Arab Women Writers between Transgression and Identity

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on contemporary novels by Arab women writers producing literary texts from the 1970s to the first decade of the 2000s, namely, Nawal El Saadawi, Assia Djebar, Fadia Faqir and Rajaa Alsanea. It argues that each of these writers employs innovative techniques of transgression to destabilise the normative gender discourse pertinent to her society. Close reading of their novels, specifically El Saadawi's 1973 *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr*, translated and appeared in English in 1983 as *Woman at Point Zero*, Djebar's *Ombre sultane* published in 1987 and translated into English as *A Sister to Scheherazade* in 1993, Faqir's (2007) My *Name is Salma* and Alsanea's 2005 *Banat Al Riyadh* translated into English in 2007 as *Girls of Riyadh*, in their original languages and in translation, reveals that transgression is a common mode of resistance used in these narratives, yet each writer deploys unique subversive strategies to effectuate an autonomous female construction.

Reading Arab women's writings in one monograph in order to foreground women's agency in women's literature of the Arab region runs the risk of perpetuating homogenising tendencies. To prevent such a danger, Chapter 1 offers a detailed socio-historically contextualised discussion to account for the diverse factors that have shaped women's experiences across the Arab world. In this chapter I argue that the Arab woman's body is connected with the notion of honour and has been exposed to discursive and material constraints to maintain its position in society as a taboo. In Chapters 2 and 3, I show how the writers in my corpus destabilise this notion of the body by enacting thematic, aesthetic and linguistic transgressions that invite a reconsideration of female perception and identity in the Arab world and globally. In Chapter 4, I focus on the topic of reception by analysing language choice and translation practices to see what other

boundaries Arab women writers are willing to traverse in order to (re)present the Arab female experience.

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Note on the Text

Transliteration and translation from Modern Standard Arabic follows a simplified version of the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) transliteration and translation system.

Arabic names of literary, political and social figures are spelled according to their accepted English spellings followed by IJMES transliteration system.

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Introduction: Writing Arab Womanhood

'There is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable'.[1]

Mark Twain

In her chapter in the volume edited by Fadia Faqir, entitled: 'Writing against Time and History', the Algerian Arabophone writer Ahlam Mostaghanemi laments her explicit marginalisation from the Algerian university, both as a lecturer and as a writer. She writes:

> Twenty years ago, I dreamed of one day receiving an invitation from Paris to deliver a lecture there. Today I hope to receive an invitation from Algeria to give that same lecture there and to return safely to my children.[2]

Mostaganemi wrote these words amid a civil war in Algeria in which 200,000 lives were lost, taking more than 70 of Algeria's intellectuals, writers, artists and journalists. It was not only, however, the civil unrest that caused women and their works to be denied academic recognition. Bouthaina Chaaban affirms in her study on Arab women writings that, unlike the West, the Arab world has yet to include literary works of Arab women in curricula at lower educational stages or at university level.[3] More recently, the Palestinian- Lebanese writer Rana Askoul has also tackled the issue of the absence of literature produced by Arab women from pedagogical programs, affirming that 'a quick review of Arabic language curricula

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[1] Mark Twain, *Mark Twain Speaking*, 3rd edn. ed. by Paul Fatout (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2006), p. 284.
[2] Ahlam Mostaghanemi, 'Writing Against Time and History' in *In the House of Silence*, ed. by Fadia Faqir (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 1998), p. 88.
[3] Bouthaina Chaaban, *Mi'at 'Am min Riwaya Nisa'iya al 'arabiya 1899-1999* [*A Hundred Years of Arab women's novels 1899-1999*] (Beirut: Dar Al Adab, 1999), p.12.

at the secondary level across the region reveals an obvious lack of references to literature produced by women writers and scholars'.[4] Indeed, Arab women writers who have produced what stands today as classic literature have been attributed little attention in the Arab classroom.

In Tlemcen University, in Algeria, at the Faculty of Letters and Languages, from which I obtained my B.A and M.A degrees, courses on Arab women's literature are non-existent. What is problematic within this marginalisation is the exclusion of Arab women writings from two core modules, where they strongly belong. They are not included in either of the modules, 'Women's Writings or 'Postcolonial Literature'. The absence of Arab women's writings from these modules may at first seem justified by their placement in the English Department; but this excludes the number of Arab women writing in English, as I shall discuss shortly. Even more troublesome is the dearth of subjects on Arab women in the Arabic Literature Department, where I have been told—off the record—that a course on Arab women writings is seen as 'insignificant', and only cursory remarks during lessons are made on them.[5] The irrelevance lies, according to this lecturer, is the fact that if a class is dedicated to women's writings, another one should be assigned for 'men's writings'. Ironically, the reading list for all courses covered in Arabic literature, with all its specialisations, privileges only male writers. To return

[4] Rana Askoul, 'We need to bring the works of Arab women scholars and writers to the forefront', *The National*, (2018) https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/we-need-to-bring-the-work-of-arab-women-scholars-and-writers-to-the-forefront-1.711368 [accessed 8 March 2020].

[5]Upon my return to Algeria, and as part of undertaking further research for the completion of this work, from February to the first week of March 2020, I audited classes in Arabic literature offered at the department of Arabic Language and Literature, Faculty of Letters and Languages, University of Tlemcen, to gain better and deeper knowledge and understanding of Arab(ic) literature. The six semesters of the undergraduate courses offered at the department focus on ancient and modern poetry of the Arab world, ancient and modern prose, comparative literature, science of the Quran and literary criticism. With the exception of May Ziada, the entire program consists of male-authored poetry and prose. Upon enquiring about the lack of featuring women's works in courses and the non-existence of a class or a session devoted to teaching their works, I was met with the above answer.

to the English department, the exclusion of literary texts by Arab women writers might be said to have to do with the purpose of the modules to familiarise English language learners with postcolonial literature produced in English, and with women's writings written in English. The works of Arab women writers unquestionably fit perfectly in these two modules, since gender is inherently positioned in postcolonialism, both as a theory and as an experience, for the colonial condition and its aftermath have impacted the life and the literature of women as profoundly as those of men, if not more deeply, as shall be discussed throughout the chapters of the thesis. Women's invisibility within the course of 'Women Writings', where diverse issues such as women's voice, women's education, women's literary output and ultimately feminism, are discussed, is confusing to say the least. The confusion occurs mainly because similar discussions can emerge out of reading fiction by Arab women, and yet their texts are still not incorporated. If the common factor determining the subjects to be taught to English language learners is the English language, then literary texts by Arab women writers should be included, for they are available in English translation, and most importantly, many are originally written in English. The Egyptian Ahdaf Soueif and her seminal novel *The Map of Love* (1999), one of multiple examples, offers an appropriate subject that claims presence, in fact, within both modules, for her text stimulates illuminating discussions on British colonialism in Africa, English Language and women's writing. Witnessing this visible exclusion, one cannot help but assume that Arab women's writings have been judged to be outside the canon of postcolonial literature and outside the canon of writing itself.

This is happening exactly at the time when there seems to be a growing body of academic volumes produced in the West that explore the subject of Arab literature in the Western university. The following examples touch precisely upon

the issue of introducing Arab women's writings into the Western classroom; two chapters are devoted to the teaching of Arab literature in the edited volume, *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English: The Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and Culture*.[6] The chapters entitled 'The Challenges of Orientalism: Teaching about Islam and Masculinity in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator'* by Brendan Smyth, and 'Teaching from Cover to Cover: Arab Women's Novels in the Classroom' by Heather M. Hoyt, share a common objective.[7] The authors of these essays discuss the pedagogical strategies for presenting Arab women's novels in the classroom, stressing the significance of deconstructing themes of orientalism, particularly images of female oppression, to preserve the process of identity construction, as portrayed in the texts and to prevent misapprehensions that are likely to occur amongst Western students. Another volume entitled, *Arabic Literature for the Classroom: Teaching Methods, Theories, Themes, and Texts*, contains three relevant chapters: 'Teaching Arab Women's Letters' by Boutheina Khaldi, 'Arab Women Writers' by Miriam Cooke and 'Teaching francophone Algerian women's literature in a bilingual French-English context: Creative voices, dissident texts' by Brinda J. Mehta.[8] The authors of these works ponder the issue of teaching Arab women's writing to non-Arab students, attempting in the process to highlight the possible, effective ways through which the texts are delivered to the students as purely fictional texts while bringing to their attention, historical and cultural specificities. The consensus amongst the

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[6] Nouri Gana, *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab novel in English: The Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

[7] See: Brendan Smyth, 'The Challenges of Orientalism: Teaching about Islam and Masculinity in Leila Aboulela's The Translator', in *The Edinburgh Companion*, pp, 386-404, and Heather M. Hoyt, 'Teaching from Cover to Cover: Arab Women's Novels in the Classroom', in *The Edinburgh Companion*, pp-405-425.

[8] See: Boutheina Khaldi, 'Teaching Arab Women's Letters', pp-24-39, Miriam Cooke, 'Arab Women Writers', pp- 40-53 and Brinda J. Mehta, 'Teaching francophone Algerian Women's Literature in a Bilingual French-English Context: Creative voices, dissident texts' pp. 54-71, all in *Arabic Literature for the Classroom: Teaching Methods, Theories, Themes and Texts*. ed by Muhsin J.al-Musawi (Oxon, Routledge: 2017).

scholars is that there ought to be a balance between covering the political and social discussions that constitute important elements in the literary texts of Arab women, and also highlighting and stressing vehemently the poetics and aesthetics in their writings.[9] In a similar vein, the contributors to the volume *Teaching Modern Arabic Literature in Translation*, offer a comprehensive list of essays that includes in its varied discussions the theme of women's writing with a focus on the translation of their literature.[10] Similarly, *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Assia Djebar*, edited by Anne Donadey, provides a compelling compilation of essays in which innovative strategies for teaching the literature of Assia Djebar — who is 'one of the most commonly taught women writers from Arab or Muslim backgrounds' in North America—are gathered.[11] Djebar's works, Donadey points out, 'are included in French, comparative literature, English, and women's studies courses', for in each of these curricula, Djebar makes appropriate subject matter for discussions of the role of Arab women and their written works locally and globally.[12]

This burgeoning field aims to present Arab women's texts and equip their receivers with the right set of skills to facilitate reading and engagement with Arab women's texts. More importantly, these works seek to establish relevant methods for approaching the subject of Arab women when they are introduced to students whose imagination has embedded stereotypical perceptions about the Arab world and the treatment of its women. If the story and history suggest that the Arab woman is a silent, oppressed and an enclosed subject, Arab women's literary works, along with useful guidebooks on how to go about reading and reflecting on

[9] Ibid., pp. 32-47.
[10] Michelle Hartman, *Teaching Modern Arabic Literature in Translation* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2018), pp. 79-89.
[11] Anne Donadey, *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Assia Djebar* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2017), Preface.
[12] Ibid., Preface.

them in the classroom, have the definite potential for undoing bias and correcting historical presumptions about Arab women.

While relevant and much needed publications such as these are available in the West, similar works designed for students in Arab countries are as requisite as they remain scarce, if not unattainable. In particular, scholarship on teaching Arab women's writings amongst literature students in the Middle Eastern and North African classroom settings ought to be considered, for concerns governing the reception of their works are present even among students in their home countries. This is of great significance, since Arab women write primarily for an Arab audience, and throughout the different generations of women in the literary canon, their participation in what has been a purely male dominated arena demanded courage and nerve. From their first publications onwards, as Radwa Ashour notes in 2008, women writers of the Arab world appeared on the literary scene with revolutionary ideas about women's status, and their tendency has been to change stereotypical images of women present within Arab society, and shatter expectations of women's fixed roles.[13] Yet in the conservative societies of the Arab world, writings that deal with women's issues such as women's rights to body, to voice and to opinion are regarded as an outright offence. Evidence for this is the extreme social and institutional resistance faced by many writers, who simply broached, through their works, subjects which are still considered taboo.[14] It is axiomatic that students, being products of their community and confronted by

[13] Radwa Ashour, Ferial J. Ghazoul and Hasna Reda-Mekdashi, *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide, 1873-1999*. Trans by Mandy McClure (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), p. 2.

[14] The acclaimed Algerian novelist Amin Zaoui has recently written an important article in which he discusses censorship of books, paying close attention to the treatment of publications that bring up the topic of women in the Arab society and the social as well as the institutional backlash it received. See: Amin Zaoui 'acharat kotob hazat al 'alam al 'arabi khilal al karn al 'ichrin' ['Ten books that shook the Arab world during the twentieth century'), *Independent Arabia,* (July 2019) < https://www.independentarabia.com/node/43816/آراء/عشرة-كتب-هزت-العالم-العربي-خلال-القرن-العشرين> [accessed 2 March 2020].

predominantly male produced knowledge, are influenced by the prevailing ideas around them and develop misapprehension, reluctance and suspicions about the content and intentions of women's literary works. Bringing Arab women writers to university courses, in particular, will radically change society as it will help students learn stories about the human experience and the Arab experience in its entirety as captured in their literature. The failure to account for Arab women's literature in the classroom should no longer be tolerated, particularly since student's interest in Arab women's writing is growing, as has recently become clear through the increasing number of undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations, written in and submitted to Arab universities yearly on the subject. What therefore is lacking is the integration of course materials and aptly trained teachers who can smoothly and productively introduce Arab women writers to Arab learners.

This research is not primarily intended to delve deeper into the subject of Arab women writer's under-representation in academic courses in Algeria or any other Arab country that also sees women's writing as unfit for class discussion. However, one of the main reasons why women's literary output is considered untreatable in educational settings stimulated my interest as an Algerian student, witnessing the lack of diversity in literature syllabi, to undertake this study. It is Arab women's manipulation of literature, its deployment to negotiate the Arab female experience through unconventional means by candidly writing on taboo subjects and by placing the subject of women at the center of the narrative, that caused the guardians of literature to regard women writing as 'insignificant'. I am driven by the firm belief that public writing, through the medium of the novel, on the taboos of Arab society is the means to better reconstruct the human condition in reality.

This research contends that Arab women writers employ the notion of transgression as a technique to construct female identity in their novels. I build on the works of Miriam Cooke, Anastassia Valassopoulous, Lindsey Moore, Brinda J. Mehta, Jane Hiddleston, Nadia Yaqub and Rula Quawas, and Miral Mahgoub Al-Tahawy, all of whom contend that there is a general sphere of strategies of resistance in Arab women's writings.[15] Building on the present literature, this thesis foregrounds transgression as a facet of the process of negotiating, deconstructing and constructing women's agency in the novels of Arab women writers. I argue that transgression and identity are very closely rlated and, as such, are presented in an indispensable coupling in contemporary novels of Arab women writers. To examine this phenomenon, I have selected a corpus of literary works by renowned writers and emerging ones whose texts exemplify this argument. The novels are: *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr* by the Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi published in 1973 and translated from the Arabic original into English as *Woman at Point Zero* (1983), *Ombre sultane* (1987) by the Algerian writer Assia Djebar translated into English as *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1993), *My Name is Salma* (2007) by the Jordanian-British based Fadia Faqir and *Banat Al Riyadh* (2005) by the Saudi writer Rajaa Alsanea, which is translated into English as *Girls of Riyadh* (2007).[16] With the exception of *My Name is Salma* which was

[15] See: Miriam Cooke, 'Feminist Transgressions in the Postcolonial Arab World' *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies,* 8.14 (1999), 93-105; Anastassia Valassopoulous, Contemporary *Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context* (London: Routledge, 2007); Lindsey Moore, *Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature and Film* (London: Routledge, 2008);. Jane Hiddleston, 'Imprisonment, freedom, and literary opacity in the work of nawal El Saadawi and Assia Djebar', *Feminist Theory,* 11.2 (2010), 171-187; Brinda J. Mehta, *Dissident writings of Arab Women: Voices Against Violence* (London: Routledge, 2014). Miral Mahgoub Al-Tahawy*,* 'Women's Writing in the Land of Prohibitions: A Study of Alifa Rifaat and Female Body Protest as a Tool for Rebellion', in *Gender and Sexuality in Muslim Cultures,* ed. by gul Ozyegin, 2nd ed (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 275-296; and Nadia Yaqub, Rula Quawas, *Bad Girls of the Arab World* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017).

[16] The copies of the novels which are used in this research appeared in different editions, the ones used here are: Nawal el Saadawi, *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr*, 6th ed (Beirut: Dar el Adab, 2003); Nawal el Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*, trans by Sherif Hetata, 3rd ed (London: Zed Books, 2015); Assia Djebar, *Ombre sultane*, 3rd ed (Algiers: Hibr, 2014); Assia Djebar, *A Sister to Scheherazade*,

written originally in English, the novels written in Arabic and French shall be used in their original languages as well as their available English translations in this study.

Canonical writers such as Al Saadawi and Djebar have received critical attention and their works have made their way into sophisticated discussions by prominent scholars in the field of Arab literature. However, little to no critical discussion has examined transgression and identity as a duo joined together in the selected texts of the pioneer writers Al Saadawi, Djebar and Faqir, or the emerging writer Alsanea. This critical lapse prompts me to undertake this study. Existing critical literature has devoted little attention to the interplay of transgression and identity in the writings of Arab women. Even when these studies revolve around the issue of identity, transgression as a strategy for self-formation has rarely been observed. Rather, the term seems to have been used only to stand as a synonym for the key word under analysis in academic works that examine Arab women writings, with the rhetorical purpose of avoiding repetition, devoid of influence and made too simplistic. Transgression in this thesis is treated as a complex notion valuable in its own right, having a distinct potency, and with the potential to give rise to new perspectives from which Arab literature in general and that of women in particular, can be approached.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word transgression as: 'The action of transgressing or passing beyond the bounds of legality or right; a violation of law, duty, or command; disobedience, trespass, sin'. A direct

trans by Dorothy S. Blair, 1st edn (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993); Fadia Faqir, *My Name is Salma*, 2nd edn (London: Black Swan, 2008); Rajaa Alsanea *Banat Al Riyadh* 1st edn (Beirut: Dar Al Saqi, 2005); and Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, trans by Rajaa Alsanea and Marilyn Booth, 2nd edn (London: Penguin Books, 2008).

equivalent in Arabic does not exist.[17] Al-Muhit's *Oxford Study Dictionary, English-Arabic*, translates the term transgression from English into Arabic as انتهاك '*intihak'* which is in English violation, مخالفة؛'*mokhalafa*' and خرق ' *Khark'* ' which both translate into English as a breach, and الخطيئة 'al *khati'ah*' and الاثم '*al ithm*', the English equivalent of sin.[18] The *Al-Mounged Dictionary for English-Arabic* gives similar translations for the term transgression, with a slight addition of the Arabic word تجاوز '*tajawoz*', equating to the English word trespass. Al-Mounged Dictionary is, however, more precise by providing between brackets an explanation of the term transgression which appears as follows: تجاوزحدود الادب '*tajawoz*' (*hodoud al adab*) and means: trespassing limits of manners.[19] What is interesting within this precision is that the word ادب *adab* embodies two denotations. Besides its signification as good manners, *adab* in Arabic also means literature, insinuating therefore that the trespass occurs against the limits of literature. Although the first connotation of the term *tajawoz* is the closest in meaning to transgression, signifying trespassing the limits of agreeable behaviour, yet the implication that the crossing over happens against the notion of literature is crucial to my usage of the term in this study.

This unclear binary for the word *adab* has long invited close examination; it is a slippery term in which manners and literature overlap. Etymological studies on the term find that its early utterances date back to the pre-Islamic era, during which the aesthetic and behavioral indications went hand in hand.[20] And throughout its usage through different eras, lexicographers have shown how the

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[17]TheOxfordEngishDictionaryOnline,https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204777?redirectedFrom=transgression#eid[accessed 6 April 2020]; and 'Transgression' in *Oxford Paperback Thesaurus*, ed. By Maurice Waite, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 688.

[18] Al-Muhit, *Oxford Study Dictionary English-Arabic*, ed. by Mohamad Badwi (Beirut: Academia, 2003).

[19] Vivian Abi Rached, *Al-Mounged: English-Arabic*, 2nd ed (Beirut: Lebanon, 1997).

[20] See: Abd Allah Khader Hamad, *Al Adab Al Arabi Al Hadith wa Madahiboho* [Modern Arab Literature and its ideologies] (Erbil: Dar Al fajer, 2017), pp. 15-16.

term *Adab* in its indication of literature derives from the former use of the word which attributes proper, refined manners in conducting the self. Literary people, as teachers of prose and poetry, were called مؤدبين ***mo'adibin***, with its double meanings in English referring to a person who is mannerly and who also acts as a preceptor.[21] Transgression in this sense, in Arab women's writings, is a dynamic action that occurs against and within the fluid space of the term *adab*, a phenomenon demonstrating how crossing over the limits in the creative domain constitutes at the same time a trespass against the real boundaries of codes of conduct expected of women in Arab society. Transgression is presented to us as a literary and a literal energy.

A preliminary examination of how the term transgression has been defined clearly shows that in common usage, transgression has a negative connotation and came to be associated with the unconventional, unlawful and the illicit.[22] This thesis, however, reclaims the term and allows it an alternative significance by illustrating how Arab women writers deploy this notion for a better cause; to rewrite—against dominant culture, history, politics, religious discourse and language itself—Arab female experience. Such a subversive use of literature means that women writers have to challenge the social norms that ascribe to women specific restrictive roles, and have to confront and transgress firmly rooted limits, for transgression cannot be performed if it does not engage with the limit.

Michel Foucault's words in his seminal essay, 'A Preface to Transgression' capture the relationship between the limit and its transgression. Foucault sees that the two terms 'depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable, and reciprocally,

[21] Ibid.,pp. 17-18.
[22] Julian Wolfreys, Transgression: Identity, Space, Time (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2008), pp. 2-3.

transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows'.[23] As limits represent an important dimension of Arab society's construction and extend the areas of their control from politics to economics, from society to culture and language, it places even more rigid bounds on women. Writing affords a space where limits are countered and transgressed repeatedly. Careful analysis of Arab women's writing and its embodiment of the notion of transgression accentuates and exploits the relationship between the limit and transgression as described by Foucault.

The dearth of academic engagement with the topic of transgression and its deployment in Arab women's literary work is apparent. As mentioned earlier, although use of this concept appears in critical writing on Arab women's writings, it has yet to be recognised as a nomenclature referring to a unique genre. To this day, only two volumes, both on Assia Djebar, both in French, bring up this issue. In the first, Jeanne-Marie Clerc's 1997 *Assia Djebar: Ecrire, transgresser, résister,*[24] a chapter entitled, 'Thème et écriture de la transgression par rapport à l'interdit féminine' argues that film making in Assia Djebar's life has had an effect on the emergence of her transgressive writing, and refers to her 1995 novel *Vaste est la prison* (which appeared in English as *So Vast the Prison* in 1999) as the novel that manifests transgressions of languages and cultures.[25] The second volume, edited by Wolfgang Asholt and Lise Gauvin, is entitled *Assia Djebar et la transgression des limites: linguistiques, littéraires et culturelles* (2017).[26] This volume in particular offers a thorough and a concise study of the notion of

[23] Michel Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', in *Language, Counter-memory, Practices: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (New York: Cornell University Press: 1980), p. 34.
[24] Jeanne-Marie Clerc, *Assia Djebar: Ecrire, transgresser, resister* (Paris: L'harmattan, 1997).
[25] Ibid., p. 37-50.
[26] Wolfgang Asholt and Lise Gauvin, *Assia Djebar et la transgression des limites: linguistique, littéraires et culturelles* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017).

transgression in the literary works of Assia Djebar as a leading Arab woman writer. I find this work to be the closest in scholarly writing on transgression to what my own research promises to do. Just as the Asholt's and Gauvin's title indicates, the contributors to the volume examine transgression in the works of Assia Djebar in its totality and offer a holistic perspective on its linguistic, literary and cultural presence in Djebar's literature.[27] My research invites a widening of the scope of seeing and understanding transgression through exploring Arab women's contemporary novels. Djebar's oeuvre establishes her as an *avant-garde* author in the tradition of transgression and this study further participates in current conversations about this specific topic in relation to her works. I do, however, want to expand the field of examination and show that this notion features in other Arab women's writing composed in Arabic and English as well as French.

Anastasia Valassopoulos, alongside other prominent scholars in the field, agree that some writers from the Arab world have gained greater visibility and attracted far more attention than others, particularly in critical works in English coming from the West. [28] At the turn of the 1970s, as Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair-Majaj argue in their landmark study, *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers,* some third world authors were rendered 'celebrities in the First World' and received ever-mounting interest and, consequently, places 'on conference panels and book tours and at universities' in the West.[29] Amireh and Suhair-Majaj name Nawal El Saadawi as an example whose Western canonization has had, to a certain extent, a detrimental effect on her reception in the Arab world amongst Arab readers and critics. Her unconventional views on the conservative societies of the Arab world put her

[27] Ibid.,p. 8.
[28] Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women*, p. 2.
[29] Amal Amireh, Lisa Suhair Majaj, *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers* (New York and London: Garland Publishing INC, 2000), p.6.

under the spotlight, eventually creating a negative reputation for her that has been further fueled by the media and pop culture of the Arab world.[30] The main presumption about El Saadawi has been that 'she was saying what the West wanted to hear' about the Arab world.[31] Although less charged, Assia Djebar has also been regarded with suspicion and reservation amongst Algerian readers and critics –and even authorities—who fixated on her language choice.[32] Furthermore, Djebar's first work *La Soif* (1957) exposed her to trenchant criticism for its alienation from the main event occurring in her country, the Algerian Revolution. In France, reviews valued the novel and compared it to Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse,* reinforcing thereby, Algerian reviews which condemned the novel for its estrangement from the Algerian sphere and its embodiment of foreign ideals, especially during the intense political times in the country.[33] Clearly, the two

[30] Throughout her career, El Saadawi has been invited to do interviews in TV programs that did not particularly do her justice. Often, the interviewers lack proper training to enable them to lead a conversation with her persona, they ask questions that entail exhaustive responsive, interrupt her while she is responding and allow her little to no time to answer. This kind of show, which mostly welcome pop singers and actors, do not present El Saadawi as a campaigner or a writer appropriately. Rather, their presentations of her revolve around her being an atheist, a nonbeliever, and an anti-hijab activist. See: Nawal El Saadawi and Wafaa El Kilani, *Bidoun Rakaba* [Without Censorship], online video recording, YouTube, 28 December 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTTkY74qKZg [accessed 8 April 2020]. See also: Nawal El Saadawi and Nidal Al Ahmadieh, *Ma'a Nidal Al Ahmadieh* [With Nidal Al Ahmadieh], online video recording, YouTube, 10 January 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=233qaitLUsE [accessed 8 April 2020].

