^{165}\) Barnet, Marie-Claire. La femme cent sexes ou les genres communicants: Deharne, Mansour; Prassinos. Bern: P. Lang, 1998, p48

canon and the mainstream literary tradition. There is an inherent violence in Mansour’s work as she sets out to subvert these roles and stereotypes. This violence cannot simply be read as a repetition of violence against women practised by patriarchy because Mansour’s work is mirroring the reality and at the same time protesting against it. To say that a campaigner against vivisection who shows photographs of what is happening to animals in science laboratories is repeating a pattern of violence against animals is nonsense. Mansour’s writing does not simply depict violence, it depicts it within a framework which constantly challenges structures which promote violence. Physical violence is an image of the psychological violence which is perpetuated against women, and felt by Mansour, as she negotiates the power structures underlying literature. Violence is part of the imagery Mansour uses to describe the act of writing. Her writing does not advocate the violence, but protests against the violence done her, and women as a group, by the literary world, in its attempts to silence, define and crush women.

Mansour’s writing is both trans-gendered and transcultural in its imagery. Mansour is seeing herself, as other;167 for Mansour has positioned herself in the traditionally masculine role of author. She travels through the looking glass to stand in the masculine world and look back out at herself. Barnet sees Mansour’s sexual ambiguity as ‘cette ambivalence de tout créateur”168:

Cherchez la femme et trouvez “mon corps profond ce poulpe sans pensée”, ce corps mansourien qui devient masculin, aussi ambigu que “Lucifer”, “Homme aux seins lourds et pâte sperme glace”’. Mansour nous prévient, elle nous met en jeu:

Je suis l’homme

L’homme qui presse la gâchette et tire l’émotion

Pour mieux vivre.169

Etre homme ou femme, être femme ou/et homme, qui est le poète ou l’auteur au féminin-masculin: “Etre homme à mon heure, “Quelle femme suis-je” (485)? Mansour ne donne pas de réponses définitives qui valoriseraient l’un ou l’autre sexe. Elle apporte, en revanche, des contradictions supplémentaires à ajouter à un autoportrait provocant: “J’écraserais mon cigare dans ton œil poché de veille, j’écraserais ton pénis de mon talon éculé, je t’écraserais tout entier dans la puanteur de mon refus.”170

167 See section on biological difference

168 Barnet, Marie-Claire. La femme cent sexes ou les genres communicants: Deharme, Mansour, Prassinos. Bern: P. Lang, 1998, p16

169 Barnet, Marie-Claire. La femme cent sexes ou les genres communicants: Deharme, Mansour, Prassinos. Bern: P. Lang, 1998, p15

170 Barnet, Marie-Claire. La femme cent sexes ou les genres communicants: Deharme, Mansour, Prassinos. Bern: P. Lang, 1998, p16
Barnet suggests that a feminist reading of Surrealist work is highly problematic, and attacks feminist readings in *Dada/Surrealism* 18 for using:

> une méthodologie d'interprétation qui suit et veut imposer des schémas de subversion ou de féminisme préparés d'avance. Il semblerait presque que les critiques ne veulent pas tolérer les marges floues, les contradictions fluides, les contradictions et les ambiguïtés qui jalonnent indéniablement les œuvres elles-mêmes rebelles des écrivaines.\(^1\)

I would like to suggest a feminist reading which incorporates the fluidity and contradictions of Mansour's work, while also acknowledging the structures in place. Mansour's argument is not with whether or not women are more worthwhile than men; the argument she has is with literary tradition, the Surrealist tradition and the tradition of language itself. In his description of the "double optic" Terry Eagleton expresses the dilemma facing those who will:

> be caught up in the very metaphysical categories [they] hope(s) finally to abolish; and any such movement will demand a difficult, perhaps ultimately impossible double optic, at once fighting on a terrain already mapped out by its antagonists and seeking even now to prefigure within that mundane strategy styles of being and identity for which we have as yet no proper name.\(^2\)

Entering the patriarchal literary tradition, both in the mainstream and in its margin of Surrealism, Mansour is taking on a masculine role. She is speaking with the male "langue"; it is she who rapes and observes, who translates and observes, and yet it is also she, as woman, who is the observed, the penetrated, the raped, and the woman who revolts against this role. Mansour's voice constantly shifts as her position changes, as she moves from the position of centre to margin, from masculine to feminine, from stereotype to personal peculiarity. Her voice shifts as do her images, challenging boundaries whilst bringing them into sharper relief. The reader is asked to participate in an intimate internal dilemma of sado-masochism. It is the multiplicity of self, as the subject self penetrates the object self and the object self fights back to reassert herself as subject that causes the trans-sexual and masochistic writing that challenges the ordered world of the reader.

Mansour refuses the sexual stereotyping of literature, the way in which it has been gendered to exclude her authorial voice. Her desire to write is paramount and it is in her refusal to be silenced that Mansour establishes her own centre within the margin. As Mansour journeys from this position into the centre, as she observes and

\(^1\) Barnet, Marie-Claire. *La femme cent sexes ou les genres communicants: Deharme, Mansour, Prassinos*. Bern: P. Lang, 1998, p282

comments on the “normative”, the reader experiences the centre as anything but normal. Reason, sanity and the world of literature are experienced as a nightmare journey into madness, chaos and violence.
Chapter 2

Andrée Chedid

With the development of modern travel and communication systems the once uncommon situation of living in a place different from that into which you were born is becoming more and more common. Andrée Chedid is representative of a situation many people face today. Her background spans three continents. As she has her character Aléa say, ‘J’ai fibres et racines sur au moins trois continents’\(^{173}\).

Born in Egypt, but of Lebanese descent, Chedid spent her high school years in France. She then returned to Egypt, attended the American University in Cairo and went on to Lebanon, married a Lebanese man and returned with him to France to settle in Paris. Her literary and cultural heritage is rich. Chedid speaks, writes and reads English, French and Arabic. A part of each of these cultures and yet belonging solely to none of them, Chedid’s writing appears to span cultures.

The recent ease with which one can exchange one country and culture for another has led, on the one hand to a great sense of hope for a world community, and on the other, to a sense of loss of centre, of identity and culture, a feeling of homelessness. Chedid does not answer this problem by choosing one country or culture over another, or by attempting to discover a new culture, instead she opens her writing out to endless difference and variety;

\[\text{Mes avatrames sont multiples. A tous les azimuts mes ancêtres se sont entremêlés.}\]
\[\text{Tous ces croisements me gardent libre et sans frontières, que le ciel en soit remercié.}\]\(^{174}\)

In \textit{L’enfant multiple}, Omar is showing Annette around Cairo. She is from Lebanon. As they travel Omar asks Annette, ‘Est-ce que ça ressemble à chez toi?’ Annette tries to find something that could link the two, but finds no similarities between the very different countries, until he asks again, and she finds the response that is the only one that seems to make sense to Chedid, ‘la beauté les ressemble’.\(^{175}\)

In Chedid’s work this results in a globalisation of life. While differences are celebrated, the diversity of life assembles in a single current in her work. Unlike Khoury-Ghata or Barakat who focus on the lies and structures which divide, Chedid


creates a world in which the lines of division disappear and lack of communication or connection is not caused by an inability to comprehend, but by an unwillingness to connect. Mansour too creates her own literary landscape, however hers is a distopia of misunderstanding and inability to link the semiotic and symbolic, whereas Chedid’s novels are an attempt at a utopia in which the semiotic is given freedom within the symbolic order. Ironically even Chedid cannot fully conceive of a society which celebrates freedom within its structures as surviving, as is revealed in her novel *Nefertiti et le rêve d’Akhnon*. Many of Chedid’s novels are set in cities, for it is in the modern cities that peoples, cultures and contradictions meet and somehow manage to co-exist. Of Paris she says,

> de toutes ces contradictions surgit l’existence. Paris m’est chère à travers tout. 176

Chedid has adopted the metropolis as her home. Paris has become a great international crossroad. It is a place of contradiction, old with a great history behind it, a French city, and at the same time a destination, constantly re-invented and changed by the great number of immigrants and travellers who have poured into it, an international city. This dichotomy is present in Chedid’s writing, for the rich cultural inheritance Chedid has behind her is amalgamated in her novels to form a unique culture. While the places are for the most part recognisable as set in Egypt or Lebanon as they retain their distinctive landmarks, the characters involved in the novels belong to a distinct culture within that setting which is recognisably “Chedidian”.

Chedid’s novels explore the belief in a universal, eternal identity which connects people to each other and to the earth. This universality is not utopian, it contains the common cruelty and violence of human against human, it contains the ‘blessures de la vie’, but it also contains love and hope.

> Aujourd’hui tous les malheurs nous atteignent, franchissent nos murs...Que faire?...Creuser un sillon dans la voie que l’on a choisie, maintenir un regard attentif, ouvert, s’exprimer contre les violences. C’est peu. Mais ce peu, il faut le faire. 177

Her choice and love of the French language notwithstanding, Chedid feels bound by language itself, feels that somehow language is limiting, that she needs to stretch it, make it take on new meanings, something which poetry allows her to do.

In spite of its limitations Chedid sees poetry as her ‘voie’, her vocation. It is through

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her writing that she seeks to ‘s’exprimer contre les violences’.

La poésie ne peut pas être que vigilante et rebelle. Non par refus, mais par amour, par recherche de la vraie vie, indicible, mais pourtant là, en nous, comme une exigence, un appel!  

The double emphasis on love and hope is a recurrent theme throughout Chedid’s work. The two are often in startling juxtaposition with the ‘gouffres’ and violent situations many of her characters find themselves in. It is through love that people can reach below the external to find the human within. The identity of the individual seems to appear in the ‘appel’. It is this call that forms the search for her characters, keeping them alive and moving.

It is very rare to find a character in Chedid’s novel who fully belongs to the time, place and culture in which they exist. Chedid’s repeated phrase that one must enter into the ‘siècle’ is often at odds with the fact that her characters themselves are exiles or aliens in the world in which they live. This exile or alienation stems from two sources. In the first case of exile there are those who are born into a place and culture from which they feel alienated because of the beliefs and thoughts they hold. Those who feel the second form of exile are alienated because they have left the country of their birth to travel to another in which they are strangers. In Chedid’s novel Nefertiti et le rêve d’Akhnaton, Akhnaton’s ideas and the society that he wants to create are so alien to the ideas of the society of which he is king that he feels compelled to set up a city elsewhere, starting from the beginning with a group of people willing to follow him. While this society fails, there remains a hope that there will be people in the future who will have the same ideas of equality, of unity between people and what they do in terms of vocation. Chedid’s novels do not present the world as moving further and further towards a more equal and just society, rather her novels show the same fight of individuals attempting to rise out of the darkness into the light, a constant cycle of reformation, darkness and reformation.

Unlike many writers on the subject of exile, however, Chedid’s focus is on connection with others, on the relationships that can be formed outside of the usual ideas of a society and culture. Her people groupings are not always formed due to tradition and the expected relationship norms. Rather they are often formed by chance encounters, or are due to a united purpose. This aspect of Chedid’s novels points to “imagined communities”:

“imagined”, not because it is not real but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries, and “community” because in spite of internal hierarchies within third world contexts, it nevertheless suggests a significant, deep commitment to what Benedict Anderson, in referring to the idea of nation, calls “horizontal comradeship”. 179

The characters in her novels frequently break out of their roles within society to establish a new culture for themselves. A common relationship is the relationship between the grandparent and the child: Omar-Jo and his grandfather Joseph, Om-Hassan and Hassan, Kayla and Sophie. Relationships cross generation divides and unite human experience across the various stages of life. In Les marches de sable three women meet in the desert and their lives form a circle of what it means to be a woman. Cyre is the child and yet it is she who is to meet death, Marie has been a prostitute and is now in search of a holy life, Anasthasia is a wife, a widow, lover and mother. Their roles are recognisable and yet they are so composed as to break the conventions of the societal norms of these figures. They form their own culture in an environment that is almost a no-man’s land, a place that is not fully earth, and not sea. The desert becomes a world of its own. The desert strips the characters of the roles that they had within society; it reduces the women to essentials. Marie is not even recognizable externally as human and Cyre’s first response on seeing her is one of fear. 180

Hena Maes-Jelinek’s discussion of exile in Wilson Harris’s work is interesting in the similarities it provides with Chedid’s work. Wilson Harris is a Guyanese-born novelist who moved to England in his late thirties. His writing, like Chedid’s is built on a poetic structure which combines history, myth and the modern world in a fictional otherworld. Maes-Jelinek suggests that exile need not be read as necessarily negative or divisive, but, as in Harris’ work, it can be a positive step toward connection:

the voluntary, imaginative going into exile is for Harris a redeeming spiritual pursuit that must contribute to a reunification of modern man’s divided inner being and to greater harmony in a broken world. 181

Chedid’s writing commonly surrounds the image of a broken world, of destruction and the new hope that rises out of that destruction. In her novel L’autre the


destructive force is an earthquake. After hitting the small town, rubble is all that is left. The protagonist, Simm, has seen a young man standing at a hotel window, he has emerged young and glorious and in the greeting that goes between them in a language that is a mixture of many languages the two men are united. After the earthquake has struck, Simm is sure the young man is still alive under the rubble. He waits beside a hole in the ruins, eventually making contact with the man below and staying with him until he is able to convince others that there is a young man in the ruins and he is rescued. Chedid has explained that the imagery is one of writing a novel, that out of the fragments and rubble of images and thoughts a living work is born. The description of the language that the two men use to communicate is interesting. Simm knows smatterings of languages from various countries; he mixes and moulds these diverse languages to communicate with the young man below the ground.

The narration of Nefertiti et le rêve d’Akhnaton takes place in the ruins of a destroyed city. This city was a city of the future, straining to release itself from the time it was in, from the culture and religion of the country it belonged to. The young king, Akhnaton, attempted to break with the traditions and culture that he was guardian of, establishing a more egalitarian society, a city united under a universal image and a god that would equal it, the sun god, Aton. The fragmentation of the city is representative of the fragments of the ideal, the remains of a life. It is from these fragments that the novel progresses, an attempt to remember and recreate the past, to build from the ruins something that will speak to the future.

Those who have left their country to live in another carry with them only fragments, memories and lingering impressions; it is from these impressions that the protagonists construct a mental reality of the world they have left behind. This reality may not be the exact replica, some impressions remain larger than life, and events that took place in an instant become eternal images of the country left behind. Exiles who attempt to write about their own country build these fragments into a whole. The language that Simm speaks is representative of this new vision. Simm takes on a new name, a new identity in order to speak with the young man. The language he adopts in no way diminishes his identity, for he makes it his own language, constructs an identity for himself in order to communicate with the character emerging from under the rubble. The audience that Chedid is writing for, in using French, is a French audience. She has made French her own language in order to communicate with that audience. Her image of the communication between the young man and Simm reveals the insignificance of language in comparison to the connection that occurs between two people of different backgrounds. Simm has
his back to the young man emerging from the rubble at the end of the novel *L’autre*. However, his empathy with the young man is so strong that he does not need to use his eyes to see. He uses his imagination and participates with the young man in his rise out of the rubble. More humorously, the translator between Simm and the rescue team finds his difficulty is not just in translating the words that Simm says, but of transforming what Simm says into something acceptable to the head of the rescuers. Simm is not acceptable to the rescue team as they cannot comprehend why someone would struggle so hard for a person who is unknown to them. They do not work on intuitions and hope, but on facts and absolutes. It is not his language that is the real barrier to their comprehension of Simm, but his perception of life. In response to Chedid’s own experience of having a background that crosses linguistic and social backgrounds, it appears that Chedid views people as connecting due to some common view of life, a common search, even if that search will draw each person to a different end. People are not united because they speak the same language, or because they live in the same place: they are united because they are like-minded in terms of their conception of life. This ties in well with the social groupings that form in a city; here it is like-minded people who meet together regardless of the distances that may separate them physically.

Characters in Chedid’s novels form friendships around a common view of life, symbolised in *L’enfant multiple* by the merry-go-round that unites the characters, each one of whom sees what object as a message of hope. In *Jonathan* it is the revolution that unites Jonathan with Alexandre even though they have not met. When Jonathan is dying at the hands of the revolutionaries that he was hoping to join, Alexandre is brought to see him before he dies. Upon meeting him Jonathan feels at peace about dying for in Alexandre’s face he has seen the identity he was searching for and is satisfied:

*Une seconde a suffi, et comme au vif d’un éclair, il l’a reconnu ce visage, le vrai visage des hommes.*

What is central to the characters’ portrayal is their relationship to their inner vocation, which in turn gives them their individuality. Individuality does not imply separateness from others, for only Marie in *Les marches de sable* wants to follow a path of solitude, and even she is presented by the narrator as still searching for a relationship with a being outside herself. Chedid has said that while some writers may need to remove themselves into quiet and solitude while they write she has found that ‘*cet isolement est une façon de mieux retrouver, en profondeur,* les

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182 Chedid, Andrée. *Jonathan*, p206
In her novels, characters who have followed their dream have drawn others to them and this central focus becomes a unifying force. Following this dream, even in the face of difficulty is what gives the characters their authenticity. It is when this dream or aspiration is thwarted or lost under the pressures from others and society that the individual becomes inauthentic.

While this ‘appel’ can be unifying it can also be divisive and destructive. Chedid opposes any ambition or drive which causes distance between people. For example, Chedid resists the confines of structured religion. In *L’enfant multiple*, and *La maison sans racines*, set during the 20th century and *Les marches de sable*, set between the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D., Chedid depicts the destruction of religious division. In *L’enfant multiple* Omar-Jo’s parents marry across the religious division and when the war breaks out they are killed by an “accident of war” while attempting to cross the demarcation line together. In *La maison sans racines* two young women in Beirut, Myriam and Ammal, decide to join each other from opposite sides of the demarcation line in order to occupy the frontier and begin a movement of reconciliation and peace. They are shot at by a sniper and when a young girl, Sybil, staying in a nearby building comes to see what has happened she too is shot, as is Slimane, the Sudanese who comes to pick her up. In *Les marches de sable* Egypt is split by a division of belief:

> Une fois de plus, le rôle de la divinité sera-t-il d’armer le bras, de frapper les iconoclastes, de réduire les schismatiques, de proscrire l’homme libre? Ou bien est-ce les hommes qui manipulent leurs dieux, pantins à la solde de haines habilement changées en devoirs sacrés?

A young Christian boy, Rufin, is murdered for his faith. Against the violence caused by divisions and splits, Chedid offers an alternative of a hybrid identity, not an identity found in religious difference, but a communication between people based on the shared condition of humanity.

Omar-Jo, in *L’enfant multiple*, is asked by his friend about the accident which killed his parents. Omar-Jo explains that it was during the war. His friend inquires,

> —... Tout ça c’est peut-être une affaire de religion? En quel Dieu crois-tu?
> —Il n’y a qu’un Dieu, répliqua l’enfant. Même si les chemins ne ressemblent pas.

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And this in turn leads the two, one French, one Lebanese, to contemplate the possibility of reconciliation and friendship across cultures. When Macé, in *Les marches de sable*, meets his friend Marie who has rejected the transitory world in an attempt to enter into the spiritual dimension, he questions her decision:

> Malgré mon incroyance, je sais aussi qu'une vie plus haute ne peut être atteinte que si l'on ajoute à tous nos quotidiens, à toutes nos réalités palpables la dimension de l'absolu, de l'indicible, véritable essor de l'esprit et de toute création ... Ce refus, cette négation n'aboutissent-ils pas à un mur, à une route sans issue?\(^{188}\)

Chedid has expressed the desire to use her writing to search for 'la vraie vie'. What she means by this is that writing should seek what it means to be human:

> à sa source, libéré, démasqué, dépouillé des déguisements de la société, des modes brillantes et transitoires. Poésie sans cesse incertaine, allant de gouffres en soleils, échappant aux pièges (même les siens) et aux définitions.\(^{189}\)

This desire to escape the mundane portrayals of people means that Chedid’s characters are people on the margins of society, by necessity. If they are to be fully integrated into mainstream society, they lose their authenticity, begin to fulfil roles, to put on masks and disguises. In this way, when Livie leaves Simon in *La cité fertile*, forsaking their life as wandering performers for the security and comfort of Natia’s and Deric’s home, she begins to lose her identity. This loss of self to disguises is presented in the image of Natia dressing Livie and putting make-up on her. As she does so, Livie is transformed into someone else. Natia’s remark, ‘—*Profité de la vie sotte!*’ is in sharp contrast to her memory of Simon’s love for her. Livie wants to mould and break Livie; Simon loved her as she was. She remembers how Simon loved her naked, without any form of covering, and moves toward the mirror ‘jusqu’à le toucher, cherche à se fondre dans son propre reflet, à s’engloutir dans ses propres yeux’.\(^{190}\) Identity is challenged by a multitude of ‘pièges’, the dilemma lies in the attempt to participate and live in a culture from which the individual’s ideas, desires and hopes are excluded.

Aléfa is Chedid’s attempt to place a mythical woman in a modern-day setting. Aléfa appears timeless and ageless. She is fluid and appears with no fixed form, transforming the events around her into a poetry of protest; everything that she notices takes on significance. Aléfa examines the whole question of identity. In *La cité fertile* Aléfa begins by examining a sponge, attempting to discover what the

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essence of a sponge is:

Parfois, par exercice, je m'enracine dans un seul objet. J'adopte mon œil le plus lucide, le plus froid... J'analyse. Je subdivise, je traite un à un chaque élément; je m'infiltra dans chaque pore... J'en énumère les espèces: éponges fines et douces de Syrie, fines et fermes de Grèce, blondes de Venise, de Marseille ou de Barbarie... je la dissèque jusqu'à épuisement. Peine perdue! Inaliénable, elle m'échappe encore.91

From the sponge she moves on to other objects, a matchstick, a stone, a fingernail. But every time Aléfa examines an object closely, its essence escapes her, 'les parcelles se multiplient. Les détails prolifèrent, m'assiègent. C'est un effroyable éboulis'.92 From her search she enters once again 'de plein fouet l'humanité confuse.' Yet here again Aléfa finds that the search for identity and the essence of another is just as much of a mystery. She unnerves several people with her questioning of their identity.

Chedid uses a comic incident between Aléfa and a young gendarme sent to get her identity papers, to reveal this return to childhood innocence. The innocence of knowing who you are and that you exist without the need for a role, comes into conflict with society's desire to find an identity that exists outside of you and to which you must conform. The memory of the grandmother of the gendarme constantly awakens the child that he was and all the freedom to love and enjoy life; yet his task and his role as police officer draw him back to the regulations and limitations of the law. Aléfa gently mocks him, trying to awaken the person he is. The commissar who has sent him wants Aléfa's identity papers, but he does not care to find out who she really is:

L'identité, c'est quoi monsieur le commissaire?... Date et lieu de naissance, noms des père et mère, mensuration, couleur des yeux, photo d'un autre temps. C'est ça que vous appelez identité?93

When she takes the young gendarme to her room she shows him the skylight in her room. It is her attempt to reveal to him her identity as a free person, unbound by the confines of a bureaucratic concept of identity. Aléfa is like the window, a small patch of blue, but constantly changing, a part of an entire universe, looking out into a view without limits:

Regardez! ... Rien qu'un châssis, rien qu'une vitre, et vous voilà en possession d'un fragment d'univers: pluie, étoiles, lune, hirondelles, soleil, nuage, jour et nuit, rien


n’échappe à mon filet. 194

Alefa turns the tables on the young man, constantly queries the young police officer about his own identity, asking, 'Qui êtes-vous?', searching for a way to force him to shake off the perception he has grown to accept of life as being confined by regulations. He does not understand her and leaves her, disturbed but unenlightened.

In La cité fertile, Simon assesses his life and remembers the promise he made as a child to be true to the identity of the child:

En cette seconde, Simon se lie à jamais à son cœur, à ses rêves d’enfant. Se lie à jamais à cette terre des vivants, des morts. 195

This is a promise that Chedid herself made as a child:

de rester fidèle à mon enfance, comme si je prévoyais à l’avance tous les filets, tous les pièges, les conventions etc... auxquels l’âge adulte vous destine.' 196

This notion that the identity of the child is the true identity is one that Chedid does not use much elsewhere in her writing. However, in La cité fertile it is expressed very clearly and it ties in very closely with Chedid’s notion of authenticity which is apparent in many of her novels. Authenticity, in Chedid’s novels, is the ability of an individual to discover their vocation, an inner calling, and to make from it their life’s work. Each character in her novel has an inner thirst or ‘gift’ that makes them who they are. When still a child, one has yet to learn the expectations of society and others as to the way in which one should live life. Responses are not yet learnt; they occur for a large part naturally. It is this spontaneity, hope and love of life that Simon wants to retain.

However, for many characters in Chedid’s novels the confrontation is not apparent until the characters have reached adult life. In Le sommeil délivré Samiya is thwarted in her attempts to live authentically by her husband Boutros, and by the expectations of the culture in which she lives, as to the way a wife should be treated and behave. She lives the large part of her life trapped in an ever shrinking world. Boutros is not only presented as unaware of the love and life in his wife, but also as completely opposed to life in all its forms.197 This is perhaps most easily revealed in

194 Chedid, Andrée. La Cité Fertile. Paris: Flammarion, 1972, p45
the way in which he replaces the beautiful living flowers that she has gathered to decorate their home, with plastic ones that will not die, because they have never been alive:

Les fleurs que m'a données ma sœur Rachida, disait le voix de Boutros. Celles-là ne meurent jamais, elles vivent sans eau. Elles sont éternelles!