[31] Amireh and Maja, *Going Global*, p. 7.

[32] In chapter 2 and 4 it will be argued how French language proved to Djebar to be challenging and a sensitive means for writing and communicating.

[33] For a more detailed account on the Algerian criticism Djebar received, see Mostafa Lachraf's condemnation of Djebar in Wolfgang Asholt, Mireille Calle-Guber and Dominique Combe, *Assia Djebar: littérature et transmission* (Paris: Press Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2010), p. 130; Christiane Achour, *Anthologie de la littérature algérienne de langue française* (Alger: Entreprise Nationale de Presse, 1990), p. 235; Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Fi al kitaba wa tajriba* [In writing and experience] (Beirut: Manchourat al Jamal, 2008), p. 72; : Gabriele Stiller-Kem, 'Assia Djebar: The Clear but Fragile Force of Writing', *Quantara* (2004) para 12. https://en.qantara.de/content/assia-djebar-the-clear-but-fragile-force-of-writing [accessed 12 April 2020].

authors' Western approval seem to have discredited their authorship and rendered them subjects of controversy within their societies.[34]

My choice of examining El Saadawi and Djebar's works, is therefore triggered by the general reaction coming from the Arab world. This research explores the novels of El Saadawi and Djebar, paying close attention to the aspect of transgression and its occurrence in their fiction, and investigates the matters that have rendered these authors celebrated in the West and marginalised in the Arab world. The attention given to these two writers particularly, in this study, is the result of the combination of the two factors previously stated: reception in the Arab world and their ostracisation from the academy. My intention is to highlight the role of El Saadawi and Djebar as the founding figures of the transgressive novel of the Arab world. While their texts have historically positioned them as such, critically and theoretically, they have not been regarded in this way. Therefore, if a categorisation of transgression as a novelistic genre of contemporary Arab women writers is to take place, one ought to trace its genesis, examines its employments, explores its poetics, understand its drives and follow its continuum, in order to establish it as a common literary practice in women's writings of the Arab world. In this case, El Saadawi and Djbar's texts are the epitome, and the point of departure of such a project.

Since transgression as an act is co-dependent on limit for its realisation, it is paramount to highlight the socio-cultural contexts in which the two writers debuted their fiction, and the bounds and the boundaries that define them. For,

[34] It is important to note that negative criticism was an issue that confronted the writers in their beginnings and cannot be said to have lasted throughout their entire careers. However, these initial impressions left with the Arab audience constitute a significant point in this thesis, for transgression as a theme and a technique is strictly related to the aftermath of the books' publication and their reception. For a transgression to earn its status, one needs to look at the context where it happened and the reactions it generated. Before it makes its way to academic writing of scholars and critics, the notion of transgression, within a literary work, is first identified by readers, publishers and other institutions.

while indeed the limit stands as a framework in a given society at a given period, making and marking its centers and its margins, its prohibitions and its permissions, it remains nonetheless, variable. Reading El Saadawi's *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr* (1973) (*Woman at Point Zero* 1983) and Djebar's *Ombre sultane* (1987) (*A Sister to Scheherazade* 1993) reveals the writers' destabilisation, deconstruction and (re)inscription of the notion of limit to portray women's negotiations of identity and self-construction—and the possibility of such a task—in the predominantly patriarchal societies of the Arab world. Such a reading captures how female characters in the two writers' selected novels expose the fragility of limit through the writer's employment of transgression as a thematic, aesthetic and linguistic technique.

Ashour's testimony of El Saadawi's influence on the tradition of Arab women's writing is significant and is worth quoting at length, for it raises a number of pertinent points that feature integrally in this thesis. On her position in Arab women's literary canon, Ashour confirms that El Saadawi is:

> Another pioneer who raised several issues related to women's freedom and drew attention to the possibilities offered by the methodologies of the feminist movement in Europe and the U.S in the early 1960s. In many books—including sociological studies, stories, novels and journal articles—Nawal al-Sa'dawi put forth a new, bold, influential discourse picked up by later generations of women writers, who reproduced it, developed it, and used it as a starting point for a path that sometimes converged with that discourse and sometimes parted ways with it.[35]

Ashour's assertions are significant since they highlight the originality and the audacity of the discourse that El Saadawi uses in her writing, and their influence

[35] Ashour, *Arab Women Writers*, p. 7.

on the upcoming generation of women authors. When she emerged on the public scene, with her first novel *Mudhakkirat Tabibah* published in 1958 and translated into English in 1988 as *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, El Saadawi introduced women's issues through fiction with a unique style, making her a leading Arab women writer in a society that had yet to acknowledge the presence of women in this arena. Djebar's comments explain the difficulty of writing in the Arab world during a period when women's literature was scarce, arguing that:

> Les romancières arabes contemporaines de langue arabe (depuis Leila Baalabaki, Guedda Semman, en passant par Nawal es-Saadawi, Alifa Rifaat, jusqu'a Hennan el-Sheikh et Houda Barakat) expérimentent elles aussi la solitude de la création au sein d'une société plutôt soupçonneuse.[36]
>
> (Contemporary Arab women writers of Arabic language [from Leila Baalabaki, Guedda Semman, to Nawal es-Saadawi, Alifa Rifaat, until Hennan el-Sheik and Houda Barakat] also experience the solitude of creativity in a society that is rather suspicious).

Djebar refers in the above passage specifically to writings by Arab women whose works appeared between the 1950s and the 1960s, and this era offers a starting point for this study. Although the earliest novel engaged in the thesis, *Woman at Point Zero* (*Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr*), dates to 1973, El Saadawi is among a generation of authors whose works contributed to the new writings of this period. Hence, reference to this specific historical point helps us to understand the new wave of transgressive women's writing. Furthermore, at the beginning of the 1960s, liberation movements swept across Arab countries, leading to new waves of writings saturated by themes of freedom and reflecting more assertive

[36] Assia Djebar, *Ces voix qui m'assiègent…en marge de ma francophonie* (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1999), p. 83. All translations from French are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

tendencies. Women's writing shifted and adopted new approaches which Joseph Zeidan identifies as the exploration of 'individualistic perspectives'.[37] Zeidan sees that women writers of this generation were keen to broach themes that conveyed 'individualism, the drive to assert a personal and distinctly female identity, and demands for the social, sexual, and political rights of women'[38]. What makes this period an essential reference point for scholars in the field, and a significant one in this thesis, is the emergence of new voices from newly liberated Arab countries, expanding and enriching the canon, allowing for more room to reflect on Arab women's writings originating from the Middle East and North Africa and written in Arabic, French and English. Marta Segarra confirms that:

> L'activité littéraire des femmes maghrébines, [qui] est une occupation relativement nouvelle. La littérature arabe classique comprend, bien sûr, quelques écrivaines, mais ce sont des exemples isolés et considères comme des cas exceptionnels […] Néanmoins, à partir des années soixante, de l'Independence de la Tunisie, du Maroc et de L'Algérie, s'est développée toute une littérature, non-pas 'féminine' dans le sens exclusif qu'acquiert habituellement ce terme, mais écrite par des femmes.[39]
>
> (The literary activity of Maghrebi women is a relatively new occupation. The classical Arabic literature comprises, of course, some writers, but these are isolated examples and considered as exceptional cases…Nevertheless, starting from the 60s, from the independence of Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria, an entire literature has developed, not exclusively 'feminine' in the sense that term usually acquires, but written by women.)

[37] Joseph T. Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond* (New York: State University of New York Press), p. 6.
[38] Ibid., 7.
[39] Marta Segarra, *Leur pesant de poudre: romancieres francophone du Maghreb* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), p.7.

While Assia Djebar expresses, as shown earlier, the senses of solitude experienced by Arab women writers in a society not accustomed to women's public articulation, this situation is even more fraught when women's literary expression is manifested in a foreign language. Djebar sees that women writers whose literary works are produced in Arabic are able to maintain some shield against criticism, for they write in Arabic, a language that has its roots in Arab society.[40] In her case, transgressive writing is composed of a double act: it is writing by a woman, using the language of the ex-coloniser.

Djebar's first novel *La Soif* has been deemed to lack a political opinion as it focuses primarily on the protagonist's self-realisation and dims the light on national matters. Djebar has been accused to be among Algerian writers:

> Qui n'ont jamais saisi nos problèmes, même les plus généraux. Ils ont tout ignoré, sinon de leur classe petite bourgeoise, du moins de tous ce qui avait trait à la société algérienne : de tous les écrivains algériens, ce sont eux qui connaissent le moins bien leurs pays, ce qui les pousse escamoter les réalités algériennes sous une croute poétique, elle-même sans originalité du point de vue du roman.[41]
>
> (Who never understood our problems, not even the most general ones. Apart from their little bourgeois class, they ignored everything else that deals with the Algerian society. Of all Algerian writers, they were the ones who knew the least about their country, which led them to conceal Algerian realities under a poetic cover which itself lacked originality.)

Although a political consciousness might not have been evident in Djebar's *La Soif*, nonetheless, this novel is significant in relation to Djebar's literary corpus and Algerian

[40] Djebar, *Ces voix*, p. 83.
[41] It is not clear whether this criticism was articulated by the prominent Algerian writer Malek Haddad or Mostafa Lachraf, however, the quote is taken from: Valérie Orlando, 'La Soif d'Assia Djebar: pour un nouveau roman maghrébin', *El-Kitab,* 16 (2013) < http://revue.ummto.dz/index.php/khitab/article/view/1226> [accessed 23 April 2020].

women's writings, because it tests the waters of reception, reflecting the writer's confrontation with societal restraints preventing women's self-discovery and self-construction. Being an 'alarmingly ahistorical' work of fiction does not necessarily diminish its vital preoccupations with women's quest for identity.[42] Djebar's identification of this work as 'une sorte de rêve' (a kind of dream) reminds us that women's writing acts in a purely male dominated space: in the midst of the Algerian Revolution, women's preoccupations were perceived as 'unreal'.[43] Like the novel's protagonist, Nadia, Djebar used this novel as an attempt to establish a developing identity.

While the topic of women's subjectivity has remained central in the novels of contemporary Arab women writers, national and political concerns increasingly permeated women's writing and their agenda shifted to portray personal and national experiences. The writings of women underwent a thematic shift in the 1970s, and the novel changed its direction from a space where individuality was sought in isolation from reality to become a means for a collective engagement. Writers became more preoccupied with economic, social, political and religious issues occurring in their societies and impacting upon the status of women. This new employment of fiction has been regarded as specifically defying the perception 'that women authors write only on love and family, marriage and children'.[44] Rather, women's literary production happened simultaneously alongside momentous political events in the Arab region, when battles were fought to claim independence or to prevent occupation.[45] The themes of the novels

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[42] Jane Hiddleston, *Assia Djebar: Out of Algeria* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), p. 28.
[43]Ibid., p. 23.
[44] Mahmoud Saeed, 'Documenting Women Novelists Leads to Re-Writing History', *Al-Jadid Magazine*, 2000 < https://www.aljadid.com/content/documenting-women-arab-novelists-leads-re-writing-history> [accessed 31 January 2019].
[45] Such as the Palestinian invasion of 1948, the West Bank occupation in 1967 and the Algerian struggle for liberation of 1954. See: Suha Sabbagh, 'Palestinian Women Writers and the Intifada', *Social Text*, 22 (1989), 62-78 https://www.jstor.org/stable/466520?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents [accessed 11 August 2019]. On the Algerian feminine literary and non-literary war narratives see Mortimer's recent

written and published during these times of turmoil display their writers' authentic concerns regarding the socio-political conditions and represent men and women's subjugation in their homelands. Miriam Cooke explains that women's writing, particularly that of the postcolonial period, combines a concern with both women's and national agency and argues that: 'Their [women's] intervention in the writing of postcolonial wars has been one of the most remarkable examples of the ways in which Arab women have transgressed what were considered to be unbreachable boundaries'.[46] Works by prominent women writers attempt to capture the plight of women's resistance, emancipation and negotiation of liberation against two controlling powers, patriarchal and colonial.

The rising political consciousness displayed in contemporary Arab women writings constitutes an important dimension in the construction of the transgressive novel. Some writers, despite their creation of seminal works in Arab literature, and despite the fact that their works employ unconventional discussions and stylistics that establish it as a transgressive novel par excellence, fall outside the framework of this study. One case in point, is Layla Baalbaki and her ground-breaking *Ana Ahya* (*I Live*), published in 1958. This work marked the birth of the subversive novel of Arab women. The work was praised for its artistic style and bold expression of criticism against the traditional and the conservative lifestyle of the Arab family.[47] *Ana Ahya* was the first novel in Lebanon to spark a revolutionary literary movement as soon as it was published,

study in: Mildred Mortimer*, Women Fight, Women Write: Texts on The Algerian* War (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2018).

[46] Miriam Cooke, 'Feminist Transgressions in the Postcolonial Arab World', *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East* (1999), pp.93-105. Pp, 93. < https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232949061_Feminist_transgressions_in_the_postcolonial_Arab_world> [accessed 8 July 2019].

[47] See for example the review of Evelyne Accad, in: Evelyne Accad, 'Veil of Shame: Role of Women in the Contemporary Fiction of North Africa and the Arab World', *Al-Raida Journal* (1976), 3-5. < http://www.alraidajournal.com/index.php/ALRJ/article/view/1670> [accessed 10 August 2019].

and became a phenomenon not only in Lebanon but across the entire Arab world. *Ana Ahya* is a story of a rebellious and defiant girl who turns against her traditional, conservative society, a girl who wants to have control over her own life and to obtain the freedom she had always wanted. Lina Fayad, the heroine of *Ana Ahya*, is among the first characters in Arab women's novels to revolutionise the role designated for women in Arabic fiction, and the writer is credited with having negotiated the identity of her protagonist through the use of the first pronoun, breaking away from the tradition of dismissing the speaking 'I', and thus reflecting the emergence of the women's novel as a quest for identity.[48] Some critics also argue that this work signalled the birth of the Arab woman's voice. Roseanne Khalaf explains, 'What made Leila Baalbaki, in particular, interesting is because for the first time, it wasn't women trying to imitate men. They sort of found their own voice'.[49] Regardless of the popular outrage that *Ana Ahya* generated, Baalbaki produced two other works: *Aliha Mamsukha* (*Deformed Gods*) in 1960 and *Safinat Hanane Ila el Kamar* (*Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon*) in 1964, for which she was arrested and sued. Baalbaki's career as a novelist did not last long; she abandoned fiction and entered journalism at the start of the civil war in Lebanon in 1975. Thereafter, she moved to London and abandoned all types of writing, refusing to have any contact with the press and the literary world and choosing 'to live in the shadows after all that furore she raised in the sixties'.[50] She might have disappeared from the literary scene, but to use one opponent's term when criticising her, she was largely responsible for the

[48] Zeidan, *Arab Women*, p. 99.
[49] M Lynx Qualey 'Renaissance in Four Voices: Four Women Writers Celebrated in Beirut' (2016) < https://arablit.org/2016/07/06/renaissance-in-four-voices-four-women-writers-celebrated-in-beirut/> [accessed 24 January 2019].
[50] Wazan Abdou, 'Layla Baalbaki assassat al riwaya al nisa'iya al haditha wa ikhtafat' *Diwan AL Arab* (2008) < http://www.diwanalarab.com/spip.php?article12933> [accessed 24 January 2019].

birth of the 'damned literature' of Arab women writers.[51] Though *Ana Ahya* offers rich potential for discussion, and indeed remains under-examined critically, the absence of a political opinion within her work—though some might argue that even the most apolitical texts are in fact political—prevents my engagement with her in this thesis, since I maintain that transgression in contemporary Arab women's writings occurs against politics as well.

Baalabaki became to many women writers from the Arab world an icon who influenced upcoming authors to use fiction as a mode of expression. Hanan al-Shaykh, another established Lebanese writer, has commented on Baalbaki's influential role, stating: 'Baalbaki's style broke new ground and began a literary revolution in language with short sentences flying like sparks in every direction, unusual imagery and large doses of anger'.[52] Baalabaki's impact on al-Shaykh is tremendous. Today, Hanan al-Shaykh is an outstanding writer. Since her beginnings in 1970 from her first novel *Intihar Rajul Mayyit* (*Suidcide of a Dead Man*) to her latest work *'Athari Londonistan* published in 2014 and translated into English as *The Occasional Virgin* in 2018, she has followed the standards and the dimensions of transgressive fiction. My decision not to include her in this thesis is mainly due to the fact that a work of criticism similar to this study, which I discuss below, analyses al-Shaykh's transgressive technique.

Transgressive tactics in Hanan al-Shaykh's masterpiece *Hikayat Zahrah* published in 1980 and translated in 1986 into English as *The Story of Zahra*, are discussed to prioritise Zahra's transgressive behaviour for the sake of the nation in

[51] Ibid., p. 103.

[52] This quote was taken from Hanan al-Shaykh's speech given at the British Library at the 2019 Saif Ghobash Banipal Prise Lecture on 7 November 2019. See full details of the event: Hana al-Shaykh: 'Hanan al-Shaykh: My Travels Through Cultures, Languages and Writing' The British Library, London. 7 November 2019 < https://www.bl.uk/events/hanan-alshaykh-my-travels-through-cultures-languages-and-writing?fbclid=IwAR3vmBiX6nDGqvOXHhVYLsNKJzOD6QcyMPJwXY9jbm9mjGN19U38r-UjDUg>

Diya M. Abdo's study. In 'Redefining the Warring Self in Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* and Frank McGuinness' Carthaginians', Abdo offers an insightful reading of Zahra's story and makes a strong point, similar to this research, that transgression of the taboos in the novel is an intentional act. Abdo's analysis sees that Zahra's subversions, her defiance and her manipulation of the boundaries reflect an active participation and stemming from conscious, well deliberated judgments. Abdo asserts that Zahra displays 'the intentionality of participation' when performing transgressive behaviours.[53] For Abdo, Zahra's transgressive behaviours should be read only in a political light and her defiant acts seen as carried out for the sake of the nation, to the extent that Zahra becomes the representation of the nation. While this argument captures aptly the writer's urgent engagement with the civil war in Lebanon and her deployment of the novel to express political views, what is at stake here is the fact that Zahra's negotiation of selfhood through transgressive acts is only understood as her attempt to establish a national identity, which then risks denying her a subjectivity, toward which she also aspires, that is distinct from national and collective definitions. While I argued earlier that transgressive writing happens within and against political realms, politics is not necessarily an initial motivator. That is, transgression occurs at different stages: before making transgression a prerequisite political boundary that ought to be trespassed, the energies that trigger the transgression are initially personal and individual, bursting from a dire need to construct a new self, before these energies develop to become communal and are formed into a political

[53] Diya M. Abdo, 'Redefining the Warring Self in Hanan Al-Shaykh's "The Story of Zahra" and Franc McGuinness' "Carthaginians" *Pacific Coast Philology,* 42. 2 *(*2007), 217-231, (p. 224). https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/stable/pdf/25474234.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A02733e14ca75c335e5daabccbe526258 [accessed 13 January 2020].

stance. I find M. Keith Booker's analysis of transgression as a literary technique particularly relevant to my argument here. Booker writes:

> Clearly, the question of transgression in literature is difficult and complex, dealing with the function and purpose of literature, the impact of ideas upon institutions, and the interactions between culture and politics. This situation is made all the more arduous by the difficulty in even defining transgression. After all, even the most transgressive works of literature do not in general immediately send their readers into the streets carrying banners and shouting slogans. Transgressive literature works more subtly, by gradually chipping away at certain modes of thinking that contribute to the perpetuation of oppressive political structures. As a result, it is virtually impossible to document the actual political power of literature.[54]

Booker here points to the subtle potential of literary transgression in generating political action, for indeed, the readers' immediate rebellion against a political system caused directly by a literary work has never been recorded. This is not to imply that literature has the only role of entertainment; as well as its poetic and creative aspects, the thematic concerns of literary works have allowed the written word to influence readers and invited reflection and change. While the focus here is on the transgressive work and its direct relation with politics, it can also enable us to interpret transgressive acts within transgressive narratives and their political implications. It is the gradual development of events that ought to be underlined; that which is political was initially personal. The sense of individualism, however, has often been questioned for its association with Western ideals, particularly with Western feminism. This is especially the case since Arab feminism in the Arab world has developed alongside collective causes. Margot Badran has traced the

[54] M. Keith Booker, *Techniques of subversion in Modern literature: Transgression, Abjection, and the Carnivalesque* (Gainesville: The University of Florida Press, 1991), p. 4.

emergence of the Arab feminist movement and confirms that the 'story of Arab feminism is a story of intersections between feminism and nationalisms' and its institutionalization has 'emerged from a coalescence in solidarity around a nationalist cause, the Palestine cause.'[55] While, indeed, politics has forcefully shaped Arab women's movements, nonetheless, an awareness of women's individual subjectivity has always been present in 'intersection' and 'coalescence' with nationalism. It is obvious therefore to see a tendency to prioritise women's engagement with collective matters over personal causes when reading Arab women's literature in the manner in which Abdo does.

At this point it is necessary to shed light on one aspect that is significant when critically engaging with Arab women's writings. A perceptible conflation seems to present itself whenever the subject of women's writings is under discussion which is its association with feminism. Although women writers might or might not identify as feminists, and their texts might or might not be defined as feminist literature, yet it is likely that a text and its writer are often assigned the label feminist, and such a categorisation is troubling particularly to the writers who have their own reservations about feminism in the Arab region. Recently, the Egyptian writer Dena Mohamed in a lecture at the British library expressed her concerns about the reception of her comic novel *Shubeik Lubeik* (2018), explaining that:

> One of the major issues [in] being one of the few voices that people know, is that people tend to assume that my work represents all Egyptian women, or it represents [like] THE feminism of today, […] I think my work very much uniquely represents me and the points of view I have. […] a lot of people tend to assume because for example my graphic novel centres women, then it is just a very feminist story; and the story has feminism in it because I am writing it, but it isn't 'a' feminist story,

[55] Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and the Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 223.

> it's just a story. […] The reason a lot of people are reluctant to use the label feminist is that, it kind of alienates some people.[56]

It might be understandable that Dena Mohamed disclaims any feminist affiliations that might be attached to her work, especially since pioneering writers before her have also refrained from identifying themselves as feminists. Feminism as a notion and as a movement, despite a history that spans decades, continues to struggle to make a space for itself in the Arab region.

On the one hand, feminism in the Arab world has had to survive a number of prejudices, assumptions and reactions, with Arabs often presumed incapable of producing their own brand of feminism.[57] On the other hand, feminism in the Arab world has had to face confrontations from within the region. Reactionaries against feminism in Muslim communities argue that feminism is another assault practiced by Westerners on them and their culture, condemning it as a transgression on social norms and religious precepts. Miriam Cooke in her *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*, argues that feminism is not a characteristic of one culture rather than another, but rather an 'epistemology' that reflects women's growing awareness of the social, the political and the cultural structures that have organised a hierarchal, patriarchal order that disadvantages women. Cooke's definition of the movement is particularly relevant, for she disassociates its origins, its relevance and its aptness from a particular geographical location, attesting that 'feminism is not bound to one culture. It is no more Arab than it is American, no more Mediterranean than it is North European'.[58] In my opinion, Cooke's decentring of

[56] Dena Mohamed made these statements in a Q&A session at the British Library on 30 June 2019.
[57] Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, 'Is feminism relevant to Arab women?' *Third World Quarterly*, 25. 3 (2004), 521-536, (p. 521) < https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/stable/pdf/3993823.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ac39a9ed160d681da1c61c978086504d4> [accessed 5 February 2020].
[58] Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (Routledge: New York, 2001), p. 3.

feminism is an adequate gesture to put an end to the criticism that questions the relevance of feminism in the Arab world. It is no longer advantageous to dwell on the eligibility of feminism in the Arab world, for it is without question that a movement, an ideology or an epistemology ought to exist in order to act against the injustices based on gender practiced and dominant in the Arab society.

Questioning the utility of feminism in the societies of the Middle East and North Africa discredits the efforts of brave women who, driven by the core value of feminism— which is putting an end to women's oppression— have ameliorated the lot of women and corrected the gendered and sexually based wrongs that have been perpetuated on them. Most importantly, the rights endowed to them by Islam, which had been seized from them, were brought back by the active engagement of women who have explicitly or implicitly identified themselves as feminists. While the term is still indeed regarded with suspicion and resistance, it is no longer a strange new ideology imported from elsewhere. If anything, negative attitudes towards feminism today continue to resonate for a different reason. While previously frowned upon for being an intrusion on the conservative society and a Western cultural colonisation, as well as a 'blasphemy to religion'. As argued by Margot Badran in her 2009 *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences,* these were the initial perceptions when women were only beginning to demand and implement changes in the Arab society.[59] These are some of the accusations that have followed it and accompanied the evolution of feminism, but they are not the only basis for the hostility directed towards the movement. More importantly, when it was first articulated, opposition to feminism occurred among intellectuals from middle and higher social classes, as argued by

[59] Margot Bdran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), p.1.

Badran.[60] Feminism today has permeated Arab society so profoundly that it is no longer a new phenomenon and cannot be rejected on the basis that it is— to borrow the language from technological platforms where it is predominantly used— 'toxic'. Youths today see feminism as a man-hating ideology and not an assault on the Arab culture or religion per se.[61] It is, thus, futile to continue to debate the applicability of the movement when it is a common word and notion in use among rejectionists as well as supporters.

Perhaps what has been most troublesome about feminism in Arab society is the absence of its Arabic language analogue. Badran and Cooke note that the Arabic term *nisa'iyya* was used to refer to feminism during its first manifestation and traced it in the work of *Al-Nisaiyat* (1910), a book by Malak Hifni Nasif in which she gathered a collection of articles she wrote and published in *Al-Jarida* newspaper.[62] While Hinfi's work embodies feminist convictions, the term *nisa'iyya* was not deemed representative of the movement as it carries the signification of something done by or about women. *Nisa'iyya* was changed after seven decades to a more 'unequivocal' term which is *niswiyya*.[63]

The term in its Arabic form might still be subject to local contestation, since it appears to be antagonistic towards Arab culture and reinforces binary categorisations such as secular/religious, traditional/modern, colonial/colonised and first World/Third World. This being the case, mediating and modulating these

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[60] Ibid., 18-55-56-66-142. This has also been discussed at length by one of the forerunners scholars in third world feminism, Kumari Jayawardena, see: Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1986), pp. 48-56.

[61] Iman Al Namer, 'Mada ya'ni an akouna nassawiya' ('What does it mean for me to be a feminist'), *TRT Arabic* (18 December 2018) para 6. < https://www.trtarabi.com/opinion/%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%86-%D8%A3%D9%83%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-15892> [accessed 08 December 2019].

[62] Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, *Opening the Gates: An Anthology of Arab Feminist Writing*. 2nd edn (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. xviii.

[63] Ibid., p. xviii.

fixed contrasts might effectuate the universalisation of the term, thus reconciling the local and the global. Hanafi Sari argues that the possibility of universalising a concept is likely under three conditions:

> The first is being the outcome of a quasi-cross-cultural consensus, and not by generalizing or universalizing values embedded from the Euro-American context. Second, it is not a teleological concept, but a historical experience (Rosanvallon, 2008) that gets its normativity as a result of a collective historical learning process (inherently open-ended). Third, its universality is impossible except as an imaginary; a general, wide, flexible concept not a model to be exported.[64]

If we follow Sari's model of universalising concepts, feminism can indeed be seen as a universal term, but a malleable one. While the term might have been coined in the West, in the Arab world its values are shaped according to the specificity of Arab culture. Furthermore, it can be divided into two paradigms 'Islamic feminism' and 'secular feminism', and emerged in the nineteenth century during major moments in the region such as 'nationalist anti-colonial struggle, dynastic decline, and independent state building', as Badran argues, which reflects the aspect of historical experience that Sari discusses.[65] Finally, what remains is the imaginary longing for women's emancipation seen through organisations and unions which advocate women's rights in the countries of the Arab world. Thus, feminism in the Arab world has established a different identity, and ever since its emergence, has been in the process of transformation in order to be rendered into a workable model in the Arab context.

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[64] Hanafi Sari, 'Global Sociology Revisited: Toward New Directions' in Current Sociology, 86.1 (2019), 3-21 (p.14) < https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0011392119869051> [accessed 22 June 2020].

[65] Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, p. 3.

When Dina Mohamed conveys an uncomfortable sense of association with feminism, as shown earlier, due to its alienating tendencies, this is in fact a result of a long history of alienation practiced on women of the Muslim world. Liberal US feminists have much to do with this. In the wake of the horrific events of 9/11 and the escalating tension between the Muslim world and US, Muslim women especially became subjected to racism, stereotyping and specific forms of violence— physical and discursive.[66] Prior to 9/11, 'Third World women' were approached and represented by Western feminist discourse largely on the basis of 'shared oppression' and the notion of 'We Are All Sisters in Struggle', as argued by Chandra Talpade Mohanty.[67] However, after the 9/11 events, the Western feminist agenda seemd to prioritise a different slogan that promised Muslim women' a 'rescue mission' that would deliver them out of a patriarchal system governed by a religion that was deemed oppressive and misogynistic.[68] Pre- and post-9/11 Western feminist discourses presented challenges to local feminist movements at the time, for, Western feminists' intervention in the situation of 'Third World women' and 'the Muslim women' failed to take into account fundamental cultural, historical, political and economic intricacies that ought to be considered for undertaking any feminist project. More often than not, Western feminist involvement, benevolent as it may be, ends up reinforcing the very thing it hopes to undo: the disempowerment and the alienation of Third World and Muslim women.[69]

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[66] Mervat F. Hatem, 'The Political and Cultural Representations of Arabs, Arab Americans, and Arab American Feminisms after September 11, 2001', in *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: gender, Violence, and Belonging*, ed. by Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany and Nadine Naber (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), pp. 10-28.

[67] Chadra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 22-23.

[68] Amal Talaat Abdelrazek, *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings* (New York: Cambria Press, 2007), p. 7.

[69] One striking example is the Ukrainian Femen movements which relies in its advocacy of women's right on 'sextrimism' tactics. In one of their public protests, in 2013, their cause was the

The period that followed the events of 9/11 marked the Arab Muslim woman differently in the global view and has simultaneously impacted women's literary productions. When mainstream media often presented the Muslim woman as an oppressed and/or an exotic other, fiction also participated in the production of knowledge on the subject of the Muslim female identity. Post-9/11 Anglophone literature by Arab women offers a useful juncture for thinking about transgression and identity in relation to women's agency. Layla Al Malah affirms that prior to 9/11, Anglophone literature by Arab women and men alike was overlooked by scholarship, while a growing body of critical studies was being carried out on other territorial literatures written in English.[70] Wisam Abdul-Jabbar argues that such a scant engagement with the Arab Anglophone novel reflects the tendency to see this category of Arab writing 'as a project in progress' that has not yet developed into field that deserves a scholarship of its own.[71]

In this new realm of Arab women's expression, the Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif is recognised as the first writer to have experimented with modern novelistic techniques to produce a literary text in English. Geoffrey Nash describes her as 'a pathfinder in the wave of Arab writers in English of the last two decades of the twentieth century.'[72] Others, however, have undermined Soueif's contribution to contemporary Arab literature, because 'the Anglophone Egyptian

Saudi driving ban on women, in which they painted on their naked breasts and held banners with the slogan 'camel for men, cars for women!'. Saudi women activists have already been demanding for such a right since decades ago, through protests pertinent to the Saudi culture, and only in 2018 the long-standing ban was lifted. Certainly, it was the tools that Saudi women with the collaboration of Saudi men, used that enabled women to obtain their right to drive.

[70] Layla Al Maleh, *Arab voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* (AmsterdamNew York: Rodopi, 2009), p. ix.

[71] Wisam Kh. Abdul-Jabbar, 'Negotiating Diasporic Identity' in *Arab-Canadian Students: Double Consciousness, Belonging, and Radicalization* (Canada: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 34-35.

[72] Geoffrey Nash, *The Anglo-Arab Encounter: Fiction and Autobiography by Arab Writers in English* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), p.65.

novelist writes in English' and hence her works were viewed as situated in the canon of 'English literature' and to retain no affiliation with Arab literature.[73]

Such remarks reflect the ongoing attempt to alienate Arab women from literature, despite the rich corpus they have produced. This attempt is certainly a reaction to their disruptive approaches within the Arab literary canon and because of their non-conforming styles. Arab Anglophone literature, particularly which is produced by British-based writers, is, as Al Malah remarks, 'female, feminist, diasporic in awareness and political in character'.[74] One writer studied in this research, Fadia Faqir, displays several affiliating links with these characteristics. From their appearance in 1985 to the present day, Faqir's works depict gender issues intertwined with historical, social and political contexts. Her fiction is strictly challenging in its nature and tackles cultural, religious and political limits preventing women's freedom head on. Had they been written in the Arabic language, which Faqir believes it to be 'misogynist', they would not have seen the light.[75] Nash argues that her writings reflect a radical feminist construction; Faqir's preference for English as a language for literature reflects 'a conscious self-liberation from the constraints facing Arab women writers who write in their native language'.[76]

Even though Faqir's and other Anglophone literature of other Arabs in America and Britain was in print for at least three decades before the new millennium, it only rose to prominence and began to be read by scholars and lay readers in the West in the post-9/11 world.[77] From big online book suppliers, to

[73] Cited by Shaden M. Tageldin 'The Incestuous (Post) Colonial: Soueif's Map of Love and the Second Birth of the Egyptian Novel in English' in *The Edinburg Companion to the Arab Novel in English*, ed. Nouri Gana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 85.
[74] Al Maleh, *Arab voices*, p. 13.
[75] Fadia Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, p. 18.
[76] Nash, *The Anglo-Arab Encounter*, p. 125.
[77] Al Maleh, *Arab voices*, p. 2.

book stores to the creation of curricula in Western universities, Al Malah, argues, Arab literature written in 'the lingua franca of the modern age' seemed to have been the right means 'to a better comprehension of the "terrorist Other".[78] Even the fiction that was published during this era, as critics attest, privileged the expectations of Western readers. Ruzy Suliza Hasim and Noraini Yusof explain that the literary production of Muslim writers post-9/11 focused on the events in two ways; the narratives either 'confirm Western prejudices about Islam' or 'produce different and positive images of the religion and its believers'. [79]

Here, too, the function by writing presents itself in the discussion on the Anglophone novel of the Arab woman writer, particularly the works published after 9/11. On the one hand, transgressive fiction produced by women writers from the Arab world in English is a mechanism of resistance through which the authors create a space where women are represented as contesting certain patriarchal assumptions and oppressive traits of Arab culture. On the other hand, this fictional representation is often taken to be a 'mirror to their real [Arab] identity'.[80] Transgressive Anglophone Arab women's writings face the danger of performing a re-inscription of stereotypical images while attempting to destabilise gender discourses dominant in the Arab world. Faqir's fiction responds to this threat by employing subversive techniques that challenge both Arab and Western perceptions of women.

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[78] Ibid.,p. 1-2.

[79] Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Noraini Md Yusof, 'Counter-discourses in Post-9/11 Muslim Women's Narratives' in Women's Fiction and Post-9/11 Contexts, ed. by Peter Childs, Claire Colebrook and Sebastian Groes (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015), p. 125.

[80] Majed Hasan, 'Islam and Muslim Identities in Four Contemporary British Novels' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sunderland, 2012), p. 143. https://sure.sunderland.ac.uk/ [accessed 16 July 2019] See: Rochelle Terman, 'Islamophobia and Media Portrayals of Muslim Women: A Computational Text Analysis of US News Coverage', International Studies Quarterly, 61. (2017), pp. 489-502. pp. 501-502. https://watermark.silverchair.com/sqx051.pdf? [accessed 11 August 2019]. See also: Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), pp.71-99.

Over the course of her career, Faqir has produced fiction that simulates different eras, and spans different geographical locations, presenting and representing in each work Arab women's agency within diverse historical, cultural and socio-political contexts. Her 1988 *Nisanit* reflects on the Palestinian/Israeli conflict and describes the crisis of identity endured by the three protagonists of the novel, Shaheed, Eman and David. Faqir's second work, *Pillars of Salt* was published in 1996 and followed by her 2007 *My Name is Salma*. These two works, by far, are Faqir's most acclaimed novels and often brought forward in discussions on the Arab World/West divide. While, in both of these novels, Faqir employs transgressive techniques for women's resistance and agency, I have chosen to analyse *My Name is Salma* largely for its contemporary time-based characteristics. *Pillars of Salt* is set around the 1920s during the British Mandate and explores the theme of women's subjugation at the hands of patriarchal and colonial powers. In this work Faqir employs transgressive techniques to destablise certain normative discourses held as fixed truth and used against women. Through the use of folk narratives, for example, Faqir deconstructs false assumptions such as women's virginity and women's enclosure within the private space of the house, engaging the women in her narrative in resistance against patriarchal restrains. Most notable however, is Faqir's employment of the storyteller who is an old man cold Sami Al Adjnabi to transgress against multiple forms of boundaries—colonial, religious, cultural and patriarchal— reflecting a sophisticated and a creative manner in constructing her women's identities, as well as her own as an Anglophone Arab writer. Because *Pillars of Salt* has often been studied as an example of postcolonial literature, I have selected Faqir's *My Name is Salma* since it is a text that is often regarded as an astute reflection of the post-9/11 era.

It is worth noting here that this thesis's time scale does not propose to see 9/11 as an indication of the end of the period of postcolonialism or of the relevance of theories of postcolonialism. For example, by calling my *Name is Salma* post-9/11 literature, I do not claim that only Arab women's writings produced prior to 9/11 are postcolonial and retain no link with today's reality. In fact, the term 'post' in postcolonialism is questionable as it raises several issues in critical theory. This argument is evident in the seminal work of Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, in which McClintock questions the casualty in dealing with 'post' concepts, arguing that:

> […] the almost ritualistic ubiquity of 'post' words in current culture (postcolonialism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, post-cold war, post-Marxism, postapartheid, even postcontemporary) signals, I believe, a widespread, epochal crisis in the idea of linear, historical progress.[81]

'Post' terms, as McClintock explains, suggest that history happens in developmental and sequential stages, signaling a termination, an expiration of past experiences. This thesis contradicts such an organisation of time since a literary text such as *Ombre Sultane*, written in 1987, could certainly relate to events taking place in more recent times. I have chosen, however, to divide the corpus of novels in this research into two 'posts' mainly to explore the transgressions as they relate to limits and boundaries fashioned at certain moments, and to analyses the writer's urgent interventions in the project of the representation of Arab women's agency during the time of the misrepresentations perpetuated by colonialism on the one hand, and mainstream media of 9/11, on the other.

[81] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 1995), p. 10.

As the question of misrepresentation of Muslim women has surfaced conspicuously in the 2000s, it has become particularly the domain of the Western entertainment industry to dispense clichés of oppressed and passive Muslim women.[39] As a result, the public demand for works by women writers of the Arab world has increased in the literary market and extended its scope to include the previously marginalised literature of the region. Saudi women especially are among the most affected by negative depictions of Muslim women, and it is precisely during this period that they rose to attention as writers and active participants in literary production. Rachel Simon observes that Saudi women's investment in fiction is one way through which distorted knowledge could be counteracted. Acknowledging that the image of Saudi society 'is not always flattering', Simon argues that the writings of Saudi women have the ability to 'attest to [the] veracity of the picture' they reflect.[82]

Raffia Tali was the first scholar to devote an entire monograph to women writers from the Gulf. There, she discusses the appearance of feminist discourses in the narratives of women from this region.[83] Tali confirms that despite the growing body of critical works that deal with the novel as a medium of self-expression for women writers of the Arab world, 'all contributions made for this objective, focused only on the efforts of prominent Arab women writers' and made scant reference to authors from the Gulf.[84] Tali examines a collection of novels by women writers from Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to see how the selected writers tackle feminist issues through indirect references and insinuation.

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[82] Rachel Simon, 'Review of: Voices of Change: Short Stories by Saudi Arabian Women Writers' *Digest of Middle East Studies* (1999),70-72, (p. 72). <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com> [accessed 30 July 2019].

[83] Raffia Tali, *Al Hob wa al jassed wa al horiya fi al nas al riwai al niswi fi al khalij* [Love and Body and Freedom in the Feminist Narrative Discourse in the Gulf] (Beirut: Arab Diffusion Company, 2005).

[84] Ibid., pp. 9-10.

She concludes that writers' characterisation of gender issues is left to the reader to decipher, since gender is not openly discussed.[85] As the novel of Gulf women is in its developing stages, the few existing works that appeared during Tali's research have been the subjects of critical studies that scrutinise women's writings with the aim of eliminating the fictional performance in their narratives and treating them in biographical terms, attempting to find the personal story of the writer behind her protagonist.[86]

Meriam Cooke suggests that the writing of women from the Gulf is an experience of documentation, precisely because it recounts the reality of the Gulf War. [87] In her analysis of Kuwaiti and Iraqi women's works, Cooke sees the representation of the war in women's writing as a manifestation of 'a new identity', one which brings a woman writer to a new role. Of Kuwaiti women's novels in particular, she argues that their authors 'evoke the shock of the invasion, its brutalities, the rape of mothers witnessed by their sons, the small acts of resistance and defiance'.[88] Writing the Gulf War, both in fictional and non-fictional forms, is, as Cooke puts it, 'peculiarly important, useful for other[s]', as the writer becomes 'a witness' of the war's realities and her testimony is heard.[89]

Clearly, the encounter with the written word has helped women to craft a space where they can attempt to make sense of their societies and reflect on their own beings. The adoption of the novel by Arab women has opened a liberating terrain in which social restrictions are escaped and reflections on the self against and beyond pre-given definitions are inscribed. Even in the conservative society of Saudi Arabia, fiction for women has opened up new territories where agency can

[85] Ibid., p. 13.
[86] Ibid., p. 212.
[87] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam, p. 15*.
[88] Ibid., pp. 16-17.
[89] Ibid., p.16.

be negotiated by destabilising the values governing their society. The newest generation of Saudi women, including Rajaa Alsanea with her work *Banat Al Riyadh* (2005), translated into English as *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), has rendered creative practice a malleable field through which a critique of society is candidly performed and silence as a barrier is overcome.

In attending to the disruption of the discourse of sexuality in El Saadawi's novel, the destabilisation of gendered spaces in Djebar's, the employment of transgressive strategies for overcoming intersectional subjugation in Faqir's, and challenges issued to conservativism and traditionalism in Alsanea's, the argument of my thesis supports itself with poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonial and feminism. Poststructural, postcolonial, postmodern and feminist frameworks, lay the ground for the perception of transgression for agency, to emerge as a strategy for reading contemporary Arab women writings.

The texts of Nawal Al Saadawi and Assia Djebar invite a poststructural and a postmodern analysis to show the process of destabilisation of gender norms, specifically the execution of the deconstruction of pre-established truths about sexuality and public/private spaces performed by the writers. My reading of *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr* and *Ombre Sultane* is supported by Michelle Foucault's theory of implantation as articulated in his *The History of Sexuality* for the former, and Judith Butler's conceptualisation of gender performativity in her *Gender Trouble* for the latter. A Foucauldian exploration of the implantation of identity helps in unwinding the hegemonic discourse that regards aberrant sexualities as intrinsic. I trace this position developed by Foucault in the text of Al Saadawi, arguing that it undoes the long-held discourses on the sexuality of the prostitute. The disruption of conventional discourses also features in the text of Djebar. Thus, in a similar vein, I explore gender categorisation, gender identity construction, gendered social organisation and chiefly, the destabilisation of the notion of gender and the domains

it has come to control. Butler's argument concerning the power of repetition, not only in consolidating but also for challenging gender norms, is essential in my reading of *Ombre Sultane.*

My analysis of *My Name is Salma* and *Banat Al Riyadh* is framed by postcolonial, race and feminist theorisation. Here, theories of pioneering thinkers are brought forward to demonstrate the process of subject formation in the Arab world and diaspora. Edward Said's contestation of orientalist knowledge produced and perpetuated and rendered a discourse on the 'Orient' elaborated in his seminal work *Orientalism* presents a model to follow in delineating the construction and the deconstruction of orientalist tropes present in the two novels. It is, especially, the counteraction by intentionally reproducing an imaginary, exotic representation of Arab women that is under scrutiny within these works, both of which deploy poetic transgressions to reject misconceptions about Arab women. Since these works appeared after the events of 9/11, a time of mounting pressure and conflict between the West and the Muslim world, this sociopolitical sphere is recognised as a predominant literary theme reflecting creatively on cultural interactions and the complex realities issuing from these events. *My Name is Salma* portrays precisely the encounter between the Arab World and the West and depicts the dual experiences of subjects resisting dual power systems preventing their self-formation.

Crucial to my intepretation of Faqir's novel is a reading of hybridity. I refer to the theory of Homi Bhabha to demonstrate how Arab women writers deploy creative writing to reflect the Arab female experience, previously uncharacterised. This novel specifically is woven with a distinctive pattern that renders the model of hybridity incapable of fully supporting the negotiation of this text. Conveying the full complexity of a diasporic postcolonial migrant Muslim woman from the Arab world, which Faqir brilliantly depicts, needs a further theoretical frame that can

reflect the multifaceted lived experience of Arab women. I engage the theory of intersectionality, which has yet to be applied in critical studies on Arab literature, focusing particularly on the views and the works of Kimberlé Crenshaw, to deliver a comprehensive study of the novel, and to reconcile the limitations that might occur from solely arguing that transgressive techniques in the text have the fuction of constructing hybrid identities. Rather, transgressive strategies carry the subject out of intersectional oppressive patterns that follows as a consequence of cultural interactions.

In my reading of *Banat Al Riyadh*, a chick lit novel, I primarily explore the notion of the subaltern's speech, employing Gayatri Spivak's theory of the subaltern to assess the capability of Saudi women's writings to participate in the tradition of Arab women's writing and to influence Arab feminist discourse. I rely additionally on the available literature and criticism critically engaging the chick lit genre to situate it as a new trend that has yet to be embraced by scholarship.

This range of critical and theoretical approaches used to explore transgression might fall into what Gyan Prakash refers to as a 'catachrestic combination of Marxism, poststructuralism, Gramsci and Foucault' in reference to the Subaltern Studies project. [90] These Western, Eurocentric philosophies are made into models to contextualise the specific lived experiences of the subject who was once colonised, or of their offspring who continues to deal with the repercussions of the colonial aftermath. Aware of the dangers of this approach, I take every possible care and use these theories with the caveat that we must account for the specific details that present— and protect—the Arab female experience as portrayed in the novels. Although this approach might present some

[90] Gyan Prakash, 'Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism' *American Historical Review*, 9. 55 (1994), 1475-1490, (p. 1490).

pitfalls when critically engaging with Arab women's writings, I have deliberately narrowed my choice of Western theory to engage poststructuralism, postcolonial and feminist critics, adopting those aspects of these theoretical approaches most illuminating of the literary works examined here.

What complicates the links between these school of thought, especially the relation between poststructuralism and postcolonialism, is the negative assumptions that have circulated around postcolonialism since its emergence. Among the reductive criticism that has followed postcolonialism is its pseudo-subordination to poststructuralism. Critics from postcolonial thought have been presumed to be incapable of producing a theory of their own, relying instead on European intellectualism to construct ideas only for postcolonial critics to recycle them. However, Robert Young, Paul Ahluwalia, Azzedine Hadoor and Jane Hiddleston are among the scholars who have advanced the field of postcolonialism, stressed its relation and relevance to the emergence of the poststructuralist project and highlighted postcolonialism's originality as an independent thought.[91] Robert Young, for example, traces the emergence of poststructuralism to Europe's colonies, and its development by 'tricontinental writers' alongside 'other writers who have migrated from decolonized tricontinental countries to the West.'[92] Paul Ahluwalia locates 'the African colonial experience' as the source of the rise of the French poststructuralist theory, highlighting particularly, 'the Algerian locatedness, identity and heritage' of the founders of poststructuralism.[93] Likewise Azzedine Hadour focuses attention on The Algerian

[91] See: Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing,2001). Paul Ahluwalia, *Out of Africa: Poststructuralism's Colonial Roots* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010). Azzedine Haddour, 'Introduction: Remembering Sartre' in *Colonialism and neocolonialism*, trans by Azzedine Haddour, Steve brewer and terry McWilliams (London and New York: Routledge, 2006). Jane Hiddleston, *Poststructuralism and Postcoloniality: The Anxiety of Theory* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010).
[92] Young, *Postcolonialism*, p. 68.
[93] Ahluwalia, *Out of Africa*, p. 3.

War of Independence and its role in producing poststructuralism, maintaining that: 'The Algerian War had an impact on the political institutions of mainland France, and the process of decolonization influenced the cultural climate and intellectual life of postcolonial France.'[94]

Among the common points that Hiddleston has identified between postcolonialism and poststructuralism is their attention to the role of the critic. Both frames of thought require of their thinkers a constant state of self-questioning and demand a clear self-positioning. Hiddleston identifies the duo's connection to be seen where 'the thinkers engage most explicitly with the problem of their own inscription in the text and the position in which this inscription places them with regard to the cultural or ethnic other that they also want to conceptualise'.[95]

The co-implementation of poststructuralism and postcolonialism in critical scholarship in different disciplines such as history and literature challenges derogatory perceptions about the postcolonial school of thought. Rather, the formation of the subject against different structures of power is a legitimate concern for both theories and their amalgamation enables us, especially in this study, to attend to the complexity of forging an understanding of the Arab female experience as portrayed in the contemporary novels of Arab women.