More tragically, when his child is sick he will not get a doctor for a mere girl until it is too late and as a result the child dies. His desire to surround himself with inauthentic life results in Samiya’s depression and crime:

Je n'étais pas semblable à ses immortelles qui pouvaient vivre sans eau. J'étais vulnérable et la sécheresse ferait de moi une morte.198

Victimisation is revealed as the thwarting of life, for without authenticity the individual appears already dead. It would be tempting to use Le sommeil délivré as a simple book with a feminist split between (good)-woman and (bad)-man. However, Chedid’s novels reveal not only women, but also men, who are trapped in roles, victims of the same pressures to conform. Jonathan is confronted with the possibility of authenticity as he cuts ties with the orphanage that has housed him all his life. He must face the decision to leave the prepared path, that of priesthood in order to enter his chosen desire, that of revolutionary. Akhnaton leaves behind his own people, religion and kingship to develop a new city that follows a religion and ethic that is more in tune with his vision of identity than that of the culture to which he is born. In L’enfant multiple Maxime is the only entirely French person who is part of Omar-Jo’s entourage in France, yet he is not understood or accepted in the culture into which he was born. His family has all but disowned him as his dream for the carousel and the joy it will bring to people’s lives makes him a pauper and a social outcast. It is as an old man who has followed his dream in the face of adversity and has become tired of fighting that he meets Omar-Jo and the dream is revived.

This ability of others to encourage and release the individual from society is more common than the characters such as Boutros. It is their hope in the individual that carries Chedid’s novels out of the most tragic situations to a focus on life, on the present and the future. It is the belief in life and youth of those on the falouk in Le sixième jour that lifts the focus of the novel away from the dead boy in the bottom of the boat to the child on the shore, alive and vibrant.199

199 Chedid, Andrée. Le sixième jour. 10e. ed, Castor-Poche . [Paris]: Flammarion, 1994, p20
Chedid’s novels often involve a struggle toward life and the salvation of the individual. When they do end in death, there is always a shift of focus to those who remain alive. In *Le sixième jour* and *La maison sans racines* it is the child that dies. Chedid’s work does not deny the darkness of life, the violence that exists in human encounters. The reader is led to participate in the tragedy of a young life lost. Chedid’s message in Sophie and Hasan’s death is that, while they must not be allowed to continue, tragedies cannot be ignored or forgotten. And yet there appears to be an acceptance that time continues and that tragedies cannot be dwelt upon, that the focus must always shift to life that continues, and to the possibility of making a decision not to perpetuate the darkness but to move out of it. When seen in conjunction with Chedid’s theory of time, which is circular in nature and within which humanity does not progress but repeats patterns of triumph and loss, individual choices appear somewhat futile. If people move through life repeating throughout history the same struggle towards the light and the same decline from that place into darkness and confusion, what hope is there for liberty and improvement? In this view of time there is no such thing as evolution, only repetition. This fatalistic view of life would appear to give no room for the creation of a better world. Kirsten Holst Peterson has the same query when looking at George Lamming’s work, which also explores

the tension between the two aspects of time (the linear and the circular), as the circular notion of time ‘rather takes the wind out of the revolutionary sails (a cyclical movement is antithetic to progress), and it would seem to contradict Lamming’s interest in history and also his firm commitment to a socialist course.200

Born in Barbados, Lamming was particularly concerned with the impact of colonisation, yet this examination of people uprooted and moved, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, led him to conclude that exile is a condition of all humanity, that everyone is a stranger to the earth and life in which they are born. Lamming’s own commitment to social change and freedom is, like Chedid’s own commitment to progress, somewhat diminished by his belief in the inevitable return to the place in which the change began. Chedid’s concept of time poses a problem when her work is viewed as protest. She says of her own writing:

aujourd’hui tous les malheurs nous atteignent, franchissent nos murs...Que faire?...Creuser un sillon dans la voie que l’on a choisie, maintenir un regard attentif, ouvert, s’exprimer contre les violences. C’est peu. Mais ce peu, il faut le faire.201


201 Chedid, Andrée, Annie Salager, and Jean-Pierre Spilmont. *Rencontrer l’inespéré,* Vénissieux:
And yet her writing reveals this cyclical nature of time, of the repetition of cruelty and violence and a resignation toward death. Chedid’s voice of protest cannot fight the repeated pattern, it can only hope to survive through the dark times. Aléfa, in *La cité fertile*, extracts pieces of news from papers that are littered around her. These she reads, making them into protest poetry. She then throws them into the river, the symbol of life. The old blind man in *Le sommeil délivré* pounds his stick into the ground, attempting to drive the record of the injustices against those in his village into the earth, the womb of life. In *Nefertiti et le Rêve d’Akhnaton* Boubastos and Nefertiti hope to write the story of Akhnaton’s dream for those who may come in the future and thereby protest what has happened and retain hope for a future society that will keep his dream alive. All these acts are looking to a time when the world will be more just, to a time when there will have been progression. However, the cycle promises repeated times of darkness as well as light. How then can the reader reconcile protest with the fatalistic cycle of human experience laid out in Chedid’s novels? What then is uppermost in Chedid’s theory of time and humanity, cynicism or hope? The answer appears to rest with the individual. While outside of the individual there may be suffering, it appears that characters in Chedid’s novels who can, through the darkness, retain their hope and connection with others will rise out of the time of darkness, triumphant regardless of the tragedy that has gone before. In this way the young man in *L’autre* rises out of the earth trap in which he has lain, with a new appreciation for life and others. In this way Athanasia comes out of the desert able to love and give, even after she has lost her entire family.

Chedid has, in fact, formed two concepts of time. While she sees human behaviour as being cyclical, she has a linear view of time that is expressed most clearly in her novels with the imagery of the river. The river appears in her novels as a continuous thread of movement. Chedid’s novels are situated in a place of movement. The destination is usually an unknown quantity, even when it is death, the ultimate destination of mankind; it often comes as a surprise to the reader, as in the case of Cyre. The past is known and to some extent fixed. However, the place of movement is one in which there is a constant challenge to identity. Movement requires that the individual change. What is altered and what remains appear to be pivotal to the question of identity. Water flowing in a river provides an image of this passage through time. This is seen in the three women in *Les marches de sable* who meet in the desert, completely altered from their past forms and yet carrying their past with them:

*Editions Paroles d’Aube, 1993, p 21*
à cette intersection de leurs chemins, chacune charriant déjà tout un passé fait
d’héritage et de souvenirs, elles décideront de faire route ensemble.

The water in a river picks up pieces of debris, loses other pieces, flows through
different landscapes, and yet is essentially the same river. Time in Chedid’s novels
also appears, then, as linear. Characters have a past, a present and a future and move
forward in time. In *La maison sans racines* Chedid uses a change in font to signpost
the shifts in time as the reader follows Kayla’s mind while she crosses the courtyard
in Beirut. While time is presented as in this way, her writing and her view of time
mean that the past is easily accessible, and often curiously so, as if it exists within
the present, or surges forward into the future. Much like a river, the individual
moves forward, yet carries the water and flotsam that has been gathered along the
way. In *L’enfant multiple*, Chedid uses a very graphic image for the way in which
the past exists within us even when we leave a country. Omar-Jo has a life that
existed before his time in Paris. No matter how dark that life was, it has become a
part of his identity. To lose the past or to patch it up would be to be unfaithful, not
only to Omar-Jo’s own identity, but also to the story it has to tell about life itself.
Omar-Jo’s parents are killed in a bombing in Lebanon. The war is not a part of their
lives, in that they belong each one to a different religious persuasion. Omar, the
father is not even from Lebanon, but from Egypt. Their death is tragic, for their
marriage symbolises the hope of love and cohabitation of those from different
backgrounds. Some time after their death, Omar-Jo, their son, goes to Paris to live.
Because he cannot carry his dead parents’ grave with him, Omar-Jo has a personal
mark of commemoration on his body, the arm that he lost in the same bomb that
killed them:

Ce membre qu’il oubliait par moments pour exister et mieux se mouvoir, il fallait en
même temps que sa représentation demeure en lui comme une amputation, comme un
cri permanent. On ne pouvait troquer ce bras, ni trahir son image. Son absence était un
rappel de toutes les absences, de toutes les morts, de toutes les meurtrissures. 302

Time for the individual is linear and as a result the individual may be able to protest
his past and live in happiness in his present. While the external world cycle of
repeated violence may harm Omar-Jo, his ability to reject the violence and to
protest, rather than internalise, the cruelty means that he is able to progress as an
individual.

In *Les marches de sable*, Chedid explores the notion of identity across time, through
the musings of Thémis, her narrator, as he discusses the lives of three very different
and remarkable women. As with many of Chedid’s older women characters, there is

a feeling that time is unkind to a woman’s body. Women find it hard to reconcile the face of their youth with the older face in the mirror. Thémis contemplates Athanasia, a woman whom he loves, and has not seen for some time. Athanasia has spent many years in the desert in the guise of a monk, caring for her husband, and is changed:

Combien le temps nous maltraite! Ebranlant le corps jusque dans ses fondements, malaxant nos traits, contrefaisant nos faces; nous laissant, pourtant, une marque indéfinissable malgré les altérations. Tandis que la chair dérive et se dégrade, quelle est cette lueur, ce point d’attache qui persiste et nous relie à nos visages les plus effacés?203

Yet while time is seen as destructive of the body, rendering us unrecognisable, the novel highlights that time brings the essential elements of a person into sharp relief. Their identity is made apparent, for it is the mark that remains. This is further accentuated in Marie. Marie was a prostitute. Becoming dissatisfied with this life, she gives up everything to become an anchorite, a hermit in the desert. Chedid strips Marie of all that she was; her body is not even recognisable as that of a human. Cyre, the first person to break Marie’s solitude, asks herself if what she sees is:

fantôme, animal, démon?...Devant cette créature qu’elle ne sait pas nommer, l’enfant se sent pénétrée d’une compassion immense204

It is their response to each other that reveals them as human as Marie and Cyre show great love and sympathy.

These two views of time—circular and linear—highlight a recurring tension in Chedid’s writing. Chedid’s depiction of time and of identity move between the semiotic and the symbolic worlds. The view of time as circular is a semiotic view of time, where there is no beginning and end, no fixity, no division, but a flow and connection. The view of time as linear is a symbolic view of time, one in which there is a fixed order and structure, a beginning and end, a progression forward, not a repetition. Chedid’s characters are described in symbolic terms, given names, fixed in time and place; however they are also constantly disrupting that order, their memories moving through linear time, making connections, uniting apparently discrete events and objects, to create living poetry, to defy the structures of the symbolic with the fluidity of the semiotic. Chedid places her characters in situations that challenge their identity. In her novels life, no matter how banal, escapes the confines of normalcy. Each occurrence is part of a greater mystery. Chedid believes


that the greatest mystery in life is not the mystery of what comes after death, but how to live in the present. When asked what it means to be a poet she replies:

Etre poète?... Une manière d’interroger sans cesse l’énigme de nos existences. D’aimer cette énigme.  

It is not surprising, then, that for those attempting to find answers in Chedid’s work, anomaly, paradox and confusion abound.

There are two parts to Chedid’s view of identity. The first view of identity focuses on that of the individual, the need to be free, to treat each person as an individual, having value and worth because they are unique. Jonathan’s struggle with individual choice does not affect world events. He is not even able to join the revolutionary movement that he decides is his path. Yet his choice is the pivot of Chedid’s novel and the choice gives him his identity, allows him to be at peace with who he is and what he believes in before he dies. It is also this love for an individual that is central to Le survivant, in which a young woman hears that the plane her partner was flying in has crashed and that there are reports of a survivor. The novel centres on her search for this man, above any other. Her continual disappointments with cases of mistaken identities and disappointments assure the reader that this individual cannot be replaced. He is not like anyone else, nor will anyone do instead of him.

While Chedid places a great deal of emphasis on individual freedom, on the worth of the individual, it is seemingly polarised with her second view of identity, that of a collective spiritual identity or ‘chant’ that runs beneath each individual’s life and connects them to a common cycle of development. This universal element is vividly alive in Chedid’s characters who are dancers or actors. Omar-Jo is one such character. Omar-Jo refuses to be categorised. He will not belong to any one group, Christian or Moslem. He will not conform to the image of a disabled person. He changes his character and face at will. He is a complex character, seemingly taking on the suffering of the world, and yet young and innocent enough not to have become a cynic, or to have lost his childish logic. He guards jealously his complete identity as both Omar and Jo, repeatedly rebutting efforts to call him one and not the other. His body is maimed, and yet he will not have a false arm as he wears the injury as an outward reminder of the loss of his parents, who are part of his identity. Yet on other occasions he dresses himself up, takes on other faces and movements, becomes anything, everything. His acting ability transforms him from one character.

into another and he appears ageless, timeless and without a fixed identity.

From the individual and unique, then, Chedid’s characters often shift into the symbolic. Her characters are not only unique and individual, they are also signs, and therefore can communicate through the very structures they are disrupting. The language which is universal, which communicates is not the symbolic as Khoury-Ghata suggests, but the semiotic language. In the semiotic language of rhythm, song and repeated sounds we are returning to a shared state, a prelingual state, in which case this modality is universal, it is understood across the gender and culture divide.

For Chedid, then, the only true communication is between authentic individuals, stripped of societal structures and orderings; any other form of communication does not involve the true “meeting of minds”. Yet in order to portray her characters, and in order to relate their beliefs, Chedid has used the symbolic modality of language. She herself follows the conventions and rules of literature and her characters are written in a realist manner, so much so that they often become icons and symbols rather than the free characters of the semiotic world they are supposed to inhabit. It is when this use of the individual as a sign comes into confrontation with Chedid’s firm beliefs in the authentic individual that Chedid’s novels lose their impact. This is most strikingly obvious in *Le sixième jour*, one of Chedid’s most well-known novels.

The novel traces the fight against cholera undertaken by a grandmother, Om Hassan, to save her grandson, Hassan. On the sixth day, they have been told, you will either recover or die. There follows the story of her escape from the town, as she attempts to flee the cholera, almost as one would flee a place. It is her incredible love for this particular son, over any other person’s welfare, that causes her to leave her paralysed husband and disappear with Hassan. Her whole life is given over to saving this son, and it is right that she should die when she does, for Hassan has come to represent her future and life. She exists only for him. As Okkasione bends over the old woman he recognises her death is tied to her grandson’s death:

\[ \text{il caresse les tempes moites, tâpote doucement les joues ridées; mais il sent bien que la femme est morte de la mort de l’enfant.} \]

Hassan is perhaps the most symbolic character of all Chedid’s characters. This may well be because of the cholera that ravages his body until his identity is no more than that of the sickness that has destroyed him. Yet Hassan not only represents this loss of identity to disease, he also represents youth and all that is associated with youth, the hope of a future, of continuity of life. When Hassan dies the reader is

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engulfed in tragedy as the struggle against the disease is lost. Yet upon his death it
is not the death of the individual, of Hassan himself, that is the focus of the novel,
but Hassan as he represents youth, and vitality. The shift from the focus on
individual identity to a semiotic reading of the individual gives the novel its
dramatic end, where tragedy and victory are held in balance. As the boatman
reaches into the hold to touch the dead child:

Tout est dur, froid. Du froid des grottes. Cette forme, cette pierre glacée, était-ce cela
un enfant?207

As he guesses the old woman is dying, he lies to her, telling her the child is alive.
With this he resurrects the child, the hope of a future:

Jamais Abou Nawass n'a senti si intensément ce qu'était un enfant. «Il vit», répète-t-il
pour lui-même.

«Demain est vivant.»208

For those on the boat Hassan is not dead, they refuse to accept that he is no more. It
is in the love for Om Hassan, that they refuse to accept his death. Cholera has not
been able to fully quash what is to come. As the child moves into the semiotic he is
alive again, ‘L’enfant est partout, l’enfant existe.’209 Hassan’s death is very different
from another of Chedid’s characters, Aléfa.

In La cité fertile Mansour follows a woman called Aléfa through the final days of
her life. Aléfa’s journey toward ‘la terre’, her return to the earth, is not a journey
away from life, but a movement toward that source of life from which she came.
Aléfa—a: Aléfa’s name begins and ends with an alpha, drawing a circle in her
identity, a return to the source,
sans cesse je plonge dans l’ombre, pour mieux vivre la lumière. Sans cesse je hante la
nuit, puis me hâte vers les matins.210

J’ajouterai ma poussière à la poussière commune. Mon visage se fondera en des
milliards d’autres visages; ainsi—même si bientôt je ne le sais plus—l’avenir me
réservera tout un avenir.211

Chedid’s writing is an attempt to make ‘la planche entre deux eaux’, the water
which is both life and death, moving and fixed. It is the mystery that humans are

individual and yet part of a whole, stemming from a single source, which Chedid attempts to bring to life in her novels. There is no border in Chedid’s work, between the symbolic and semiotic, they rely on each other, and are part of each other, just as the individual needs to know his/her connections in order to know his/her distinctness.

The concept of a spiritual identity or source that connects all things is most commonly expressed in Chedid’s use of the imagery of water. Linked closely to the river representing time is the use of water as an image of life. Water in all its forms, whether it be an oasis, a well, a river or the sea, is used as an image for life. This source or current of life is often revealed in the imagery of the river, the river that carries all things to the sea. It is in this river or flow that Chedid sees life. At the time of Cyre’s death in *Les marches de sable*, she is taken to the oasis, returned to the source of life. And Anastasia, who chooses to live, who needs to be reborn into human contact finds that life beside the river. The Nile returns as a powerful force in Chedid’s novels set in Egypt. In describing Marie’s participation in life, the narrator of *Les marches de sable* explicitly likens the river to life:

> Semblable à ce fleuve qui traverse l’Egypte, libre et en mouvement, elle visitait les esprits et les corps comme une suite de paysages, infiniment semblables, infiniment variés avant de s’engloutir dans la mer.  

Identity in Chedid’s novels becomes fluid. The individual who becomes static in their development of identity is worse than dead for Chedid. Chedid does not see death as the end of the journey of identity; rather the end of the journey occurs when identity becomes fixed. In *Les marches de sable* Marie chooses the life of the courtesan because in that life she can mix with men, men who are able to move, to have projects, to change the way things happen. She chooses that over the life allowed the ‘good’ woman, comparing their lot to that of the males:

> tandis que les femmes, aux regards raccourcis, empêtrées dans leurs racines, se retranchaient, et s’ancreaient à un rêve stationnaire.

It is this life that Samiya wants to escape in *Le sommeil délivré*, a life in which she is constantly forced to retreat, to conform, to accept tradition. Identity should not be diminished by movement or change, for movement is part of the cycle of life. This imagery of water is used to great effect in the close of *Le sixième jour* when Om-Hassan greets death with the words, ‘La vie, la mer ... soupire-t-elle. Enfin, la

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mer..." Om Hassan’s words connect together two apparent contrasts, life and death. As the river is the source of life, it also becomes a point of departure after death. The Nile that crosses Egypt visits bodies and spirits. Life and death are connected in the underlying universal of the river. Joseph, the grandfather in L’enfant multiple sees death as the connecting thread that underlies all human experience:

Le monde lui parut vaste, prodigieux, hybride et foisonnant! De toutes parts surgissaient amours et violences, fidélités et trahisons, injustices et liberté. Mêmes rêves, mêmes désespoires, mêmes renaissances. Et partout, cette même mort! Une tenace solidarité aurait dû lier, lui semblait-il, sur cette image évidente, essentielle, de la mort, tous les humains.215

As Om Hassan greets the sea she is greeting life, but is also greeting death. It is as if she is dying into a new life, or returning to the source of all life from which new life will flow. The river connects all people to each other, no matter at which place they occur on the river. Those who are in contact with this river, the underlying song of life, possess a spiritual oneness with all around them. Being like this river, moving, variable, able to give life, fighting for life, is what gives people their spiritual authenticity. It is this source that Thémis sees in himself and Macé: ‘à la moelle de nos désirs’, he writes, ‘à la source de nos questions—quelque chose au fond de nous portait le même nom’.216 This source is the source of questions, however, not answers. Chedid’s novels can be read as an attempt to push language into the space which transcends time, place, difference and change.

Chedid uses movement to highlight the way in which identity survives change. Exile is likened to death, and the parallel drawn appears to show that life exists beyond death, that the individual survives in a transformed state, but very much the same person as they were before death. Throughout her work there is the sense that there is so much more to know, so much more unanswered, and that rather than being frightened, Chedid has decided to be delighted by the complexity of life and the variety of human experience around her.

Si l’on est à la recherche d’une finalité, d’une réponse totale au pourquoi de la destinée humaine, je pense que l’on n’arrivera pas. Nos cerveaux sont trop limités pour tout comprendre. Mais en chemin, que d’interrogations, que de réponses partielles et inépuisables: l’art, la beauté, la recherche, l’amitié, l’amour, tout l’imaginaire...que de vie à vivre!217


217 Chedid, Andrée, Annie Salager, and Jean-Pierre Spilmont. Rencontrer l’inespéré. Vénissieux:
What language allows her to do is to tap into that source. It is the ability to speak, to communicate with another, possibly to connect with the universal in the other that Chedid seeks to express in her novels. Chedid's writing is a constant shift from the universal to the particular. It is in this combination that the identity of the individual is centred. It is the mystery of humanity that we exist in an instant and over a period of time; that we are unique and yet united in common experience. Unity is expressed as a situation of tolerance, rather than as a situation of uniformity. As a result there is no one answer to the question of life, only individual journeys toward the final destination, death, that is paradoxically also seen as life.

Editions Paroles d'Aube, 1993, p5

Chapter 3

Vénus Khoury-Ghata

Vénus Khoury-Ghata has published thirteen collections of poetry and twelve novels. In 1980 she received the Prix Apollinaire for Ombres et cris, in 1987 the Prix Mallarmé for Monologue du mort, and in 1993 le grand prix de la Société des Gens de Lettres. Born in 1937 in Beirut, Khoury-Ghata moved to Paris in 1973. However, she has returned to Lebanon periodically since then. Khoury-Ghata’s work is hard to define. Appearing at times to be set in a Surrealist nightmare, at others to be grounded in the most everyday of family life, her novels explore both the strengths and weakness of individuals in situations which challenge the structures upon which society and identity are based.

In the early days of the feminist movement, women academics were faced with courses which taught work written largely by men, and interpreted and valued according to white, middle-class, male systems of value. Unchallenged, the assumptions of this power base became entrenched as truths. If women were to challenge the way in which women’s literature had been devalued, there was a need to challenge the value system and the culture from which it sprang. In its early days this endeavour focused mainly on the canon of work by white, on the whole male, middle-class scholars. Annette Kolodny summarises the arguments surrounding value assignation and the formation of the canon of “major works” which were deemed to properly constitute literature:

We read well, and with pleasure, what we already know how to read; and what we know how to read is to a large extent dependent upon what we have already read (works from which we developed our expectations and learnt our interpretative strategies). What we then choose to read—and by extension, teach and thereby “canonize”—usually follows upon our previous reading.\(^{219}\)

Women have learnt to read the male version of woman, to identify with the hero and view themselves through ‘his eyes’. In her book, entitled The Resisting Reader, Judith Fetterley writes about the experience of women reading American fiction by male writers:

In such fiction the woman is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in

opposition to her, she is required to identify against herself.220

Dismantling the concepts of the objective and the universal truth assumed to be held by all good literature, the difference in women’s experience of the world shifted the focus to the specific and subjective nature of literature. This happened not only within feminist criticism, but was a movement also taking place in Marxist and Postmodern theories. The canon was challenged and its ‘truths’ exposed as assumptions. The reader moved to the forefront of literary theory, ‘taking control of the text’ and ‘subverting the text’. However, the focus of feminism was not merely the dismantling of patriarchal texts. As the focus shifted from the centre of patriarchal structures, texts which had been overlooked, forgotten, or dismissed, were pulled out and re-examined.

Women scholars questioned why books abounded about women, but not by women, and what the implications were for the female reader.

“The ‘competence’ necessary for understanding [a] literary message depends upon a great number of codices,” after all; as Césare Segre has pointed out, to be competent, a reader must either share or at least be familiar with, “in addition to the code language ... the codes of custom, of society, and of conceptions of the world” (what Woolf meant by “values”). Males ignorant of women’s “values” or conceptions of the world will, necessarily, be poor readers of works that in any sense recapitulate their codes.221

Women’s writing was examined for hidden sub-texts and subversions of the patriarchal culture and literature of their time. Feminist scholars shifted their attention from dismantling structures that assigned value and instead sought out the codices of women’s conceptions of the world. New methods of reading and of assigning value were sought, and the notion of a literary hierarchy was itself challenged.

As feminist theorists re-read work written by women, a theory commonly known as the ‘muted group’ theory developed. This theory was first proposed by Edwin Ardener222 who looked at language as a way of structuring ideas based upon an external social hierarchy controlled by the dominant group.223 This theory views the


223 For discussion of women writing within a literary subculture of male dominated society, see also Kolodny, Annette. ‘Dancing through the minefield,’ in Showalter, Elaine, ed. The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory. 1st ed. New York: Pantheon,
dominated group as struggling to write into a language system that has oppressed them, attempting to break into a literary canon from which they have thus far been excluded. Wanting to be read and understood, the dominated group uses the language and norms of the dominant group and in the process much of what is intended is 'lost in translation'. Language and literary conventions did not appear to 'fit' women’s experience. In order to be published and read, the woman writer was required not only to write at times under a male pseudonym, but also according to patriarchal systems and structures. In their introduction to *The Feminist Reader* Belsey and Moore comment on the way in which feminist scholars refused to isolate literature from culture:

‘Art’ was no longer a cover for politics; ‘literature’ ceased to be a special category, a repository of timeless truths concerning an eternal human nature; and ‘great authors’ could get it wrong...Writing was a cultural, rather than a purely individual phenomenon, and the social context of literature was more than an explanatory ‘background’. Fiction, it seemed, both manifested and influenced the ways in which societies understood themselves and the world.