In this light, the thesis is organised in terms of four interconnected chapters designed according to specific themes. To ensure a profound critical engagement with the writers' texts, Chapter 1 forms the basis of this criticality by providing social and historical contexts for Arab women's literary productions. To see how women arrived in the field of literature and how they made it a woman's space, the chapter sheds light on historical moments in which Arab women contested the

[94] Hadour, 'Introduction', p. 17.
[95] Hiddleston, *Poststructuralism and Postcoloniality*, p. 4

multiple forces striving to subjugate them. Because transgressions in fiction challenge confining limits in reality, this chapter situates women's works alongside the main societal taboo controlling them: their gendered bodies. The woman's body, it will be argued, has been socially embodied with mythical ideologies and coded with restrictive discourses, making it a social, collective property, and a taboo rigidly untraversable. The texts of the writers studied here represent the female body with an alternative vision, allowing it to claim every denied right and make it independent and self-possessed. Hence, Chapter 1 is designed to achieve complementarity between context and the novels' content.

Chapter 2 aligns Nawal El Saadawi's novel, *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr*, with Assia Djebar's *Ombre sultnane* in a reading that illustrates how sexuality and public space are represented as sites of control and resistance. In the section devoted to El Saadawi's text, I describe how the protagonist manipulates the disciplining discourse practiced on her as a means of achieving agency. Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* contributes to an understanding of how subjects can challenge social and historical inscriptions of identity on the body. Likewise, in my discussion of Djebar's novel in relation to her other works, I argue that the writer uses subversive techniques to reject the division of society as spatially gendered. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is useful to see how gender has been a social construct maintained with the status quo through repetitive behaviours. Djebar's novel challenges gendered spaces as coherent categories dictating women's and men's roles and defining their identities. The chapter concludes by examining how both El Saadawi and Djebar treat the conundrum of elite women's representations of non-elite women in their novels.

Chapter 3 offers a reading of Fadia Faqir's text *My Name is Salma* and Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*, drawing from Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Homi Bhabha's *Location of Culture,* as well as Kimberlé Crenshaw's works on

intersectionality to examine the narratives' transgressive themes. I argue that Faqir and Alsanea employ orientalist tropes not to consolidate stereotypical images on women of the Middle East, but to counteract them. The transgression in their texts consists of a dense, bold criticism directed against local and global hegemonies marginalising Arab women within and beyond the Arab world. Here, I pay special attention to the ways in which genre—the diasporic novel the case of Faqir, and chick lit in the case of Alsanea—operates as means to resist cultural construction.

Most of the texts of my corpus are classics and others, if not yet having reached that status, have attracted illuminating critical discussion. Chapter 4, accordingly, tackles the material aspects of the book to focus precisely on language and translation as means of monitoring the selected writers' reception. The texts of Arab women, whether written in Arabic or Western languages or translated from the original Arabic, have always provoked critical concern regarding these writers' intentions with the foreign language. I examine the ways in which Djebar and Faqir have mirrored their identities, as authors and as women from the Middle East and North Africa through French and English, and I return briefly to *Ombre sultane* and *My Name is Salma* to see how the protagonists as subalterns deploy Western cosmopolitan languages. In the second section of the chapter, I argue that El Saadawi and Alsanea face similar questions regarding the appearance of their works in different language, an issue which is as complex as Djebar's and Faqir's, since the process of translating their texts has generated on-going debates regarding the Western interest in Arab women's fiction. Translations of these novels have involved major alterations to ease their reception in the Western market and to claim Western readers' approval. I engage the main scholars who have brought this topic to attention and study how the notion of transgression is further reinforced by the translation process. My overall aim with this chapter is to show how Arab women's texts in any language are candid

transgressions against the notion of silence that has been so long expected from Arab women locally, and has guided the perceptions of them globally. This chapter concludes that the contemporary novel of Arab women writers, whether in the lingua franca, the indigenous tongue or between these two, breaks away from silence and shatters the image of the subaltern's inability to speak. Rather, it turns the tables, and questions the non-subaltern's ability to hear.

To conclude this Introduction, I draw attention to one more crucial aspect of engaging with Arab women's literature, which is the label Arab. In his review of Brinda J. Mehta's book, *Dissident Writings of Arab Women: Voices against Violence* (2014), Abdelkader Cheref criticises Mehta for identifying her corpus of women writers under the term Arab.[96] Cheref's criticism is made on the basis that an 'Arab identity' is a 'myth' that has been denounced by recent postcolonial criticism. One point in Cheref's criticism is correct: Arabhood is not an essentialist category—nor does Mehta present it as such, for that matter. The region given the name 'Arab' is so historically, culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse and rich that a cohesive term to group and represent it has rarely generated consensus.[97] Hence it is important to note that my identification of any writer as an Arab is because the author identifies explicitly as such. At the same time, the vibrant dynamics that render the region of the Arab world a heterogeneous one should not be a cause of separation and fragmentation; if anything, artificial borders that have limited an engagement with the problematically termed Arab world should be trespassed. As this research is driven by the transgressive spirit

[96] Abdelkader Cheref, '*Dissident Writings of Arab Women: Voices against Violence* by Brinda J. Mehta (review)' *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 13. 3 (2017),438-441, (p. 438). https://muse.jhu.edu/article/677737 [accessed 12 August 2019].

[97] On this issue see: Baha Abu-Laban and Sharon MacIrvin Abu-Laban, *The Arab World: Dynamics and Development* (Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1986), pp.2-3. And: Paul Eid, *Being Arab: Ethnic and religious Identity Building Among Second Generation Youth in Montreal* (Québec: McGill-Queen's University, 2007), p. x.

of the seminal writers in my corpus, it, too, commits a transgression in destabilising the critical field by providing a joint reading of literary texts by women from across the region.

Chapter 1 Arab Womanhood: Context and Content

In his seminal book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Dipesh Chakrabarty criticises Eurocentric social sciences that 'demystify' complex historical dimensions of non-Western societies, in an attempt to simplify local distinctiveness subsuming it into a universal prototype of human experience. Such a demystification, Chakrabarty argues, is made 'in order to produce a critique that looks towards a more just social order' ignoring in the process the details that ought to be highlighted for establishing an 'understanding of the diversity of human life-worlds'.[1]Likewise, In 'Under Western Eyes' Chandrah Mohanty urges and appeals for an engagement with third world feminist activism to cast microscopic attention on the 'difference', the 'local', the 'particular', and with the notion of 'specificity ' pertinent to third world women when feminist movements address their concerns and issues.[2] This chapter responds to Mohanty's call by providing an analysis of the distinct contexts that have shaped the lives of women and constructed womanhood across the Arab region.

This region particularly, as Halim Barakat asserts, 'is not a mere mosaic of sects, ethnic groups, tribes, local communities and regional entities. Rather it carries within it the potential for unity and diverseness'.[3] Indeed, because the Arab world is not one stagnant, symmetrical and congruent territory, because Arab women do not constitute one group and because identity construction is a unique and an individual experience, this chapter conceptualises some of the historical and the social contexts from which Arab women writers derive their content. My purpose is to remain attentive to the social, historical,

[1] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. 2nd ed (New Jersey and Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 18.
[2] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles' in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, ed. by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 222-223.
[3] Halim Barakat, *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. xi.

political and cultural factors that have made Arab womanhood a heterogeneous lived experience across the different parts of the Arab world. Like Mohanty, Grewal and Kaplan, I emphasise the 'need to address the concerns of women around the world in the historicised particularity of their relationship to multiple patriarchies as well as to international economic hegemonies', while raising questions regarding women's resistance to oppression.[4] In this spirit of pinning down categorical conditions of oppression, forms of resistance and subject formation, this chapter locates major Arab feminist articulations at particular historical, cultural and political moments for multiple interconnected objectives.

My first aim is to account for the common but also the diverse aspects that have shaped the Arab female experience. Secondly, I wish to show how feminism as a movement concerned primarily with legal and cultural changes was met with fierce resistance and opposition at various points in time in the different societies of the Arab world. Lastly and most importantly, I aim to show how the woman's body and its association with the notion of honour became regarded as a taboo. Even though this is a ubiquitous taboo, it has emerged differently and was enforced in different ways in all of the societies of the Arab world.

Although different strands of Arab feminism have tackled various issues affecting women's lives, the focus in this chapter is on specific themes germane to the novels studied in this thesis. The chapter is broken down into four specific topics that structure the discussion: women's sexuality, the battle for public space, honour crimes and the clash between conservativism and feminism. The premise, based on details emerging from this structure and these discussions, is that women's bodies in the Arab world became an arena on which discursive powers and ideologies proclaimed and sustained their dominance. Distorted discourse on sexuality, gender segregated spaces and dominating local traditions have identified the female body as a signifier for man's and society's honour, and hence

[4] Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 17.

has conceived of the female body itself as a taboo. Literature, however, has the capacity to act against this oppressive power insofar as it represents the body as free of any inscription, transcending rigid mythical and material boundaries.

The rigid construction of women's sexuality:

During the 2011 upheavals in Egypt, when women participated actively and massively in political protests against the regime of Hosni Mubarak, the discourse on women's sexuality transitioned in its construction of the female subject as social and cultural property to a political one. Egyptian women who marched the streets were humiliated and exposed to virginity tests imposed by the military.[5] This strategy was used to push women from the public sphere when, in fact, their presence equalled and surpassed men's, contributing to the mass gatherings and giving more importance and resonance to the demonstrations.[6] Fellow male protestors also practiced sexual harassment against women to force them to leave Tahrir square and return indoors. Sexual violence against women was used to maintain the social structure as a gender segregated one. However, women did not retreat from the public sphere, nor were they silent. Victims of these incidents spoke out publicly of their violations and took the offenders, including members of the military, to court.[7]

This was not the first daring confrontation of Egyptian women against their sexualisation. They have long fought the reduction of their bodies to mere sexual objects.

[5] Andrea Khalil, *Gender, Women and the Arab Spring* (Oxon: Routledge, 2015), p. 89.
[6] Fatima Sadiqi, *Women's Movements in Post-'Arab Spring' North Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 105.
[7] Mona Eltahawy, 'Why Do They Hate Us? The real war on women is in the Middle East', *Foreign Policy* (2012) < https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/04/23/why-do-they-hate-us/> [accessed 13 June 2019]. See also: Corinne Fortier and Safaa Monqid, *Corps des femmes et espaces genres arabo-musulmans* (Paris: Karthala, 2017), p. 11.

Since the first organised women's movements of the 1920s, they have challenged the practice of women's seclusion.[8] Their initial struggle was to erase the boundary separating them from the public sphere and to break free from the harem which confined them on the pretence of protecting the purity of their bodies.[9] But the harem, as Mary Ann Fay explains, is a notion more complicated than the imagined orientalist definition European artists and travel writers proclaimed and perpetuated.[10] Rather, because of a firm belief that women's virginity must be protected, the harem became the locus for 'male control over female sexuality' and the space where 'honor is valorized'.[11] The link between the harem's dual purpose of protecting honour and women's sexuality should not be viewed as indicating men's undervaluation of female's sexuality. On the contrary, the organisation of the society in terms of the dichotomies of public vs. private, and masculine vs. feminine is upheld by misappropriating Islamic principles. Islam maintains that women have greater sexual drives than men, and their sexuality is an active site of power and privilege in the women's body.[12] However, this perception has been used against women by patriarchy to enforce their enclosure.

The distorted view of women's sexuality as justified by religion has been eloquently challenged by two of the Arab world's most prominent sociologists and feminists, the Egyptian Qasim Amin and the Moroccan Fatima Mernissi. In their classic critical works, Amin and Mernissi challenge the Arab mentality that sees women's

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[8] Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam and the nation* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 3.

[9] See: Margot Badran, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian feminist 1879-1924* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1986), p. 8. See also: Julia Lisiecka 'Re-reading Huda Shaarawi's "Harem Years"-Bargaining with the Patriarchy in the Changing Egypt' *SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research*, 8 (2015) < https://www.soas.ac.uk/research/rsa/journalofgraduateresearch/edition-8/file102674.pdf> [accessed 5 December 2018].

[10] Mary Ann Fay, *Unveiling the Harem: Elite Women and the Paradox of Seclusion in Eighteenth-Century*
Cairo (New York: Syracuse, 2012).

[11] Ibid., pp. 27-29.

[12] Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*. 2nd edn (London: Oneworld Publications, 2013), p. 129.

sexuality as a source of deficiency and vulnerability, and offer an alternative, credible interpretation of the power of Muslim women's sexuality. Amin writes:

> How strange! If men feared that women would be tempted, why were not men ordered to wear the veil and conceal their faces from women? Is a man's will considered weaker than a woman's? Are men to be regarded as weaker than women in controlling their desires? Is a woman considered so much stronger than a man that men have been allowed to show their faces to the eyes of women, regardless of how handsome or attractive they are, while women are forbidden to show their faces to men?...Any men who claim this viewpoint must then admit that women have a more perfect disposition than men.[13]

Even though Amin focuses mainly on women's veiling in the Arab culture, particularly in Egypt, and the employment of the veil to control sexuality, his remarks are also valid in the context of women's exclusion from the public sphere. Mernissi, too, sees that Muslim women have come to be realised as the embodiment of sexual power and, consequently, argues that entire social structures and cultural practices, such as seclusion and veiling, were organised to contain and limit 'the disruptive power of female sexuality'.[14]

Early Egyptian feminists, such as Huda Shaarawi, Nabawiyah Musa and Bahita al Badiya have, since the early 1900s, rejected the 'omnisexual' perception used to devalue and oppress women.[15]Their access to print provided them with a forum to address the topic of woman and her continually low status in an ever-changing society. However, their public discussion of gender, though bold for its time, remained, as Badran puts it

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[13] Amin Qasim, *The liberation of women: And the New woman: Two Documents in the History of Egyptian Feminism*, trans. by Samiha Sidhom Peterson (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1992), p.42. Google ebook.

[14] Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in Muslim Society*. 4th edn (London: Saqi 2003), p. 45.

[15] Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, p. 65.

'conservative', particularly when discussing the issue of the veil.[16] Because these early feminists saw that women unveiling their faces was still a step for which men in their society were not prepared, on the one hand, they refuted women's sexualisation manifested through different oppressive practices, such as women's confinement and face veiling. Yet, on the other hand, they called for women to take slow and careful actions in their attempts to implement social transformations, and they did not themselves display any daring attitudes or actions, such as unveiling. Though this is a paradoxical stance, the strategy enabled women to leave the domestic sphere and 'desexualize woman's image' to gain access to public life more easily. [17] It was until 1923, that the tradition of face covering witnessed its first distabilisation. One of the most daring gestures that signals early Egyptian feminists' rejection of traditional constraints was Huda Shaarawi's public removal of her face cover, which scholars view as symbolyzing 'the end of the harem system'.[18] Upon her return from an international feminist meeting in Rome in 1923, Shaarawi, who was already a leading Egyptian feminist, stepped off from the train at Cairo train station and drew back her veil revealing her face publicly.[19] Despite the power of such an act and its historical resonance, it is important to stress that Shaarawi saw that face covering had been one of the obstacles that stood between women and education, since girls were withdrawn from school at certain age. Jean Said Makdisi in her reading of Shaarawi's memoirs, written in Arabic emphasises that Shaarawi is critical of face covering due to its repercussions on girls' access to education, noting that Shaarawi's:

> full attention is [women's] education, and not face covering, and in the only short part she devotes in her memoir to the veil, it is always addressed from the same

[16] Badran, Feminists, p. 67.
[17] Ibid., p. 68.
[18] Beth Baron, 'Unveiling in Early twentieth Century Egypt: Practical and Symbolic Considerations' *Middle Eastern Studies,* 25. 3 (1989), 370-386 (p. 371) https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/stable/pdf/4283318.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ac99dabc0ad4ad1a4746f840a406ed038 [accessed 23 October 2020].
[19] Huda Shaarawi, *Harem years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-1924)*, trans by. Margot Badran (New York: The Feminist Press, 1986), p. 7.

perspective, that is to say, unveiling is not an ultimate goal on its own, but it opens the path for more important goals.[20]

Over the years in Egypt, though, as in other parts of the Muslim world, the veil underwent a transformation so that it became political and social at core, allowing it to take on diverse meanings and objectives and established for it a history on its own. During Colonial Egypt, unveiling, as Leila Ahmed puts it 'was emblematic of the desire and hope for a new social and political order, for the promise of modernity' and liberation from 'British colonialism and racism, autocratic rule, a rigid class system, a restrictive gender system'.[21] The vital reconsideration of gender definitions and gender roles began to take greater shape as Egypt was liberating itself from colonial occupation, a time when nationalism for Egyptian women meant the liberation of the country and the liberation of its women.[22] Their political engagement changed drastically along with their status in the society; the public sphere, which was for women a prohibited territory before the 1919 anticolonial protests, and the veil, which was their second confinement, were contested. This challenge indicates women's growing consciousness and their transformation into active citizens and agents involved in the making of their free nation. While veiling and domestic confinement, both public restrictions employed to control women's sexuality, began to disappear after Egypt gained its Independence in1922, — though, the practice of veiling resurged again in the 1970s signalling a new era for women—, other private, secret

[20] Jean Said Makdisi, 'Meetings and Novels: huda Shaarawi and the Women's Congress in Rome in 1923' in *Arab Women in the Ninteen-Twenties: Presence and Identity* [Nisa' Al 'Arabiyat fi Al 'ochriniyat: Hodour wa howiyah] ed. by Ameera Sonboul and others, 2nd edn (Beirut: Bahithat, 2010), 381- 414 (p.406).

[21] Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Havean: Yale University Press, 2011), pp.40-41.

[22] Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (California: University of California
Press, 2008), pp. 109-113. EBook Library. See also: Mervat Hatem, 'The Politics of Sexuality and Gender in Segregated Patriarchal System: The Case of Eighteenth-and Nineteenth-Century Egypt' *Feminist Studies*, 12. 2 (1986), 250-274 (p. 272).
https://www.jstor.org/stable/3177968?ab_segments=0%252Fdefault-<2%252Fcontrol&refreqid=excelsior%3A5006056be04238b6db73eb805f9f38c4> [accessed 18 June 2019].

practices violently regulated women's bodies and their sexual organs.[23] These were rarely addressed publicly, and only gained public attention during the early 1990s.[24]

Female genital mutilation, or FGM, is the most extreme form of restrictive violence Egyptian women endured to ensure the maintenance of their intact virginity, and hence the protection of Egyptian men's honour. Though the practice is perpetrated to ensure the prevention of loss of the mythical notion of chastity, it is also a confiscation of women's rights to sexual pleasure. Scholars on sexuality in Islam have argued for the equal right to sexual fulfilment of women and men.[25] Women, rather, are said to possess 'enormous sexual appetites', and patriarchal societies perceive women's sexual desire as aggressive, destructive and distractive.[26] Mernissi writes:

> It is therefore no surprise that in the actively sexual Muslim female aggressiveness is seen as turned outward. The nature of her aggression is precisely sexual. The Muslim woman is endowed with a fatal attraction which erodes the male's will to resist her reduces him to a passive acquiescent role.[27]

Since the male is the weaker sex who cannot control himself, society has taken other extreme measures against the female and violated her body by performing life-threatening procedures to regulate it. As the woman is expected to be passive, circumcision is an operation that changes her from the desiring subject to as a desired object.

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[23] On the resurgence of the veil in Egypt from the 1970s see: Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*, pp. 68-157.
[24] Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, p. 172.
[25] On the subject of Islam's vision of sexuality see: Fatna Ait Sabah, *Women in the Muslim unconsciousness* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1984). See also: Abdel Wahhab Boudiba, *Sexuality in Islam* (New York: Routledge 2008).
[26] Badran, *Feminism*, p. 170.
[27] Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p. 41.

FGM is by no means exclusive to Egypt; it is found in other Middle Eastern countries including: Iraq, Yemen, Oman, Lebanon and Palestine.[28] On the African continent, research has found that it is dominant in 23 countries particularly, Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia. Although FGM is not widely practiced in the Northern part of the continent, though, North African societies employ other repressive forms of controlling women's sexuality, such as what is referred to as 'sihr' or black magic.[29] Due to migration, the practice of female circumcision has reached other parts of the world, such as Europe, Northern and Southern America and Australia, to become a global issue.[30] But because its origins can be traced to societies where Islam is widespread, female circumcision came to be seen as an Islamic practice that derives its motives from religion.[31]

Opponents of this view, such as Mohammad Fayyad in his seminal work *Al Bater Al Tanassuli li Al Banat* (Female Genital Mutilation), argues that such a practice goes against the preaching and the values of the Islamic religion, and sees it as a 'premediated crime' with severe repercussions on Egyptian society in general, and women in particular.[32] He goes on to classify the practice as one of 'the four historical anathemas used as violence against women'. These are: femicide during pre-Islamic times, the Chinese practice of foot binding, the chastity belt during the Middle Ages and female circumcision, which unlike the previous three, and though minimally, continues to be performed.[33]

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[28] Mary Nyangweso, Female Genital Cutting in Industrialized Countries: Mutilation or Cultural Tradition
California: ABC-CLIO (2014), 14-15. < https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kingston/reader.action?docID=1809710> [accessed 14 June 2019]

[29] Ibid., p. 16.

[30] Mohammad Fayyad, *Al Bater Al Tanassuli li Al Banat* (Cairo: Dar El Shorouk, 1998), p 12.

[31] Ibid., p. 15.

[32] Ibid., p. 5.

[33] Ibid., p. 6.

Today, the Egyptian government has officially abolished the practice and anyone discovered exposing women to secret operations faces criminal charges.[34] Even in some rural areas of Egypt where FGM used to be deeply entrenched, villagers have grown conscious of its baseless nature, and now recognise it as a custom that places high risks on the lives of women. Its abolishment, however, does not mean its entire annihilation, but the legal measures taken against this practice and the social transformation in its perception, especially among people who have for long regarded it as sacred, is certainly indebted to the writings of Nawal El Saadawi.

Since the 1970s, Nawal El Saadawi has written and published works of fiction and non-fiction challenging the dominant discourses and customs that regulate women's bodies and sexualities. Nawar Al-Hassan Golley confirms that no woman had spoken so openly and publicly on the topic of female sexuality in the Arab world before El Saadawi. [35] Even feminists concerned with Arab women's oppression criticised women's violation through social, economic and political forces, but none dared to engage with sexual oppression until El Saadawi broke the silence on this subject in a candid and unreserved manner, eventually drawing attention to the issue of FGM.

El Saadawi's disruptive discussion of Arab women's sexuality did not emerge from thin air. It was informed by her expertise in the medical field and by her own experience as a woman subjected to sexual control. Her role as a physician endowed her with the needed courage to present an alternative understanding of women's bodies, especially since this topic is a taboo. Her early writings on FMG were an attempt to speak explicitly about sexuality after years of loud silence and distortion, and their appearance was a momentous act in the modern history of Arab women. Conservative Arab societies cannot tolerate an

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[34] Amal Abdel Hadi, 'A Community of Women Empowered: The Story of Deir El Barsha' in *Female Circumcision: multicultural Perspectives*, ed. by Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), pp. 104-124.

[35] Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies: Shahrazad Tells her Story* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 131. Google eBook.

Arab woman speaking of sex as publicly and unconventionally as El Saadawi has done. By probing this topic, she was seen to be casting aside the garment of timidity the Arab woman is expected to wear. However, her interest in this topic was not to speak of the intimate physical act between men and women, but to speak of the practices and the attitudes surrounding it that have rendered sexuality a distorted, policed and a politicised site where women are often its victims.

This is a rather a paradoxical situation: the rationale behind the Arab sensibility against public sexual discussions is associated with Islam, yet, as Leslie Peirce, attests, Islam is 'famously described as a 'sex-positive religion''.[36] El Saadawi's aim with her writing is certainly unlike what has been attributed to her, or to any Arab intellectual who addresses sexuality. El Saadawi's concern with the topic since the 1970s has been to speak out against discriminatory physical violence against women and to show how female subjugation is more politically and economically motivated than religiously prescribed.[37] Her first book, *Al Mar'ah was al jins*, published in 1971, treats all sexual issues concerning women openly-–clitoridectomy, virginity, premarital sexual relations and marital rape—but the government sanctioned her speech. The book was banned in 1972 and she was dismissed from her position as general director in the Ministry of Health.[38]

Fiction has served El Saadawi well and facilitated the process of undermining long held structures of normative sexuality. In each of her novels, she treats the topic of women's bodily ambivalence as a result of clashing societal expectations and women's own experiences of their bodies. In her first work of fiction, published in 1957, entitled *Mothakarat Tabiba*, translated into English as *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1988), she depicts the life of a woman who struggles to identity and embrace her nature as a feminine

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[36] Leslie Peirce, 'Writing Histories of Sexuality in the Middle East' *The American Historical Review*, 1114. 5 (2009), 1325-1339 (p. 1327). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23303429?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents> [accessed 21 June 2019].

[37] Nawal El Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader* (London: Zed Books, 1997), pp. 67-68.