Looking at literature within the framework of culture and history opened the door for new readings of old texts written by both men and women. The linkage of culture to women’s issues opened up new avenues for discussion.

Elaine Showalter first began to look at women as being like a colonised sub-culture when a colleague of hers explored the issue of the Western world’s view of the East:

I saw that if "women" were substituted for "Arabs," we would begin to understand the way in which the male world had viewed women, and equally, I saw the plea that feminist scholars now might make for a fresh start from a new perspective.

If women are seen as a cultural group that is subsumed under, but separate from, the male culture, then it is likely that patriarchy would operate differently in different cultures and the experience of being a female would be different in each culture. Women writers in the East began to question the assumptions of the Western feminists. For those who bear the consequences of slavery and racism white western

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women are as oppressive and “other” as white men are. Postcolonial women writers have looked at the problem of ‘translating’ their own culture and experience into the language and culture of the dominant group, in an attempt to write the reality of their own experiences and ideas. Bangladeshi writer Himani Bannerji highlights the problem in her essay entitled *The Sound Barrier. Translating Ourselves*:

A look at much of the writers in English reveals that the problem goes beyond that of conceptualization and skill to that of sensibilities, to the way one relates to the world, is one’s own self. Literature, in particular, is an area suffering from this tone of translatedness.227

When I speak of my life in India, my mother or others there, I have a distinct feeling of splintering off from my own self, or the actual life that is lived, and producing an account, description, narrative—what have you—which distinctly smacks of anthropology and contributes at times to the paraphernalia of Orientalism. The racist-colonial context always exerts a pressure of utmost reification, objectification of self and others.228

The overwhelming preoccupation with what “they say we are” and “what we are not”, our “otherization” by “them” precludes much exploration or importance of who we actually are.229

The difficulty Khoury-Ghata faces is twofold, for she is not only writing as a woman, but also as a woman of non-French origin writing in French for a French audience. Her need to be understood, her desire to connect with the predominantly French audience, has meant that she has needed to deal with this difficulty of translating into the French culture her heritage from the Near East. She has also been concerned with the problem, that because she is a woman from a foreign culture writing into the male literary canon, her writing is even less likely to be understood than work written by women in the margin of the dominant culture. Rather than cause her to retreat, the need to tackle both these issues has given Vénus Khoury-Ghata fuel for creativity.

Khoury-Ghata has used her novels to illustrate the relationships involved in literature as the author, the text and the reader communicate with each other, exploring the variety of dynamics that can affect this relationship. She uses the characters to play out the roles of reader and writer, of storyteller and audience, illustrating the way in which power structures operate not only within literature, but

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also within language in its many uses. The central notion I should like to examine here is the notion that language is the currency of power in her novels. The power found in language is not confined to a literary exchange between reader, writer and text, but extends its influence across culture, gender and society.

Identity and the word, whether spoken, read or written, have a unique relationship in Khoury-Ghata’s work. Telling a story is not a matter of simple entertainment or pleasurable pastime, for it involves the identity of the participants. Within the feminist movement there has been recognition of the role language plays in the marginalisation of women. This involves not only the need to change the words themselves within a language to make the language ‘gender friendly’, but it involves women telling their own story and thereby authoring their own lives. In taking control over the story of their lives women have taken the power away from the male viewer and have authored their lives according to their own notions of value.

Mikhail Bakhtin explores the interaction between reader, text and author in his discussion of dialogism:

Relations between A and B are in a state of permanent formation and transformation; they continue to alter in the very process of communication. Nor is there a ready-made message X. It takes form in the process of communication between A and B. Nor is it transmitted from the first to the second, but constructed between them, like an ideological bridge; it is constructed in the process of their interaction.230

Khoury-Ghata pushes this relationship between author, reader and text to its limits so that the act of reading constructs a reality which threatens to destroy the physical boundaries of time, space and the body. The story is experienced so profoundly it makes reality ephemeral, or rather, constructs its own reality which is so vivid that the world outside the constructed reality of the book fades. This is shown perhaps most humorously and vividly in the “pregnancy” which the protagonist in Bayarmin experiences as she reads the diary of the pregnant Sultana. Translation or communication is not always a shared process, however. Misreadings and appropriations also take place, and the narrators in her novels constantly deconstruct and reconstruct the facts in the plot to reveal layers of interpretation and meaning. No longer is it important what actually happened, rather the importance lies in who takes control of the story. Khoury-Ghata shifts the power dynamics within her novels, constantly reminding the readers of their own participation in this web of relationships, posing the questions: how is the story told; who tells the story;

who writes the story; who reads/hears the story; from whom is the story withheld; who controls the story. All these questions depict a power struggle, the struggle for the assertion of one identity over the identity of another.

Highlighting the question of interaction between cultures and the translation of cultures which ensues, Khoury-Ghata’s plots involve Western women who arrive in the East and are challenged by the different culture, and central characters who are caught between East and West in the power struggles taking place in their own countries. I shall look at these two scenarios in turn.

*Les fiancées du cap Ténès*, set in 1802, is a fictionalised account of the fate of five women survivors of the sinking of the French ship the *Banel* off the Algerian coast. The *Banel* was on its way to Saint-Domingue to quell a slave rebellion. Washed up on shore the survivors are killed if they are male and treated as booty if female. As conquerors the French have assumed that their occupation of the island Saint-Domingue and of North Africa and the injustices they commit are within the law, the actions of a civilised people. As one of the French women stands before the villagers she trembles:

> Sa mémoire est remplie de récits de voyageurs qui atterrissaient à la table de la comtesse douairière sa belle-mère. Les mots ne suffisaient pas pour décrire ces indigènes qui vivent en marge des lois, attaquant tout étranger, fût-il Espagnol, Maltais ou Français, qui s’aventurait dans leur contrée.  

The *Bani Hoaua* tribe has its own view of the strangers, bound in their own laws and assumptions:

> Tout homme qui vient de la mer est un ennemi, un voleur, qui veut s’emparer de notre bétail et de nos femmes.

Both cultures view the other as a threat, particularly to their women. The white women are a curiosity to the tribespeople, and Khoury-Ghata turns the Eastern gaze on the Western women.

> On les trouve aussi maigres que des poulets de tichrine, plus pâles que les murs de la zaouia. Leurs cheveux jaunes sont de l’étoupe, de la mauvaise laine. Des prostituées, sinon elles n’auraient pas voyagé avec tous ces hommes.

This description of the women recalls the descriptions of French travellers to North Africa who discussed the morality and costumes of the women they saw without any understanding of the different frame of reference of Arab culture. In Khoury-

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Ghata’s novel *Bayarmine* the French widow comes under the same speculation as she enters the home town of her dead husband. The French widow is greeted by the inhabitants who call out to her, ‘Zavelli dul’ (poor widow). When one remarks that she cannot be a widow, dressed as she is in yellow, he is silenced by his neighbour, ‘—Qui te dit que le jaune n’est pas la couleur du deuil pour les Parisiens.’

Patricia Linton’s discussion of the relationship between the Native American text and the Euro American reader makes the point that

> Euro American readers of ethnic or post-colonial texts must be prepared to have the differential power relations inscribed within the text altered but not eliminated. The margin becomes the centre and the centre the margin. Anglo readers will experience what marginalization means: invisibility, criticism, exclusion.

While Linton uses the term ‘invisibility’ I would use the term ‘exposure’. Invisibility suggests an ability to blend in, to be undifferentiated, however the foreign women are objectified and excluded as items for scrutiny. Any sense of invisibility may stem from that desire to be seen as similar, to be recognised as a person, rather than as an object.

Linton is describing Native Americans, who are more often than not English speakers, and are a minority group within their own country. The silences involved and the cultural dynamics in Khoury-Ghata’s novel *Bayarmine* are somewhat different to those Linton is discussing. *Bayarmine* is set in Turkey, where the French language is a marginal language, and there is no ruling French presence. The French protagonist sets out to read the diary of her late husband’s great aunt, Chirmazar, who was the kadin (favourite wife) of the local Sultan. The power balance is revealed in concentric rings. The Sultana is taught to read and write by a French woman. Her diary is then to be read and translated for a French audience by a French woman, and her story is to be told to Chirmazar’s own relatives. While the French widow has access to the diary through her literacy and knowledge of French, the *hanum* also has her own knowledge of the author and the culture in which the diary was written, and as both have an image of who Chirmazar was, they argue over the other’s interpretation. Each one is denied some knowledge, and each one is privy to knowledge which is denied to the other.

A similar situation arises in *Les fiancées du cap Ténès* between the group of French women and the Banni Hoaua tribe. Each group has an interpreter: the *thaleb*.

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student of the Coranic school, speaks French and Mère Jeanne-de-l’Enfant-Jésus, a nun, speaks Arabic. Interestingly enough, it is their different religious education which has taught them the language of the other. It is through their translation of customs and values across cultures that the reader is made aware not only of their own cultural assumptions, but also of the understanding language can bring. Language is not always sufficient to bridge the cultural gap, however.

When part of a society is illiterate, to be able to read and write gives a person status and privilege which often translates into power and superiority. Those in positions of power often seek to maintain the power that literacy has given them. One way in which to do this is to shroud language in mystery, the written word becomes a sacred and mystical realm into which only those privileged by birth or holding power can enter. Islam, Christianity and Judaism have all viewed their holy books as sacred. In Judaism the name of God could not be spoken or written in its fullness. In Christianity the Bible is viewed as a sword, a weapon, and great controversy followed its translation from Latin into the vernacular. In Islam the whole language of Arabic is sacred, to write in it is to undertake a sacred act. Writing is also a physical act, and makes the abstract tangible. In this way thought, dreams and ideas can be spread, held and remembered.

The fear of the almost spiritual power of the word, its power to control and enchant is evident in Bayarmine. The concubines and the mother of the sultan are sure that Chirmazar has used magic to gain the love of the sultan, so enamoured is he of her, and they look throughout her belongings for the “écritures maléfiques”236 that she has used. Not knowing how to read, they are scared of her power to write and read, and it is only through the literate male that she is cleared of the charges when he interprets what she has written. Language does hold a power, and yet the mistrust and fear this power can generate can in turn lead to violence and the loss of life.

The women off the ship Banel become a part of the culture of North Africa, not because of their ability to blend in but because of the freedom they have as foreigners to be different. Laouza who had disguised herself as a boy to get onto the ship was attempting to escape the role and value she had as the daughter of a washerwoman in France. In North Africa she is able to reconstruct herself as femme fatale, a woman spy in the battles for power between Ottoman, French and local rulers.

Laouza n’a aucune raison de rentrer en France. Faire jouir le représentant de la

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Sublime Porte est bien plus important que de repasser le linge des Toulonnais.237

In the same way Hélène, widowed by the shipwreck, chooses to stay in Ténès.

Pas question de quitter. Elle s’est habituée à vivre face au large, avec l’horizon pour tout obstacle. Les maisons cernées par des murailles, prisonnières des villes, ne sont plus pour elle. Elle y étoufferait. Hélène en France deviendrait une veuve parmi d’autres veuves, vouée à un deuil éternel. Ici elle est l’édacatrice, la mouallima, celle qui apporte le savoir et la connaissance. Le thaleb, un passeur entre les langues, la secondera de son mieux.238

All five women choose to stay in North Africa. They begin their time in North Africa as slaves and yet, when free to go, find that they are more free as outsiders, in the margin of North African society, than they ever were in France. This freedom is also experienced by Chahida, a young woman raped by her stepfather. Afraid that the discovery that she is not a virgin would lead to her being lapedicated on her wedding night, Chahida marries outside her culture, a young sailor from Marseilles, and leaves for Brest where she spends the rest of her life.

Nevertheless the freedom which the women discover in the margin does come at a great cost to themselves as well as those around them. It is only when they forge roles for themselves that an understanding and truce develops. It is only when they are given the freedom to leave that they choose to stay.

In Bayarmine the French widow chooses to go to Turkey. However, she goes because she wants to discover something about Chirmazar/Mahria, not because she is attracted to the country or culture. There is almost a naivety in her assumption that she can connect with the woman through the text of her diary without any cultural connection. The widow narrates her arrival in the town of Bayarmine with all the prejudice of the West against the East. She describes the women waiting to welcome her as crows, dark silhouettes, and finally as five single women who want to make her one of them. Her hostility extends further as she describes the town:

J’ai détesté Bayarmine lors de mon premier séjour, détesté ma belle-famille qui parlait, riait et priait dans une langue que j’ignorais.

Jour après jour, ces gens me dépossédaient de mon mari. Il réintégrait progressivement sa race, en dépit d’une vie passée en Occident.239

For the French widow reading the text, there is both a desire to connect with the author and a fear of the encounter. The fascination starts before the woman reads

her journal, or even knows of its existence. The connection is made through a photograph. As the widow’s gaze meets that of the woman from a different culture and background, she feels a connection:

J’entretenais des relations complexes avec le portrait qui m’attirait à toute heure du jour vers le tiroir où l’avait enfermé le caprice d’un homme. 240

Not long after beginning to read the journal, the French widow begins to move from the position of observer to that of a participant, to a position of identification.

Chirmazar s’est réincarnée en moi. Il m’arrive de tâter mon ventre à la recherche de notre enfant qui grossit dans nos entrailles. Ma démarche s’alourdit de jour en jour. Je descends l’escalier en m’appuyant sur la rampe. 241

In reading the diary, the hanum also hopes that the French woman will resuscitate her dead sister. Before being read, the journal is a tomb. Once opened, it will be given new life.

‘Ce que ces deux idiotes prennent pour la caverne d’Ali Baba n’est qu’une tombe. Elle renferme une histoire morte’[…]—Ressuscitez-la, fait le hanum d’un ton exalté 242

However, it soon becomes clear that the French widow cannot resuscitate the dead kadin. The life that the French widow experiences in reading the journal of the kadin is really a life born of herself. Mahria/Chirmazar’s sister mocks her:

—Je t’ai demandé de lire le journal de la kadin, non de te prendre pour elle. Par Allah! Cette fille singe Chirmazar. 243

The woman she experiences is the product of the two of them, she is not Chirmazar, but the translation of the text, not only from one language and culture to another, but also from one woman to another. As she reads the diary and attempts to understand what she is reading she feels as if she wrote the diary herself. 244 Her reading has in fact become another story in itself, and her own story has woven into that of Chirmazar to such an extent she sees them as one and the same:

Je suis Chirmazar, proclame-je d’une voix retentissante. Nous attendons toutes les deux un homme qui ne reviendra pas. La mort a emporté le mien, l’Anatolie a dévoré le sien. Je n’ai pas besoin de lire le dernier passage. Je le connais par cœur. 245

As the diary of the woman threatens her own identity, the widow realises that she must extract herself from the story, that she is beginning to walk the life of the dead, and not her own life. This is what she has to come to realise before she is able to finish the book. As she writes,

je suis grosse d'une morte. Mahria-Chirmazar est en moi, elle occupe les moindres recoins de ma peau, aspire l'air de mes poumons, marche dans mes jambes, pleure dans mes larmes et gesticule dans mes bras. Son journal s'est gonflé de nouvelles pages, invisibles à l'œil nu, dues à mon enquête auprès des habitants de Bayarmine. Il est temps que je me déleste d'elle, me dis-je lorsqu'elle fait les cent pas dans ma tête.

The French widow enters the text expecting a connection, just as those around her expect one. However, her reading is really a translation of the text, not only from one language to the next, but also from one woman’s experience to her own. In the end her experience is not that of being inhabited by another woman, but of being inhabited by her own grief and anger.

Chirmazar/Mahria was a real woman, her diary and her photograph do exist, yet for the French widow they threaten her identity because they challenge her own values and culture. In order to understand what she reads she has had to surrender herself to the story, and in so doing she has had to surrender herself to the culture and time of the woman. Author and literary theorist Hélène Cixous is a proponent of an alternative language for women. She suggests a move into what Kristeva has called the semiotic in order to write women’s experience. Her writing relies heavily on biological essentialism, on an essential difference between men and women, removing women from their connection and interaction with men, and placing them back where men had placed them in the role of housewives and mothers. She leaves them boxed as emotional rather than rational beings. From Kristeva’s theoretical stance, there needs to be a balance between Cixous’ advocacy of total surrender to the semiotic world of connection and fluidity and on the other hand, the concept of the symbolic modality, with the individual who writes to communicate, but who, in order to do so must first acknowledge the presence of a separate “I”. Morag Schiach writes about this balance in her analysis of Hélène Cixous.

Total identification with another threatens the subject with annihilation, while separation leads to unbearable grief.

The widow is aware that, if she does identify fully with Chirmazar/Mahria she will lose her own identity. Her fear of losing her mind to Chirmazar is also a fear of

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losing herself to another culture and time:

La kadin me noie dans sa mort après m'avoir plongée dans sa vie, et fait partager sa grossesse et son exil... Ma première pensée en me réveillant est de fuir. Cette femme est un gouffre. Elle engloutit tous ceux qui ont le malheur de se pencher sur elle. Sa boulimie de vivre reste si aigue un quart de siècle après sa mort.

The widow is aware that as a reader she needs to maintain her own identity, that she cannot become whatever the journal dictates, and yet to put the woman aside is also a kind of death, the death of the woman she has transformed into part of her own identity. Her quest for connection and understanding has meant that she has lived out what she has read, now it is time she disconnected, that she regain her own identity and self.

Gardiennes des lieux de la kadin, spectatrice de la vie posthume, ces cinq femmes oublient d'exister. Le même sort m'attend si je ne fuis pas à temps.

The reader/narrator in Bayarline risks losing her identity as she reads, usurped by the identity of the author. Just as Aïshé speaks with the African slave’s voice and is overtaken by him when used as a medium through which to speak to Chirmazar, the reader is overtaken by the kadin, becomes her medium, and it is in this state that she is meant to write the kadin’s story. The journal becomes Chirmazar, it is in reading the journal that she will be brought back to life. The task given to the ‘bru’ is to rewrite the journals, and so the text is also recreated and can find new readers. Chirmazar can live and change and grow as she is reinterpreted, re-read and experienced by those who will read the book written by ‘la bru’. Chirmazar, the kadin, is, however, also unable to control the outcome of the text fully. She is aware that she cannot tell a full story of who she is, that time will distort what she writes. J.Culler writes that

even if the author does not think of readers, he is himself a reader of his own work and will not be satisfied with it unless he can read it as producing effects.

Chirmazar reflects that she herself can see her journal being read and not telling the full story, only the part in which she was able to write, during her unhappiness. Not only is she limited by language she is also limited by the reader.

When the widow, terrified of dying, decides to leave, Aïshé, the kadin’s old slave, speaks to her dead mistress:

—Elle ne peut plus te servir à grand-chose, maintenant que tu l'as réduite à une loque.
Qu'elle rentre chez elle, dans son pays; elle est indigné de te remplacer dans ta maison,


The widow was unable to resuscitate the dead woman of the text because she did not have the stamina to cope with the woman behind the text. She moves between believing the haunting to be real and the belief that this is only a result of her lack of detachment. Faced with the beliefs and structures of another culture she becomes useless. We read the diary of Mahria Chirmazar through the framework of the French widow’s fear. She is afraid not only of the other but she is also afraid of becoming a part of that otherness. Mahria/Chirazar is not just a woman who had an interesting life and kept a diary, she is the embodiment of Turkish history and the women who participated in her story are held by that past. It is that legacy that the widow is resisting. As readers we are given not only the text but the framework in which it is read. The widow wields power over the text, transforming its contents with her own response and story. For the non-white, non-Western reader, however, there is less identification with the widow. The author herself is not French, her decision to write her novel through the eyes of a French woman highlights the fear and power the harem and its inhabitants still wield today over the mind of the Western audience. In ‘Ethical Reading and Resistant Texts’ Linton discusses the complexities of a cross-cultural text:

The text becomes a ‘richly hybridized dialogue’ addressing cultural insiders and outsiders with different kinds and degrees of privilege. As Owen comments, ‘The result of this exquisite balancing act is a matrix of incredible heteroglossia and linguistic torsions and an intensely political situation.’

Throughout the novel Khoury-Ghata invites the reader to challenge the text. Chirmazar’s text, along with the remarks of the hanum and the slave, give the reader an alternative view of the widow and the text. Ultimately the text is so finely balanced between the widow and the kadin, between truth and doubt, that power is ultimately given to the individual reader, to translate and transform the text according to his/her own framework.

In the previous two examples of reading cross-culturally, the novels involve notions of the outsider and insider at the meeting of people from different countries and language groups. In Le fils empaillé and La maîtresse du notable Khoury-Ghata involves the reader in the lives of a family who live in constant tension between inside and outside, at the crossroads of cultures, where cultural identity is fractured


252 Linton, Patricia. ‘Ethical Reading and Resistant Texts,’ in Madsen, Deborah L. Post-Colonial Literatures: Expanding the Canon. London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 1999, p34
and splintered.

In *La maîtresse du notable*, Khoury-Ghata tells the story of a girl whose mother has run away with her lover. The family lives in an apartment building on the demarcation line in Beirut. As the war rages outside, a very personal struggle is mirrored inside as the Christian mother has run away to join a Moslem man, and the occupants of different faiths participate in the family’s crisis. Murad, the valet of the owner of the apartment building, uses written verses from the Qu’ran, in order to curse the adulterous mother,

\[
\text{Ils ont découpé dans un vieux Coran tous les versets relatifs à la femme adultère et les ont expédiés à ma mère. Ils lui annonçaient qu’elle serait lapidée, pendue, empalée, et surtout interdite de séjour au paradis. Son âme, comme celle des animaux nuisibles, errerait dans les basses sphères de l’espace.}^{253}
\]

As things descend from bad to worse and men from the lover’s house come to find the author of the letters, Murad attempts his ritual again, this time taking no chances,

\[
\text{L’islam et le judaïsme réservant le même châtiment à la femme adulte, il se servit dans la Bible de son maître.}^{254}
\]

In writing he keeps his identity secret, and yet wields power. However, when he goes himself and speaks to the mother he is killed, his tongue cut out and his hands chopped off, a punishment for the words he has written and spoken. The reason given for the violence of this act is not simply what he said, but also that he was Moslem and yet lived and worked with those who were not.

\[
\text{L’avertissement de la servante du notable était claire: «Un musulman voisin de chrétiens, et valet d’un juif, c’est comme un poisson d’eau douce égaré en pleine mer. L’eau salée finira par le détruire.»...Le seigneur du secteur musulman a horreur des êtres qui circulent entre deux régions et deux religions.}^{255}
\]

In taking sides with the abandoned family he is seen as having committed a betrayal against his people, and his religion. While Chirmazar is able to gain power by writing down the crimes of the sultan, Murad is not. While belonging to the same cultural framework as those who murdered him,

\[
\text{Il est aussi musulman que toute cette horde qui se presse devant le portail. Il est leur frère, leur cousin en misère, leur fils en soumission. Il prie dans les mêmes termes qu’eux, le visage tourné vers la même Mecque et la même Kaaba. Nous n’avons pas à}
\]

But there is reason to worry, for Murad has altered the framework of his identity by moving across the frontline to live in the house of a Jew and by confronting those of his own faith with the words of the Koran in defence of a Christian family.

Vénus Khoury-Ghata is important amongst the writers I have chosen to study here, as she has set out to explore the Lebanese voice and identity. Her writing is, as a result, distinctly flavoured by the multi-cultural heritage of the country. This focus on the writing and experience of writing across cultures and languages has meant that Vénus Khoury-Ghata has been particularly concerned with the process of writing and reading, the transfer of text and the nature of story telling.

Vénus Khoury-Ghata is aware of the particular role she plays as a Francophone woman writer. She is one of the few authors in Lebanon to have discussed the role that the French language has played in the Lebanon and her own relationship to a language that is at once her own and yet one which she feels estranged from, a borrowed language. The resulting influences on Vénus Khoury-Ghata’s writing are something she reveals in her depiction of characters’ apprenticeship into writing. In *Le fils empaillé* the various positions are seen in the dynamics of a family: both the unifying effects and the dividing effects are apparent. This division is symbolised by the mother-father relationship in the family, and the effects on the children. As a child-narrator learns to differentiate the separate inheritance she has received from her parents we learn the aspects of this separation:

> un orphelin de quarante et quelques années, notre père.

> Sa tendre mère, la France, l’a abandonné parmi les barbares qui ne parlent pas sa douce langue, ou qui la parlent, et c’est plus dramatique, avec un accent qui lui enlève toute sa douceur.

> Mais on parle aussi le «franbanais» lorsque les mots de la langue maternelle font des bulles de savon à la surface de la langue du pays protecteur et vaguement colonisateur...

> Si les enfants de mon père doivent parler français, sa femme, elle, parle petit-nègre.257

As the French give her language this name they also rob her of the true nature of her language which belongs to the Lebanese culture, that which Vénus Khoury-Ghata prefers to call *franbanais*. As a result, neither she nor the father are speaking their own language. The children grow up in this separation, trained by their father to think that pure French is superior to any adulterated form, that to speak French with


an accent is ‘bad form’. As their mother, whom they love, speaks ‘franbanais’, a mixture of French and Arabic, the children are forced into the position of either despising their mother for her linguistic limitations, or rejecting the father and his disdain for the mother’s language. The parents play out the effects of colonialism once the foreign power has departed. The linguistic result points to a profound psychological division. Both parents are victims of oppression, who live out two results of colonisation.

The father clings to a mother who has deserted him. A bastard child of the colonies, the father rejects anything that could reduce his ties to France, anything that might suggest he belongs elsewhere. A result of the strong power the imperial culture wielded in usurping the culture of the people it ruled, the father believes that only the pure French language is good enough. Anything less is an insult; to incorporate any influence from the cultures surrounding Lebanon, the pre-French culture of Lebanon, is to insult his mother France. Still fiercely loyal, he takes refuge in rules and regulations, the memories he has of mother France, escaping the modern reality through alcoholism and memories of some distant event. The history of the French in Lebanon is incorporated into his own story. He had envisaged a very different life for himself and resents his children and wife for the choice he has made to have a family of his own. The French language is his last grasp on the power he envisaged for himself. He clings to the French language, but cannot understand its poetry. To his son’s great horror he uses the poetry of Victor Hugo as toilet paper in an economising measure.\(^\text{258}\) He is the tomb of the French language, the post-colonial voice that romanticises the past, re-writes its beginnings and ignores its Arab parentage. His form of escape is raki, an alcoholic drink that Lebanon is renowned for. It is only when he is drunk that he can tell his story, and can realise his utopia.

Le verre de raki est pour le père ce que sont les rêves pour sa femme.\(^\text{259}\)

Just as his wife seeks to create a calm and affectionate husband in her dreams, the father seeks to create a special relationship with France, symbolised by Charles de Gaulle, a relationship in which he was honoured by France and not abandoned, not treated as a bastard child.

—Et le général (il s’agit de de Gaulle), lors de son passage en 1943, n’admet que moi à ses côtés comme interprète.\(^\text{260}\)


The mother symbolises, on the other hand, the remains of the Arab heritage, muted and confused. Her story is only told in the symbolism of dreams. In retaining his mother France, the father has robbed his wife of her *langue maternelle*. Still in love with the husband who clings to France, she will not admit that since their marriage he has been reduced to an alcoholic cynic. In order to deal with the reality of his intolerance and anger she re-creates him in her dream world, where she has him speaking to a gathering of

\[
\text{des érudits et des savants, c’était visible à leur barbe et à l’air de profonde sagesse qui se dégageait de leurs traits.}^{261}
\]

She does not recognise him at first, for he has his back to her. He is speaking to great acclaim, proud and distinguished, yet she cannot hear him. When he turns to her and signals that she also be applauded, the mother is made aware, even if only in the symbolism of her dream, that in giving him status and acclaim she is silenced, and, inappropriately dressed for such a gathering, she is stripped of her dignity. Even as he loves and recognises her, she is ashamed of who she is.

In the second dream that she recounts to her children, she is looking for them and as she searches she is mewling like a cat.\(^{262}\) Frédéric remarks that this is progress as their mother’s dreams are usually mute. She has lost her own voice and the closest she gets to speaking is making the noise of a cat, an animal. Her children also call out to her in her dream by meowing, as if each one has lost their voice. Diane, the narrator, is, however, found playing the piano. The song she is playing is a love song, not the national anthem, as Frédéric suggests. Her playing transcends national ties. The mother can not only hear the music, but also recognizes it. Her dreams, usually silent, are now filled with a language she can understand.

The children belong to this mixed heritage. Frédéric is largely the victim of the conflict the father faces. The father is violent. Having lost the power he held under the French he is determined to impose his will on the family. Frédéric is working from a different framework from that of his father. While both view French as a superior language, they do so for different reasons. The father clings to the power of French imperialism, personified in Charles de Gaulle. He is concerned with rules and the regulations. Frédéric is enamoured with the poetry, with the avant-garde, with what he can achieve, not with what he has lost.

The opening scene of *Le fils empâillé* occurs around an altercation between father


and son involving a mathematical question about trains which Frédéric has not completed for his homework. The father has beaten his son and the whole family is caught up in the dilemma of the homework. Each member of the family has their own view of the trains, each one seeing them differently. The conflict becomes an image for the incoherence of the family structure. As an image for the civil war in Lebanon it reveals the futility of any attempt to debate the facts, for the problem is not so much the trains but the lack of comprehension among the members of the family:

Page-gare de tous les trains qui partent en sens contraires et qui finissent, oh miracle! par se rencontrer parce que la terre est ronde et que la bosse des mathématiciens l'exige...

Page sur laquelle s'épuise pour le moment le père qui essaie de corriger le devoir de son fils après avoir corrigé celui-ci. Et le fils, qui ne devine jamais l'heure à laquelle les trains aiment se rencontrer pour la bonne raison qu'il n'en voit pas la nécessité, reste facété au pied de la table...

Yaya, qui cherche à sauver son frère, jure que jamais Frédéric n'a manqué de respect aux trains, ni en crachant sur leur passage, ni en leur faisant uncroc-en-jambe quand ils traversent la bordure de la ville en sifflant à tue-tête. Mumuche, qui ignore tout des rails parallèles sur lesquels roule plusieurs train en même temps, démontre patiemment à son père le danger que courent deux trains allant l'un vers l'autre, leur rencontre ne pouvant que déclencher une catastrophe épouvantable.

La mère, elle, n'explique rien. D'ailleurs elle ignore tout de ce système si compliqué de l'aiguillage des trains. 263

The father is tied to the past, concerned with protecting the language and his own position. The son is looking to a future and concerned with stretching language, taking charge and creating something new and better. However, the son also wants his father's understanding. Father and son are so alike that the mother sees the son as 'un modèle réduit de celui du père', and yet so completely different that there can only be conflict when they are together. The son is heavily influenced by his father, his heroes are all French but one, a Lebanese poet Schéhadé, who writes in French. He wants to go to Paris, viewing it as his spiritual home where all poets become great:

—Poèmes qui finiront certainement par étouffer dans ce pays, se plaint-il. Seul l'air de Paris, capitale de la tendre mère de son père, donc en quelque sorte sa grand-mère, pourra les sauver. «J'irai à pied» dit-il dans ses moments de découragement. Il suffit de longer la côte de la Méditerranée, puis de bifurquer à gauche, à partir de Marseille, et de continuer tout droit pour tomber nez à nez avec la Tour Eiffel. 264

France will however reject him, just as it did his father and he will return broken,

only to wrap himself up further and further in his own dream world in order to escape the violence and reality around him.

Frédéric hides in his mother’s dream world, yet he does not take it seriously enough to view it as art or as having any literary value. While he does include Schéhadé, the Lebanese poet, in his literary canon, Frédéric’s male literary canon is predominantly French, and predominantly male. Unlike Diane who attempts to write her story in ‘le langage quotidien’, who uses franbanais, the language of her home, as well as the stories and techniques of her childhood and her own milieu, Frédéric attempts to mimic and surpass old masters, to be the ‘new’ Victor Hugo, the new star of the French literary world. The result is that, as the narrator starts the novel, Frédéric is,

Un mort jamais enterré, ou un mort enterré en lui-même. Il enfonça un jour dans le puits de son corps et n’en émergea plus jamais. 265

Frédéric cannot move on into anything new; his identity is lost in his search for a self within. He is convinced that the only way he can be a true poet is to go to France, to write and publish there. He is convinced that in France he will be immediately recognised as the great new talent. However, France treats him and his dreams with as much contempt as his father does. He returns still clinging to the fantasy, but without the practical skills to carry them out. He has moved further and further away from reality and those around him, becoming a non-person: ‘il s’aplatirait un peu plus et il faudrait alors le palper pour savoir s’il est toujours de chair et d’os’. 266 The father’s influence has rendered him and his poetry lifeless. We are shown his papers,

souvent vierges de toute écriture. Il considère que le froissement de la feuille tient lieu de l’écriture;

«Du blanc sur le corps du blanc, aime-t-il répéter. Le relief qui devient signes, une encre blanche, aussi blanche que mon sang, décolorée par le regard de mon père; rien que du plasma, l’hémoglobine s’est évaporée.» 267

As he drifts under his mother’s protection she envelops him in her dream world, over which he was once ruler. He lies at home like a corpse until he goes, in Diane’s view, in search of his poetry, to recapture it, but loses his mind as he resorts to drugs. The book ends during the war in Lebanon. Although he is shot at, Frédéric is


indifférent aux balles qui sifflent autour de lui.

Il fut deux fois blessé. Jamais à la tête que le franc-tireur trop adroit doit considérer comme déjà morte.268

The war is a larger enactment of the family discord. As the clash of loyalties is waged around him, Frédéric is forced to escape into his own world, ‘il se rend à son journal’, which is really an image of desolation,

Un journal réduit à quelques pans de murs dressés face au ciel d’un quartier continuellement bombardé, et où nul ne se souvient de ce jeune homme aux yeux miel, aux cheveux miel et dont les mots de miel s’enchaînaient en poèmes étranges...269

Frédéric’s madness is caused by his inability to reconcile reality and the fantasy worlds his parents have created to deal with their own situations. He wants an acknowledgement of past wrongs but cannot get them because his parents have rewritten their own roles in oppressing him, clearing themselves of any blame and so silencing him.

The sons of Lebanon are expected to produce some answer, some solution. The focus is on them, and yet they cannot finish their stories. Expected to be part of the centre of the framework of patriarchy, they are expected to understand and know what is required of them. The girls in Khoury-Ghata’s novels find a certain amount of freedom in the margin. It is in the wings that they view the action around them, and it is from here that they are able to construct their own stories.

Both La maîtresse du notable and Le fils empaillé are narrated by the daughters of families torn apart by conflict. In La maîtresse du notable, the son is also called Frédéric. He also writes poetry and goes to France seeking answers, he too is sent by his father to an asylum. His family live on the demarcation line in Beirut, Lebanon. His mother Flora, occidentale, leaves her family after the birth of her third child to live with her Muslim lover on the other side of the road. The son cannot bear her abandoning him, the mother is incapable of returning to him, caught up as she is in her own failure. When she fails to come to a Christmas dinner which they have prepared for her, Frédéric leaves to get her and is shot by someone in the house. The dispute between the communities has centred on Flora and her lover. The war over the woman as possession has destroyed the next generation of males.

Once again the family drama in La maîtresse du notable becomes an image of the war taking place in Lebanon. Firstly, in a direct way Flora becomes the cause which


justifies the antagonism between the camps. The tragedy is that in crossing the divide between the Muslim and Christian households she has become that divide. The militia camped around the house who don’t even know the family use Flora’s absence to justify their presence.

Porsonne ne les voit partir de sitôt. Ils sont partie du paysage et de l’air qui nous respirons. Ils nous rappellent surtout que Flora est une marchandise à récupérer. 270

The killings which take place around the family are blamed on Flora’s absence, giving new impetus to the violence already present. Nothing is heard directly from Flora once she has left her family. Isolated and cut off from her—even the telephone does not work—the family hear her story from others, never truly understanding their abandonment. The father attempts to justify her absence to himself and others, giving diverse explanations which attract ridicule from others and do nothing to help him deal with the reality of her disappearance. The daughter believes she has stopped loving her mother, and yet she dreams about her constantly, narrating the mother’s life in an attempt to understand her. But the overwhelming feature of Flora is her absence. As an image of the reality of life in war-torn Beirut it is compelling. Elizabeth Kassab highlights the profound impact of demarcation lines and divisions on the lives of those in Beirut during the war:

Caught in the present and alienated from past and future, trapped in a small and limited space and deprived of safe and free passage, Beirutis are forced to live in the narrow confines of here and now. The war has upset and narrowed their social life. The displacement of population due to deportation, flight, or emigration, as well as communication breakdowns, due to the impossibility of free and safe movement and the disruption of telecommunications, have generally made contact among family members, friends, colleagues, business partners, and people living in different quarters of the city, very difficult. Isolation and distance characterize social life in war torn Beirut. 271

Flora is absent and yet she is the cause of the suffering. She is emblematic of the breakdown of Lebanese society. Flora’s search for individual freedom has been accompanied by a profound loss. Liberty has come at the cost of her children. The children in the novel are left without any protection, experiencing only fear and isolation.

The sniper on top of the narrator’s house is also isolated from society. Another figure of the war, he is trapped in the present. The war has become his only reality, isolation has meant the destruction of any normal social interaction. When


discussing the plight of the youth in Beirut, the Lebanese literary theorist, Kassab, describes the way in which war operates in order to remove any notion of an other, or of oneself, so that communication and order disintegrate, leaving only destruction and violence in its wake. The article has particular pertinence to the description of the sniper in Khoury Ghata’s novel, who has lost any sense of himself beyond his identification with his gun. As Kassab writes:

> violence became a form of life, indeed the only effective means to assert oneself. The enemy was anonymized, dehumanized, and de-individualized. This facilitated the use of violence against each other, in a social landscape marked by isolating barriers. Under these conditions, wrote Khalaf, people witnessed, "a progressive erosion of their capacity to empathize with other victims and a general desensitization to indiscriminate killing”. This led to a demoralization of public life, plunging the country into socio-ethical crisis.²⁷²

The sniper wonders what he will do when the war is ended and he cannot continue as a sniper. Having removed himself from social attachments, having no education or purpose beyond the present and shooting according to his own whim without any understanding of what the war is about, he sees everyone as the enemy and subsequently life is without value. He is shot before he finds any answers and when his story is broadcast the narrator discovers his father had abandoned him and he had withdrawn further and further away from interacting with society. The novel is a lament against the madness and futility of divisions and asks questions about the future of a country so worn out by the war that it cannot offer anything other than madness or death to its children. The sister is left to ask the questions:

> Je peux enfin me lever pour demander qui a tué mon frère.
> Il était temps qu’il se calme, me répond Mme Eugénia qui plie la nappe du diner qui n’a pas eu lieu.
> Elle devra plier du même geste la maison et ses habitants.²⁷³

In Le fils empaillé there is a similar sense of despair, and yet there is a strength in Diane that manages to rise above the situation. In taking control of the story and in closing the book, Diane leaves the family and their arguments behind her. There is hope in Diane’s own ability to free herself.

Diane, the young narrator, manages to distance herself from both the linguistic background of her mother and that of her father, enough to treat this revered inheritance with some irony and, taking possession of the two literary worlds, she


forms her own voice that is the daughter of this marriage, mixing franbanais and French in her writing. Language and the structures of nation and government are inescapably linked in Khoury-Ghata’s work.

Vénus Khoury-Ghata is a nationalist in that she is seeking to discover a Lebanon that is not divided and without identity, but a nation that finds its identity in its diversity, and so can build and not destroy. However, even as Diane discovers her own voice, the war continues and the victims remain. Diane can leave the family arguments and finish with them before time tires of her and ‘de sa main trace le mot FIN.’ 274 But for the rest of the family the discussion and discourse about whether Frédéric’s poetry is really poetry or not still goes on, just as the discussion as to the nature of the Lebanese voice still goes on.

Much of the power associated with language exposes the results of patriarchy and colonial imperialism. In a country that is governed by a power that uses a different language from that of the subjected people, any position of responsibility, any position that would give rise to wealth is reserved for those who can speak and read or write the language of the ruling power. The ability to read, speak or write that language gives power, the converse diminishes power and heightens fear and mistrust.

The mother in *Le fils empaillé* is bound to use the same phrase or words, to begin her story:

...je... Un silence suit le «je» qui reste suspendu dans l’attente du verbe qu’il doit servir puisqu’il en est le sujet.

—En fait, je marchais dans une prairie, reprend-elle très vite en soupirant [...] 

Ça lui coûte de commencer son rêve par la deuxième phrase. C’est comme si on donnait le do à une cantatrice à la place du la. 

Cela a été prouvé, maman doit prendre appui sur une prairie pour pouvoir démarrer. 275

For the mother to retain her power over her story she needs to impose order. The beginning of the story belongs to her, but the children take over her account of her dream:

maman ne s’étonne pas. L’espace de ses rêves, elle le considère comme notre propriété commune, notre maison de vacances, notre résidence secondaire. Chacun y apporte sa

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As they do so, they use her fantasy world to escape the reality of their situation. It is their mother’s formula for her own survival.

Each child enters into the dream and takes part, writing themselves into her story. Frédéric has taken over the role his father played in the previous dream, that of hero. Because they know the formula and bear witness to each other’s version of events they can become powerful.

The dream world of the mother, like the poetry of Frédéric, helps the children survive reality, giving them temporary relief, and yet they are unable to use language to alter their reality and transform the situation.

When the father locks Frédéric outside the house for writing love poetry to a nun, Frédéric begins his descent into madness. Looking from the window the narrator, his sister, wants to yell out “coupez” and end the pain but “[l]e langage du théâtre m’est inconnu”. It is only when she is able to write the story when she is older that she is able to write the word “fin” and close the story.

The father’s domination means that the children descend into silence:

To subvert the father’s power the children within the family use a language of their own invention which they call ‘rossignol’:

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276 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, p33
277 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, p17
278 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, p34
279 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, p56
280 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, p26
In this novel the daughter Diane is the narrator and, as she struggles to write the story of her brother’s descent into mental illness, she uses language as a cathartic instrument, reclaiming power over a situation in which she was powerless as a child. In order to take control over the story she begins by putting the elements of the central crisis together in order.

While the chaos of the first sentence conveys the chaos of the situation better than an ordered account could, Diane is aware of the need to order events in order to take control over them. As narrator, Diane manages to convey the mess of the situation and then re-order it so that the events are understood by the reader. Later on in the novel Frédéric asks Diane to repeat the story over and over to him and he re-enacts it. The readers are left to draw their own conclusions as to why he should want to repeat this scenario. However, as Diane tells the parents’ version of events, there is some understanding that the event, which had such an impact on Frédéric and his sisters, would be altered and dismissed in the parents’ re-telling, and their suffering would not be justified. While Frédéric and his sister exaggerate the beating, entitling their narrative “Frédéric ligoté par son père” so as not to diminish it, the parents try to downplay what happened.

As they are only children they are unable to control their parents’ story telling, yet through the re-telling and re-enactments, and in the act of writing the events down as she saw them happen, Diane has been able to close the curtain on their scene and move away from the endless repetition of the tale to explore her own story, and thus her own identity.

Throughout the novel there are questions as to what really happened. Diane

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281 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, p51
282 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, p13
283 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, 135
284 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, p136
acknowledges that while she is attempting to tell the truth, truth is subjective and just as her mother may have attempted to alter the story so may she, for her own ends.

The novel contains the telling of many stories and on each occasion the story is told in order to gain control over a situation. This is best illustrated by the story of the crucifix. In this story the family crucifix begins to weep. In order to witness this miracle, neighbours, friends, the curious and journalists descend on the house. On the arrival of the journalists the children have an opportunity to tell their stories:

Le fait d'avoir été longtemps contraints au silence nous conduit à déverser sur le reporter un déluge de paroles.

Given the power to give their own accounts of what happened, each child takes a different approach:

Et nous nous disputons sous l'œil satisfait du reporter qui enregistre les moindres détails. Nous sortons toutes nos histoires, les vraies comme les fausses.

One particular journalist listens eagerly and publishes the most fantastic of their stories. However, it is not only the children who argue over the significance of the weeping crucifix. Belonging to different religious groups, the journalists have their own stories to tell:

«PAS UN INFIRME NE RETOURNE BÉDOUTILE CHEZ LUI» sous-titre d'un journal catholique d'extrême-droite. Un article venimeux et plein de sous-entendus semble lui répondre dans un autre journal, important porte-parole de la communauté mahométane. [...] Quant à l'unique journal de la communauté protestante, porte-parole d'une minorité qui condamne toute représentation de Dieu et ses saints, il disait laconiquement:

«Le Christ, s'il pleure, c'est à cause du cadre dans lequel nous l'avons enfermé, lui qui a le vaste monde à sa disposition pour pleurer tout son soûl.»

The newspapers all want to report the story and yet the motive behind their reporting is an attempt to control the outcome of that event. The journalists attempt to shape the telling of the incident of the weeping crucifix in order to maintain their religious high ground.

There is no clear indication in Khoury-Ghata’s novels as to why the daughters manage to escape the fate of the sons in their apprenticeship into writing. I would

285 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, p92
286 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, p97
287 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, p96
288 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, p95
like to suggest three possible explanations. The first explanation deals with the notion of freedom in the margin which was raised earlier in the discussion of the women from the Banel. In *Le fils empaillé*, Frédéric is on centre stage, not only within the novel but also within the family and within society at large.

Dès le lever du rideau, nous verrons le père gesticuler. Le fils, son coude replié pour parer le coup qui va lui être asséné, occupera le milieu de la scène.289

Frédéric is watched, examined and disciplined far more than the girls are because he is expected to maintain the status quo of the gender-based power structures in operation. The daughter on the sideline has time to observe, to distance herself from what is going on and to learn how to use her position in the margin. While Frédéric writes beautiful poetry, he is unable to assess his audience, unable to cope with criticism and unable to bear the weight of expectation from both his father and mother. In the wings Diane has time to learn, to watch and reflect. There is much more awareness in her writing of the power dynamics at work in the transfer of text. Diane learns how to tell the story, and to which audience. She learns to tell a story for its effect. Frédéric is more concerned with writing for himself, as a way of escaping reality however, the narrators speak of the sons as writing good poetry. There is no suggestion that the sons have failed to succeed because they could not write. Rather, it is their failure to remain lucid that causes their downfall.

Linked to this notion of reality is the second possible explanation. While *Le fils empaillé* and *La maîtresse du notable* are fiction, there is a sense in which the daughters are attempting to relate a truth, to search out what really happened. There is manipulation of the events, but only in an attempt to find the best way of relating what they saw happen, both in order to bear witness to injustices committed and also in order that they might leave the past behind them. Rather than accepting the fictions of both the father’s and mother’s accounts, or for that matter, of Frédéric’s account, there is a sense in which Diane is attempting to escape evasions, to write down what happened, no longer for an outside audience, but for herself, in order that she can control the action, begin and end it as she wants to. In this activity there are two obstacles, the first is memory itself, the second is “le seul plaisir de voyager avec les mots. C’est traître, les mots, aussi traître que le vin. Il faut savoir leur résister.”290 The narrator in *La maîtresse du notable* is also attempting to record the story of the household in which she lives within the framework of the civil war. In both novels the narrators are relatively powerless over their situations as children.

289 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. *Le fils empaillé*, p10

290 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. *Le fils empaillé*, p10
Diane cannot stop the battle between father and son nor can she prevent her brother being taken to the asylum. In the same way the narrator in *La maîtresse du notable* cannot prevent her mother’s amorous liaisons with the notable, nor the death of her lover, the sniper, nor can she prevent her brother’s drug-taking, madness, institutionalisation and death. Triumph for the narrators is their survival and their refusal to sentimentalise their past.

Khoury-Ghata’s novels leave the reader caught between hope and despair. When the narrators do manage to document what has happened, to take control of the story and write what they witnessed, there is still a hopelessness in the narrative voice, for Diane leaves behind her a broken brother and a family and country still caught up in conflict. The narrator in *La maîtresse du notable* closes the novel with an image of deep despair, made all the more painful when accompanied by an image of serene domesticity:

Les cris ont réveillé Bébé qui dormait sur mes genoux. Je peux enfin me lever pour demander qui a tué mon frère.

Il était temps qu’il se calme, me répond Mme Evguénia qui plie la nappe du dîner qui n’a pas eu lieu.

Elle devra plier du même geste la maison et ses habitants.291

The third possible explanation is found in Khoury-Ghata’s semi-autobiographical novel *Une maison au bord des larmes*. The book tells the story of Khoury-Ghata’s own brother whose story closely resembles that of Frédéric in *Le fils empaillé*. For her there was success as an author and novelist, she too has sought to tell the story of her own childhood, to face her own nightmares and she too was unable to alter the course of events which led to her brother’s lobotomy. The three novels are an attempt to document events which the narrator/author felt needed to be documented in order that they would not be forgotten, that the injustices would be exposed and brought out from behind the veil of shame. The autobiographical explanation does not negate the possible thematic explanations, but operates on a more personal level.

While it would appear that the girls succeed where the boys fail, the issue of gender is not so easily divided. Not all the women in Khoury-Ghata’s novels are able to find a place of resistance in the margin. The mother in all three novels bears some responsibility for the son’s madness: Flora for rejecting Frédéric for her lover, and the mother in *Le fils empaillé* for handing over her son to the father and not protecting him. Both of them submit to the traditional power structures and roles.

ascribed them within society, with no room to be more than subservient to their lovers.

Gender issues are involved, as Chirmazar’s diary reveals. Just as Aïshé is in bondage to her mistress, so Chirmazar is in bondage to the sultan. It is in Chirmazar’s slavery to men that she denies her friendship with Aïshé, sends her on impossible quests and robs her of her voice. In the artificial world of the harem, Chirmazar is selected to be the sultan’s lover, this is her role. Chirmazar cannot write while she is ‘in love’ with a man. As long as she is involved with a man she is fully occupied with him, in giving him pleasure.

Je devins le lieu de recueillement de mon sultan, son objet de vénération. Il me sépara rapidement du reste du harem et m’installa dans un appartement contigu au sien. Il détenait l’unique clé. J’étais sa prisonnière d’amour, son otage heureuse. Je découvrais avec ravissement la volupté d’appartenir à un homme et de lui céder chaque fois qu’il me désirait.  

She is a man-made woman, constructed to give men pleasure and to find her own sole pleasure in them. In *Bayarmine* the sultan re-names the kadin, taking away her old identity and giving her a new one, thereby asserting his power over her. This new name is to mean a new direction in her life, he is taking charge of who she will become, moulding her identity.