[38] Ibid., p. 68.

being. From the first sentences of the text, the nameless character describes the sense of alienation she experiences with her body and engages her 'in a state of enmity' with herself and the world surrounding her.[39] The difficulty in coping and identifying with her womanhood continues to shape her life, and her resentment of her body as feminine grows stronger, leading her to perform prohibited behaviours defying any prescribed definitions of femininity. In her resistance to her mother who strives to instill in her feminine characteristics, her defiance takes different forms. The narrator recounts an incident in which she has her hair cut in attempts to liberate herself from femininity and her mother's control. Infuriated by the figure of her mother as a figure of power, she asks: 'it was my mother who controlled my life, my future and my body right down to every strand of my hair, why'. [40] Her hair represents simultaneously, the power of rigid social definitions of gender features and family control, by cutting it, she is ridding herself of both. Interestingly, El Saadawi's opening words in the preface of the work insists upon the fictional state of the text, since elements such inequity in the family sphere, medical studies and marriage, feature in this work as they do in her autobiography. In the English version of the book El Saadawi confirms that the text is not autobiographical, as some people might believe it to be 'but although many of the heroine's characteristics fit those of an Egyptian woman such as myself […] the work is still fiction'.[41] Her insistence upon the fictional nature of work draws attention to her utilisation of creativity a free territory where women can overthrow preconceived definitions established for them, and the space where uncomfortable and painful women's sexual experiences are precisely documented and counteraccted. In her writing, El Saadawi attempts to portray women's salvation from some ancient crime they are said to have committed. This salvation is not so much aimed at reconciling them with the other sex, but at women's reconciliation with their own sex. Her

[39] Nawal El Saadawi, *Motharakat Tabiba* (London: Hindawi Foundation, 2016), p. 2. All quotes from this text is my translation, unless otherwise stated.
[40] Ibid., p. 18.
[41] Nawal El Saadawi, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, trans.by Catherine Cobham (London: Saqi, 1988), p.8.

novel, *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr*, has revolutionised Arabic literature and stands as a classic text of world literature for its bold treatment of women's sexuality, encompassing in its discussion taboo sexual topics such as the graphic depiction of female genital cutting, woman's sexual pleasure and masturbation, incest, and especially prostitution. While her non-fictional books are as challenging and transgressive as her fiction and plays, the novel, as I will show remains the only platform where subjects who suffer the most because of sexual oppression and repression are allowed a chance for redemption of their own bodies, reconstruction and articulation.

Twentieth century Egypt has seen women rising to the public sphere, denouncing social and political discourses that validate women's inferior position in society. I have argued so far that women's sexuality was established as the embodiment of the notion of honour, hence inscribing fixed roles for women to perform. Feminists such Huda Shaarawi and Nawal El Saadawi introduced, though each at different periods, counter narratives about the perception of womanhood, reinscribing thereby the female story within history. In what follows, I examine precisely Algerian women's historical contestation with different power structures and their attempts to rewrite the female body against the myth of honour.

Algerian women: history as palimpsest

During the 1950s Algerian women were active participants in the construction of their nation to liberate it from the French colonial domination, only to find themselves underrepresented in nation building projects following independence.[42] Indeed, the history

[42] See: Danièle Djamila Amrane-Minne and farida Abu-Haidar 'Women and Politics in Algeria from the War of Independence to Our Day' *Research in African Literature*, 30. 3 (1999), 62-77 (p. 68). https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/stable/pdf/3821017.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Afebf0257e6b43816318a9ea95c92ca7d [accessed 25 November 2020].

of Algerian womanhood is characterised by stories of resistance and deception: the oldest dates to Algeria's pre-Islamic era, to the story El Kahina, one of the symbols of Algerian Women warriors. El Kahina was a Berber queen who fought the Arab troops to protect her territory, later to be betrayed by a military protégé who led to her defeat.[43] Modern deception is witnessed in the demonstrations of February 2019 against the regime of President Bouteflika, during which women's presence in the public sphere was encouraged to ensure the maintenance of peaceful protests and to prevent any violent confrontation between the police and male protestors from occurring. Yet, when organised feminists groups began articulating their demands and speaking for women's rights, this articulation was met with threats of physical violence if they continued to voice feminist concerns.[44] This ebb and flow of Algerian women's rights within their society is currently the subject of representation and inspiration in great literary narratives in French and Arabic. Contemporary Algerian literature, including historical works, has revisited the past female experience to draw it out of the silent zone into which it has been pushed in the years following independence.

The post-war deception remains the most historic and the most consequential one for women, with far-reaching impact that has greatly shaped the status of contemporary Algerian women and their role in society. During the eight-year war of Liberation (19541962), Algerian women transgressed many boundaries at once, aiming to establish what could have been today one of the most gender egalitarian societies in the world. Men's intentions and women's agendas clearly clashed: men tacitly perceived and partially tolerated the engagement of women in the battle as temporary, whereas women

[43] Marina Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 20.

[44] Violent threats were made by an Algerian British man who recorded a video of himself encouraging 'fellow' Algerian men in the country to perpetuate acid attacks on the women who are heard vocalising feminist discourse. For further information see: Women's rights activists in Algeria threatened with acid attacks. *France 24* (May, 2019) https://observers.france24.com/en/20190405-algeria-women-rightsactivists-threats-acid-attacks [accessed 25 June 2019].

optimistically envisioned their activism as an indication of a social transformation that moves beyond the division of domestic women and public men.

The French agenda for rendering Algeria a French possession was conducted by erasing the religious identity of the country, and replacing Islam with Christianity, a plan, as historians attest, which was not applied in France's other colonies, including Algeria's neighbours Morocco and Tunisia.[45] During colonisation, French missionary Charles Foucauld declared that religion was the first element of society that must be changed, stating: 'if we cannot succeed in making Frenchmen of these people, they will drive us out. The only way to make them into Frenchmen is to make them Christian.'[46] Besides religion, the French used the condition of Algerian women to justify their occupation of the country, and woman's rescue from the barbaric Algerian man became the explicitly articulated rationale of Frenchmen and women alike. Radical French feminists such as Marie Bugeja pledged the French mission to civilising Algeria by reforming the Algerian society through its women. Bugega is quoted to have stated that the Algerian 'woman represents tradition; if one wants to modify tradition, that is, manners, customs habits of feeling, thinking, it is advisable to begin with her', By enlightening women, she adds, and pulling them 'out of their ignorance, they would be precious auxiliaries for us'.[47] Colonisers targeted women as the means to a total destruction of the country's identity. They set up a strategy of bringing down men by making their women French.[48]

Such a conception of Algerian women led to a Franco-Algerian contestation in which women were reduced to mere objects of ideological embodiment. To resist the

[45] Peter R. Knauss and Jennifer Knauss, *The Persistence of Patriarchy: Class, Gender, and Ideology in Twentieth Century Algeria* (New York: Praeager, 1984), p.18.
[46] Marilyn French, *From Eve to Dawn, a History of Women in the World: Revolutions and Struggles* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2008), p. 246.
[47] Amelia H. Lyons, *The Civilizing Mission in the metropole: Algerian Families and the French Welfare During Decolonization* (California: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 55. EBook Library
[48] Karina Elieraas, *Between Image and Identity: Transnational fantasy, Symbolic Violence, and Feminist Recognition* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007), p. 37. eBook Library.

French ideology, a group of young Algerian scholars who received education in French schools emerged in the 1920s to advocate Algerian women's emancipation, but their espousal of French values made them appear in the eyes of Algerians as anti-Islamic. This religious faction was run by Sheikh Ibn Badis, and in their agenda called for women's right of education but restricted it to girls between the ages of 7 and 12 years old. Girls would leave school at the age of puberty and most likely would be veiled. Their aim was to spread Islamic values to prevent younger generations from falling under French influence and to work to restrict prostitution, alcoholism and drugs. The interest in emancipating Algerian women by Ibn Badis and his group was not for the sake of women themselves or, as Lazreg has correctly argued, for the sake of the principles of religion as they claimed. Had these campaigners followed Islam, they would have 'understood the fact that what passed for 'popular Islam' enabled women and men to live their lives in relative harmony'.[49] The emancipating projects of Algerian reformists created more restrictions on women than before. The freedom of circulation they used to enjoy became limited and monitored. However, the greater damage was the marginalisation of women's voices.

When both French feminists and Algerian scholars formulated their prescriptions for and expectations of Algerian woman, they denied her the right to speak and act on her own.

The emergence of an Algerian feminist consciousness occurred during the 1940s, when Algeria was beginning to organise to combat colonialism. Faced by a powerful Algerian resistance, the French army had to opt for one of several strategies to control the resistance. Seeking full control over the country, the coloniser invested in any method that would grant him power. Realising the importance of the Algerian woman, he marked her as a way to efface Algerian identity by attempting to convert her to the French lifestyle. Franz Fanon, in his work L'an V de la révolution Algérienne, argues that women became the new target of the coloniser to maintain his power:

[49] Lazreg, *The Eloquence*, p.85.

> L'administration colonial peut alors définir une doctrine politique précise : "Si nous voulons frapper la société algérienne, dans sa contexture, dans ses facultés de résistance, il nous faut d'abord conquérir les femmes ; il faut que nous allions les chercher derrière le voile ou elles se dissimulent et dans les maison ou l'homme les caches". [50]
>
> (This enabled the colonial administration to define precise political doctrine: "If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and in the houses where the men keep them out of sight".)[51]

The policy was to attack the minority to get to the majority. In rural areas, it began with the complete extermination of villages and the capture of women and children. One of the French generals, General Montaignac, explained the fate of the captured women: 'Some we keep as hostages and the rest are auctioned to the troops like animals'.[52] One officer in the French army maintained that the cruelty practiced on Algerians was extreme:

> We burnt down a village in the Khermis, of the Beni Snous tribe. Our soldiers did not spare the lives of the elderly, the women or the children… the most hideous things are that the women were actually killed after being dishonored.[53]

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[50] Fanon Franz, *Sociologie d'une révolution: L'An V de La Révolution Algérienne* (Paris : Francois Maspéro, 1959), p. 21.
[51] Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. by Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965), pp. 37-38.
[52] Zahia Smail Salhi, 'Algerian Women as agents of change and social cohesion' in *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Agents of Change*, ed. by Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), p. 149.
[53] Ibid., p. 150.

General Montaignac could have used any other term to recount the military atrocity; he could easily have stopped after describing the murders of women. However, his particular choice of the word 'dishonour' reflects the malicious intentions behind using sex as a weapon; it was to strike the Algerian man in his core, that is, his honour.

Rape, during the French occupation, became a frequent weapon used against Algerian women. The coloniser's sexual violence had disastrous effects on the victims, especially since most women were brutally raped in sight of their fathers, brothers and husbands. It was a strategy used to punish men, to deprive them of their power and their manhood

Through rape, women's bodies became a war zone, where the French wanted to prove dominance. In rural areas, it was often used to the point that rape became random, repeated and expected. Helpless women would 'lay down immediately [upon the entrance of the paratroopers into their homes]'.[54] It had even worse consequences, it enhanced women's seclusion from public life due to the potential loss of family honour. Seclusion came with other results as well. Algerian women who used to be labourers in rural areas of the country were forced to retreat. Poverty hit Algerian families, and with women's captivity within their houses, the economic conditions of the families underwent hard times. Outside men became subject to humiliation and were frustrated. Only in their houses, with their women, could they reclaim their masculinity and sense of superiority. The Algerian woman was then doubly colonised by a foreign coloniser who took away her land and tore it apart and a familiar coloniser in her family. She became the colonised of the colonised.

During this period of mounting struggle and resistance there were few Algerian movements and associations working toward the liberation of Algeria. The PPA (Le Partie

[54] Marina Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2008), p. 155.

du Peuple Algérien: The Party of the Algerian People), for example, involved women in their militant work but believed that the discussion of women's rights in the country should be set aside, and all focus had to be shifted to the liberation of Algeria. Djamila Amrane Minne, who was later a militant during the battle years and who was the first historian to document the role of women during the struggle, states that for the PPA 'la réflexion sur la situation de la femme est toujours remise à une date ultérieure' (the reflection on women's situation is always postponed to a later date).[55] In 1943, however, a new movement emerged that spoke of women's conditions. The UFA movement (Union des Femmes d'Algérie: The Union of the Algerian Women) was backed up by the PCA (Partie Communiste d'algérie: The Algerian Communist Party). The UFA started immediately working for its aims by establishing a journal, Femme d'Algérie (Woman of Algeria). In six years, it gathered 15,000 members and all of them were out demonstrating alongside other men and women demanding freedom. After this success, the UFA was joined by the PPA movement, overcoming their gendered and ideological differences. The PPA suggested that women could be included in the national struggle when they were fully equipped with military knowledge. Not long after, another movement was created on 2 July 1947 to engage with the Algerian family in urban and rural areas of the country, to increase awareness and to advocate girls' and boys' education. It was called the AFMA (Association des Femmes Musulmanes Algériennes: The Association of Muslim Algerian Women). In collaboration with the UFA, the AFMA created programmes to increase women's self-awareness of their significance in society.[56]

When the revolution broke out in 1954, women took a great part in it. They were the moudjahidat (freedom fighters) and the *fida'iyat* (female bombers). Under their haïk (a long white veil particular to the Algerian veiling style) they would carry messages and

[55] Djamila Amrane Minne, 'Les combattantes de la guerre d'Algerie' *Materiaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, 26 (1992), 58-62 (p. 59). < https://www.persee.fr> [accessed 8 August 2019].
[56] Salhi, 'Algerian Women', pp. 152-156.

weapons to the army located in different zones of the segregated cities.[57] Unveiled Algerian woman played a prominent role as well. Such women were less likely to be detained, assuming her to be what Vince refers to as a 'pro-French' woman.[58] She had free access to the European quarters, where she would pass the checkpoints easily and blend with the Europeans.[59] There, she would plant explosives or gather intelligence of police activities in that area.[60]

In the mountains, women were nurses, cooks and soldiers, transcending traditionally prescribed gender spaces, contributing to the making of independent Algeria, and making independent Algerian women. They were active members and their presence was essential. The revolution brought a new light to their lives, their participation was urgent; Djamila Bouhedra, Djamila Boupacha, Hassiba Ben Bouali and Baya Hocine head up a long list of women who were strong figures of the Algerian revolution, and who stimulated the imaginary of Algerian fiction. Though much of Djebar's works deal—at minimum or extensive level— with the topic of the Algerian revolution and women's role within it, yet it is in her 1962 novel *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde,* translated in English as *Children of the New World: A Novel of the Algerian War,* that engages substantially with the revolution, for this novel is the product of that period. In this work, Djebar represented Algerian womanhood through different female characters, attempting to shed light on the diverse lived experiences of

[57] Natalya Vince 'Transgressing Boundaries: Gender, race, Religion, and "francaise Musulmanes" during the
Algerian War of Independence' *French Historical Studies*, 33. 1 (2010), 445-474 (p.454) < https://read.dukeupress.edu/french-historical-studies/article/33/3/445/34475/Transgressing-BoundariesGender-Race-Religion-and> [accessed 5th December 2018]. In fact, *haik* has facilitated not only the delivery of weapons and letters to the revolutionaries, both of my grandmothers participated in the revolution using haik to carry underneath, handmade militant boots, which was the case of my paternal grandmother, and food which was the case of my maternal grandmother. Nothing, however, has been documented scholarly about this particular use of haik.

[58] Ibid., p. 454.

[59] This has been brilliantly represented in the award-winning film: *The Battle of Algiers*, dir. Gillo Pontecorvo, and all. (Argent Films, 1966).

[60] Ibid.

women during the war of the 1950s. Unlike *La Soif*, women in this work are portrayed as being occupied by individual as well as collective concerns, attempting at a tumultuous period to negotiate their identities. A close look at this novel, reveals women's diverse ways of participation in the liberation against colonial power; Cherifa and Salima, who despite the differences in their social status, both reflect an awareness of the importance of their activism in political acts, regardless of the extent of their political engagement. When Cherifa steps outside her house, an act that goes against the rules imposed on her by her husband and the norms of her society, to inform Youssef, her husband, of the danger awaiting him, she realizes the severity of her trespass but also her obligation to take a political action, despite the 'so many hostile eyes' shaming her presence in the public space, she repeats to herself 'He's in danger' to reach her destination and fulfil her political act without surrendering and giving up her cause.[61] Widening the category of Algerian women's role during the war, Djebar depicts Salima as a woman who hast taken a bigger duty in the revolution. Salima is a school teacher and an active member of the FLN, in charge on communication missions. She regards herself as 'a link in a chain' of the revolution.[62] Multifaceted lived experiences of women in this novel does not stop at Cherifa and Salima's stories; the text provides myriad ways of being an Algerian woman during the fight against occupation.

Algerian women's participation in the war not only defied the coloniser, but also challenged social assumptions about women's roles. Even during those intense times of the war, when the collaboration of both genders was necessary to defeat the coloniser, women who joined their fellow patriots in the mountains were looked down upon and considered

[61] Assia Djebar, *Children of the New World*, trans, by Marjolijn de Jager (New York, The feminist Press, 2005), pp. 143-144.
[62] Ibid., pp.65- 168.

transgressors of traditional social and military norms. [63] If there was a precise period when these old social perceptions of women's roles had to be overcome, it was during the revolutionary years of Algeria. Yet even in that epoch, women had to fight the coloniser and the colonised. One is only left to contemplate why a woman who would sacrifice her life for the liberation of her country would still be criticised, and what sacred law has been violated to consider the woman warrior a transgressor. Indeed, Algerian women were brave enough to care less about social norms and to continue the fight for freedom.

Algerian women's literature stands as a perfect representation of this fractured, gendered society, as it recounts war stories to refresh the memories of those who tend to undermine the role of Algerian women during the struggle for liberation. The narratives of Assia Djebar overlap with the history of the country in numerous ways. She uses the past as a basis, and a point of departure and return, to free the woman'svoice from the silence in which it has languished post-independence. Djebar deliberately mingles traditionally male domains, literature and history, to publicise the story of women who have remained invisible and silent. This is a deliberate act of transgression. It is through this act that Djebar assumes her identity as a woman, author and historian, and interrogates the past constructions of Algerian women's identities. Her writing has been committed to revisiting and reviving the rich Algerian female past.

After eight years of an extraordinarily cruel and bloody war, Algeria earned its independence in 1962. Algerians obtained their freedom after years of fighting, during which the lives and souls of women and men were sacrificed. Now that the country was free, order was restored. People who had left their houses in the villages went back and the quarters that were taken over by the French belonged again to their owners. Women

[63] For more information on the complexity of the relationship between militant women and men during the battle years, see: Ryme Seferdjeli, 'Rethinking the History of the Mujahidat during the Algerian War' Intervention, 14. 2 (2012), 238-255 < https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1369801X.2012.687902?needAccess=true> [accessed 2 May 2016].

envisioned a better life based on equality and tolerance, or so they thought. They were yet to experience their biggest disappointment when it became clear that the revolution was not revolutionary for women: they were expected to go back to the private life, the life they used to lead prior to the revolution. Natalya Vince confirms: 'As Algerians reclaimed public space, Algerian women seemed to be excluded from it'.[64] The role of men during the battle was glorified and that of women was marginalised and hardly mentioned, if at all. As Amrane has accurately stated, it is a matter 'd'une injustice profonde que l'histoire de ces sept années de guerres s'écrive en faisant abstraction d'une moitié de peuple algérien: les femmes' (of a deep injustice that the history of these seven years of war would be written by rendering half of the Algerian population an abstraction: women). [65]

Revolution implies a new order, new aspirations and a hopeful change. However, Algeria began to restore an identity which had been defaced by the coloniser. The nation resumed an identity that values customs and traditions, of which women were considered guardians. Women were expected to be meek, passive and submissive; the women's question was neglected and put on the back burner. In the aftermath of the war, men in politics ignored women's status, claiming that the country has just survived a ruthless war and efforts must be devoted to its recovery and development. Peers of the battle quickly forgot the contribution women made to winning that war: the country's development into a free nation depended on women's traditional roles as they were expected to resume their responsibility as, what Anne McClintock refers to, the 'bearers of the nation', only to be deprived of 'any direct relation to national agency'.[66] Postcolonial Algerian women were betrayed. They were left to ask themselves whether the revolution they helped to win was really successful. Did they reach the independence they had envisioned? It was then time to

[64] Natalya Vince, *Our Fighting Sisters: Nation, Memory and Gender in Algeria, 1954-2012* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 110.
[65] Djamila Amrane, *Les Femmes algériennes dans la guerre* (Paris: Plon, 1999), p. 14.
[66] McCklintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 354.

enter a second fight, alone but armed with knowledge and experience that allowed a historical rectification.

Patriarchy resumed in the postcolonial period, but this was not a state of affairs for which Algerian women would easily settle. If their participation in the revolution was taken for granted, it at least granted them the required experience and knowledge to become empowered. After the UNFA misrepresentation of Algerian women, starting another movement was compulsory and urgent.[67] With the government of President Houari Boumediene in 1965, the country began to revive. During his rule, the Algerian state began recognising the right of women for public participation. Out of 10,852 positions for communal assemblies, 99 were held by women elected in 1967.[68]

The years between independence and the 1980s were characterized by a lack of democracy. Any criticism against the Algerian government and its policies was neither respected nor tolerated. In the mid-1980s, economic conditions of Algeria underwent severe crises, and on 5 October 1988 violence spread across the country when thousands of frustrated young people took to the street protesting against the government.[69] Women in this period also had their share of frustration from the state's laws, particularly the Family Code of the early 1980s, in which women were underrepresented and deprived of full citizenship, addressed only as mothers, daughters and wives of men. Agitated, they took to the streets in demonstrations. Not long after, several groups were founded, including the Committee for the Legal Equality of Men and Women, and the Algerian Association for

[67] Salhi, 'Algerian Women', p. 159.

[68] Abdelkader Cheref, 'Engendering or endangering Politics in Algeria? Salima Ghezali, Louisa Hanoune and Khalida Messaoudi' *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 2. 2 (2006), 60-85 < http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=7e4c18c3-0a30-4c23-96c114124df80c18%40sessionmgr102> [accessed 11 May 2016].

[69] Yasmina Allouche, 'Why Algeria's 'Black October' in 1988 defined its role in the Arab Spring' *Memo: Middle Easter Monitor* (2016) https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20161006-why-algerias-black-octoberin-1988-defined-its-role-in-the-arab-spring/ [accessed 5th December 2018].

the Emancipation of Women, who also voiced their disappointment with the government treatment of women and their legal status.

In the midst of this economic and democratic chaos, Algeria would face another struggle which took more than 200,000 lives and, particularly, worsened the situation of women to a great extent.[70] What is referred to as the Black Decade was a result of a power struggle between two opposing parties, the FLN, who had been in power since the independence and the FIS, a fundamentalist religious party which opposed the secular conditions of the country. The bloody war of the 1990s, which took the lives of men, women, children and elderly people, lasted for 10 years, during which the FIS targeted mostly women, intellectuals and government officials.[71] The FIS made the mosque their platform to spread their fundamentalism: in that way, the FIS succeeded in brainwashing the poor, unemployed and desperate young men, recruiting them to fight against what they claimed was a sinful society. The FIS addressed women, demanding that they undertake only one specific role, which was giving birth to future fighters 'for the cause of Islam'.[72] The party advised men to keep their women in the house rather than allowing them to take over jobs that belonged only to men. When the civil war between the army and the FIS reached its peak, the FIS members made the mountains their hiding places, and once again women found themselves in those sites, but this time they were victims rather than the fighters they had been during the revolution.

The price women paid during the civil war was very high. Their lives were at constant risk, and they endured violence of all kinds. Salhi puts is as follows:

> women were at the top of the terrorists' agenda and…their bodies were primarily targeted as symbols; lists of women to be killed were pinned up at the entrance of

[70] Patrick Crowley, Algeria: Nation, Culture and Transnationalism, 1988-2015 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), pp. 6-7.
[71] Farida Ibrahim Ben Moussa, *Zaman al Mihna fi Sard al Katiba al Jaza'iriya: Dirasa Nakdiya* [*Epoch of the Ordeal in The Algerian Woman's Narrative: Critical Study*] (Al Manhal, 2012), p. 20
[72] Salhi, 'Algerian Women', p. 164.

> mosques, women who worked in the government offices were threatened and killed, women who owned shops such as hairdressers, beauty salons, Turkish baths were not spared and in some instances were forced to close their businesses. Women teachers were beheaded in front of their pupils, women related to government offices or security workers were also targeted. In remote areas whole villages were massacred, young girls were kidnapped, gang raped and tuned into sex slaves, divorced women or widows who lived alone were also targeted. Women's bodies were mutilated and abused, with their genitals often amputated.[73]

In her fictional narrative *Ta' Al Khajal*, Fadila al Farouk highlights the atrocities committed against women during the black decade. Upon its publication, the novel was banned in Algeria, specifically because it captures the plight of women during those ten years, and breaks the rule of silence that prohibited any public discussion of the events of the decade. In an excerpt containing factual information taken from Al Khabar Al Osbou'i [The Weekly News] magazine, Al Farouk documents the following:

> Since 1995 abduction and rape became a war strategy, Islamists Armed Groups 'GIA' announced in their 28th statement, published on 30 of April, that they have extended the scope of their battle: 'to triumph honour by killing their women, and those women who fight us wherever they are, in every region where we haven't object to the honour of its people, and where we haven't held women accountable (…) and we will also extent the circle of our victory by killing the mothers, the sisters and the daughters of the non-believers who live under the roofs of these and who gives shelter to the irreligious'.[74]

[73] Salhi, 'Algerian Women', p. 166.

[74] Fadila Al Farouk, *Ta' Al Khajal* (Beirut: Dar Riyad El Rayyes, 2003), p. 36. This excerpt is originally in Arabic and the quote above is my translation.

Eventually, women had to submit to the new conditions. They were too frightened to carry on working or to go out unveiled. Others had to leave the country because submission was not a deal with which they would settle.[75] Yet, women actively, if covertly, carried on their feminist struggle to spare Algeria from a second war that was tearing it apart.