The name he gives her has a specific meaning, *Chir* means poetry and *mazar*, place of prayer and meditation. Chirmazar becomes a temple to poetry, almost a sacrificed offering. It is her writing that becomes her identity, and the sultan, who has never been interested in a woman before, preferring males, comes to love her, perhaps because she has taken on this male role.

In the same way that he robs her of the name given her by her mother, he also separates her from the other women in the harem, separating her from their stories, assigning her to a woman slave who has only one story to tell, the story of the older sultan’s oppression of Chirmazar’s family. It is only when Chirmazar begins to be released from the sultan’s power that she is able to avenge that injustice by writing, covering the ancient sultan’s picture with the crimes he committed against her family.

Her weapon is her pen, her ability to write in protest a sign of her ability to capture power for herself. When she ceases to write she is a slave to the sultan. It is only in being released from him that she is freed to write. When trying to please the male, when trying to fulfil his desires and needs, live under his gaze, there is no true

292 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. *Bayarmine*, p34
expression of self. When the focus of the gaze is changed, the woman begins to find her own identity.

While she is the object of veneration she is trapped, rather like the poetry of the sixteenth century, where women were put on a pedestal and were made unreachable. She is not able to write so long as she is in love with the sultan and pleasing him:

Pourquoi n’ai-je pas commencé ce journal le jour de mon arrivée à Dolmabaché?
J’étais si occupée à plaire à mon maître.293

It is only when he is absent that her identity is hers again. However, it is he who has renamed her and educated her, and it is with his ‘patriarchal’ language that she is identified as object of love, her desires met at his whim. While the sultan has the only key to her room and keeps her separate from the other women of the harem, she is unable to hear their stories, to hear a woman’s view. The only other woman she can speak with is Aïshé, who, being a slave, is by necessity not free to be herself.

While those around her who have been denied men and who have been locked away from men find sexual release with eunuchs and other women, Chirmazar is the embodiment of romantic love as dictated by men, willing to lock herself away and be despised rather than to remove herself from the possibility of male attention. The choice the other women make is not seen as better, simply the result of the lack of contact across gender. The men in the novel have ultimate control over Chirmazar’s future and yet it is only in her attempt to contact the woman in the future who will read her journal, that she begins to establish any self-awareness and reflection. It is through the slave woman’s story that she also gains a small triumph over the sultan and the history of violence that has preceded their generation. Using the power that she has gained through her ability to write, Chirmazar defaces the picture of the sultan who murdered her ancestor. In denouncing him she has not only scored his identity as murderer into his picture, but has not allowed the story to continue hidden. The French woman, who has come to the Bosphorus to discover the story of her dead husband, finds in Chirmazar the real answer to her grief. In order to avoid the destruction that slavery to another can cause, particularly when that slavery continues across the divide of death, the individual must re-tell the story of that life and then find within it the identity of the self separate from that story in order to continue and participate fully in life.

293 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Bayarmine, p31
Power issues are perhaps nowhere more explicit, however, than in Khoury-Ghata’s description of servants and slaves. In Bayarminé Chirmazar’s position as kadin afforded her the luxury of a slave, Aïshé. As her slave, Aïshé is bound to serve Chirmazar. This bondage extends to include her voice. Aïshé is restricted not only in her movements, but also in the stories she must tell. When we first hear a story from Aïshé it is at the request of the kadin, and the kadin dictates what the story is to be. In fact she will only listen to that story, and it is partly because it is a story that affects her. Chirmazar writes:

Je l’interrogeais sur l’ancient sultan, l’assassin de mon grand-père, toujours avide de nouveaux détails. Elle me raconta cent fois de suite sa terrible fin. Cent fois j’exigeai qu’elle repriit son récit depuis le début.294

Slavery has become so much a part of her identity that when asked again and again to re-count stories that Chirmazar wants to hear she is bound by the language and words of the stories themselves:

Mon esclave avait recours aux mêmes termes et aux mêmes images pour raconter le même événement.295

Aïshé’s lack of power within society means that she is lacking in power in the use of words.

Pauvre fille, soupire Mufidé. Elle a servi de lieu de passage aux voix des autres, à leur vie, ce qui n’a pas laissé énormément de place pour la sienne.296

Just as she loses her own story to the stories of others she loses her own identity. Even from beyond the grave Chirmazar uses Aïshé as a mouthpiece to instruct the hanum.297 However, Aïshé does finally oppose her mistress, telling her to let the widow go. As she does so she uses the “tu” form: “Aïshé tutoie son ancienne maîtresse et personne ne s’en étonne”.298 Finding a voice of her own has also released her from her position as slave.

In La maîtresse du notable Flora leaves her family, including her newborn infant, to live with her lover. She has been seeking happiness and finds it in his bed. However, left alone, she has nothing to occupy her time with and spends most of it in front of a mirror:

294 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Bayarminé, p35
296 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Bayarminé, 1988, p219
297 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Bayarminé, 1988, p65
298 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Bayarminé, 1988, p270
Elle...parle rarement à ses servants, jamais en face, mais à travers le miroir où elle passe le plus clair de son temps. Elle le quitte pour le lit dès qu'elle entend le pas de son amant.299

While she is looking at herself her identity remains elusive. She views herself in terms of how her lover views her. In the same way her anger at her situation is quickly silenced as she moves to speak to the lover about what he likes best to talk about.

In *Le fils empaillé*, however, the mirror begins a journey into a discovery of self away from the male centre. When Frédéric leaves for France Diane experiences the loss of the male centre of her story. She loses the male writer, with his male literary canon, and it is a painful time. She cannot find any place that speaks to her in poetry or in religion. Diane is aware that the patriarchal world has not written anything for her. It is as a result that she begins to examine herself, to observe herself:

> Ne trouvant refuge ni dans la foi ni dans la poésie je me tourne vers moi-même, cherche mon image dans toute chose qui peut la refléter. Exercice qui attendra un tel degré de perfection que je finirai par noter les vitrines qui bordent les rues que je traverse.300

She begins to see herself as two separate people, the observed and the observer:

> Vivant si souvent face à mon reflet, je deviens deux personnes: la Diane quotidienne, et l'autre, ENAID, mon nom dans le miroir. 301

She cannot remain at this place of narcissism. However, at this point it is vital for her to go through it in order that she can shift the focus away from her brother and make herself the centre of the story. If she is ever going to have an identity that is not bound up to her brother, she must find a sense of her own self from which she can observe him and have a story to tell of her own. While she does attempt to place the identity of Frédéric in her skin, she quickly rids herself of him, for his poetry and ‘angoisses’ are too heavy for her. She can now begin to discover what it is that she has inside her that gives her an identity and does not make her a simple shadow on the stage, as she places both herself and her sisters at the outset, ‘les trois filles ne seront que de modestes figurantes, elles interviendront rarement au cours du spectacle.’ However, as she writes her own story, examines her own version, Diane is taking the role of stage manager, and we as readers are made aware of the identity of Diane as she decides what version of the story she will tell.


300 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. *Le fils empaillé*, p172

301 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. *Le fils empaillé*, p172
At the opening of the book it is she who sets the scene, who decides the style, who places the characters on the set. And it is her sisters that have the final word on the kind of action that is being played out before them. She is no longer the Diane in the story, who listens to the brother’s stories and poetry, who tells him the story of the broken lamp, the spilt ink and the angry father the way the brother wants to hear it, in order to please him. She is now telling her story, the version she holds as her reality.

As she begins the story, she muses over the different forms she could use to write it, the different ways in which she can mingle the elements of the story. She is aware that she is in control of how the story is written, and that her memories of events will be mixed with effects and results that words produce by themselves.

Il y aura «moi» qui guetterai aux murs de ma mémoire, et «moi» qui prendrai un billet pour le seul plaisir de voyager avec les mots.

She begins with the words of the title, words that are the entrance to the story, but also the close of it. She makes clear the driving forces behind the story.

Je trace ces mots en grandes lettres, en haut d’un feuillett, et j’élève pierre après pierre sa vie, la nôtre aussi. Le pas de mon père martèlera ces pages. Les cris de Frédéric les transperceront, les larmes de ma mère les ramolliront.

In the title of the work Diane is setting up a relationship to her brother that is only realised at the end of the story. Frédéric is her brother, and for the majority of the book they are together as brother and sister. In fact Diane is almost his understudy, she exists for him. However, by the end of the novel he is “le fils empaillé”—the son, his relationship now tied to his mother and removed from his sister.

Frédéric has always been in charge of his mother’s dreams and life and she has always made him the focus of her story, even if sometimes putting up mock protestations. Diane also filled this role, telling stories to, and for, Frédéric, in the way in which he wanted to hear them. However, in writing his story, Diane gains control over the narrative and Frédéric loses his power over her. Diane is able to write her own story.

The narrator in La maîtresse du notable also lives in the shadow of her brother. It is as much through him as through Mme Eugénia that she begins to write, but it is he who introduces her to poetry:

302 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, p11
303 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, p10
304 Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. Le fils empaillé, p10
Frédéric m’a présenté Victor Hugo par une nuit de grands orages. Il m’avait réveillée pour me lire Océano nox qu’il connaissait par cœur. Il récitait les fenêtres grandes ouvertes sur la nuit. Sa voix s’envolait vers le large, grossie par le vent qui s’engouffrait dans nos rideaux. Mon frère avait une voix maritime, et moi une oreille cavernue.\textsuperscript{305}

The narrator weeps which raises her brother’s estimation of her:

Il ne désespérait pas de faire de moi un poète. À la seule condition de ne jamais toucher aux grands sujets qui lui appartenaient. Je n’avais qu’à puiser dans les éléments et les saisons. Mon frère me voulait prisonnière du soleil, de la pluie, des feuilles mortes et au besoin d’une hirondelle ou deux.\textsuperscript{306}

The sister is willing to remain in her brother’s shadow. He terrifies her with his dark imagery and yet she is captured by it. When she shows Frédéric’s poem to the sniper, with whom she is in love, he throws it to one side:

Tu restes de glace et déclares préférer ma peau aux pages, mes seins aux phrases et mon ventre à tous les livres exposés dans les librairies. Tes mains de franc-tireur font une boule du poème puis le lancent dans un coin.\textsuperscript{307}

Her only escape from Frédéric is a dangerous love affair with the sniper, which leads to her attempted suicide and his death. Under the fear of the sniper and the terror her brother inspires in her, the narrator is surrounded by the nightmare of the civil war. It is difficult to say where the fears in her own head begin and end within the nightmare of her reality:

Pourquoi tient-il à me faire partager ses hallucinations, si noires quand sa mère lui manque? Le monde, d’après lui, nous a oubliés après nous avoir posés sur le bord d’une route qui ne signifie plus rien. Nous n’existons plus pour personne. Notre quartier est un no man’s land et notre immeuble un radeau qui dérive. Le radeau de la Méduse qu’il me montre dans la partie historique du Larousse me donne la chair de poule. Sur de m’avoir terrorisée, il s’applique à me rassurer. Il m’affirme que nous serons sauvés par la poésie: la sienne, qu’il me fera découvrir lorsque je deviendrai une initiée comme lui,...\textsuperscript{308}

However, the world which he wants her to be initiated into is the world of glue sniffing. The brother himself is terrified and needs her to accompany him in his nightmare world. The narrator is able to escape him as she writes the novel. Her account deals with great issues, while remaining in the small world of the street in which she lives. While the love she had for her brother remains, it is tempered in her account with a lucidity about events, about her brother’s own weaknesses.

\textsuperscript{305} Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. La maîtresse du notable. Paris: Seghers, 1992, p156

\textsuperscript{306} Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. La maîtresse du notable. Paris: Seghers, 1992, p156f


\textsuperscript{308} Khoury-Ghata, Vénus. La maîtresse du notable. Paris: Seghers, 1992, p63
In her article “La guerre du Liban dans la littérature,” Julia Schmidt has a bleak view of Vénus Khoury-Ghata’s vision of Lebanon. Comparing her writing to that of Eddé and Chedid, she writes:


This description of Khoury-Ghata’s work does not do it justice, for while Khoury-Ghata does describe the “horreurs qu’a traversés son pays” there is not only “l’amertume et la haine” expressed vis-à-vis her country. In *La maîtresse du notable*, *Le fils empaillé* and *La maison au bord des larmes* the narrator’s voice is softened by compassion and a humour which is not simply a spectacle grotesque, but is an image of humanity in the midst of chaos.

The narrator’s ability to escape into humour transcends the grim reality of the war. To close one’s eyes to the moments of unity and enjoyment is to become like Frédéric in *Le fils empaillé*, who denies the existence of the village of Tantine where they had been happy, arguing with his sister that it was a childhood invention of theirs in order to escape the reality of their lives:

«Nos souvenirs d’enfants de ville ne peuvent avoir pour espace que l’asphalte et la chaussée pluvieuse», dit-il.310

Frédéric retreats into his own mind because he has lost hope in reality. While Khoury-Ghata’s work relates the experiences of those in desperate situations, the ability to order them into fiction, to give a structure to the chaos and to communicate the experiences of those who inhabit the world of violence is in itself a triumph.


Humour in Khoury-Ghata’s novels is a challenge to the bleakness of the war. It removes the dehumanising effect of war, reminding the reader that the people in the narratives are not simply grotesque representations of a world awry, but people who experience the full range of emotions, who are able to laugh, despite the extreme circumstances of their lives, offering hope in humanity to the reader as well as to the narrator.

The randomness of violence, its range, timing, and target, makes any defense system vain and derisive. The imminence of death makes life more precious and more intensive, but at the same time more futile. Nihilism, the eclipse of meaning, becomes a reality of every day life. Beirut, say Eddé, is the city where children discourse on the senselessness of life. In an environment transformed into a minefield, Beirutis develop an attitude of perseverance and resilience and learn to live day by day with a fake sense of habituation and indifference. Cynicism and black humour form important outlets for their overwhelming anxiety.311

Humour is an important survival mechanism in war narratives, lessening the pain of the reality which threatens to overwhelm those living the reality.

Translating the war, communicating the culture of war for an audience living in relative peace has its own problems. Those who live through a war inhabit another culture. Language no longer fits what needs to be said and the speaker is faced with the difficult task of translating the experiences of war not only into the culture of peace, but also the structure and order of language itself. Khoury-Ghata’s need to express her own story, in order to liberate herself from it, is a common feature of those who lived through the war. Anhoury, author of Un enfer familier, writes, ‘the words fall apart emptied of meaning and consistency’.312

Khoury-Ghata chooses to remove her stories from the political debates, focusing instead on individual experiences. Khoury-Ghata writes a compelling description of the way in which the civil war in Lebanon did not only concern militia men and soldiers, but households, families and individuals. Elizabeth Kassab has highlighted the need for something other than journalistic reports to come out of the conflict in Lebanon:

It becomes a problem of reporting a very special reality to non-Beirutis, one that is often beyond the imagination and lived experiences; beyond verbalization. In Lettre Posthume, Eddé writes, “One can always say that a hundred families were massacred on such a day at such a time; but how can one describe what goes on in the look of a


survivor?” It is in the face of such problems of expression and verbalization that the importance of the Lebanese war literature comes to the fore. In such literature, scholars, writers and poets attempt to find words, sentences, images and concepts for those lived experiences. They express what the rest of the Lebanese and Beirutis cannot. They become the speakers of those left speechless.  

Kassab comments that “the war literature, in the form of diaries, memoirs, or fiction, often constitutes the most poignant anti-war manifestos, bringing to light the impact of war on the lives of people.” For Chirmazar writing across the portrait of the old sultan; Diane describing the destruction of Frédéric; the narrator La maîtresse du notable journaling the disintegration of her home, and Khoury-Ghata herself, writing the story of her honte, these narratives are the voices of those who have no way of communicating their situations. In telling their stories Khoury-Ghata is refusing to let them be forgotten.

Khoury-Ghata’s novels shift between connection and division. Identity is problematised as Khoury-Ghata brings first one identification marker and then another into her novels only to splinter them. Identifications with others based on a shared gender, race, religion, language, home, family or language are dismantled. Khoury-Ghata’s novels are situated at the place where same becomes different. In this place of paradox the literary dynamics shift and change as self becomes other. Reader becomes writer and writer becomes reader; text becomes reader, reader becomes text; author becomes text and text becomes author. This moment can result in violence or chaos as the borders collide or refuse to connect, or there can be a fluidity, where individuals inhabit both the inside and the outside, finding themselves on the other side of the mirror.


Chapter 4

Leila Barakat

Leila Barakat started her career as a writer with three novels in French. Each of these novels is set in a different country: Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq respectively. As with the previous novelists discussed in this study, the process of writing from her position in the margin, into a male and French canon, has been used creatively in her novels. I shall be looking at the way in which exile impacts upon identity and at the ensuing identity crisis. From this point I shall show the connection between the way in which identity is affected in the post-colonial and feminist narratives, and the narrative of the identity in exile. Barakat portrays the post-colonial voice and the female voice as operating from a position of exile, which has often meant a silencing, or muting. Her protagonists come up against a sense of alienation and loss of control and unity which results from, and in, a society in conflict.

Exile is explored from many different angles in Barakat’s work. Globally the world has been through an unsettling time. Perhaps the most fundamental change that has occurred is the rise of technology that has opened up the world and made distance a surmountable factor in the equation of influence and power. Each one of Barakat’s novels deals with the dilemma facing traditional societies as globalisation begins to have an impact on every area of life. Unlike European novelists for whom the problem of modernity was the struggle of man against machine, Barakat centres her novels around a cultural conflict that modernity instigates.

Modernity in the Middle East is not primarily viewed as a movement from within, but rather as an external imposition. One of the largest threats to the East is posed by the swamping of the Eastern world by Western influence. Barakat reminds the readers that the position of Iraq as subordinate is not a permanent position, that the East too has had its great moments in history, and that Western domination is not eternal, that history has its ‘lois de la civilisation’ which follow a circular path ‘de la grandeur au déclin.’ 316 The new imperialists are those with access to technology, and in particular, information dissemination. This imperialism is much more difficult to identify and fight as it impacts not only upon the government and international relationships, but also upon the homes and lives of individuals. Even while suffering under the American sanctions, Iraq watches American television:

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Barakat, with some humour, reveals the alien nature of the Western “norm” from the position of the Eastern margin. In doing so, she also points out that when surfaces change, that is not the only thing that alters:

La salle à manger de style Louis XVI est autant étrangère à la menuiserie yéménite que Marie-Antoinette à la reine de Saba. Quand on emprunte les habitudes d’autrui, on emprunte aussi le matériel d’autrui. Et le mode d’emploi.

Barakat’s writing is grounded in the Middle East and yet the problems she highlights are problems many cultures and peoples are facing. To what extent should modernity be rejected? How can the benefits be sifted from the obvious losses to identity?

While she does deal with the way in which this form of exile operates on a national level and the civil war which can result, Barakat centres the problem at a personal level. She examines the divisions which occur within the individual when external structures on which one’s identity are based are in conflict. In order to explore various aspects of exile and possibly in an attempt to form her own position, Barakat has chosen to write using protagonists and narrators who are émigrés.

The formation of an identity involves a past as well as a present and, when the two come into conflict, a crisis in identity will occur. Barakat, in her novels, illustrates the way in which the past and present in conflict can result in people living in exile within their own countries.

While her characters are exiles, it is their own cultures which are the central dynamic of the text. For each protagonist in her novel, be it Aïcha, Arij or Kyes, the conflict between past and present is the same. All three protagonists have the ambiguous feeling that they are split between identification with the past and an identity that positions them in the modern. In *Sous les vignes du pays druze*, *Le chagrin de l’Arabie heureuse* and *Pourquoi pleure l’Euphrate...?* there is a central thread of the problem of a divided self, or a self in exile.

Exile is manifested in each one in a different set of circumstances. In *Sous les vignes du pays druze* the problem of exile occurs between the city and the village.

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The return to the village is the cause of distress and confusion for the protagonist. In *Le chagrin de l’Arabie heureuse*, exile occurs as Aïcha feels her society has no room for who she is as a woman. In *Pourquoi pleure l’Euphrate...?* the Arab protagonist goes to Iraq from France and struggles with the sense of both belonging and feeling alienated as he assesses his identity as Arab, and yet feels separated from his people because of his time in France.

The results of this division are different in each one of Barakat’s novels. It results in a death, which could be called suicide as it is a death caused by the self, in her first novel; schizophrenia, or multiple personality disorder, in her second; and an existential sense of emptiness and unreality, in her third.

As Said has pointed out, societies appear to need to go through the positions of assimilation and rejection, to reach the position of autonomy. In Barakat’s novels the delineation between the three stages is not so easily drawn. For individuals the movement can become fraught when autonomy is not allowed in a society to which one’s identity is tied. The dilemma is that while humans are individuals, we are not living in isolation and much of our identity is tied up in the groups to which we belong. The individual who has spent time in a foreign environment, or who feels affinities with a foreign environment, as well as the one in which she is placed, experiences exile as a division of identities and loyalties. This struggle is often isolating.

*Sous les vignes du pays druze* examines the issues of modernity as opposed to traditional culture, and centres on the conflict between individual liberty and cultural identity. Although the Lebanese war is barely mentioned in the novel, sectarianism is an issue and as a result the novel refers to issues present in the war in Lebanon. This is primarily done through the relationship between the Druze protagonist Arij and her Shi’ite lover Nabil, and the portrayal of the pressures their relationship comes under. The conflict is not so much represented as a feud against past wrongs, but as an attempt to preserve a cultural identity under the pressures of globalisation. The Druze people have been under threat for so long that their rejection of outside interference has become an integral part of their religion. Isolation and clan protection have become a moral value in the fight for survival. In this way the Lebanese civil war is shown to be the symptom of the conflict present throughout Lebanese society between the traditional and the modern. In a country in which there are so many communities and groups under threat, any openness to

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what is new will place the traditional under pressure.

In *Sous les vignes du pays druze* the protagonist Arij faces the dilemma of an identity that isolates her just as it binds her to the people she loves. The conflict is not presented as arising when two countries come into conflict. In this novel the village collides with the city, and yet the city is very much tied to modern thinking and the external world. Arij’s family have left to live in Venezuela and she is left to live with her aunt in the Chouf region of the Druze people. Her arrival is discussed by the women of the village and they question why she was left behind when her brothers and the rest of the family left. The answer given is:

> Parce que l’étranger est une affaire d’hommes, walaw! Les mœurs y sont relâchées. Et elles acquiescent toutes de la tête. 320

However, Arij herself is aware that her own reasons for staying are different,

> En fait cette décision ne me gênait pas. Si mes parents veulent que la toile ne sorte du cadre druze bronzé, le motif recherche tout-à-fait autre chose: j’aime le Chouf. 321

This conflict continues throughout the novel. As the gap between intentions and interpretations widens, Arij and those around her are divided by incomprehension. The facts of the book are not in question, but the motivations behind them are.

It becomes more and more difficult for Arij to survive these misinterpretations. As her actions are misinterpreted, her heart is torn between her desire to act according to her true feelings and her fear of alienation from those she loves but who have completely different views of events. Arij wants to go to a meeting of the Druze, not because she desires to become initiated as her aunt wishes, but out of the hope that she will learn something in order to better understand her people whom she loves. In the same way, her decision to end the relationship with her Shiite lover Nabil is read as the conquering of ‘les liens de sang’ over those of the heart. Hatem, the cousin who has promised himself her hand in marriage, takes great delight in this step which he sees as progress toward his goal of having Arij submit to him. We see in Arij the same situation that Aïcha faces in *Pourquoi pleure l'Euphrate...?*, for it would appear there is a division between some of her acts and her will. As Hatem mocks Arij he almost falls off a precipice, but she manages to save him. Arij notes to herself that: ‘ce n’est pas moi qui ai agi. Mais quelque chose qui m’habite et porte mon nom’.

She questions her identity and the fragmentation that has occurred as she has been


torn in different directions by the love she bears for Nabile the Shiite, her choice of companion, and by her identification with her people and village in the Chouf. The conflict within her is never resolved. She dies as a result of a fever that overtakes her. This death/suicide could be read as a triumph as Arij refuses to succumb to the life around her that would cause her to lie about her true feelings, and she retains both her chaste love for Nabil and her refusal to quit the Chouf which she loves so much. On the other hand her death could be seen as a tragedy stemming from the modern dilemma of an identity in conflict. In her foreword to *Sous les vignes du pays druze*, Barakat asks two questions:

> la vie est-elle raison?...la vie n'est-elle pas aussi identité? J'ai écrit, surtout pour illustrer le dilemme: Face à la raison des éclairés, les entrailles des racines. Une fièvre!

On pourrait trouver une solution. Fuir ensemble!
Naïf mon Nabil. Bon, mais naïf.
On ne fuit pas ses racines.323

The men in the novel require Arij to reject that which she loves because it is foreign to them. Her brother cannot understand her love for the Chouf, as, despite his ‘éducation druze’ he deserted his country to emigrate, and so has lost that contact that Arij chose to maintain. Nabil fails to understand her when he asks her to escape with him by leaving for Australia:

> On pourrait trouver une solution. Fuir ensemble!
Naïf mon Nabil. Bon, mais naïf.
On ne fuit pas ses racines.323

Roots for those who stay and for those who leave become problematic as the world opens up to change. Arij cannot survive the modern world as she clings to a past she cannot accept or understand because of the modern thinking and life she has grown into.

In *Pourquoi pleure l'Euphrate...?* Leila Barakat documents the return of Hamadé to his native country, Iraq, from France where he has been living. The novel is also set in contemporary time and, as with *Sous les vignes du pays druze*, deals with the issues present for the returned exile. The reasons for Hamadé leaving France are reasons that have been recognised in Miriam Cooke’s work, *War’s Other Voices*.324 A threat to one’s home country often awakens a desire within the individual to return. For a threat to one’s country and culture is also a threat to individual identity, because the loss of one’s country is also the loss of one’s past, particularly


in a situation of war as the past appears to be lost in the changes it causes. Hamadé goes to Iraq in search of answers, attempting to find his identity as Iraqi which he has lost in moving to France. By owning and possessing his past, he hopes that he will be able to know who he is and feel truly alive.

Hamadé leaves France with a suitcase so light that it appears to carry nothing.

Devant l’ahurissement du concierge qui réalisait que je portais une valise vide un rire gouailleur m’a échappé... Je n’emportais rien. Le poids de mon existence suffisait. 325

The novel opens with Hamadé walking through the empty apartment he has rented for his stay in Iraq. He feels frightened asking himself,

Où suis-je? Aucun meuble, aucun coussin oublié, point d’odeur, pas la moindre couleur, rien, ni bruit, ni signe de vie. 326

This outside emptiness reveals the inner emptiness he experiences and as such the apartment becomes a projection of Hamadé’s interior. The empty suitcase also reveals the emptiness within, and the actual suitcase and the image of Hamadé’s interior are linked by Hamadé’s statement,

Moi, je ne suis qu’une énorme valise vide que portent les questions. 327

His return to Iraq has not brought him to a home, but to a place in which he feels a stranger:

je me laisse guider, à la lumière de ma peur, dans les dédales de l’habitation inconnue.
Me hasarder encore, avancer, affronter, reculer, partir, fuir? J’hésite. Sur le sol, une ombre frétillante —la mienne— semble plus que jamais isolée du monde.328

As Hamadé begins to walk through the rooms, however, he discovers that there is a room that is full objects:

La pièce étale un luxe de monuments insolites, éclairés du haut par des filtres de lumière blafarde, juxtaposés à d’anciens bibelots, sobres et sombres [...] la salle ressemble à un musée privé en miniature.329

What is more disturbing to Hamadé is that there appears to be a female phantom present, for when he passes his hands over the collection he notices that there is no dust: ‘Rien, sauf l’évidence, rien sauf la nouvelle preuve d’une présence. Et peut-

être féminine'.

Read as a symbol for his own interior, this passage would indicate that the past is the only presence in his life, and that the present is without meaning or impact. This strikes him as he leaves the apartment expecting to be in the city that belongs to the artifacts in the room, but:

Bagdad n’a rien d’un paradis terrestre, rien d’un rêve de temples et de palmiers. La tour de Babylone, naguère si hauâne, rampe dans la honte, courbe son temple aux briques émaillées et traîne à tes pieds ses terrasses superposées.

The dust which covers the city is very different from the carefully dusted ghost room.

The past appears to inhabit his memory more completely than it does the city. As a result, Hamade is isolated from the present in his own life, and the present in the city. In the same way he cannot see the city as anything but isolated from the present and exterior world, a kind of ghost town:

Où est la ville? Seul le vide s’offre à mon regard, et autour de moi, rien. Rien. La poussière est reine: une poussière millénaire pour dissimuler, isoler encore, isoler toujours, ce reste de terre déjà coupé de la planète, évacué de la mémoire.

As a result Hamade does not see the life present in the city in the now, he sees Bagdad as being just as isolated as he is from the present and the exterior world. He is an image of the city, and the city is an image of the man, and yet they are not one and the same.

The city is not the polished, dusted past that he retains in his mind, but a city full of disillusionment:

Va, étranger, la ville est à toi [...] vois, étranger, ces hommes dormant au pied d’un mur qui a si peu d’ombre à offrir [...] Regarde bien, au-dessus de leur tête: les tiars invisibles de leur glorieux ancêtres ont cessé de briller.

It is in this vision of disillusionment that Hamade discovers that his identity and that of the city are joined:

Quel bonheur de découvrir la Mésopotamie, ce demi-homme noir en moi. Je traverse les heures pour devancer le temps à la rencontre de mon autre moi, la ville, Bagdad, le néant.

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Beneath the dust, which is in fact the reality of the present state of Iraq under embargo, he begins to discern ‘la ville sous sa poussière’.  

It is only when he begins to see a future, to dream of a new era, that he sees the life of the city, not its death.

Des roses ont fleuri sous les chaussées défoncées, des arbres ont crû parmi les décombres. De chaque sang de mort jaillit la sève d’une nouvelle plante tandis que les arcs-en-ciel se promènent allègrement au-dessus des immeubles par deux fois détruits, et par deux fois reconstruits.

As this happens Hamade himself is given new hope, and a new life. This new life is the dream of a future that he has conceived with the city, and it has caused an alteration to his identity.

However, as with the other situations in Barakat’s novels, the answer is not so simple. The three faces are part of the same identity, and yet the identity of the protagonist is not completely one or the other.

While his identity is multiple, containing all the influences throughout his life, at different times one identity is more dominant than the other, and at no time is there any union of the three. He fears his multiple identity. Disassociated from the part of himself which is born of new circumstances, he is a stranger to himself as he exists in the present:

Non, je n’ai pas peur de ce pays, je n’ai pas peur de cette ville fantôme, je n’ai pas peur de cette maison aux mille vies. La seule chose à même de m’inspirer de l’inquiétude, de m’inspirer encore et toujours, c’est l’inconnu qui m’habite jour et nuit.

For Hamade it is not so much the external reality that worries him, the ‘mille vies’ of Iraq and the past, but the vies that occupy his interior world.

As the novel progresses and he becomes part of what is happening around him, he realises how attached he is to the world, it becomes clear that his identity is very much linked to the exterior world. The crisis he faces stems from a much larger crisis which is repeated throughout society:

j’appartiens à une vignette: la famille, fixée dans une autre vignette: l’Irak, lui-même

encadré par une dernière vignette: la Terre. Et je sentirai mon cordon ombilical qui transpercera ces carrés superposés, les transpercera l'un après l'autre pour me lier encore au globe des humains. 339

He can no longer say his only fears are those which are about his internal life. His story is one which links him to the whole of humanity which moves forward, altering the past so that the human condition becomes one of exile. Discovering this link with the outer world, however, has brought him no cohesion in his interior world.

The Euphrates river is very much a symbol of this identity which contains all the stories of the past and the present, all the great and all the insignificant details of life, which continues to flow as the Euphrates from its source to its destination. For Hamadé the problem is that he wants an absolute answer to his identity, to be able to compartmentalise his identity as different stages, separate from each other. He desires a definitive identity that will tell him how to live his life.

Chi’a, moi? Pourquoi pas, au fond. Paysan chiite. Et quand l’on s’ignore, comme un vent qui tourne, un vent déchaîné et qui tourne, on tombe sous le charme de la première identité que vous offre le voile blanc séduisant d’un bateau en paix avec lui-même. Kyes, mon ami, tu seras arabe d’origine, français de nationalité et irakien chiite de conviction... Demain, peut-être, frère de sang d’un Apache, petit-fils de Mao [...] qui sait?340

His idealism and his dream are thwarted throughout the novel as he continues to search for an identity outside of himself, wanting to own and possess the identity of those around him and not having any concept of himself except as an empty shell.

He is dissatisfied by the reality of others’ identity, just as he comes to be disillusioned with Iraq as an answer to his own identity:

Ce qui me semblait d’abord une noble définition de l’homme champêtre, avalée à force d’idéalisme comme des comprimés d’aspirine effervescents parmi tant d’autres stéréotypes, est d’une nature tout à fait différente dans la réalité des médiocres illustrations humaines.341

Hamadé faces the problem, with both Iraq and women, that he has created a place and a woman in his mind that bear no relationship to the reality of either. The woman is a goddess, Iraq an utopia. His dissatisfaction with both stems from the unreality of his ideal. With Jasmine the disillusionment is clearly stated:

Je l’ai crue, je l’aurais souhaitée: divine.
Les déceptions, sous de multiples couleurs ces temps-ci dans ma vie, ont lassé mon


enthousiasme; les portraits de l'autre sexe, surtout, qui accompagnent à vau-l'eau mes désespérances et mes résignations. Il manque une vraie irakienne à ma vie. De l'éclat d'Ishtar, avec son éternelle pureté, de la sagesse de Naqia, esprit pondéré et caractère réfléchi, de la poigne de Sémiramis, avec sa grandeur et sa puissance, et la pompe de ses cortèges et l'apparat de ces cérémonies. Ces gamines n'arrivent pas à combler le rêve. 342

This woman is placed in reference to a glorious past. This woman that he seeks is the woman haunting his apartment, keeping the treasures of the past dusted: 'Une femme ravissante qui monte l'escalier à pas feutrés, fruit d'une union entre un pays—Mésopotamie et un rêve—femme. 343 This woman is Elle who Hamadé seeks to own and possess. She has become a reality for him, at first invisible, and then elusively visible but out of his reach. He attempts to find satisfaction with the women in the building, hoping to find a woman who will incarnate Iraq so that he may carry out a relationship with her. When he is about to make love to Anissa, Elle interrupts: “Mon pauvre Kyes, il n'y a que moi que tu désires...” 344

Elle knows that he is attempting to find a representation of Iraq in the women around him, and yet she knows that it is the interior world that he needs to unite with Iraq:

—Mais désillusionne-toi. Si tu me désires, jamais tu ne me posséderas. Et sais-tu pourquoi? Parce que je ne suis pas une femme. 345

Elle is neither femme nor une: she is not a physical being, she does not inhabit the same world as Kyes and she is also not a singular entity, but has a fluidity which allows her to move across the land as well as through the water. The dream world and the world of reality are in conflict within him, just as his past is in conflict with his present. In Barakat’s writing this dualism is present in her imagery,

Si le Tigre sourit, l'Euphrate pleure. 346
Les deux espaces, celui du rêve et celui de la réalité, se disputent encore mon corps. 347
Il fait encore jour. Il fait nuit de l'âme. 348

Hamadé’s imagined world is constantly being interrupted by outside worlds. It is this interruption that he views as separating him from Elle, his vision/woman. He

believes that in leaving Iraq he is leaving her, that she is more to do with Iraq than she is to do with him, and yet she is his own version or vision of Iraq:

Femme de mes rêves, je ne te verrai donc jamais…
Tu seras une sœur entre mes bras, un papillon crépusculaire qui volera gracieusement entre mes rêves et mes pensées, le dernier grain de fierté d’une identité perturbée, un futur pourchassant le passé: ce présent n’est pas le tien. Tu seras mon bourreau et mon geôlier, le fouet qui s’abattra sur moi tant que je me lèverai arabe et me courberai arabe […]  
Dans la nécropole assyrienne, parmi les vers rongeant les célèbres cadavres de l’histoire, les yeux grand ouverts, nous serons les seuls encore à rêver.  
D’ici là, et à travers les marais bourbeux d’une vie déstructurée, cauchemar, vieillesse sénile après jeunesse frustrée, Dieu allumera les bougies du ciel pour nous guider.  

He sees both Elle and himself as being apart from the harsh realities of life, and yet it was this reality, not the dream world, that he sought out in coming to Iraq,

Mon périple en Iraq est le sursis d’un agonisant. Bagdad, c’est l’accident fatal qui survient après les légers cahots. Le pont à franchir si le moribond veut passer de vie à trépas.  
…je n’étais qu’un spectateur anodin en quête d’un étalage de souffrances par dépaysement—et n’est-ce pas ce que tu es, ignoble Kyes?  

He discovers, however, that life is a mixture of reality and vision, that the dream is necessary to survive the reality, and yet that the reality is as important as the dream. He is about to leave Iraq, carrying with him what he has observed, and yet he believes that the tragedies of Iraq are no longer his, that Iraq never shared his dilemma:

J’ai déposé dans ma valise la frustration d’un peuple. La dégradation des grands, les décennies Nabuchodonosor, les cartes postales des cadavres décimés. Les désappointements bien pliés, les souffrances bien entassées. Mes espérances trompées m’accompagneront pour le voyage.  
Ce pays ne me retient plus. Son malheur n’est plus mien, mon malheur n’a jamais été sien. L’Irak a quitté son habit irakien.  

Once again Hamadé is seeking to find an exterior reality that will answer his interior dilemma. He leaves Iraq hoping to escape what he has learnt there, to once again recreate the past as attractive in order to face the future, and as a result anchoring himself in illusion.

D’un adieu à l’autre, après les Al Hawath, c’est de l’Irak entier que je cherche à me dérober, un pays que je n’ai jamais cessé de chercher pour ne jamais cesser de fuir. Un dépotoire où j’aurais voulu me débarrasser des questions d’injustice qui me courent

entre mes yeux, sur mon front, sous mes aisselles, le long de mon dos, sur le bout de mon nez. Afin de n'emporter dans mon exil sans fin que les images poétiques, ...

Pour l'étafaine affaiblie à son pollen, l'Irak n'est plus qu'une promesse d'avenir: un monde à fleurir. A l'ombre des taillis, les corolles papilionacées semblent clamer que pour longtemps encore, la verdure demeurera la loi immuable de l'univers...

Loin de la guerre, bien à l'abri: une multitude de fleurons éclosent dans le calice de l'espoir, tel un nid d'oiseaux nouveau-nés qui s'ouvrent à la vie.  

It is this illusion which will enable him to have hope for the future, and yet it is this illusion that will refuse him satisfaction in the present and future reality.

However, this exile and sense of frustration and disilluisionment is not simply with the realities Hamadé discovers in Iraq. When Hamadé goes to visit the children's hospital in Bagdad he is struck once again by the isolation of the country under embargo from the rest of the world. Even though he personally has the benefits of living in France with access to medical care, he is helpless to save the lives of the young children dying in Iraq. He is asked by the doctors and parents to go back to France and tell the world what is happening. Hamadé doubts that he will do anything. When he crosses the border between East and West his identity alters. He came to Iraq with nothing from France, and he went to France with nothing from Iraq. His identity is split by the division. While he is able to pass between the two countries he is isolated from both, unable to participate because he is constantly negotiating his own identity over the border which divides East and West. Hamadé is unable to remove himself from the suffering of those around him, due to the part of himself which is attached to his people, but he is also aware that in the crossing of boundaries he is trespassing on both sides of the border.

In order to move freely in the West he has had to assume a new identity, to hide and adopt the dominant viewpoint. Perceived by others as being on the side of the powerful, those who hold sway over their lives, he is made painfully aware that he does not belong in the West, that he has given up his Iraqi identity at the checkpoint, as it were, in order to guarantee his passage across the borderline. In coming back to Iraq he has reassumed his identity as Iraqi, and yet this identity no longer fits the man. In a sense he is guilty, guilty of being a dream of hope, without substance, to those asking for his help.

Nous avons pensé qu'avec vos relations en France...

Pauvre Kyes, si inutile. Inefficace. Nul [...] Ce Zoulou a perdu tout contact avec l'extérieur: déconnecté de toutes les réalités du hors Irak [...] Cela revient à mendier un


espoir.\textsuperscript{355}

However, he will not be their disillusionment and so offers them the hope they ask for, with no belief or intention of fulfilment.

Hamadé believes he is living in a world over which he has no control, that he is being told stories of which he is a part. He calls the city ‘la ville des mille et une nuits’ and the reader is reminded of the literary history of Iraq once again as the split between Jasmine and Rabih is described in terms of a story told by Schéhérazade.

Pour bercer le roi, la conteuse persécutrice a sur les mains le sang d’une légion de couples, condamnés tous par sa parole, incarcérés par ses mots, exécutés par ses lettres.
Le verdict est tombé: la conteuse est criminelle.\textsuperscript{356}

In the same way he asks if Allah is not ‘en train de chanter dans le ciel?’ and describes the way in which music fabricates feelings and emotions, acting like a drug which transports you into unreality, until, at its cessation you are confronted with ‘la plus âcre des réalités’.\textsuperscript{357} Allah and Schéhérazade are blamed for the disillusionment he feels when his own dream world of unreality is confronted with reality, and yet he cannot stop himself from playing the music, from dreaming, just as he cannot bear to shatter the illusions of those around him.

*Pourquoi pleure l’Euphrate...?* as a novel is full of lives in exile. Manale is also a victim of her attachment to another time and world. She continues to believe that she is in a war which separates her from the reality of the cease-fire:

L’infortunée hallucine. Elle croit voir un nuage sanguinolent déchiqueter le ciel. Des missiles faire long feu. De longues traînées ardentes roussir la brume. Il la hante: le fantôme de la guerre.\textsuperscript{358}

Manale runs out into the street, her mother chasing her:

Comme si la pauvre pouvait encore entendre! Comme si elle n’appartenait pas à un autre univers inaccessible—lointain, impalpable, intangible, où l’unique langage est celui du geste.\textsuperscript{359}

Manale is locked in the horror of the war. Unable to communicate what she has


witnessed, unable to find the words to express herself, she finds a language without words. The war is Manale’s lover, just as Elle is Kyes’. The war gave her an identity and it took with it all those who were a part of the future she saw for herself. Manale is, like Hamadé, moving across boundaries, only this time the real and the dream world are life and death. In order not to lose them again, Manale refuses to participate in peace:

Sous le ciel de Bagdad tournoie cette enfant aliénee, et avec elle tournoie éperdument le rêve des peuples meurtris [...] Un gémissement de plaisir lui échappe: la jouissance. Ne savez-vous pas qu’on peut faire l’amour avec les souvenirs de guerre?360

As with Hamadé there is an inability to let go of the past and dwell in the present. The reality of the past is just as unpalatable as the present. However, in the mind of the exile the reality of any good thing lost is magnified into an overwhelming obsession. Hamadé could not love or accept any of the women around him, as he wanted them to be a fulfilment of his utopian ideal. Manale could accept no present suffering, nor anything that could replace past happiness and so sent her sister to her death to be partnered with her old lover, killed in the war. Her own jouissance in the memories of the war lies in the possibility of her own death, in the possibility that she will not be left behind.

The problem of exile does not appear to be a necessary outcome for those who leave and return to their cultures. Hamadé’s empty suitcase appears in stark contrast to that of his travelling companion,

un Babylonien émigré en Europe—commençait à déploier ses cadeaux avec effusion.
Il en avait acheté trois cent soixante-deux exactement, sans compter les trois valises de médicaments et les paquets ficelés de pâtisseries...361

This companion has returned to Iraq with gifts and a secure knowledge of who he is and what he is doing. Hamadé on the other hand has come empty-handed. It will only be when he enters a situation without fleeing, or pursuing that he will experience an identity free of the crisis of exile. Hamadé will never be free of his past:

Né arabe, une dizaine d’années à Paris n’ont pas fait de moi cet individualiste sourd aux cris d’alentour, et me voilà redevenu arabe: d’un bond je me retrouve au balcon.362

His Arab origins are a part of his identity, just as his visit to Iraq has altered his identity. His problem is that he seeks absolutes, and desires to separate himself into

identities for each situation.

Hamadé believes that when he leaves Iraq he will leave Elle and Iraq behind him, that the past will be neatly folded away with no impact on a present or future life. On his arrival at the airport, Sévrine takes his suitcase from him, and he feels that he is starting life again, naked, as if new born:

Quand elle m’arrache ma valise, qu’aucun souvenir d’Iraq, par ailleurs, n’a encombrée, je me retrouve dénudé, dépossédé de mon dernier bien sur terre […] Redevenu un homme sans rêves, de la chair mourante comme les autres, j’ai dû la suivre…Le retour ressemble souvent à un échec.363

However, the past will not leave him as he imagines, with the changing of country. The novel ends with the continued presence of Elle: ‘le doute n’est plus possible. C’est Elle. Elle.’364 She is his collective identity that will accompany him throughout his life, whether he be in France or Iraq. It is interesting that this ending places Elle in the role of his taxi driver from the airport, perhaps an image of the hope that he will be conveyed into the future by his past, perhaps an image of the continued haunting and dissatisfaction that will mark the entirety of his life.

Barakat’s novel Pourquoi pleure l’Euphrate…? was published about a year after Le chagrin de l’Arabie heureuse. While Le chagrin de l’Arabie heureuse ends with the hope of triumph and unification, there remains the same sense of unease about the unresolved identity of the protagonist, as if coherence is a fragile state. The modern dilemma appears to be about the ordering and control of the multiple within a single body. The struggle for unity within individual identity is linked to the national question of identity in Le chagrin de l’Arabie heureuse. The war in this story is a civil war, the enemy is not a tangible external aggressor, as with the American aggressor in Pourquoi pleure l’Euphrate…? While the Occident/Orient struggle and the modern/traditional struggle is very much a part of the text, it is the structures within the Orient that are put under scrutiny, their role in the identity crisis which is examined.

One of the problems pointed out in post-colonial discourse is that the West appears to view the traditional Eastern cultures as fixed entities. In their study Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East, Göçek and Balaghi point out that,

Studies on the Third World often contain Orientalist elements that treat social processes in cultures and societies other than itself as static or, at best, as derivative.365

365 Göçek, Fatma Müge, and Shiva Balaghi. Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East:
This results in the assumption that anything that changes the traditional culture is necessarily destructive of that culture, an assumption that is not only patronising, but also exclusive in its tone. When the traditional culture is one’s own, however, the tension between exposure and protection is more fraught. Barakat, it would appear, is as aware of the tensions inherent in choosing to write about the Middle East in the European language French, as the other women in this study.

Aware of the Orientalist pitfalls, whereby the Orient is measured against the Occident in an exercise of ‘explain, compare and contrast’, Barakat has added another dimension to her writing that has not been visible in the previous authors studied. Her novels examine the tensions and power struggles that exist within the Orient and critiques her own culture through protagonists who are Arabs. This act is particularly problematic for the women involved. The protagonists who are women appear to have a more difficult time in the conflict between the traditional and modern than the men, and the pressures on them are externally imposed, requiring imagination to circumvent them. *Oum Ahmed* is a wonderful example in *Pourquoi pleure l’Euphrate...?*, arguing imaginatively, using imposed commands to justify actions stemming from different motivations.

Il n’y a pas longtemps qu’elle a adopté le voile. “Pour éviter d’aller chez le coiffeur”, m’a-t-elle expliqué, le ton persuasif mais la logique bien singulière. A tout âge, les Irakiennes sont tenues de soigner leur mise. Saddam se fait un devoir de le leur rappeler: l’élégance sous l’embargo est un défi à l’Occident. Pour la première fois sans doute de l’histoire, les femmes auront reçu l’ordre de se bichonner d’un souverain, et les hommes, mains baissées, devraient y voir un devoir national. Et dans ce contexte, le rendez-vous chez le coiffeur devient aussi incontournable que le passage chez le boulanger. On accepte tout de même l’exception si, aux boucles frisées par la main d’un professionnel, la femme substitue le voile de la pudeur. Pour Allah, on ne se pomponne pas.366

As women have the role of childbearers they are seen by many as the upholders and keepers of moral and cultural fabric, for it is the women who will educate and ‘bring up’ the generation to come. If the men must adopt new ways in order to be commercially successful, then the onus is on women to maintain the cultural, religious and traditional aspects of a people:

For women human rights are caught in the additional bind of a political culture that links government legitimization to islam and women’s role to cultural authenticity, so that women’s rights are hostage to shifting political currents and struggles over who is allowed to define national culture.367

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In a society under threat, women are forced into a position of sacrifice for the nation. Feminism is often relegated to the back seat, and, as traditional culture is placed under greater threat, it is often the case that women are more stringently controlled and restricted. As a result, the more a culture is influenced by the West, the more stringently religious and cultural rules referring to women’s conduct are applied in the East.

Evelyne Accad discusses this dilemma in her book *Sexuality and War*, quoting Mai Ghoussoub’s trenchant analysis of feminism in the Arab world:

Colonialism was lived by the Arabs not simply as a domination or oppression, but as an *usurpation* of power. The principal victims of this complex were to be Arab women. For the cult of a grandiose past, and the ‘superiority of our values to those of the West’, inevitably led to a suffocating rigidity of family structures and civil codes. Everywhere under the supposedly modernizing regimes of ‘national revolution’, the laws governing the domestic and private sphere—marriage, divorce, children—continue to be based on the Shari’a. The justification of this relentlessly retrograde nexus is always the same.

In each one of Leila Barakat’s novels the victimisation of women through the removal of autonomy is challenged. The exile of being a woman in a traditional society, fighting for a place within her own culture, is explored in the character of Aïcha in *Le chagrin de l’Arabie heureuse*.

Torn between the different cultural ideals of women in her country, Aïcha is unable to be a whole multiplicitous self, she is psychologically unable to obtain a foundational identity. Her dilemma is diagnosed (in English) by the foreign therapist: ‘Problem of multiple personality, declare le thérapeute, it is obvious’.

In the one woman, each role provided for the Arab woman is manifested:

elle est Fattouma avec sa serpillière, Aïcha face à ses ambitions, Zeinab dans le lit des hommes, Layal au cœur de la sensibilité et Amina au fond du désespoir. Elle n’est pas UNE mais CINQ femmes. A cet instant, elle part servir et asservir et elle ne voit vraiment pas comment elle pourrait être une autre que Fattouma.

The structures of society have placed Arab women against each other. The thinking woman Aïcha cannot also be the menial slave, Fattouma. Life has been compartmentalised. In the same way Sanaa, the heart of Yemen, is described as being the harem of the sultan of the Arab world, and it is divided in much the same

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The narrator’s voice reminds the reader that this is a condition which was present in the past, that the division of the country is not the result of colonialisation. Aïcha’s personality is not split into the roles assigned in Occidental patriarchal systems, those of virgin, wife/mother and whore, but the divisions are grounded very much in the structures which exist in the Arab world. For Aïcha the problem of her multiple personality is not a problem stemming from a post-colonial era. As problems specific to the people and nation of Yemen, they must be addressed not in reference to the outside world, but in reference to the good of the nation.