Overall, terrorism in Algeria denied women their humanity, and the recovery from that merciless war was going to be a long journey that once again, would take all women's efforts to accomplish. Widespread terror ended in Algeria in the early 2000s, when the overthrown President Abdelaziz Bouteflika came to power. Under the pressure of multiple women's organizations, he promised to make reforms to the Family Code. In 2005, a new modified version of the Family Code was presented, which, did not carry major revisions to the restrictive 1980's version. The few amendments that were made, however, touched basically on the age of marriage. Women were also granted the right to divorce; a right for which they fought strongly.[76]

Algerian women's historic resistance to various types of violence, and their commitment to claiming agency, inspired other women who face the same fate and share the same experience. Their story resonates strongly with the ongoing struggle faced by women in Palestine, who also have been fighting for the freedom of their land and their own freedom from a male dominated society. While Algerian women are symbols of bravery and strength for some, for others they have become counter-examples of what to avoid. Amal Barghouthi, an activist and a director of a Palestinian women's organisation,

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[75] Hassiba Boulmerka is one example of many women who lived in exile during the civil war. Boulmerka was an athlete who won the 1500 meters in the 1991's World Athletics Championships. After the news of her success spread in the country, she received death threats to her house and was ordered to resign and stop practicing a profession in which her body is revealed. The fundamentalists demanded that her father disown her publically. Eventually, she had to flee the country and settle in the United States. For more information, see: Jennifer Hargreaves, *Heroines of Sport: The Politics of Difference and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 61.

[76] Caroline Sakina Brac de la Perriere, 'Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa' *Freedom House* (2005) < https://www.refworld.org/docid/47387b6a0.html> [accessed 6th December 2018].

mentions that Palestinian women involved in political movements fear that 'what happened to Algerian women after Algerian independence is going to happen to us; we talk about it. Certainly, we want to avoid their fate'.[77] Regardless, the combat of Algerian women not only against colonial powers but also against native male domination continues to serve as a model for their fellow Palestinian sisters. Zeena Yasin asserts that:

> From History, it was efficient for many Algerian women to challenge this [resumed patriarchy after independence] as their rebellion from patriarchy essentially helped them to achieve national liberation. It seems that the Palestinian women are following their footsteps and with good reason.[78]

Between the history of Algeria, and the her-story of its women, there is a fundamental, intricate relationship. Both, the country and its women, revolted for their right to exist, both contested with different limits and both have been left to wander in a quest for identity.

The women's narration of these stories by marginalized or celebrated women writers, however belated it is, is a logical and an urgent act of interference and an act of interruption to the tradition of telling only (his)story.[79] Many war survival stories have been told by male historians, writers and journalist and, until recently, very few women joined the discussion.[80] Yet, those few women who began writing on Algerian women with

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[77] See Amal Kharisha Barghouthi, 'Comments by Five Women Activists' in *Palestinian Women of Gaza and The West Bank*, ed. by Suha Sabbagh (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 200.
[78] Zeena Yasin 'Women Revolutionaries in Algeria and Palestine: A repeat of History? (2017) < https://medium.com/@Zeena.Yasin/women-revolutionaries-in-algeria-and-palestine-a-repeat-of-historye1173c25dd98> [accessed 8 December 2018].
[79] One of Algeria's pioneer writers is Yamina Mechakra, whose two novels contribute to feminist writing, Algerian literature and postcolonial literature, alike, suffered during her lifetime from marginalisation, because of her outspoken criticism of government. See: Valerie K. Orlando, *The Algerian Novel: The poetics of a Modern nation, 1950-1979* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017), p. 256.
[80] Stora Benjamin, 'Women's Writing between Two Algerian War's' *Research in African Literature*, 30.3 (1990), 78-94. < http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=a15332a2-65fa41fa-b0cf-42b04acbf7dd%40pdc-v-sessmgr01> [accessed 25 October 2016].

a feminist aspiration and with an emancipatory hope, contributed greatly to the understanding of women's lives in colonial and postcolonial Algeria. In a very male dominated arena, Algerian women writers gave a voice to Algerian women's concerns and broke the locks on social and political issues impacting the lives of women in the country. As the discussion of Djebar's fiction in this thesis demonstrates, these women were considered transgressors, for revealing untold and hidden stories, and for venturing into forbidden spaces with a language that was not only a tool for reflecting male mastery but also an illicit appropriation of the coloniser's language.

Women in Jordan: battling honour crimes

'Many in Jordan see feminism as a taboo subject, and a threat to the social and religious order', even though it is a political movement that shapes its values according to Jordanian values, nature and strives to enhance the status of the Jordanian women while taking into account the socio-cultural made up of their society.[81] In fact, despite the major transformations that the feminist movement has been able to effect in a relatively short time, its existence in Jordanian society is regarded as illegitimate. By the 1980s, women's collective efforts were able to establish different associations that allowed them to challenge political and juridical negligence of women' status. As a result women benefited from access to education and job opportunities, and managed to snatch the right to stand for parliamentary seats.[82] However, different forms of extreme violence against women are still characteristic of Jordanian society, which render the task of feminist movements

[81] Olivia Cuthbert, 'A new chapter for feminism in Jordan' *Open Democracy* (2017) https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/olivia-cuthbert/new-chapter-for-feminism-injordan [accessed 13 December 2018]

[82] For more information on political advancements by women's movements see: Nicola Pratt, 'A History of Women's Activism in Jordan: 1946-1989', *El Hiber magazine* (2015) < https://www.7iber.com/society/ahistory-of-womens-activism-in-jordan-1946-1989 > [accessed 18 December 2018]. See also: Abeer Dababrech Bashier, 'The Jordanian Women's Movement: a Historical Analysis Focusing on Legislative Change' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2005).

arduous and challenging. Mainly because these forms of violence are politically supported, even their legal abolishment will not guarantee their complete eradication from society. Inevitably, women are left to battle certain practices alone.

Nicolat Pratt Sees that feminism in Jordan emerged around the 1920s and was organised mostly around charitable and social services. However, the changing political situation of the 1950s, transformed Jordanian feminism's agenda and pushed it to seek greater political and gender reforms.[83] In 1955, Jordanian women activists raised several issues to the government in order to address gender inequality present within the society. The primary goal was to allow women their full citizenship by providing them the right to vote, for, they argued that the constitution holds that all citizens are equal, but in reality, women were regarded as second-class citizens deprived of many civil aspects, such as their right to vote and to run for municipal office.[84] It was until 1974 and 1982, respectively, that women were granted these two rights. However, claiming officially civil rights does not signify a total eradication of the social and the institutional expectations of women. Joseph Massad confirms that despite women's success in establishing 'modernized' status, their 'traditional role in the private sphere must be preserved through the application of the Personal Status Law'.[85] The latter, reinforces patriarchy and allows for more gender discrimination and women's oppression. The ongoing struggle in Jordan is to secure women's basic right to life, honour killing, along with other practices such as early marriage and marrying the rapist have darkened the lives of Jordanian women in their society, the calamity is that crimes against women seems to be supported by law. Feminist movements supported, if not initiated, by creative writers and journalists challenged certain

[83] Nicola Pratt, 'A History of Women's Activism in Jordan: 1946-1989' *Al Hiber* (2015), para 1 < https://www.7iber.com/society/a-history-of-womens-activism-in-jordan-1946-1989/> [accessed 30 November 2020].
[84] Joseph Andoni Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 53.
[85] Ibid., p. 54.

practices and the tribal patriarchal dogmas and have worked studiously to remove gender discriminatory laws.

On an annual basis, fifteen to twenty Jordanian women are killed in honour crimes.[86] The murderers are family members, often fathers or brothers, sometimes uncles or cousins. The victims in most cases are single girls in early adulthood. The reason for such crimes is supposedly that the victim has brought shame to the family through committing disgraceful acts such as premarital sex, adultery, refusing an arranged marriage, marrying without the consent of the family or having been a victim of rape.[87] These girls are murdered by shooting, acid attacks, and, most commonly, stabbing. The perpetrators are usually sentenced leniently.[88] This kind of extreme gender violence is not only common in Jordan; it is also practiced in other Middle Eastern countries, such as Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, and in other parts of the Eastern world of Central Asia, including India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.[89] In Europe, until 1981, the Italian penal code granted reduced sentences to those convicted of killing adulterous wives.[90] In fact, as Massad argues, honour crimes code in many European countries and in some state in the U.S are inspired from 'the Napoleonic Code'.[91]

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[86] Rothna Begum, 'How to end 'honour killing' in Jordan' *The Jordan Times* (2017) < http://www.jordantimes.com/opinion/rothna-begum/how-end-honour%E2%80%99-killings-jordan> [accessed 17December 2018].

[87] Sharon D Lang and B.A. Bailey, *Sharaf Politics: Honor and Peacemaking in Israeli-Palestinian Society* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p.82. EBook Library.

[88] Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress amid Resistance* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010). EBook Library.

[89] Lama Abu Odeh 'Honor Killings and the Construction of Gender in Arab Societies' Georgetown Law(2010), 911-952, (p.915) < https://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2644&context=facpub> [accessed 18 December 2018].

[90] Fadia Faqir, 'Interfamily Femicide in Defence of Honour', *Third World Quarterly*, 22. 1 (2001), 65 82. http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=278afe05-5019-4320a2aef93e05f06489%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=4052879&db=buh> < [accessed 18 December 2018].

[91] Massad, *Colonial Effects*, p. 85.

Recent statistics on honour killings in Jordan, however, remain questionable. Fadia Faqir, whose novel, *My Name is Salma*, is analysed in this thesis, contributed to research on this matter and argues that there is still a lack of exact and sufficient documentation of these incidents. Furthermore, the available data have been gathered by men who, according to Faqir, 'have never been trained to be gender-sensitive and whose prejudices influence the way each case is perceived and recorded.'[92] Faqir's research on honour crime aims to publicise the discussion of honour killing, for, this subject has always been surrounded by opacity and treated as a taboo subject doomed to remain in silence. Faqir concludes that its treatment as such hinders any possible eradication of this phenomenon and the abolishment of the laws protecting it. Her engagement with this topic in both her non-fiction and fictional works lifts the blind on this taboo and breaks the barrier of silence. This theme features initially in her 1996 novel, *Pillars of Salt*, in which she depicts the way colonial and patriarchal powers expose women to severe forms of violence, driving them to madness and death. Nasra's story in the narrative reflects the way society has constructed forceful ways in dealing with women and punishing them for uncommitted crimes. Although Nasra is a victim of rape, yet her life is ruined due to her failure to protect her honour. Even worse, Nasra is held accountable and blamed and told that she 'should not have tempted' her rapist. Even though, Daffash, the rapist, has committed the same crime on another victim, yet it is women in these instances of violence that face harsh consequences.[93] Because *Pillars of Salt* recounts the narratives of women during the British mandate and explores the theme of resistance against colonial and indigenous oppression, honour crime in this story does not exceed the narrative of the secondary character Nasra, in *My Name is Salma*, however, this topic received a larger discussion and its consequences on women's lives are treated in a more elaborated manner. In *My Name is Salma*, Faqir not only confronts her society with its faults and injustices, but also allows

[92] Faqir, 'Interfamily' p.65.
[93] Fadia Faqir, *Pillars of Salt* (Massachusetts: Interlink Publishing Group, Inc., 2004), p. 13

the discussion of honour crimes to reach global ears, since her literature is written in the global language of English and published in Western countries.

Honour killing is a result of a transgression that threatens to smear men's honour and tarnish the collective identity of the group. Jordan and other Mediterranean societies, despite their differences, attribute fundamental importance to communal identity and shared values and beliefs.[94] Honour thus becomes a boundary within which the social status of the family is placed, and it is strictly related to the codes and norms of women's sexuality. Upon woman lies the responsibility of safeguarding the reputation and pride of her clan. The status quo, must be preserved by her purity and virginity as a girl and by her fidelity and fertility as a wife. Joseph Zeidan confirms:

> Much of the hostility of Arab parents toward female offspring was due to the Arab cultural obsession with a peculiar notion of honour—that is, that the family's honour depended upon its women's virginity before marriage and chastity after marriage.[95]

Women are thus reduced to being merely the repository of men's honour and subjected to uniquely gendered prejudices. As Faqir explains, women and honour became intertwined as 'a symbol of national "purity" and identity'.[96] Kamel Daoud, on the attitudes of the Arab world on its women, brilliantly writes:

> Le corps de la femme est le lieu public de la culture…A qui appartient le corps d'une femme? A sa nation, sa famille, son mari, son frère ainé, son quartier, les enfants de son quartier, son père et a l'état, la rue, ses ancêtres, sa culture nationale, ses interdits. A tous et a tout le monde, sauf a elle-même. Le corps de la femme est le lieu où elle perd sa possession et son identité…Le corps de la femme est son

[94] Lang, *Sharaf Politics*, p.88.
[95] Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, pp.139-140.
[96] Faqir, 'Interfamily Femicide', p. 77.

> fardeau qu'elle porte sur son dos…Elle joue l'honneur de tous, sauf le sien qui n'est pas à elle.[97]
>
> (The body of the women is the public space of culture…To whom does the female body belong? To her nation, to her family, her husband, her eldest brother, her neighbourhood, to the children of the neighbourhood, her father and the state, the streets, her ancestors, her national culture, to the prohibitions. To each and everyone but her. The body of women is where she loses her ownership and her identity…the female body is her burden which she carries on her back…She is the honour of everyone, but she isn't to herself.)

In such a reading, the only time a woman is the sole owner of her body is when she errs: then, she bears full responsibility and has to be disciplined. Her body is itself a boundary: if it is trespassed and performs behaviours outside its code of conduct, it brings upon itself any method of regulation deemed legitimate and appropriate.

The literary representation of honour by women writers becomes a space where alternative discourses on women's bodies is induced and their individual identities are constructed. Honour crime is represented in the fiction of women writers and the victim is re-presented, allowed to voice her version of the story, for rarely is the woman allowed to speak out in reality. The writer questions the men's entitlement to live guilt-free in an act that requires his involvement but not his punishment. In a novel about honour killing, the woman writer destabilises and disturbs the common practices that vilify women and glorify men. Faqir's *My Name is Salma* initiated the discussion on honour and others followed, such as the Jordanian-Palestinian writer Ibrahim Nasrallah with his novel *Shorfat al Ar* (*Balcony of Disgrace*) published in 2010, and the Syrian Maha Hassan with her novel,

[97] Kamel Daoud, 'Cologne, lieu de fantasmes' *Le Monde* (2016) https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/01/31/cologne-lieu-de-fantasmes_4856694_3232.html [accessed 21 December 2018]

Banat al-Barari (*Girls of Wildness*), which appeared in 2011.[98]

The social system which is based on the notion of honour legitimises the killing of women for irrational reasons. It justifies taking innocent lives so that men maintain the social status and gain social validation. A sixteen-year-old girl was raped by her brother and killed by another brother. The so-called 'honour' killing in this case is due to having been a victim of rape rather than participating in an act of consensual sex. The killer was sentenced to seven years in prison while the other brother was given a thirteen-year sentence.[99] Incidents like this are numerous, in which innocent women become victims of ancient social values. Some reported data show that women are also victims of gossip: they are killed for the mere rumours about their behaviour.[100]

Perhaps what most aggravates the situation is the unchanging legal system that supports such crimes. Victims are spared their lives only when they are forced to marry the perpetrators. A controversial article in the Jordanian Penal Code is Article 308, which entails that a rapist will not be charged or imprisoned if he marries his victim: 'if a valid contract of marriage is made between the offender and the victim, the prosecution is suspended. If judgment was already passed, the implementation of the punishment upon the sentence is suspended.'[101] For the sake of preserving honour, the victim is forced into marrying her rapist. Not only has she undergone a physical and an emotional trauma, but she is also forced to endure society's pressure to cleanse the stain. The victim in Jordan

[98] See: Ibrahim Nasrallah, 'Honour Crime: Always a Crime with Honour' *Diwanalarab* (2010) < http://www.diwanalarab.com/spip.php?article22238> [accessed 20 December 2018]. See also: Martina Censi, *Le Corps dans le roman des écrivaines syriennes contemporaines: Dire, écrire, inscrire la différenc*e (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp.62-63.
[99] Faqir, 'Interfamily femicide', p. 72.
[100] Abu Odeh, 'Honor Killings', p. 918.
[101] Marta, Bellingreiri, 'Artist Paints Scathing Picture of Jordan Rape Law', *Al-Monitor* (2015) http://www.almonitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/jordan-artist-lobby-cancel-jordan-law-rape.html.

does not have much choice, and between honour killing and marrying the rapist. The second is the lesser of two evils.

It took decades of organized efforts by women's movements, pressure from international human rights organizations and electronically gathered votes and petitions to abolish the law that further victimises the victim.[102] In 2017, Article 308 was abolished, announcing a changing perception of women in the Jordanian society. Discussions and negotiations are still ongoing to increase longer sentences for murders who kill women under the banner of honour crimes.[103] These modern and progressive juridical laws seem to be developing tolerance towards women. The question remains however, about the culture's willingness to recognize the legitimacy of women's rights to body, mind and life.

Jordanian society incarnates the notion of honour in the female body. This body, consequently, is abstracted from any of the natural functions embedded within it, and rather serves the purpose of sustaining social values. In reality, women are denied their agency. Fiction, consequently, hopes and attempts to restore the original and innate aspects of women's bodies; it transgresses all restraints to portray the body as a source of pleasure, a site of individuality and a platform to reform corruption. Above all, it shows the body as a woman's possession. What is striking about Faqir's novel is the characterisation of the notion of honour as a crime that inflicts different forms of violence beyond the physical, producing, severe psychological turbulence that impoverishes the lives of women.

Saudi Arabia: the emergence of feminism and its relevance

By varying degrees, women's movements across Arab societies have impacted the situation of women and marked female lives differently. Today, a loud and vibrant

[102] Rana Husseini, 'In historic vote, House abolishes controversial Article 308', *The Jordan Times* (2017) < http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/historic-vote-house-abolishes-controversial-article-308> [accessed 21 December 2018].
[103] Ibid.

discussion of women is happening even in the most patriarchal societies. Women's voices have registered their public participation in the reformulation of gender discourses, and the reorganisation of society in an equal manner. This is the case of the Saudi female voice, which has, in contemporary times, broken the barriers of silence and contributed to an ongoing Arab feminist movement. And yet, despite their macroscopic strides, taking into account the nature of their society, these women have been the subject of microscopic academic attention.[104] Their situation in their society was mocked and worse, they became an example of what to avoid and a scale for measuring the development –or the backwardness—of society. Little is said about the progress they have made in recent years. Women in Saudi Arabia have been taking milestone leaps towards a change for which they have long aspired. Jawaher Alwedinani argues that the conservative nature of the country has always laid great pressure on women.[105] For years, they were subjected to intense patriarchal, oppressive and authoritarian control. These restraints, however, did not hold them back from writing, in varying degrees of transgression. While some writers have chosen to address social taboos obliquely, Rajaa Alsanea, the Saudi writer whose *Girls of Riyadh* is selected for analysis in this research, addresses the society directly and explicitly, shocking readers with the daring critical tone underpinning her stories.

Despite advances in health and education, Saudi women are reported by the 2010 Global Gender Gap Report to be absent from economic and political participation.[106] In 2011, however, Saudi women were finally granted the rights to vote and to run in municipal elections. Four years later, in December 2015, Saudi women were finally casting their votes in cities across the kingdom. Although only a relatively small number of

[104] Hend T. Al-Sudairy, *Modern Woman in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Rights, Challenges and Achievements* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), p. 5. Google eBook.
[105] Jawaher Alwedinani, 'Gender and Subject Choice in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of York, 2016), pp.34-35.
[106] Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 1.

women participated, women's access to polling centres is a step promising a gradual progressive shift in the social sphere for Saudi women.

At the global level, however, Saudi women have been subjected to two dominant stereotypes. The first is that of a woman completely covered in black, hidden and secluded from public appearance. The second is that of an extremely wealthy woman, owning businesses and enterprises and always traveling to enjoy the freedom she is deprived of in her country. In reality, neither of these two images are exact representations of Saudi women. In the last decade, they have been working actively and ambitiously to counteract these images, to give a truer portrayal of Saudi women's lives.

Saudi Arabia remains today one of the most conservative countries in the world. Its economic, political legal and social affairs are guided and ruled by Islamic principles, and unlike other Arab countries which have been through a colonial period, Saudi Arabia (and some other neighbouring gulf countries) has not been through any kind of Western occupation. Thus, there has never been any kind of secular movement that addresses social phenomena outside the religious context.[107] This might also explain the late arrival of the genre of the novel, which is generally held to be a modern creation whose essence emerged from secularism.[108]

According to Madawi Al-Rasheed, whose work is among the few that provide a detailed account of gender discourse in Saudi Arabia, the emergence of the Wahhabi ideology in 1932 as a nationalist movement heavily guided by religion, with the aim of restoring 'a unified religious nation' is behind the current status of Saudi women.[109] She argues that when this movement took control of the society and created different

[107] Mazin Al Harthi, 'Social Transformation in the Saudi novel: Ibrahim Al-Nassir as a case Study' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2015), p192.
[108] For more information on the nature of Saudi society and its relationship with literary production, particularly the novel, see: Abd Al-Rahman Muhammad Al-Wahhabi, 'Women's Novel in Saudi Arabia: its Emergence and Development in A Changing Culture' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Manchester, 2005), pp. 16- 224.
[109] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, pp.14- 44.

institutions, such as Mutaween (the Religious Police for Commanding the Right and Forbidding the Vice), its aim was to transform Saudi society into a more pious one by spreading a firm national discourse that targeted women specifically. The first action they took was dressing all women in one unifying black abaya, symbolising the Saudi religious national identity.[110] They have also reinforced and strictly policed the spatial segregation between the sexes, in which public life was made a property of men, and women were severely restricted to the private sphere.[111] This physical and social segregation stems from the belief that protecting women's reputation also protects men's honour, a belief that is common in the region of the Middle East and North Africa, and yet is nowhere as legitimised, reinforced and policed as in the kingdom. Confining women to their own space is intended to prevent any kind of wrongdoing that might not only jeopardise the family's honour but that of the holiness of the land. Whereas honour in other countries is a matter of tradition and custom, in Saudi Arabia, it is a matter of religion.

In fact, activists who are concerned with the development of women's status in Saudi society have used Islamic principles to defend their cause and to speak of Saudi women's rights. A group of women, scholars and academics adopted Islamic morals as heir guiding tools to demand better work opportunities for women and their rights to divorce and their rights after divorce.[112] These women argue compellingly that the plight of women is socially constructed rather than religiously imposed.[113] While the efforts of this Islamic group cannot be ignored or underappreciated, their outspoken opposition to the Saudi liberal feminist agenda has only slowed improvements. The latter's agenda included, and focused chiefly, on lifting the ban on women's driving and calling for laws that deal with

[110] Ibid., p. 116.

[111] See: May-lee Chai, 'Saudi Women' in *Saudi Arabia: A Modern Reader*, ed. by Wiberg Chai (Indianapolis: Indianapolis, 2005), p. 117.

[112] Lim Merlyna, 'Unveiling Saudi feminism(s): Historicization, Heterogenity, and Corporeality in Women's Movements' *Canadian Journal of Women's Movements*, 43.3 (2018), 461-479. < https://searchproquest-com.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk> [accessed 26 December 2018]

[113] Ibid., 470.

all forms of sexual harassment. Such demands, however, were not welcomed by Islamic feminists, resulting in a divided discourse which does not serve the cause of liberating Saudi women.[114]

However clashing the liberal and the Islamic agendas might seem, they reflect the existence and the exuberance of the discussion on women's rights in society from within. Hatoon el-Fassi explains that the term feminism brings to the conservative minds of society Western feminist values and ideologies. Western feminist demands pose a threat to the conservative nature of the kingdom.[115] El-Fassi sees that undertaking any examination regarding the situation of women in the country should start by pausing an alternative question, one which investigates the interest of Saudi women in the movement. Since the term feminism 'is practically non-existent in Saudi Arabia,' El-Fassi argues, 'it is perhaps better to put the question thus: are Saudi women interested in feminism?[116]

Two of Saudi Arabia's established writers share a common reluctance to articulate a clear feminist stance or even to identify themselves publicly as a feminist. Rajaa Alsanea's novel is apt for analysis in this research because its themes support one of the aims of this thesis, that of showing how women's articulation for the sake of reconstruction

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[114] This clash of opinions regarding the appropriate tool to advance the cause of Saudi women, was not solely witnessed in the kingdom, but has been dominant in other countries of the region. These two different strands are said to have operated both similarly and distinctively, some critics see that they are based on a relationship of dependency, and others believe that the two are rivals in essence and are not advantageous for the principal cause of liberating women. For more information see: Margot Badran 'Between Secular and Islamic Feminism: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond' *Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1.1 (2005), 7-23. < https://www.jstor.org/stable/40326847?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3A908f9d4c4f4fa02ab3085eb3d0b5928e&seq=7#page_scan_tab_contents > [accessed 21 August 2016]. See also: Nuraan Davies, 'Are Muslim Women in Need of Islamic Feminism? In Consideration of Re-Imagined Educational Discourse' *British Journal of Religious Education*, 37.3 (2014) < https://www-tandfonlinecom.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/doi/pdf/10.1080/01416200.2014.944096?needAccess=true > [accessed 1 September 2016].

[115] Hatton Ajwad el-Fassi, 'Does Saudi feminism Exist?' in *Arab Feminsim: Gender and Equality in the Middle East,* ed. by Jean Said Makdisi, Noha Bayoumi and Rafif Rida Sidawi (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 121.