The problems Aïcha and Yemen face are shared, the narrator’s voice holds up the woman as an image of the country of Yemen:

A l’image de Yémen, fille du Yemen. Autant de bouleversements pour la femme que pour le pays.371

Both a united Aïcha and a united Yemen will come up against the same threats of division, for Yemen as a land is in exile from those deciding its destiny, at the mercy of politicians who have aligned themselves with foreign nations, and Aïcha is a woman in exile as the structures of her society have no place for her identity.

Throughout the book there is a tension in this relationship between Aïcha and Yemen. For while Aïcha is an image of Yemen, victim of the same structures, she also feels destroyed by the conflicts within the country:

—Le Yémen a épuisé toutes les possibilités de femme en moi...372

The problems that Aïcha has in trying to keep her own identity alive at times cripples her ability to fight for Yemen:

Le regard de hajj Ali recouvre Amina d’une enveloppe soyeuse et la transforme en un jeu de bluettes que s’envoient les prunelles. Oublions tourisme—Yémen—misère humaine, comprenons la souffrance d’une femme: au fond de ce tourbillon de cercles noirs enfermés dans un ovale blanc.373

As a fellow victim she finds that her own survival is as problematic as that of Yemen. If she is to be able to act for her country, she has to be able to find a way of


way.

Un harem qui divise la ville à son gré, bloquant capricieusement une ruelle par ici, exploitant curieusement une ruelle par-là.370
overcoming the divisions of her personality. As the five women within her have been pitted against each other under the humiliation of their revelation to the male gaze, it would appear that Aïcha has been destroyed, 'consumée par la lutte des filles.' In terms of resources, her own predicament is like that of Yemen:

Les deux Yemen dépensent des millions de dollars pour s'armer l'un contre l'autre. Avec l'unification, le budget irait ailleurs. The unification of Yemen is the only thing that might unite the different aspects of Aïcha, so that she is no longer victim of the outside gaze, but exploiter of the outside gaze. It is her grandmother who returns her dream to her:

Dans cette pelote de laine emmêlée qu’est la souffrance de cinq femmes, la hajja vient de retrouver un fil d’espoir. —Lève-toi ma fille. Va à la rencontre de ton mythe. Le Yémen est trop pur pour être le rêve d’un homme.

Under this one goal her identities can be united in a concerted effort, whereby the necessary aspects of her identity can be used in order to combat and break the power of the external gaze. In order to escape the confusion which she feels through being partitioned into different women, Aïcha needs to move from the position of observed to observer.

Aïcha turns the gaze to the male centre and examines it according to the cultural demands that are placed upon her as a woman and finds it lacking. The diplomatic quarter, where the leaders of the patriarchal hierarchy gather, is a target for her attack.

Le quartier diplomatique ajoute à la laideur de son désordre intérieur la laideur du monde extérieur. C’est tout bonnement le fief des diplomates, où, entre le qat des autochtones et la pipe des étrangers, se joue le sort du pays. La terre parle moins, dans cet antre, comme étrangère à elle-même. Etrangère et égarée.

The country is in exile from this patriarchal power structure, and is as incongruous in the conversation of the diplomats as the traditional meal on the Louis XVI table. This is a part of the modern usurpation of identity that Barakat condemns in her novels:


However, A’icha must find a way of uniting the traditional world of the interior with the modern exterior world. She has taken on the role of Head of Tourism in an attempt to exploit an avenue that is underdeveloped. Tourism requires the Orient to open up once more to the Occidental gaze, but as with A’icha’s own story, this time Yemen has the opportunity to write the script on how it is to be viewed. Rather than accepting the modern as superior and constructing buildings which have no relationship to the land and history of Yemen, A’icha’s proposal is that restoration and a Yemen-based architecture should flourish. In this way the past will not be destroyed by the present. The trend for the modern she condemns as being functional, but detached from the people, country and land to which it belongs:

le ministère de la culture et de l’information évoque un bloc compact d’armoires grisâtres, une facilité de construction moderne qui a fléchi devant le côté pratique de l’époque. À Sanaa, voix du passé, notre siècle a déclaré la guerre: se faisant un défi personnel de séduire cette ville moyenâgeuse comme il fait tomber, une à une, les villes de la planète.378

However, she is willing to concede that with the passage of time there must be a movement forward:

Pour ce qui rapporte aux musées, nous sommes en droit d’esperer la réhabilitation de ceux que nous possédons et l’édification de nouveaux bâtiments... En tout état de cause, l’impact sociologique du tourisme doit être contrôlé. Nous ne cherchons pas à agresser notre société. Pour le prouver, rien de tel que de faire profiter les communautés locales des bénéfices du tourisme.379

Concessions that are made to tourists will be recuperated in the long term, for tourism will be based upon the promotion of the cultural and religious aspects of the country.380 In the same way A’icha realises that there will always be divisions within, that being a woman is multiplicitous. However she is in control of the way in which she presents herself to the outside world:

—Je ne serais jamais une, se dit-elle. Mais l’essentiel c’est de pouvoir m’imposer le visage voulu. L’essentiel c’est la volonté humaine. Sans fers sans limites.381

The question of gaze in *Le chagrin de l’Arabie heureuse* is used creatively. Barakat makes constant reference to the image of the mirror. In this image the act of writing into a foreign language and the experience of writing into a language other than one’s own is explored. Writing once again becomes the struggle for power, but in

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this novel the attempt is not to translate accurately the reality of the other, but to alter the positions of power and to redefine them.

Post-colonial literary theories have often argued that there is a difficulty in expressing the identity of a country in the language of another culture and people. Authors, where they are using the language of the coloniser to write about another country, colour their novels with the slang and rhythms of the colonised people in an attempt to approach a ‘realism’ in their novels that mirrors the identity of their people, their status as different, or other. This is perhaps most visible in the creole novels of the Caribbean. Increasingly books contain phrases and words in the original language of the people, rather than lengthy descriptions of items and concepts outside of the coloniser’s language.

As with travel books, many novels written into the French canon by those from a country outside of France contain lengthy descriptions of surroundings and customs that are extraneous to the text but vital to the reinforcement of a separate identity. Authors and commentators have debated this realism, often accusing the authors of pandering to western stereotypes, attempting to attract readership with the voyeuristic “Orientalism” that Said repudiates in his work of that name. In Le chagrin de l'Arabie heureuse, Barakat plays with the notions of realism and the difficulties of writing an Oriental situation into an Occidental language. Writing is an important image within the text itself, for Aïcha must write a plan for tourism, must decide how and under what circumstances Yemen is going to be revealed to the outside gaze.

Barakat takes the language of the Orientalists discussed by Said, and in turn writes about the East, describing a culture to which she is linked yet using a language that has a literary tradition that uses France and Europe as a frame of reference. The object of the gaze remains the same, the medium of presentation is the same, and yet the subject has altered, highlighting the limitations of language in conveying what is alien. The novel describes the traditional food and meals in great detail. The dishes are described in terms of content and preparation method and show a good working knowledge of the traditional Yemeni meal. Just as the meal is served up on the dishes, and in the French style, so too the meal described in French is an incongruous mixture. As the meal progresses Aïcha retreats into the written wor(l)d and the objects around her lose their substance,

Sujet après sujet, mot après mot, syllabe après syllabe... Aïcha n'écoute plus. Aïcha ne voit plus. Il n'y a plus que des lettres qui l'entourent, sa solitude et des lettres qui

Characters become words, losing their substance and move into the world of fiction. Aïcha is attempting to translate the reality of Yemen, but the words take over, replacing substance. Lost in the words themselves she is transported out of the reality which has become too difficult for her to negotiate, to enter a world of language which is 'son paradis', but also a trap which could prevent her from completing her task.

Aïcha is described as being part of a story that has been written. Her letter is not "A", however, but like her body she is bent by the story in which she is participating,

\[ \text{la douleur arque son dos apr\`es une journ\'ee de m\'enage dessinant, l'ironie du sort, la lettre "C" de la condition humaine.} \]

In *Le chagrin de l'Arabie heureuse* the image of the mirror becomes an image for the act of writing identity. The naked body and the page held up to view are heavily linked. The novel opens with the scene of a woman writing as a candle flickers and goes out. The reader discovers that the woman is naked. However, in the darkness the 'violence de sa nudit\'e' is hidden. This image contains both elements of discovery and veiling for the reader: the woman is writing, but as she writes the candle goes out and both her words and her nudity are hidden in darkness. The image of the naked woman is followed directly by that of 'les papiers d\'eflores'.

The taboos have begun to break. From Mansour to Khoury-Ghata to Barakat the inverted image of the woman taking up the male phallus of the pen to write is repeated. The novel opens, then, with the naked woman, holding the male phallus, the pen, and with it deflowering the virgin page. The text is sexually loaded, and the taboos broken deal not only with the taboos of Arab society, but also the taboos of the literary world.

Barakat links the breaking of this taboo with the breaking of 'un fatras de tabous' as Aïcha struggles with the desire to go to the mirror and see 'ce qu\'est une fille de Y\'emen nue au fond d\'une chambre au fond d\'une fiert\'e'. For an Arab woman to view a naked woman, to view her own body, is to break a taboo.

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Aïcha oserait peut-être, peut-être, affronter le miroir...
Elle se lèverait peut-être, peut-être, pour aller vers la surface polie, la toucher, la sentir.
Et la défier. Dans son imaginaire arabe, un farouche de tabous s'amoncelera. Refus, résistance, et refus et résistance.\textsuperscript{387}

To view one’s own body is to also seek one’s identity. Aïcha’s body and the text have already been heavily linked. Writing about the Orient, writing in particular about the identity of an Arab woman is to examine identity and become the author of the text; in the same way to examine one’s own body is a powerful act. The mirror and the act are in themselves perhaps insignificant; it is the dialogue they allow between the selves before and through the looking-glass that is of power.

Fattouma titube jusqu’à l’armoire, toise le miroir terni par l’haleine de l’aube. Pensive. Dédainneuse; n’est-ce pas dérisoire, un objet si impersonnel qui s’interpose pour un dialogue avec son propre corps?\textsuperscript{388}

Barakat has linked the body with the word, and the breaking of taboos surrounding writing and the female body begins the novel’s progression toward a woman finding an identity beyond the male gaze. The text is much like the mirror, and as the novel progresses it becomes clear that Aïcha is struggling with the way in which she is portrayed back to herself through the male gaze. In her speech which fails, Amina (one of the five women who make up Aïcha) tries to return to Aïcha; however

l’image qui scintille dans les iris du public reflète Amina. Le miroir la poursuit.\textsuperscript{389}

The veil becomes a necessary part of life for Fattouma (‘ce n’est que déguisement’\textsuperscript{390}) that protects her from the male gaze that would reflect back its own view of the woman who works as a servant in the homes of others. The woman writing, the woman before the page, the woman before the mirror: both the mirror and the page reveal back to the object that she is also the subject of the gaze. No longer is the ‘fille de Yémen’ the object of the male gaze, Aïcha has begun the journey toward placing herself as the object and subject of the gaze, and through the mirror she has also become the audience.

In order for the protagonist to escape the struggle that has been going on among the five women of her identity, the mirror that reflects her back in that way needs to be broken. It is this act of defiance that will release her into a state of self-definition

that is exempt from the pressure exerted by the outside gaze:

Amina n’a plus ni larmes ni volonté. Consumée par la lutte des filles... Ce qu’elle a pu faire, ce qu’elle a fait sans hésitation, c’est casser tous les miroirs de la maison. 391

Barakat’s imagery questions not only the identity of the image ‘through the looking-glass’, and the way it emerges at the other end of the process of writing, but also the identity of the image before the looking-glass, how the act of gazing upon oneself affects one’s identity. The implication of both acts is more than impersonal and scientific curiosity. The power that a woman gains when she alone authors her own vision of self will bring into question the patriarchal stereotypes and categories which have attempted to mould her.

Barakat has not set men and women up in total opposition, however. The gaze which is unwelcome is the gaze which separates the multiple aspects of her identity and sets them up in opposition against each other. When she becomes the author of the text and is able to unite her selves, then she is able to hear, and able to accept the words of Tahar,

ce n’est pas le mythe qui m’intéresse. C’est la femme.
—Laquelle? J’en ai une à chaque bout de doigt.
—Toutes... je suis capable de les aimer toutes. 392

It is only when she is able to look at herself and accept all the aspects of herself that she can withstand the male gaze, without becoming subject to it.

Barakat’s novel suggests ways in which the woman’s own altered perception of her identity could shape the political and social world around her. In this way the unification of North and South Yemen that Aïcha is writing is greatly affected as Aïcha begins to view the problems of Yemen as stemming from the same system that has caused her own fragmentation of identity. As Aïcha questions the version of identity in which the male is the subject of the gaze she is able to escape the circular arguments and hierarchical structures which cause division and fragmentation. In conjunction with this, Aïcha has discovered, through authoring the tourism plan, that when she is given the role of presenting Yemen to the outside gaze, she can affect how Yemen is viewed. Yemen’s release and her own release are triumphs over the restrictions of hierarchies which remove individual freedom. When it is the West which authors the Eastern situation, the centre of reference will be the Western world; the mirror/text is the West, the image the East. This is transformed when the centre, or author of the text, is both the subject and object of


the text. The audience is still male, just as the readership of Barakat’s text will be French, and the tourists to Yemen will be foreigners, however the power has shifted to the other side of the mirror.

The power structures dividing Yemen are not only those of patriarchy and post-colonialism. Throughout all three of Barakat’s novels the effects of globalisation of the economic market are documented. The new imperialism whereby people are priced and valued monetarily is just as crippling to a united identity, and to the traditional world, as the past colonial eras. In Pourquoi pleure l’Euphrate...? the devaluation of the people in Iraq is seen in the light of the American trade embargo;

Le malheur s’appelle dollar. Jadis le tiers de son ennemi, le dinar, il a pris depuis sa revanche en se changeant à cinq cents dinars: comme qui dirait qu’il faut aligner cinq cents petits Irakiens pour fair l’équivalent d’un boy américain.393

Under the pressures of the isolation the country faces economically, the only solution is to sell:

Pour la population affamée, vendre plus, vendre tout, semble, de quelque façon, la solution miracle. Grand leurre, à n’en pas douter: comme une fuite en avant, inutile et perpétuelle....A l’approche de la cinquième année d’embargo, il n’est plus rien que les familles puissent encore vendre.394

To this extent the only thing left to be sold is the self. Jasmine feels obliged to marry her cousin who will be able to provide for her family. Rabih, her lover of choice, likens this to prostitution, where Jasmine’s body is to be sold. He says to Jasmine, on the news of her engagement to her grocer cousin, ‘Prostituées légales, la vie est à vous! Il me semble que je n’ai rien perdu’. 395

Feminism or any attempt to exercise freedom of choice comes under threat:

On t’a promise? Je t’ai aimée rebelle, Jasmine. Depuis quand celle qui règne sur mon cœur est-elle tombée dans l’esclavage des traditions austères, domestiquée et enchaînée par les conventions sociales? La réponse est tranchante: —Depuis que nous sommes quatre dans la maison à avoir faim, Rabih.396

The situation of poverty has reduced Iraq from its former identity to an identity that would make it unrecognisable to the past:

Les descendants des Sumeriens dégringolent la dernière marche de leur trône. Bientôt ils rouleront par terre, dans la poussière de l’agonie, poussière de la ville et du silence—dans la honte et l’oubli. Le berceau des civilisations est ramené loin en

arrière, loin vers cette époque où seule la nourriture se conjugait aux soucis du quotidien et que l'on surnommait l'ére de la barbarie. La barbarie des temps modernes. \[397\]

The global economy has brought nothing but misery to the inhabitants of this country. The people themselves are so reduced by their basic needs that the whys and wherefores of the situation are lost to them. The notion of identity itself is without meaning:

L'Irak du passé, il l'a pleuré, l'Irak des autres—celui des générations à venir—ne l'intéresse plus. Par contre, le dîner de ce soir, si. Rien que de très habituel. Un ventre mal nourri digère mal les grands idéaux. \[398\]

It is their economic needs that isolate them from the outside world and from the past, just as it is the protagonist's comparative wealth that isolates him from his identity as Arab. This is a situation in which the protagonists are victims of an imposed monetary rule. Jasmine does, however, tell her mother she cannot marry her cousin, and exercises her right to choose, but in doing so she is sacrificing her own life and that of those around her.

Les palmiers d'Irak ont une histoire de grands hommes à raconter. [...] Et du berceau au tombeau. Les palmiers d'Irak ont une histoire de cadavres à raconter. \[399\]

In *Le chagrin de l'Arabie heureuse* it is the rule of money which has set Arab up against Arab that Barakat deplores. This is not a devaluation of the individual, born of need, but one born of greed, a desire to own and possess.

Aïcha ne sait pas faire l'amour avec les billets de banque. Les êtres qui affirment leur identité à travers l'argent ne comprennent pas que certains puissent le dédaigner; quoi, ce roi argent ! ce monstre argent ! ce dieu argent ! \[400\]

With it comes the attendant devaluation of women, who are seen in the same terms of commercial property, linking back to the previously referred to image of Sanaa the market place as harem of the Arab world. As Aïcha is confronted by the Saudian investor she is repulsed:

Elle connaît sa laideur, elle a déjà senti sa laideur, cette laideur d'Arabe qui achète l'Arabe. \[401\]

\[401\] Barakat, Leila. *Le chagrin de l'Arabie heureuse.* Paris: Editions l'Harmattan, 1994, p55 See also page 135 in regard to the offer of money to bed Aïcha
When the Saudian insults not only her country, but her personally, by offering her money for sex, A'icha's repudiation of him shifts the balance of power. The Saudian believes she will comply as he has threatened to reveal that she is not only A'icha, but also Fattouma, the household servant. In refusing him she has rejected the financial power structures, willingly opening herself up to discovery and possible humiliation. The veil has been lifted, and in doing so A'icha (Fattouma) has broken the taboo that sees not only women as shameful, but also poverty as shameful. By becoming the centre of the text and examining the monetary powers from an external position, A'icha exercises her autonomy and in so doing is released from the value structures of economic power. Her ability to be author of the gaze alters the power dynamics around her.

Barakat portrays the way in which the present identity of her protagonists is being muted, not only through patriarchy and orientalism, but also through the economic structures in place in the world. There is a new imperialism present in her writing, a new kind of colonialism, and one that is viewed as stemming very much from America and the Western world. The thinking that accompanies it, while not automatically racial, has caused an East/West division. Yet Barakat also shows how this imperialism is present even between countries in the Orient. The new imperialism could be called capitalism.

The power to write one's own story, and to write the story of a situation, is in the hands of those with access to money and technology. People are no longer valued for anything other than their revenue-earning ability. As a result the double standard comes into play in *Le chagrin de l'Arabie heureuse*, whereby the assembled diplomats are shocked by A'icha's suggestion that they allow foreigners access to women or at least to make women visible to them: and yet these same ministers are willing to use her to seduce money from the Saudian foreign investors. The public face of Yemen, Barakat suggests, is very different from the private face. When money is at stake women take on commercial value.

Barakat argues that the perpetuation of structures which cause division are underpinned by the issue of money. Money, in Barakat's novels, serves only to perpetuate division between those who have power and those who are without it:

> Les deux Yémen dépensent des millions de dollars pour s'armer l'un contre l'autre. Avec l'unification, le budget irait ailleurs. 402

Those with power in Yemen have caused its downfall by refusing a composite

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identity.

Barakat has portrayed exile as a position of isolation, stemming from the inability of the individual to dictate his/her own story. When there is no sense of free-will, no sense that one can choose the way in which the past will impact upon the present, the individual has the sensation, as with Hamadé, that he is a part of a cruel tale, or a nightmare. The position of personal exile in Barakat’s novels is portrayed as similar to the position of the post-colonial identity, and the position of women under patriarchy.

Society is structured in such a way that divisive lines are drawn: between gender groups, between languages, between countries, between races, between the rich and the poor, between the saint and the sinner, in binary opposition. Kyes’ identity is past present and future, myth and reality, France and Iraq, Orient and Occident. In order to move across borders he has drawn the divisions in his own identity. Aïcha has also faced the difficulty of uniting a composite identity across the divisions between women in her society. The nation itself is divided by the oppositional structures that divide the nation between North and South Yemen, city and country, master and servant, male and female. In Women Writers in Francophone Africa, Nicki Hitchcott reveals a similar focus:

> What emerges in this book is the way in which the African woman’s identity is expressed at different levels in these texts. In the early writings duality emerges in a lexical analysis, as well as at the fictional levels of imagery and character presentation, and ultimately at the level of the discourse itself in the shape of a central axis of modernity/tradition which is translated into smaller semiotic categories similar to those presented by Clément and Cixous.

Activité/Passivité,
Soleil/Lune
Culture/Nature
Jour/Nuit [...] 
Homme/Femme.

The suggestion is that women’s identity is contained within, and restricted by this binary axis, and is therefore unable to express itself with any degree of autonomy.403

Barakat not only reveals how this lack of autonomy comes about, but she also undermines the divisions. In writing the male story, Barakat is breaking yet another taboo, moving through the looking-glass, to observe the world as a male, while observing the male’s interior. Inside and outside are no longer clear categories, the private and the public space meet and overlap, and the structure of binary oppositions is shown as destructive and inadequate to the role of mapping human experience. Canadian writer, Suzanne Lotbinière-Harwood, describes her own

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Choice requires an either/or decision. For those who are multiple, for those who live on both sides of the borders, whose past present and future are a flow between place and space, choice requires a death, a division of self, a censoring of identity.

In the chapter on Vénus Khoury-Ghata the muted group theory was discussed, in which there is a sense that those in the dominant group write the identity of the dominated, and that language is in fact stifling any true selfhood or identity of those in the dominated group, even when they attempt to write their own story. Barakat adds the economic dimension, revealing how women can be disadvantaged not only under patriarchy, but also under colonial rule and the economic dependency. As with Evelyne Accad, author of *Sexuality and War*{\textsuperscript{405}}, Barakat sees the problems women face as being central to the question of national identity. Indeed it would appear that there are similarities in the domination experienced by both women and oriental nations. In any situation when one is muted, the individual is exiled from the norm, categorised as too different to be considered normal. In order to break this domination, a new centre of reference needs to be set up, a new position of autonomy, not operating against, but separate from, the dominating groups.

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{\textsuperscript{404}} Scott, Gail. *L’écriture comme lecture.* Outremont [Québec]: Editions nbj, 1985, p80

Conclusion

In discussing the work of these four novelists, I am aware that I may have done them a great injustice. Grouping together the work of four novelists because of their gender, ethnicity and choice of language draws legitimate criticism. Kamala Markandaya follows through the argument:

A world aspect is so cumbersome, so unmanageable, that we have necessarily to break it down into packages....But when writers take their places in the appropriate package the suspicion arises that they are judged by the standards of that particular package—which may be higher or lower than what prevails elsewhere, that is not the point, but it gives the impression of a special standard.406

Markandaya further argues that, as a result, those within those “packages” are perceived as speaking for, and as, the members of that particular nation or grouping. She stresses the point that “in everything I say, I speak for myself.”407 Nonetheless, Markandaya is ready to accept that there are universal themes which develop in writing by the “Commonwealth writer overseas”: themes of exile and displacement, and what she calls the problem of “double vision”, of seeing two sides to everything.

It is the variety of ways in which these major themes are expressed which gives individual writers their credibility as authors. It is their universal ground which connects them to their audience through their writing. Katherine T. Bartlett in her essay on political correctness questions a criticism that has been leveled at those challenging the centre.

In any social organisation, the views of the dominant tend to be taken for granted as objective and neutral. Challenges to these views—like those we are now hearing in the universities—appear to seek special favours for the “less qualified,” or some compromising of academic standards.408

She argues that, when requests are made to include Toni Morrison or Mary Wollenscroft in the curriculum of a University course, they are viewed as


“political” requests, or special pleadings, whereas any request to incorporate T.S. Eliot or Nathaniel Hawthorne ‘draw[s] no notice and require[s] no defence.’ In response to those critics who may question the validity of a study of Post-colonial writing that incorporates only women, I can only point out the overwhelming amount of literature available on male authors from the same region in comparison to the body of work on women. Moreover, in many instances there is no recognition of the fact that women have been excluded from, or under-represented in, a collection, as in the case of Roger Allen who includes only four women novelists in his collection of Arab writers. This disparity is compounded further by the author’s attempt to ‘achieve a balance, both in terms of genres discussed and of geographical areas within the Arab world’ but not to ensure a balance of gender representation. Hilary Kilpatric includes a section on women in her book, *The Modern Egyptian Novel*. However, the section deals largely with male representations of women and only briefly comments on those novels written by women. As the subject of this thesis is political in that it looks at the disruption of the centre power structure by those in the periphery, the choice to look only at women’s work is central to the discussion of the thesis.