[116] Ibid.

has been regarded as a transgression on Arab societies. This novelist, whose work clearly adheres to the criteria of feminist writing, has publicly rejected the label of feminist.[117] Although Alsanea does not disassociate herself from the discussion on women's rights, the term feminism seems to be regarded with great reservation by her and those who clearly abide by its principles. Badriah El Bishr, for example, is one of the most well-known figures in the Saudi media, and has for more than twenty years discussed clear gender issues and spoken out against women's subordinate situation in the kingdom. El Bishr is also an established writer whose novel, Hend wa Al Askar (2006; English translation 2017 under the title of Hend and the Soldiers), stirred a controversy in Saudi society and led to the work's embargo. In the 2019 Shubbak festival for Arabic literature, held on the 30th of June at the British Library, El Bishr was among the panellists of a session entitled 'The Endless Wave of New Feminist Writing'. There, ironically, El Bishr rejected the label of feminist and provided counter arguments as to why feminism is a 'problematic' and a 'sensitive' topic to be associated with Saudi women. Needless to say, El Bishr's comments left the audience with a visible disappointment, when clearly, as a reading of her novel reveals, the story exudes feminist themes and hopes.[118]

Isobel Coleman shares a similar concern that labelling women's efforts in organised movements in Saudi Arabia as feminism is a premature step. She asserts that although there is a growing awareness of the importance of collective activism, 'I don't see signs of a feminist movement—I see signs of rising consciousness among women—a questioning of why things are the way they are'.[119] Adopting the term feminism, Coleman believes, only hinders the development of the Saudi women's cause, and might be fettered by the

[117] Lesley Thomas, 'Sex and the Saudi girl: the writer who brought chick-lit to Arabia tells about passion behind the veil', *Sunday Times* (July 2007). https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sex-and-the-saudi-girlm9qstds3mkf [accessed 18 February 2018].

[118] Badriah El Bishr attended a Q&A session alongside other feminist and queer writers from the Arab world, on the 30 June 2019, at the British Library.

[119] Rob, L. Wagner, 'Saudi Women Embrace Feminism on Their Own Terms' *The Jerusalem Post* (2011) < https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Saudi-women-embrace-feminism-on-their-own-terms> [accessed 18 August 2016]

predominantly obstinate patriarchal majority if conservatism is menaced. She adds: 'Islamic feminism provides a more comfortable alternative path toward change, it can be seen as a more culturally relevant and less threatening to core Islamic values'[120].

Saudi women activists are aware that their demands are specific to Saudi woman, and even more conscious that these demands need to be fought for in a manner that conforms to the Saudi social structure, which is predominantly religious. The right to drive, for example, has always been a unique restriction imposed on women, and has been practiced solely in Saudi Arabia. The ban was lifted in June 2018, but it took decades to accomplish this, during which constant protests, incidents of rebellion and recorded transgressions occurred, often ending with severe repercussions for the offenders. In November 1990, for example, when a religious scholar issued a Fatwa prohibiting women's driving, forty-seven women broke the ban and sat behind the wheel, encouraged by their male supporters. The forty-seven graduate and academic women, most of them from King Saud University, dismissed their drivers and took over the vehicles to navigate the streets of the city capital. The women were arrested and charged for disobeying the law. They were even accused of offending religion, and extremists called for their decapitation. Luckily, King Fahd intervened and ordered an investigation of the matter. The gathered assembly who were assigned the task concluded that the women did not commit any transgression against religion, but only against tradition. Although proven innocent, these women were dismissed from their jobs and only allowed to return to work years later.[121] This is one example, of how custom shapes the Saudi society. This was the long-standing ban that has no basis in religion, but sprang out of tradition and was reinforced by law.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Souad Joseph, *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East* (New York, Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. 232. Google eBook.

Women activists in the kingdom have tirelessly tried to put an end to the sexist segregation created by tradition and legalised by law. Women's access to education has been a late phenomenon in the country compared to the rest of the Arab world. This might explain why women writers in the country are regarded as newcomers to the field of literature. In the 1960s, when the right of education was granted to women, parents and religious men strongly expressed their opposition to the idea based on their concerns regarding mixing girls and boys under the same roof, which was seen as allowing opportunities for committing prohibited acts. Bahgat explains:

> In the more conservative Saudi Arabia, granting the right of public education to women took longer and caused serious debate. Objections from concerned parents and ulama (religious scholars) to girls' schools, based on the fear that they might have undesirable effects on girls, delayed the establishments of these schools'.[122]

Education, then, was received in the privacy of the girls' houses and was exclusive to only those who could afford it. The restriction on girls' public schooling began to loosen up after the establishment of same sex schools, yet even then, segregation was practiced in different manners.[123]

While boys' educational programs varied and included myriad subjects and material, the girls' program contained limited subjects with specific contents. The girls' curriculum focused on subjects that prepare them for married life, raising children and obeying their husbands.[124] Religious scholars in the country, whose discourses are regarded with eminent consideration and respect, claim that the quality of education provided to

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[122] Gawdat Bahgat, *The Persian Gulf at the Dawn of the New Millennium* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1999), p. 57.
[123] Nouf Alsuwaida, 'Women's Education in Saudi Arabia' *Journal of International Education Research*, 12.4 (2016), (p.112) < https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/docview/1829504591?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&accountid=14557> [accessed 11 January 2019].
[124] Bahgat, *The Persian Gulf*, p. 57.

girls needs to be oriented to serve particular purposes, and should not divert from religious scripts. Yet, activists who support themselves by the words of Quran and the Prophet Mohammed have proven that such claims are false.[125]

The spatial and the qualitative segregation in education in the country would not end until after the tragic event of March 2002, which took the lives of fifteen Saudi girls and was the straw that broke the camel's back. On that day, a fire broke out in Mecca in a girls' school. The terrified girls ran towards the door to save their lives but were pushed back by the religious police, and firefighters were not allowed in the school to save the girls, because the latter were not covered in their abayas. Fifteen girls and two teachers died and more than fifty others were seriously injured. This incident, in which customary law was considered more important than human life, outraged the public and they demanded urgent reforms to the educational system.[126]

The sudden exposure to globalisation, which has accompanied the thriving oil economy, has been met with mounting resistance from the authorities and the conservatives.[127] However, the events of 9/11 were a wake-up call to Saudi citizens to look at the degree of extremism existing within their country.[128] This has also put the country under a strong spotlight for the situation of its women, although improvements in women's status began to be discussed early in the 2000s and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was signed in 2000 under pressure from the United Nations. But it was not until 2003 that concrete actions were realized by the first conference organised to the study of women's concerns in the kingdom. Initially the conference was assigned the name of 'The Rights of Women' but due to some undeclared

[125] Ibid., p.113.
[126] Nikki R Keddie, *Women in The Middle East: Past and Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p.175.
[127] Freshteh Nouraie-Simone, *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 2014), p. 116. Ebook Library.
[128] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, p. 153.

reasons the word 'responsibilities' was added. In the aftermath of the conference, women were praised for their brave articulation of women's topics that were deemed undiscussable in the past. Hatoon confirms: '[The conference] did manage to tackle issues such as violence against women, women in school curricula, women and labour, education, customs, legitimate rights, custody, alimony, the attitude of courts towards women, and women and poverty'.[129]

As we can see from the preceding discussion, the Saudi feminist agenda, throughout the years, has clearly harnessed fruitful projects aimed at rendering the Saudi woman an active and a visible citizen in her society. Limitations and restrictions continue to exist and new ones continue to emerge, as different forces such as political constitutions and religious scholars, and even at times other women, are attempting to protect the preferred mode of life in the kingdom, that of patriarchy.[130] These dominant institutions have customised a unified identity for women, and made it the reality. Inferiority was imposed and women were expected to settle for it, but their activism throughout the years, has proven that nothing demeaning women is scripted and nothing is hermetic to change.

Women activists' own interpretation of religious scripts, revealed two matters: the first is that religion is misused against them.[131] The second is that nothing is challenging to them, they are apt to engage with the most complicated issues, passing authentic judgments and displaying critical intellect. The identity assigned to them as women to nurture, is slowly being contested in theory and practice, and spaces for challenging the status quo are expanding. Estranged from their societies, the writers of the country used fiction as a

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[129] El-Fassi, 'Does Saudi feminism exist?', p.129.

[130] Princess Jawaher Bint Jalawi, along with her supporters launched a campaign referring to it as 'My Guardian Knows What's best for me' demanding reinforcing the laws that limit women's mobility and freedom of movemt. For more information see: Liv Tonnessen, *Women's Activism in Saudi Arabia: Male Guardianship and Sexual Violence* (Michelsen Institute, 2016), p. 20.

[131] See: Yahya Al Alhareth, Yasra Al Hareth and Ibtisam Al Dighrir, 'Review of Women and Society in Saudi Arabia', *American Journal of Educational Research*, 3. 2 (2015), 121-125 (pp.123-124) < https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu> [accessed 9 August 2019].

medium through which gender segregation is contested and women are empowered. It is this medium that enables them the full experience of womanhood. The Saudi woman writer identifies the pitfalls of her society, and chooses to reveal them raising questions that probe sensitivities, renounce norms and confront the limit and erase it.

This renders Rajaa AlSanea and her novel, Girls of Riyadh, the perfect illustration of this bold social criticism, and of the Saudi women'svoices. This is a voice that never ceased speaking, especially with the technological advancement that conquered the Saudi sphere and enabled the emergence of a more liberated and a growing articulation of progressive discourses and crafted some space for self-expression. AlSanea represents a relevant case study for examining the progressive social and technological shift that occurred in this country of the Persian Gulf, precisely during the new millennium, and its mobilisation of women. While pioneering women writers in the country, such as Samira Khashoggi and Raja Alem, engaged with fiction early on and tested the waters with subtle narratives, AlSanea, aware and fearless of the consequences, published by far Saudi Arabia's most candid fictional social critique. This is perhaps why this novel has endured, and why the writer continues to be regarded as a controversial figure.

As has been shown, the high degree of conservatism conspicuous in the kingdom hampers women in obtaining their full rights as citizens. This characteristic of the society distinguishes Saudi women's feminism from any other feminist movement in the more liberal Arab societies. Therefore, what feeds the writer's creative appetite differs from one region to another, according to her milieu. As a result, Arab women write with varying degrees of transgression to attain their desired identities. Yet, however enormous the space between these varying degrees, the distance does not separate them completely or render them isolated subjects of discussion and analysis. Rather, what binds them together is their ways of negotiating their identities, and their use of fiction to deconstruct fictional and illusionary social expectations for women. They have all aimed at achieving their identities

and constructing those of their countrywomen by transgressing social, historical and literary boundaries.

Conclusion

At the turn of the 1920s, Arab society recorded its first public feminist uprising. Egyptian women initiated the changing perception of women in the Arab society. Their uprising signalled the creation of a unique movement that caters to the specific needs of Egyptian women and challenges the equally specific hegemonic construction of the female identity, particularly, the association of women's bodies with honour. Early feminists in Egypt were faced with solid resistance, but their determined engagement allowed practices deemed dishonouring to be challenged and slowly changed. The following generation publicly destabilised the notion of honour associated with woman's sexuality, declaring a shift in the perception of women's bodies and identities.

Though the juxtaposition of women and honour in Algeria manifested itself in similar ways as in Egypt, its reinforcement was inflected by long colonial presence and violence. The French occupation added another layer to female oppression: women were a political territory and the native and the colonial waged war over their bodies to claim their possession. But women were not only victims in this contestation: they were full participants in the emancipation of their country. They played unconventional roles that marked their womanhood differently. It turned out after the revolution that these roles were temporary and women were pushed back to the margins of the society to find themselves in another war of ideologies to which they fell victim.

The social construct of women's chastity and men's honour has other aggravated consequences that were more dominant in some parts of the Arab world than others. In Jordan, women formed collective efforts to end honour crimes which menaced and indeed took the lives of women who supposedly brought shame to the family. Jordanian women

activists striving to spread awareness, especially in villages where the practice is common, were hindered by juridical laws that claimed to protect women when in fact they protected their male assailants. Recent changes to the laws promise new protections of women and greater support for their rights to body and life.

The changes in the status of Arab women across the years have reached the most conservative of societies in the region to alter the female experience and to end firmly rooted gender discrimination. Indeed, Saudi women have managed to push their agendas and challenge patriarchal norms that long ruled the lives of women. Yet, despite the gains women have managed to obtain, Saudi society continues to resist the women's cause, and continues to view it as a threat against socially constructed values. The perception of women as embodiments of honour was reinforced by the major economic and political forces that have governed the country ever since it opened itself to globalisation.

In light of these social, historical and political forces that directly influenced the status of women in their societies, literature became the dominant mode of response which Arab women have used to represent and reflect the female experience. Literature opens a space for experimenting with the female identity beyond the customised one that has been fitted for women. The following chapter examines Nawal El Saadawi's *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr* and Assia Djebar's Ombre Sultane, demonstrating how these two novels represent challenging interventions into conventional discourses that dictate women's identities and encumber their independence in forming autonomous ideas of themselves.

Chapter 2 Resistance through transgression: Nawal El Saadawi and Assia Djebar

This chapter focuses on Nawal El Saadawi and Assia Djebar, two of the Arab world's most innovative and challenging women writers, to argue that they transgress boundaries in their novels, but that these transgressions are only preliminary acts towards the quest for identity. In *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr* and *Ombre sultane*, the heroines' transgressions are portrayed as acts that begin without necessarily leading to an ultimate resolution for their plight: Firdaus, Hadjila and Isma engage in long journeys after violating specific taboos in order to claim autonomous agency for themselves. This reading of these novels will show how the possibility of re-negotiating women's identities is conducted by way of the body, the locus where social conventions are inscribed and subverted. In bringing these two texts together in this chapter, I maintain that these writers make of literature a mode of resistance perpetuated through transgressive narration.

Derived from Foucault's views on the modern understanding of sexuality and its relation to the construction of identities, this analysis of *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr* shows how Firdaus, El Saadawi's heroine, is a sexualised subject created, repressed and disciplined by a single power. The author, however, chooses to liberate her heroine from such sovereignty by turning the impetus of this power against itself. Isma and Hadjila, the protagonists of Ombre sultane, transcend domestic and public spheres, challenging the notion of private and public gendered spaces. Judith Butler's philosophical disruption of historical and social gender construction in Gender Trouble is useful to show how Djebar's novel disturbs the status quo by creating fluid identities who move swiftly between the so-called masculine and feminine spaces, thereby creating a literary work that proposes an alternative discourse on women in her society.

The chapter concludes by examining El Saadawi's and Djebar's representations of women and solidarity among them. In their novels, they brilliantly effectuate a visible

deconstruction and a rejection of the notion of sisterhood by shaping a female relationship characterised mainly by mutual opposition. Both writers confront their elite characters with their subaltern ones, portraying the nature of the articulation that might emerge out of this hierarchal encounter. This image, however, most significantly reflects
El Saadawi and Djebar's consciousness of the limitations of their roles as women writers. Their status as intellectuals who had access to education, unlike the majority of women in their societies, is the main encumbrance alerting the writers' to the impossibility of forming a sisterhood.

The implantation of sexual identity within the body in *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr*

In Chapter 1, I argued that women's sexuality in the Arab world has been exposed to various discourses, mostly distorted as they diverge from sacred religious scripts where women's sexuality is discussed, resulting thereby with material practices created to keep women under control. Women's bodies became the bearer of traditional values and representative of the notion of honour, and hence subjected to physical restrictions such as the domestic seclusion and FGM, to protect the status quo. This need to tame women's sexuality is reflected in *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr*. The social environment where the protagonist grows up configures sexual habits to allow only reproductive sex to be the conventional form of sexual relations. Any other forms of sexuality are prohibited and punishable. If matrimony is the only accepted space for sexual relations, sexual behaviours outside the institution of marriage are illegitimate, and those who commit them are regarded as deviants.

From the first scenes of the novel, El Saadawi reveals the transgressive act that her heroine has committed for the sake of liberating herself from the confinement and shackles denying her liberation. Firdaus, the protagonist of the novel, kills her pimp to claim her

independence as a prostitute. The transgression lies not in the crime she committed, but in the purpose for which it was carried out. The writer creates a narrative that portrays the struggle to claim, and the resistance against claiming, an individuality that is not in accordance with the established and permitted categories of identity in her society. Her focus in this novel is to destabilise the understanding of sex to allow those castigated and denigrated because of their bodies and their sexualities to be recognised and accepted.

El Saadawi centres the narrative around different forms of the illegitimate sexual practices that defy the sacred aura surrounding sexuality in Arab-Islamic society and the primacy of marriage as the sole locus of sex. El Saadawi does so not merely for the sake of defiance, or causing sensation, but to show how enclosing sexuality behind the walls of the conjugal household and hiring authoritative and defining sex as heterosexual, monogamous and reproductive has produced other sexual identities that are regarded as non-conforming and illicit. The text exceeds the transgression of the heterosexual order of sexuality and employs the themes of bisexuality to deconstruct the binary of masculine/feminine as the cite of sexual practices. This deconstruction is conducted by depicting bisexual tendencies as a way of navigating and constructing a sexual identity. On several occasions, Firdaus, the protagonist of the novel, is seen enjoying the company of women and can only recuperate long lost feelings and sensation when touched by a woman. Firdaus is, however, constantly attempting to reconcile this unacknowledged same sex desire within her. Attempting to remind herself of the sex of her lover, she asks: 'but she's a woman. Could I possible be in love with a woman?'[1] Such an unstable state of being and feeling has been generated from the strict control that she and women endure because of their sex. Women

[1] Unless otherwise mentioned, all quotes from the novel are from the original Arabic: Nawal El Saadawi, *Imra'ah*, p. 35. For a more detailed discussion on same sex desire in the novel see: Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women and God(s): Nawal El Saadai and Arab Feminist Poetics* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1995). See also: Omar Mohamed Abdullah, 'Kristivan Abjection in Nawal EL Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*' *Mediterranean Journal of Social Science,* 6. 6 (2015), 80-86 < https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283826973_Kristevan_Abjection_in_Nawal_El_Saadawi%27s_Woman_at_Point_Zero> [accessed 23 November 2020]

are especially targets of distorted discourses and violent practices because of their sexuality: the aim to control women's bodies and to form their sexual identities as meek, obedient and passive, have in fact generated reverse effects and created the most undesirable sexual identity for woman in the Arab society, that of the prostitute.

The theme of sexuality, its repression and its construction in *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr* resembles, partly to Foucault's idea in his The History of Sexuality: Volume One, so much so that a productive reading of the novel is possible by applying Foucault's views. I focus particularly on his criticism of the repressive hypothesis and its direct relation to what he calls, 'The Perverse Implantation'. I am particularly interested in his analysis of the modern creation of perversion, its production as one form of 'peripheral sexualities' and how they were brought to light by the very power trying to eradicate them.

The nineteenth century proliferation of discourses acting as power mechanisms on sexuality took it upon themselves to carefully describe, organise and control a plurality of deviations from 'sexual irregularity'.[2] Foucault explains that this role resulted in 'the multiplication of disparate sexualities' and rebukes the idea that modern societies 'ushered in an age of increased sexual repression'. If anything, he argues, this era has seen a 'visible explosion of unorthodox sexualities' as a result of powers' 'encroachment' on bodies and their pleasure.[3]

The appearance of peripheral sexualities, according to Foucault, is managed by four operations of power to proliferate and implant perversion within bodies that are said to have non-conventional sexual tendencies. The first and the second operations in his list are the main points of consideration here as they illustrate the process through which the

[2] Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality: 1*, 6th edn (London: Penguin Group, 1998), p. 36.
[3] Ibid., pp. 48-49.

sexual identity is implanted in bodies and established as their realities. These two operations are summarised as follows:

Power tactics employed on the sexuality of children, unlike those employed on incest, have acted as antithesis to their objective. He writes, 'on the surface what appears [in both cases] is an effort at elimination that was always destined to fail and always constrained to begin again'.[4] The efforts undertaken by power to eliminate child's sex, 'leads one to suspect that what was demanded of it was to persevere, to proliferate to the limits of the visible and the invisible, rather than to disappear for good'.[5] Controlling children's sexuality by discursive power was not to stamp it out, rather, it expanded it by 'lines of penetration'.[6] This is the first means by which perversion began to be established.

The second operation is a continuation from the first one and is conducted to achieve complementarity between the two stages. At the heart of this step is the embedding of perversity in bodies and making subjects see themselves in terms of perversion. The crucial role of this operation is the 'incorporation of perversion' in the body of that with an 'unnatural' sexuality.[7] Every comportment displayed became analysed and seen as the pervert's personality. Foucault emphasises homosexuality to show how, by means of this operation, modes of behaviour are regarded as the roots of one's identity. Aberrant sexuality is 'established as a raison d'etre'.[8] The strategy applied to controlling 'alien' sexuality did not suppress it; rather an 'alien' sexual identity was 'implanted in bodies' and solidified in them.[9]

[4] Ibid., p. 41.
[5] Ibid., p. 42.
[6] Ibid., p. 42.
[7] Ibid., pp. 39-42.
[8] Ibid., p. 44.
[9] Ibid., p. 44.

Firdaus, endures a life of sexual exploitation, during which she struggles to free her body from a chain of abusers while she struggles to construct independent sexual identity. Her plight is the sex of her body and the gendering it demands. Her control by her patriarchal environment involves an interplay of power mechanisms, discursive and material, which shapes her subjectivity according to the mainstream models of "feminine" identity permitted in her society. Her subjugation is initiated by introducing her and teaching her hierarchical discourses on gender and on women's bodies as objects of subordination. This social undertaking is supported by physical control to ensure that Firdaus's body remains sexually submissive and passive. This collaborative effort, in fact might seem to be working to regulate her sexual identity and normalise it according to the patriarchal conventions dominant in her society. Instead, it produces her sexual deviance in order to control it.

El Saadawi seems to lead us to the conclusion that the destructive sexual identity of her character is incorporated in her by the power of her abusers from the start of the narrative to the final lines of the novel. She creates a sense of a social mobilisation in which everyone is summoned to control women, even women themselves, through a collaboration of institutions and individuals. The joint efforts might on the surface seem to be teaming up to demolish the danger that is within women, to end their 'sin' and to prevent the 'forbidden' from occurring. In fact, any alliance formed is to establish woman's 'vice' and claim to combat it. (15-16) This is indeed an undertaking, to use Foucault's expression, that is always 'destined to fail and always constrained to begin again'.[10] Firdaus's cycle of exploitation takes this form and each abuser inserts another piece in her identity, so that the finished product is the persona they have been working to annihilate. Everyone who enters her life claims to be protecting her from the danger, the

[10] Ibid., p. 41.

sinful and the forbidden; promising her honour by dishonouring her body and extracting its virtue.

El Saadawi is known to have been among the most outspoken figures in the Arab world, who never hesitated to articulate her criticism against religious men and their misinterpretation of religious scripts.[11] Likewise in the novel, she does not shy away from portraying religious figures as the source of women's sexualisation and desexualisation because of their manipulative discourses. The village imam is the hypnotising power that transforms the villagers into his servants. After the Friday sermon, he is praised and admired by fellow men for his 'convincing and eloquent' speech through which he instills in their minds the ideas that 'stealing was a sin, and killing was a sin, and defaming the honour of a woman was a sin' (15). They leave the mosque with a feeling of solemn wonder. They are in awe of his 'Holiness' and left in a state of 'admiration and approval of everything' he said (15). The young Firdaus would observe them as they are deeply influenced by what they heard, and how swiftly and immediately they would conduct themselves according to the imam's preaching. They have been made responsible for the wellbeing of the community. They live up to the expectations by surveilling 'what went on around them with weary, doubting, stealthy eyes, eyes ready to pounce, full of an aggressiveness that seemed strangely servile' (16). The imam has mobilised his followers and they yield to his power. They are set on their mission, indistinguishable from one another in the purifying uniform designed for them, looking exactly alike to the extent that Firdaus cannot distinguish her father in this large group of men. To her 'he resembled them so closely that it was difficult to tell' who was her father in this group of strangers (16).

[11] In her study of EL Saadawi's works, Fedwa-Malti Douglas explains that El Saadawi's writings are a cause of much controversy in the Arab world because of her fierce accusation of politics and religion for the plight of women in the Arab world. She writes 'Nawal El Saadawi, by inserting religion into many of her recent textual creations, has placed herself in the heart of the fray'. See: Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women and God(s),* p. 8.

This masculine union, however, is just a temporary façade and Firdaus notices how men only minimally hold onto the role they have been assigned. She sees how her father displays such a devout spirit publicly, but when it comes to his own well-being, the words of the imam do not entirely hold true. Even though he was told that 'stealing is a sin', he nevertheless practices unethical acts to earn money. For example, he would 'sell a buffalo poisoned by his enemy before it died' and he would go as far as 'stealing from the fields once the crop was ripe' (14). It is particularly the words of imam regarding the protection of honour that remain engraved in his mind; the imam's discourse resonates strongly within him and he knows he has to act quickly to protect his reputation by controlling the body of his daughter. Firdaus's account of her father's perception of her young body reveals that as a child she has always witnessed how the woman's body is a malleable surface open to penetration and alteration. Her father has maliciously made the virgin body of his daughter a single expense that produces two returns; an inactive sexuality is made a commodity with two beneficial attributes that satisfy his two needs, the need for respectability and the need of income. She explains that her father's knowledge in life is limited and what he has learnt from his environment is how to secure his daily living and his esteem. For him, these two could be achieved concurrently by 'exchange[ing] his virgin daughter for a dowry when there was still time' (14). This instance remarked by the young girl is significant, for she learns that there is a duplicity revolving around the notion of honour. Despite the fact that her father's honour depends entirely on his ethics and morals, yet the chastity of his daughter is the scale on which his social regard is measured. More importantly, she is alerted to how a woman's sexuality generates a synergistic effect on others.