However, I must also add that there is in no way a move on my behalf to treat the women in this collection with ‘far more gentleness and kindness than [I] would treat their male counterparts’ as the Egyptian novelist and critic Taha Husayn stated he would. Despite this, I have attempted to unearth what lies within the novels in this study, rather than to evaluate and weigh up the “worthiness” of their inclusion within the body of what is accepted as “literature”. My own assessment of the validity of the issues raised within the novels, and the skill or lack thereof of the writers has, doubtless, emerged. The focus of this study has been to read the political narratives of identity within the fictional narratives studied. In *yearning*, bell hooks repeatedly asserts that ‘language is also a place of struggle’ and further that, ‘our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance.’ In articulating ‘what [they] see’ the women writers in this study occupy space, resist, enlarge their position. Writing from the margin, from the periphery of the


412 hooks, bell. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990,
dominant group, is not only to write as a victim, then. To write from the margin, to position oneself in the margin and not be silenced is to occupy 'a space of resistance'.

hooks criticises those who colonise the voice in the margin, silencing through authoring the text:

"Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the coloniser, the speaking subject, and you are now at the centre of my talk." Stop!

According to this argument I am entering the space of coloniser of the stories of Mansour, Chedid, Khoury-Ghata and Barakat in this study.

While I have endeavoured to keep away from this position, it remains true that translating the text into one's own centre is an inescapable part of reading. Made apparent by the authors themselves, particularly in Vénus Khoury-Ghata's work, is the mediation which takes place between the author and reader. Rather than colonising the texts, my intention has been to establish a dialogue with the texts. Patrocinio Schweickart's discussion of feminist readings compares 'the metaphors of mastery and submission, of violation and control, so prominent in Poulet's essay', with Riche's paradigm of reading which is a 'dialectic of communication'.

The power I hold as a reader is to connect, resist, ignore and interpret, and yet my very response is reliant on the voices within the texts themselves. The authors have their own power to speak, to hide, to challenge and to reveal. In staying as close as possible to what is contained within the text, I have attempted to ensure that there is a constant dialogue in place, and not an imposition of a position which is refused. In reading the struggle, in highlighting and re-working the struggle contained within the text, there is an attempt on my part, not simply to dominate over the voice of the text, but to enter that margin myself, not as liberator, or oppressor, but in dialogue with the texts. My identity has come into contact with the identities within the text, the identity of the authors and external identities within my own background in literature and society. I cannot enter into dialogue without my subjectivity. To return to Schweikart's discussion:

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The first moment of the dialectic of reading is marked by the recognition of the necessary duality of subjects; the second, by the realisation that this duality is threatened by the author’s absence. In the third moment, the duality of subjects is referred to the duality of contexts.\\footnote{416 Schweickart, Patrocinio P. “Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading.” In \textit{Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts}, edited by Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart, 31-62. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986.}

As a responsible reader it is necessary for me to acknowledge the limitations within my reading of the dual contexts due to a reliance on texts written in European languages as a result of a lack of knowledge of Arabic.

However, in publishing and telling their stories to a wide audience, the authors implicitly invite the \textit{other}/reader to enter their space. In exploring the themes and the interplay of identities with the texts as the centre, I have sought to enter the margin, to speak myself from within that place of resistance. In interpretation there is a crossing of boundaries between the centre, which is “I” the reader, and the centre which is “other” to me, the author and the text itself. As Bulbeck points out, within women’s studies courses, ‘other’ women still often appear as just that, as footnotes of difference on the general themes of white women’s lives and experiences.\\footnote{417 Bulbeck, Chilla. \textit{Re-Orienting Western Feminisms: Women’s Diversity in a Postcolonial World.} Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p4}

She goes on to add that, unless Western feminism is stretched out from ‘its eurocentrism towards its borderlands, towards its intersections with women of other cultures’, it will create a new power centre which perpetuates the silencing of women from other cultures. When I write about women from ‘other cultures’, my own centre is stretched and challenged, and the distance between self and other is decreased.

There are points of connection and dialogue. Literature is the study of the way in which the written word operates to express and communicate the experience and internal world of the author to an audience. Literature therefore involves identity, the interaction of these identities within the structures of a language. In language there is universalisation. Words like ‘fear’ are universal words which cover a multitude of individual emotions. This universalisation through naming implements and enables a connection and unification between speaker/writer and audience. At the same time, however, language also inhibits connection as its ability to universalise restricts and confines individual experience. Authenticity therefore becomes problematic. Whenever identity is shifted into the confines of language, it is altered by the meanings given to words by the audience. In order to communicate
an inner reality, the writer relies on a shared experience to evoke a physical and emotional experience. Within the written text there are assumptions made by the writer as to values, desires and responses to physical stimuli that the audience will hold. Where the writer has an individual experience which challenges these assumptions about the audience, the writer adds more words, places the experience within a context in order to explain their own world view. In order to communicate, there must be a shared language and yet language is inadequate in revealing the complexities of a situation. Challenging the constraints of language, pushing the universals require creativity. In sequencing these words in narrative the universal becomes individualised. Words add meaning, narrowing down interpretations of the words with which they are partnered.

While I have never lived through a war I have experienced upheaval and violence, I have witnessed destruction, have knowledge of rebellion. While I cannot identify myself within a narrative about war which is not my story, I can read and identify with the particulars within the narrative and come to some understanding of the whole. The shared ‘language’ of this study is the language of resistance, resistance to boundaries between sexes and between cultures. To access the individual voice, there is a need to examine the way in which language and narrative have combined to create an individual experience, in a text where writer and reader interact.

All four women write narratives of self-authorship. By this I mean that the characters within their novels struggle against their imposed identity in an attempt to identify themselves. In Joyce Mansour’s *Marie* there is a dream sequence in which Marie finds herself in the desert. She is given clay with which to make her own face. This opportunity to create her own identity is thwarted as her tears wash much of the clay away. With the little she has left, her new identity is fragmented and unfinished. In discussing the margin, bell hooks writes:

> Understanding marginality as position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonised people. If we only view the margin as sign marking despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way the very ground of our being. It is in that space of collective despair that one’s creativity, one’s imagination is at risk."418

It is the tears, the despair which thwart Marie’s attempt to escape the brutality of her position as victim.

In Chedid’s novel, *La cité fertile*, Aléfa’s rejection of the categorisations made by identity papers places her in a position of resistance which liberates her. It liberates

her because she knows who she is. Her question to the centre disrupts the authority of the law. ‘Qui êtes-vous?’ she asks him. Her resistance challenges his perception of her identity, as other, as disruptive, and in so doing challenges his centre. Her resistance requires him to question assumptions about what constitutes his own identity and the assumptions of the dominant centre which have laid out a superficial and oppressive framework for identity which sets up frontiers and boundaries and in no way expresses the identity of a person.

L’identité, c’est quoi monsieur le commissaire?... Date et lieu de naissance, noms de père et mère, mensuration, couleur des yeux, photo d’un autre temps. C’est ça que vous appelez identité?419

In the first situation despair reduces resistance, and the protagonist is left with little clay to create her own identity. In the second the protagonist lives through hope, her resistance gives her a creative freedom in authoring herself. The second situation brings up issues involved in the crossing of cultural and geographical boundaries. In resisting the identity papers whose purpose is to separate “them” from “us”, Aléfa resists the political borders which separate countries, preventing self-knowledge and knowledge of the “other”.

In Barakat’s novel, *Sous les vignes du pays druze*, it is Arij’s inability to cross cultural boundaries which leads to crises about a fever which kills her. The “mestiza consciousness”, a consciousness which has its existence in two divided identities, is not productive for Arij but destructive. The conflict encountered requires a choice of loyalties in order for her to move out of the hostile no-man’s land which exists along the division line. Yet the two cultural identifications exist within the one woman, to deny one part is to deny a fundamental aspect of her identity. Arij’s inability to author her own identity in resistance to this conflict causes her death.

Aicha’s identity struggle involves resisting the assumption of a single identity. When she names herself as multiple she is pathologised as schizophrenic. Her multiplicity is unacceptable to the centre and, as she perceives her identity as authored by that centre, she is divided, at war within herself. When she becomes author of her own identity, through defining herself as multiple, resisting the frontiers imposed on her multiplicity, Aicha is able to become a unified whole made up of many parts. This self-authorship empowers Aicha to author her own future, create a new reality.

This self-authorship requires a resistance of the assumptions and categorisation of

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the dominant centre. In many instances this resistance involves the breaking of taboos. This involves entering forbidden territory, speaking the words the centre does not wish to hear, exposing that which has been hidden, resisting enforced codes of behaviour whether it be by action or inaction.

In uncovering the character Aicha in her novel *Le Chagrin de l’Arabie heureuse*, Barakat not only gives the opportunity to Aicha to view herself as a whole woman, to author her own identity, but she also challenges the “packaging” which separates the reader from the Arab female protagonist. The lifting of the veil involves traversing a cultural minefield. Within Arab society and religious belief is the notion that women are bearers of the culture. In creating the home environment and raising the children within that home, women bear the burden of upholding and embodying that culture. To survive through the generations, the culture must survive in the women. The word ‘embody’ connotes a physical characteristic. Not only is the culture something which women bear, it is viewed as an integral part of what a woman is, her role. In the face of Western domination, through technology and economic advantage, women have been removed from public view. In order to protect women from the public domain, from external threat, the veil enables women to bring the private into the public world.

However, the protection of the veil can become a place of imprisonment. In lifting the veil off Aicha, Barakat is undressing the culture before a French, Western audience. This act breaks taboos, bringing the private into the public without the benefit of the veil. It challenges the imposed role placed upon women which can nullify their identity even as it seeks to protect it. The body as object, as vessel, is demystified, the mass of veiled faces viewed by Western audiences is individualised. This challenges classifications which set up divisions between women of different cultures, and in so doing challenges the white Western woman’s power structures. As this private unveiling is written, as it enters the public realm, the boundaries between interior and exterior worlds are broken. This unveiling, this resistance to *un fatras de tabous*, is an act which leaves the text, protagonist and author open to the external gaze and its critical and destructive power.

In unveiling before a Western audience the charge of betrayal of all that the female is said to embody will be made by the male Arab centre. In rejecting the roles imposed upon women by the Arab male centre, in crossing the boundaries between private and public, Aicha has undressed the Arab culture before the Western audience. This invites the West’s criticism of Arab culture, and so even as it challenges the West’s perceptions, it reinforces their feeling of superiority. In order
to protect the culture to which she belongs, Aicha must deny her own identity which resists the imposed role. The inequalities in power mean that there is an imposed burden upon Aicha to split her individual identity as a woman in resistance to the construct of women as authored by her own culture, and her cultural identity as a Yemenite in resistance to foreign domination. In this case the problems facing women are so important to the fabric of the nation, if it is to survive, that Aicha risks that journey to self-authorship.

Chilla Bulbeck speaks of fracturing binarisms. Binarisms imply a division between two wholes. The division between east and west sets the two concepts up in opposition to each other. When identity is grounded in east and west, the frontier between the two can cause a fragmentation of identity. The exiled Hamadé in Barakat’s novel *Pourquoi pleure l’Euphrate* experiences alienation from the very places in which his identity is grounded. This alienation results in a thirst for identity through other externals. His inability to connect the past, present and future, to cross boundaries of time and place make him the victim of his world rather than the author of it. Fracturing the binarisms requires the subject to cross those boundaries and frontiers which divide the self.

Affirming one’s racial identity in opposition to whiteness condemned the mixed-race or hybrid identity as inferior. Instead of merely asserting the value of one’s pure (but formerly denigrated) identity, postcolonial writers suggest hybrid or mixed identities which encompass the contradictory history of colonisation. 420

In choosing to write within a consciousness of the borderlands, the author resists the language and power structures of the frontier. In creating her own fictional land which is not based upon geographical, class or gender boundaries, but rather a land of unity in thought, Chedid resists the divisions laid out in a power structure which seeks to divide her own sense of identity. Her resistance to the frontiers gives her the power to reconcile the divisions which have been imposed upon her own identity. Her choice to create within this borderland, to occupy the margin, not as victim of it but as a choice of freedom, empowers her to author her own story.

When Khoury-Ghata uses a French woman’s journey to Turkey, she assumes the trappings of an identity of the West in order to re-enter the East. As the French widow reads the diary of her Turkish husband’s aunt she becomes consumed by the text. The relatives of this aunt berate her for not understanding the text and seek out other ways of reinforcing an authentic reading of the identity of the text’s author. The implication is that language can cause a sense of connection between the reader

and writer, yet because of the cultural differences between the two women there can
be no authentic connection. Language gives a false sense of reality, a false
experience. In writing the assumptions and perceptions of how this imagined
Westerner would react to the East there is an underlying reminder that the author is
also making assumptions about how a Western woman would react. This challenges
both the assumptions made from the centre in the West and those made in the East.
In giving Chirmizar, the diarist, the ability to write in French, Khoury-Ghata
removes her from the rest of the women in the Harem, from the margin, and places
her in connection with Western women. Yet Chirmizar’s world, the physical and
cultural world she occupies, is Eastern. Chirmazar’s identity is not erased by the use
of another language, even while it may be transformed. Khoury-Ghata’s writing
embodies the constant tension between language and culture, narrating the process
of transformation that occurs through translation. Identity is deconstructed even as
it is constructed.

Foucault has argued that where there is power there is resistance, that for power to
exist there must be freedom of choice, otherwise power would not need to be
exerted. In the same way Khoury-Ghata’s novels argue that culture and society are
structured to impose restrictions on freedom. Yet these structures have their
alternative freedom in the identity of the individual. Individuals are able to move
across boundaries, to have an identity as an individual which, while it may be a
product of that structure, can be its place of resistance. In highlighting the
assumptions of both centres, that of the West and that of the East, Khoury-Ghata is
not attempting to deny that those of the East are factual and assert that those of the
West are fallacies. What she is highlighting is that both centres have their own
assumptions which prevent true connection between Western women and Eastern
women. Connection can only occur when the subject of the assumptions becomes
the author of her own story and disrupts the centre of the other. The centre disrupted
must reconstruct itself, even if it is, finally, to re-establish old structures.
Consciousness is altered by the interaction with an other.

In Barakat’s novel *Pourquoi pleure l’Euphrate*, the situation in Iraq is personalised.
The largely Western-sourced depiction of the situation of the Gulf War, with its
sanitisation of the battle, is challenged. This is done through the character of
Hamadé. Barakat uses Hamadé, who has a French education and adult life, as a
bridge for the Western reader to journey through into the marginal space which is
also a part of Hamadé’s identity, that of the East. The tension he experiences as he
is pulled between the reality of life in Iraq, in contrast to his own constructed reality
after being in the West for so long, lulls the reader into the position of being
challenged but not knowing it. Because the story appears to belong to Hamadé the reader has no sense of identification, which allows the writer to challenge the Western centre without placing the reader from the West on the defensive. The reader is not asked to take sides, but rather to participate in the dilemma facing Hamadé, who is moving between the two positions himself. The reader is made aware that humanity can and does exist on both sides of the border and that it is the division, the constructs of difference, which have caused the destruction and violence, inaction and loss of freedom. As the opposition between “them” and “us” is broken down by Hamadé’s experience of reality in this border land between East and West, the Western audience begin to see that the “other” is a possible part of “us”, and moreover “me”. Difference can be a place of resistance of assumptions, but it can also perpetuate assumptions in that it maintains a frontier which places the two cultures in opposition to each other. In order to dismantle the opposition, the frontier needs to become a place of intersection, not a place of division.

The divisive nature of frontiers also occurs within the positioning of women as other. As long as there is a frontier separating male and female there is a division of power. In her autobiographical work, North African writer Fatima Mernissi describes the gender division as perpetuated by the Harem:

“The frontier [which divides men and women] indicates the line of power because wherever there is a frontier, there are two kinds of creatures walking on Allah’s earth, the powerful on one side, and the powerless on the other.”

I asked Mina how would I know on which side I stood. Her answer was quick, short, and very clear: “If you cannot get out, you are on the powerless side.”

Unless the frontier is crossed and there is communication that travels across the gender division, the woman remains powerless and trapped. If, however, she crosses those boundaries, she will discover her strength and ability to survive. In The Harem Within, Mernissi also recounts Mina’s discovery of her identity of resistance through crossing the borderlands.

‘...If you have never seen the Sahara Desert before, Mina said, you cannot imagine it...A human life is so negligible in the desert, where only sand dunes and stars can survive. A little girl’s pain there is an utter trifle. But it was in crossing the sand that I discovered there was another little girl inside me. A girl who was strong, intent on surviving. I became a different Mina then. I realized that all the world was set against me, and the only good that I could expect had to come from inside myself.”

This traverse of the desert represented a journey in identity, not simply a


geographical movement, for the young girl. Chedid uses the same journey across the desert to situate the journey of identity which the protagonists go through in *Les marches de sable*. The desert represents a margin, a place which is perceived as hostile to life, and yet it is in surviving and crossing that borderland that the four women come to understand their strength and to author who they are in essence, without the external packaging which objectifies them. The men who have colonised a part of this borderland, who have built a fortress inhibiting contact with the outside world, are interrupted and disturbed by the female presence as the women ignore the boundaries and enter their domain. Not only does this contact benefit the women, but the challenge also awakens and heals the male centre.

In this struggle to author oneself there is the dilemma of the reader, the audience. In entering the desert or facing the mirror, the female protagonists are their own audience. In writing for an external audience, in entering an external world, being authentic in the public as well as the private space, the identities of the protagonists and authors move out of the safety of the margin to disrupt and draw attention away from the gaze of the dominant "other". Aicha moves from the position of a woman in solitude into the position of public speaker in Barakat’s novel, *Le chagrin de l'Arabie heureuse*. She must confront the external gaze. In authoring her own identity she is empowered to speak her own reality and to decide which face she will show the audience. No longer is she a victim of the external gaze. Her self-knowledge allows her not only to resist external perceptions which have sought to define her, but to take the initiative of determining herself as centre of the story and to therefore challenge and, in the case of Tahar, meet that gaze. Her authentic self is the self that is not acting simply in resistance to the external gaze, but in a position of freedom from its impositions.

Vénus Khoury-Ghata explores this interplay of powers in her novel *Bayarmine*. In this novel she has created a reader, and in the relationship of the reader to the subtext of the novel, Khoury-Ghata explores the problematics of exchange between reader, text and writer. The reader is overwhelmed by the text, the story of the other, to the extent that the identity within the text threatens to inhabit and destroy her. In this situation the reader is colonised by the text. And yet the text is in many ways self-authored by the reader, in that it is the interpretation of the text by the reader which threatens her. Crossing the frontiers between self and other requires a good deal of self-knowledge and knowledge of the other if the reader is to survive the journey. In the same way the author's story must remain that, the story of the author. Inhabiting that story, colonising it, redefines its identity. Any reading should contain an acknowledgement that the reading is not the text explained, but rather
the text transformed.

Where the craft of writing has been appropriated by the male centre, writing becomes an act of resistance in itself. The protagonists in the novels who have chosen to write have crossed the frontier between the sexes, while remaining in their own place of resistance. Khoury-Ghata, Barakat and Mansour have all included female protagonists who defy this frontier, Chedid has also done so but somewhat differently. The line between man and woman is drawn on the basis of biological difference. The appropriation of language and the craft of writing have been carried out by the dominant male group who are other than women in that they perform a different sexual and reproductive function. The appropriation of language has meant that writing has been described from a male centre. In this way writing is named as masculine. So there is the situation whereby the very language used to describe writing is sexualised, as/and the seminal mind deflowers the virgin page.423 Being the subject and author of the act of writing, the female must confront this language in order to imagine herself as writer, firstly, and secondly in order to take action and take up the pen and write.

In Khoury-Ghata’s novel Bayarmine the protagonist Chirmizar has the power to read and write. Furthermore, she can do so in another language. This separates her from the other women within the harem, giving her a power linked to the male domain. This power allows her to write over the story of her own history of oppression with the words of resistance, but it also causes a division between her and her identity as a woman. Because of her ability to write, she is viewed as ‘transsexual’, as sexually deviant. This makes her husband desire her, and yet it is a false perception of herself which he desires. For Chirmizar remains a woman within her crossing of the gender boundary. In retaining her womanhood, yet going against the roles assigned her, Chirmizar challenges the validity of the assignation of roles assigned by the dominant patriarchal society.

The external gaze from the male centre colonises her text, and through that, her body and identity. Aicha, in Barakat’s novel, and Joyce in Mansour’s short story both struggle with the sexual prohibitions on women writing. Mansour plays with the pun of her name Joyce with “joystick”, in this way personalising a phallic perception of the pen in order that she can take up, a sexualised masculine object and write. In order to fly, to cross the frontiers and taboos which inhibit female authorship, there is a need expressed to appropriate for herself a masculine part to

423 See also the fuller discussion in the introduction
her own identity. However, there is a hope expressed in Mansour’s work that, at some stage, women will be able to write without the boundaries and divisions which require them to cross over from one position to the other. Mansour’s writing is full of sexual ambiguities which undermine gender divisions, dismantling the structures which would require her to make a choice between two integral parts of herself.

Barakat’s protagonist, Aicha, struggles with the violence of writing. Her actions feel like that of a rapist as she begins to write. Authoring her own self is perceived as a male act of violence. Her body is the page which is penetrated by both gaze and pen. In order to write she must alter the way in which she views herself and writing. When she remains in the position of victim, accepting the assumptions made about her by the external, dominating patriarchal power structures, she perpetuates violence against herself. As the page she is named and inscribed, appropriated and confined by the text which controls her. When she becomes the subject as well as the object of the gaze, when her writing is self-authored from a power structure of which she is the centre, then she can write her own reality. The presence of the male audience and its assumptions and the appropriation of public space and language interfere with her own identity as a woman and as a writer. Writing crosses the frontiers which have been put in place to separate the “private” female space from the “public” male domain. By taking up the pen, Aicha moves the private into the public, challenging the male appropriation of language and communication of identity.

The power of naming is a particular aspect of language. In naming there is a reduction and packaging of the identity named. This packaging implies a control and ownership of what is named, it also draws a distinction between the identity named and the “other”. There can be empowerment in naming. When the naming is part of the process of self-authorship, naming can be viewed as self-empowerment. However, when naming occurs in order to confine and is imposed upon an identity from the external world, it can be destructive. Chirmizar is named by the sultan in Bayarmine. Her name identifies her with one aspect of who she is, separating her from the other aspects of her identity, much in the same way as she is physically separated from the other women in his harem. In naming her he acknowledges her power and at the same time uses that power to divide her identity and deny her physical and emotional qualities.

As the writers in this study challenge the assumptions of the western and patriarchal centres, they confront this power of language to name and thus confine and reduce
individuals. However, they also use the same act of naming to confine and reduce the power of patriarchal structures. This is done in the personal relationship between Mahria/Chirmazar and the sultan of her harem. Mahria/Chirmizar writes the reality of the sultan’s tyranny over his portrait. In giving language to her reality, her view of him, she resists his assumption of her role in relation to him, that of the eager, subordinate wife, and challenges the portrait made of him in his centre of power. The private challenge occurring within their relationships, moves into a public challenge against tyranny through the act of being written. The women in this collection break down the borders between public and private, individual and national identity. Any struggle to find individual emancipation disrupts the centre, shaking the structures which exert power over society.

In naming and giving language to these assumptions, the authors separate these assumptions from the power centre of which they are part. Separated from the power centres of the dominant group and inspected them from the centres in the margin, these assumptions are seen as just that, assumptions. No longer are they truths, but fallacies. This lends a sense of the ridiculous to Mansour’s narrative of Joyce’s encounter with the male centre in *Illusions de vol*. In this surreal dream sequence Mansour exposes the phallus, the male centre of power from her own centre as female. Within the patriarchal worldview the separation between men and women is based upon biological difference. With the ownership of the penis the male’s identity is imbued with certain assumptions of strength, superiority and a higher spiritual existence. The penis is constructed as phallus. When Mansour reduces the life work of male creativity to a tray of phalluses constructed out of bits of wood, paper, feathers and glue and places this production next to the whole body of an individual woman surging out of the water, the male centre of power and authority is dismantled. This at once reduces the phallus from its position of authority and divine inspiration to exactly what it is, a physical appendage with little bearing on the identity of the individual male as a whole being.

The author may also be reduced by the inability of language to portray a whole experience. It can only communicate a part, a fragmented identity. Mansour’s vision of a whole woman emerging from the water, named, and as a complete identity, disrupts the fragmented and truncated world of language. In attempting to write her own reality, Chirmizar in *Bayarwine* and Joyce in Mansour’s short story *Illusions de vol* both acknowledge the limitations and confines of language itself.

‘Language is also a place of struggle’\(^{424}\). Writing both constrains and enables

connection and communication. It is only in maintaining one’s own identity, even when that identity is going through the process of transformation, that any of the participants in a literary dialogue can retain authenticity and self-authorship. Mansour, Andrée Chedid, Khoury-Ghata and Barakat have found a way of portraying what Eagleton calls a ‘double optic’:

at once fighting on a terrain already mapped out by [their] antagonists and seeking even now, to prefigure within that mundane strategy styles of being and identity for which we have as yet no proper names.425

Ambiguities and paradox abound as this double vision becomes the central element in Mansour’s shifting and metamorphosing self-portraiture; Chedid’s fluctuations between acceptance and refusal: Khoury-Ghata’s constant reconstructions of deconstructions which problematise the beliefs of the reader, and Barakat’s depiction of the multiple sources of identity which cannot survive the structures of binary opposites.

The writers in this collection have stretched language in order to overwrite boundaries which deny their identities and which seek to silence them. Their narratives cross the lines drawn between constructs of gender and the constructs of cultural difference, disrupting and transforming the central structures of society and culture. The margin is exposed as a place of oppression, of silencing. In moving the margin, in writing across the text, the women in this study have re-appropriated literary space as a place of resistance and freedom.

Bibliography

Primary Works

Barakat


Chedid


**Khoury-Ghata**


Mansour


Secondary works