The dissemination of this distorted understanding of women's bodies in El Saadawi's novel is presented as emerging from the discourse promulgated by religious leaders, who themselves are described as subjects who preach virtue but practice vice.

Firdaus's uncle is the second religious figure who has direct control over her body. Firdaus's unnamed uncle is a student at El Azhar University, one of the most prestigious universities in the Islamic world, and Firdaus has often had paradoxical feelings about him. One the one hand, he is to her a role model, as she looks up to him with fascination for his ability to read and to write. In his visits from Cairo, he teaches her the alphabet, and helps her memorise poetry and Koran. He also teaches her about the right ways of conducting the female body and repeats to her that 'dancing was a sin, and that kissing a man, too, was a sin' (28). On the other hand, this man well versed in religion and entrusted with Firdaus, first as a mentor and a teacher when her parents are still alive and later as the guardian, when her parents pass away, molests her and uses her body for his repressed sexual needs. Shortly after he cautions her from using her body in sinful acts, Firdaus describes in minute detail the sexual assault which her uncle commits:

> Great long fingers would draw close to me after a little while, and cautiously lift the eiderdown under which I lay. Then his lips would touch my face and press down on my mouth, and his trembling fingers would feel their way slowly upwards over my thighs. (28)

A similar molestation incident has happened to her previously, and both incidents leave her bewildered about the nature of this practice, especially since the trembling fingers of her uncle are the same ones that used to teach her how to hold a chalk pencil and 'make [her] write on a slate: Alif, Ba, Gim, Dal…'(18). Firdaus's attachment to her uncle is stronger than the one with her father; she says that 'my uncle was closer to me than my father' however, she is unable to identify the nature and the meaning of his hand gesture. It is 'a strange thing' she refers to it because the movements of the uncle's hand with a 'brutal insistence' are arousing in her body 'a new pleasure still unknown, and indefinable', 'in a part of my being'. This new 'spot' in her body triggered an unfamiliar sensation that marks her life entirely (18-28).

Firdaus's uncle is not merely the initiator of the chain of her sexual exploitation, he too continues to instil ideas in her mind regarding men's honour and their dependency on women's bodies. Her relocation to his house after the death of her parents begins her development into what she will fully become later in her life. From the first moments in his house, Firdaus sees her body in the reflection of the mirror for the first time; such a small act but rejuvenating to such an extreme that it makes her question 'whether a person can be born twice' (25). Yet this rebirth does not offer a drastically new life. The notion and demands of honour follow her at the different stages of her physical development. After successfully finishing secondary school, Firdaus expresses to her uncle her wish to join El Azhar University. In response, 'he would laugh and explain that El Azhar was only for men' (20). Despite her brilliance and educational achievements, he denies her access to university because his status would be endangered if his niece goes 'to a place where she will be sitting side by side with men'. The public reputation he has established for himself as 'a respected Sheikh and a man of religion' is jeopardised by his niece's desire 'to mix in the company of men' (47-50).

The connection between the discursive control of religious men and the construction of Firdaus's body and sexual identity is clear. The imam of the village, his influence on her father, and the uncle who graduates and becomes a sheik, adjust the bodies of women as an embodiment of their own honour. In all of these instances, Firdaus is aware that the notion of honour is corrupt; that this myth centred on her body is only a pretext for the men in her life to prosper by exploiting her chastity. This kind of control may have aimed to take her attention from her body and sexuality, but this rhetoric instead is a steady and a solid infusion of the idea that a woman's active sexuality is dangerous and risky. From her early years of childhood to late adolescence, her sexual identity was in the process of intensification; prohibitive instructions penetrated her body and have taken over her attention and consciousness. As a result, she grows aware of her body and its composition. It 'was slender, [her] thighs tense, alive with muscle, ready at any moment to

grow even more taut' (73). Her body is a source of a social chaos that discourse alone cannot control.

If discourse on honour engages everyone in the maintenance of authority over the female's body, El Saadawi shows that religious men influence women as well as men to assume power over their own and other women's bodies. Women have internalised the distorted narrative and are made to perceive their bodies according to the imam's dogmas. They, too, are rallied to ensure their own objectification and the objectification of their female offspring. Firdaus's developing body and mind requires further modes of repression to mould her into submission. The confusion caused to Firdaus by the resemblance of her father to his friends and her inability to recognise him leads her to ask her mother about the way she was brought to life. To find an answer to this query, she recounts 'one day I asked my mother about him. How was it that she had given birth to me without a father?' (16).

This is a vague question that reflects the normal process of a child's developing mind. Although it does not necessarily indicate Firdaus's curiosity about sexual matters, her mother perceives this as a sign that her daughter is entertaining impure thoughts. The response to this innocent question is punitive. To eliminate the danger that her mother begins to sense in her daughter's simple question, severe measures have to be taken. Firdaus suffers FGM and graphically narrates this episode:

> First she beat me. Then she brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs. I cried all night. Next morning my mother did not send me to the fields. (16)

Firdaus's curiosity is seen as an abnormal behaviour that reflects her aberrant personality, and it regarded as the token that reveals her sexuality. The immediate reaction of the mother suggests that she regards her daughter as a dangerous being capable of causing destruction. She was awaiting the simplest, even the most trivial manifestation of deviation to perform an extraction of the sexual organ that is the source of her daughter's

nonconformity. This physical violence ends with the implantation of the aberrant sexual identity, and throughout her life Firdaus is set out to seek that 'new pleasure' she has been denied.

The discursive and physical controls of Firdaus's body to which she is exposed throughout her early years are dual prohibitions aimed at eradicating her sexuality. In these subjugating processes, the environment where Firdaus grows up produces her in order to control her paradoxically, she is reprimanded for being a deviant by being made into a deviant. The dreaded threat of her sexuality is made into her reality, into her individuality. Firdaus has been made a prostitute.

Resistance through self-prostitution

The image of the prostitute in literature since the eighteenth century has lacked authentic description: prostitutes are always depicted as objects by male writers and ignored by male critics.[12] Evelyne Accad, in her study of prostitution in Arab fiction, analyses the ways in which prostitutes are characterized by male and female writers from the Arab world. She argues that prostitutes in Arab male fiction are negatively portrayed, dehumanized and always cast in the femme fatale role, whereas Arab women writers tend to romanticize the relationship between the prostitute and the client. Unlike male writers, women writers represent prostitutes with sympathy and construct them as victims of particular circumstances.[13] El Saadawi is among the first women writers in the Arab world to provide an alternative discourse about prostitution, aiming at negotiating an identity for those women who have been assigned a stereotypical one. Coming to terms of what will be a self-constructed identity is a long process for Firdaus. By emphasising the thread of

[12] Pierre l. Horn, Mary Beth Pringle, *The Image of the Prostitute in Modern Literature* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1984), p.4-5.
[13] Evelyne Accad, 'the Prostitute in Arab and North African Fiction' in *The Image of the Prostitute in Modern Literature*, p. 65.

sexual exploitation that runs from Firdaus's childhood into her adult life, El Saadawi shows how Firdaus embraces the identity constructed for her as a means of resistance and a way to claim her body and wield power.

In her non-fiction, El Saadawi offers a socio-historical analysis of the emergence and the development of the profession of prostitution in the Arab world. She argues that in ancient Egypt, 'sacred or temple' prostitution was a common phenomenon that granted the prostitute−once retired− 'respect' and would elevate her to 'a class of high priestesses'.[14] She points out that prostitution has been prevalent in different societies of the world and has been socially accepted, publicly recognised and justified under religious, economic, medical and political pretexts. At no point in time and in none of the world's societies, however, has prostitution catered to the sexual needs of women, nor has it ever generated an egalitarian profit for the two parties involved in it.[15] *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr* attempts to overturn this historical construction of prostitution insofar as the prostitute struggles in this arena to attain sexual pleasure and to rise to a positon of power. Abir Hamdar and Lindsey Moore state that El Saadawi's 'critique of patriarchy on domestic, social and religious axes is far from unusual', since male authors before her have already conducted such a criticism.[16] However, her own way in carrying out literary denunciation distinguishes her from her male and female contemporaries, and presents her perspective as a 'radical (and [a] highly controversial one).[17] Indeed, this polemic and extremity are especially evident in the writer's act of negotiating an identity for her protagonist.

Yet is resistance possible? Can a subject attain autonomy by erasing indelible inscriptions? Can Firdaus resist the powers that sexually exploit her? And can she construct

[14] Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (London: Zed Books, 1980), p. 57.
[15] Ibid., pp.59-61.
[16] Abir Hamdar and Lindsey Moore, *Islamism and Cultural expression in the Arab World* (Oxon: Routledge, 2015), p. 8.
[17] Ibid., p.8

an independent identity other than what has been designed for her? Foucault proposes that 'where there is power, there is resistance' and for this resistance to succeed, it cannot be activated from 'a position of exteriority in relation to power'.[18] Rather, Foucault sees that power relationships are only maintained because they are faced by the opposition and the confrontational counteraction of its adversaries. One example of this is the models and the mechanisms with which power continues to renovate itself in the face of 'a plurality of resistances' that comes in distinct shapes. Some are 'possible, necessary, improbable'; others are 'spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant or violent'.[176] Firdaus's revolt against subjugating authority takes on some of these forms of resistance to attain the sexual liberation she longs for. Her resistance begins by using the discursive power inscribed on her by becoming a sex worker; that is, by immersing herself in the very practice which has been imposed upon her.

In his discussion of the novel, Omar Mohammed Abdullah claims that Firdaus embodies symptoms of sexual hysteria that cause her 'to lead a life of prostitution'.[19] Using a Freudian psychoanalytical perspective-–despite the fact that El Saadawi vehemently disagrees and criticises Freud's analysis of women's sexuality in her Woman and Sex—Abdullah makes a compelling argument regarding Firdaus's early years of sexual exploitation to show how childhood repression shaped the hysterical woman she becomes in adulthood.[20] Firdaus does indeed display hysterical tendencies, but hysteria does not drive her to prostitution. She does not choose to 'lead' a life of prostitution, for that implies that she has followed that path from the beginning and conducted herself actively and consciously in that manner, which has not been the case.

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[18] Foucault, *The History*, p. 95

[176] Ibid., p.96.

[19] Omar Mohammed Abdullah and others, 'Manifestation of Hysteria in Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero' *The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 21. 3 (2015), 99-107 (p. 101).

[20] Nawal El Saadawi, *Al Mar'a wa Al Jins*, 4th edn (Cairo: Al Mostakbal Publishing, 1990), pp.53-54.

Firdaus's prostitution happens in the most indirect way, within the institution of marriage. When her uncle marries and starts a new life with a woman who resents Firdaus, she becomes a burden on this family. Her presence in the house is intolerable, even as a servant. The uncle's wife sees her as a useless person with no value and only an extra expenditure on the presumably limited family budget. To rid herself of Firdaus, the uncle's wife persuades her husband to marry her off at the age of 19 to a man over 60 years old. The easily convinced husband does not hesitate to bargain with Sheikh Mahmoud to take Firdaus−who is no longer 'young', who 'has grown' and whose 'life without a husband' is a 'risky' one (48). The uncle quotes a price of £200 but is willing to lower it to a hundred pounds and using that dowry, he 'will be able to pay [his] debts' (49).

In her husband's house Firdaus is hungry, allowed minimal food and expected to carry out heavy labour. At night, she has to submit her exhausted body 'passively' to the old man's forceful sexual gratification 'without any resistance, without a movement' (60). In this reality, Firdaus conceives of her body as a commodity, 'neglected furniture' and a 'pair of shoes forgotten under a chair' (60). Such a grim characterisation of herself perception reflects the loss of the material sense of the body. She internalises the discourse that has circulated around her and she sees that the carcass she carries is meant to be sexually used in exchange for food and shelter. The institution of marriage for which her consent was not sought becomes the brothel she inhabits, where she unconsciously performs the prostitute's role. El Saadawi writes in Woman and Sex that if prostitution entails a woman's engagement in sexual relations with men in exchange for financial revenue, then 'marital relationships where sex and money are exchanged, do not differ in their core from that of prostitution'.[21]

After she runs away from the violent, battering husband, the chain prostituting her continues. She is sheltered by a man called Bayoumi, whose decency and generosity do not

[21] Ibid., p. 109.

last long before he too, exploits her body, locks her up in his dwelling and offers her to his friends. Her self-loathing at this period does not end and she continues to see herself as a 'piece of wood, or an empty sock, or a shoe' (55). She does not, however, perceive of herself or of her body in a derogatory way. Certainly, she sees it as a useless object, but she never uses sexist insults commonly used against women in a misogynistic way to describe herself. These terms, such as 'slut, bitch' which appear in the English translation of the novel, are used against her but she does not dare to utter them. In fact, these two terms are not available in the Arabic original. In this particular scene profanity is not used but replaced by ellipses suggesting an intuitive understanding of these words. She states that 'he cursed my mother with a word, that I could neither hear, nor pronounce' (56). When she develops the ability to pronounce these words, however, she uses them solely against men.

Over the course of this violent physical, sexual exploitation, Firdaus makes continual attempts to liberate herself and rescue her body. Her escape from both her husband and Bayoumi to the open streets is one mechanism of resistance. In both cases, she seeks shelter in the public space where her senses are relatively awakened, but only to the extent that they notify her of the pain and the deprivation her body is experiencing. This action of roaming the wild streets unequipped is so drastic and uncalculated that it seems to take her always in the same direction, to the same doom. In the same way that her flight from her husband's house propels her to Bayoumi's, running from Bayoumi's does not lead her to an environment less sexually charged. When Sherifa finds Firdaus in the streets and takes her in, Firdaus recounts the same plight:

> I never used to leave the house. In fact, I never even left the bedroom. Day and night, I lay on the bed, crucified and every hour a man would come in. There were so many of them. Where do they come from, and they are all married, all educated? (62)

At Sherifa's, Firdaus's financial situation might have improved but she continues to endure sexual slavery, and though she is plainly inhabiting a brothel, yet, the term prostitute with its clear interpretation is never used. On the contrary, in that space, she is declared to be valuable, for her young body and for her 'culture' because of 'her secondary school certificate' (60). These comments persuade her to remain. Although these deceptive and manipulative discourses are employed to keep her under control, they also have the potential to enable Firdaus to climb the ladder of power to release her body.

Firdaus's body has been appropriated; it is the embodiment of other's pleasure, other's finances, social status, power, norms and values. Her identification as a prostitute is firmly established; although she does not identify herself as such, others do. She insists, 'I am not a prostitute. But right from early days my father, my uncle, my husband, all of them, taught me to grow up as a prostitute' (135). To achieve liberation, she realises that she needs to adjust her resistance techniques by conveying her body in alternative ways. In her previous escapes to the streets, her body was only a package shielding her soul from any further damage. She used to carry it out in a manner that communicates her vulnerability and renders it an object of confiscation by her abusers. She learns that in order to claim a corporeal authority and achieve agency, she needs to change her own perception of her body, first by reconnecting with it and administering its confident demeanour in the public sphere, and second, by adopting and adapting the prostitute's profession.

Anna Ball writes that although 'economic and social agency reside with men in patriarchal society, Firdaus realises that this power, is in one sense, purely material'. [22] Indeed, it is the realisation that the deterioration of her life and its aggravation have been

[22] Anna Ball, 'Between 'Awra and Arab Literary Feminism: Sexual Violence and representational Crisis in Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero' in *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation,* ed. by Sorcha Gunne and Zoe Brigley Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2010), p.79.

exacerbated by her underprivileged economic situation that prompts her towards an independent acquisition of financial security. To reach economic stability, which will eventually free herself from subjugation. She does not make a radical rupture in the field in which she has found herself. Her resistance, to use Foucault's formulation, is not improbable, spontaneous or solitary. Rather, it is possible, concerted and violent. Because her subjugation is caused by a network of sexual and economic powers, her resistance takes a similar form, conducted in the same language that was used to bring her under control. She uses the language of the body, adjusting its posture by walking in 'the streets with my head held high' (91). She 'cease[s]' bending her head and learns how to fix her eyes onto her onlookers' 'with an unwinking gaze' (92). Her footsteps change pace 'on the dark tarmac road . . . 'struck[ing] the ground with force' and producing an 'elation' she has never experienced before (92). Her reclamation of her body as her own property guarantees her economic salvation. She says that now, 'I could decide on the food I wanted to eat, the house I preferred to live', becoming a breadwinner not only for herself but for others who she hires to manage her daily life. The 'I' in her narrative is not just a testimony of financial growth but a reflection of a rising consciousness that would deliver her from a state of subjugation to self-definition.

Despite an evanescent internal struggle caused by the issue of respectability which leads to a three years hiatus from prostitution, the twenty-five years old Firdaus becomes a self-employed prostitute whose profession grants her eminence and recognition in the circle of her highly influential clientele.[23] Yet, Firdaus is still faced with other forms of power disguised behind the mask of chivalry; the norm of a mandatory social inscription continues to follow her. Although, she is now a self-proclaimed 'free' and 'successful' prostitute in a conservative society that imposes bashfulness on women more than men,

[23] On the notions of respect as a human right and its portrayal in the narrative see: Elizabeth S. Anker, *Fiction of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2012), pp. 115-149.

this identity must be changed. The new discourse used against her appears through men's 'noble attempts' to lift the 'low' woman and turn her into a 'respectable woman' (120). Others, such as the vicious pimp Marzouk, are more direct in their treatment of her body. Marzouk states that: 'I am in business. My capital is women's bodies'. It turns out that this business has granted him more connections than Firdaus's, and her attempt to escape his dominance are doomed. However, her development of traits such as 'integrity' and her own kind of 'honour', her refusal 'to surrender' and her determination to be 'undefeated', allow her to escape what could have been an infinite sexual and economic slavery. Firdaus identifies herself as a woman who is 'speaking the truth', and because truth, she continues, is 'savage and dangerous' she is regarded as 'a savage and a dangerous woman' who would not hesitate to resort to aggressive resistance to end all forms of restriction (137). Her survival is therefore at the expense of the pimp's life, and with quick and swift hands, she stabs him with his knife, ending his life and realising that this tardy resolution put an end to a 'culmination of fear over the years' (131).

In her commentary on the significance of El Saadawi's novel to Arabic literature, Assia Djebar writes:

> What is a feminist novel in Arabic? First of all, it is a voice—here, a voice 'in hell' of a woman called Paradise—a night murmur, a lament across the hurdles of twilight that finds birth in a suddenly lit private interior of heaven. An ancient wound finally and gradually opened up to assume its song. The revolt evolves as it searches for new words: the revolt develops as it searches for new words: the revolt develops here in circular, repetitive rhythm of its speech.[24]

This statement captures the imperative communicated in El Saadawi's text: to revolt and to voice. Firdaus's ultimate revolt ends the degradation she has endured all her life, not

[24] Assia Djebar, 'Introduction to Nawal El Saadawi' Ferdaous: A Voice from Hell' in *Opening the Gates*, pp. 387- 393.

simply by killing the pimp, but by practicing one last authoritative gesture over her body. After she is captured and sentenced to death, Firdaus refuses to make an appeal, choosing instead to die as a woman who has 'triumphed over both life and death' (137). And as victory needs to be recorded, she chooses to narrate, without interruption, her story, letting her voice break through the walls of the cell and carry the 'savage, primitive truth' to the world, making a breach in the history of women and sexuality. The voice of the prostitute rises neither for repentance nor for penance, but to assume its right to speak.

El Saadawi has been criticised as being a literary writer who lacks artistic and creative abilities and whose works do not distinguish between fiction and reality. Alia Mamdouh, an established Egyptian writer, states that Nawal El Saadwi 'does not present the truer picture of the creativity of Arab women' and adds that she 'turns creativity which is imagination and living memory into a lab to show how the sick samples which are deformed, which she represents as generalized social types'.[25] It is intriguing the way El Saadawi's writing has been attacked. Mamdouh undermines the vitality of El Saadawi's representation of all experiences of Arab women, even those 'sick' and 'deformed' characters that have been excluded by submissive literature. Indeed, El Saadawi remains the first woman writer from the Arab world to include previously marginalised characters in her works.

Joseph Zeidan agrees that the writer's novels are created with 'noticeable artistic shortcoming', yet, he notes that they deal with the most silenced of social issues 'unapologetically and directly'.[26] El Saadawi's texts might be written with an accessible language that does not adhere to the masculine standards of the modern Arabic novel, but it this sharp, fierce language that renders them potent and effective in transmitting the message she has been committed to share. Any criticism against the degradation of women

[25] Quoted from: Amal Amireh, 'Arab Women Writers' problem and Prospects' *Solidarity* (1997) < https://solidarity-us.org/atc/67/p803/> [accessed 28 June 2019].
[26] Joseph Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, pp. 13-131.

status, the exploitation of their bodies in extreme ways and their denial of self-governance, must at times transgress the limits of art and destabilise those 'artistic' features expected of the composer. El Saadawi's work pushes, the limits of art itself, relaxing its edges and making of it a space for unique innovations.

Algerian women and the shadow of the private in *Ombre sultane*

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Algerian women have claimed the right to participate in the public sphere, and the recent transformative political wave in the country has indeed been caused by the mobilisation of both women and men. Women are no longer marginalised from the public space. Yet they do not profit from it the same way that the other sex does, nor is their presence welcome. In 1984, Algerian women witnessed the passing of the Family Code, which not only restricted their freedoms, but also exposed them to an enduring social and political marginalisation. The law was created to transform the society into a religious one and to maintain its traditional institutions by asserting that their foundation, the family, is religious. Patriarchy was supported by legal institutions which have aggravated the plight of women. As Zahia Salhi explains, the Family Code dictated a social order privileging the status of the father, the brother and the husband at the expense of women:

> The family code of 1984… institutionalized polygamy and made it the right of men to take up four wives (article 8). Women cannot arrange their own marriage contracts unless represented by a matrimonial guardian (article 11), and they have no right to apply for divorce, while a man needs only to desire a divorce to get one, it is made a most difficult, if not impossible thing to be obtained by women.[27]

[27] Zahia Smail, Salhi, Algerian Women, Citizinship, and the 'Family Code''*Gender and Development* ,11 (2003), 27-35 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4030558?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents> [Accessed 13 March 2017]

Salhi argues that the code was largely derived from the 'tradition of patriarchy' and is not supported by religious tenets as the authors claimed it to be.[28] Its articles forced Algerian women into submission and deprived them of basic rights. Helpless and enraged, women held protests asking the state to amend the code, yet their demands were not heard. Nevertheless, it was the time for women to come together to resist the mounting social and political pressure opposing them and to advocate for equality.[29]

In 1977 Assia Djebar began working on her film *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*, which was purely a work of memory, where Djebar traced stories of women during the period of colonization. Djebar in this film, shows her important vision regarding connecting the past and the present to coexist, a process much needed especially for Algerian women. In attempt to voicing out women's experiences in post-colonized Algeria, Djebar shifted from the use of the written word to rely on the spoken one, through the camera, she introduced both women and camera to each other and allowed one to break a long running silence about women's lives. Stefanies Van De Peer argues that the act of looking carries a political notion and problematises the issue of representation, stating that 'in the struggle to clarify that these forgotten aspects must be unearthed, Djebar challenges her subjects and her spectators to rethink histography'.[30] One particular feature about the film was Djebar representation of women's space that would be more developed in her forthcoming writings, mainly in the novel analysed in this work. From this film Djebar attributed great deal of concern regarding gender space division in the Algerian society after the independence. The first scene of the film projects its entire significance; the protagonist ‹Leila‹ is shown contemplating the scene of the Chenoua Mountains from the

[28] Ibid., 31.

[29] For more information on feminists organised group see: Irina Daniela Mihalache, 'Le Code De L'infanmie' *Feminist Media Studies*, 7 (2007), 397-411 <https://www-tandfonlinecom.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/doi/pdf/10.1080/14680770701631604?needAccess=true > [accessed 26 March].

[30] Stephanies van de Peer, *Negotiating Dissidence: The Pioneering Women of Arab Documentary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Pres, 2017), p. 117

threshold of her house, this signifying from the beginning the importance of woman's gaze and its relationship with space confinement. *Ombre sultane* explores the dilemma of continual social constructions of womanhood and the loss of women's bodies and selves under these conditions. It proposes that finding and reclaiming the bodies of women is possible by transgressing the rigidly gendered segregated social spaces. Although Assia Djebar separated herself from feminist activism, it is possible to read *Ombre* as an urgent participation in the debate surrounding Algerian women's deteriorating situation.[31] The novel is part of the quartet which marked Djebar's return to literature after a long hiatus from writing that lasted for ten years from the world of cinema, where she had focused on Algeria's oral tradition of female language rather than its literary expression. The first novel of the quartet is her *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985) translated into English in 1993 as *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* which critics point out that the work is a clear manifestation of maturity.[32] The text shows the transitional phase Djebar went through when writing using French language and the novel is a combination of personal autobiographical reflections, collective autobiographical reflections and testimonial letters (oral and written) from the colonial times, composed in French and Arabic (standard and dialect) all written and told by an unnamed, unknown narrator. Djebar in this novel is seen again attempting to harmonize the past and the present and cast light upon lost and forgotten incidents to form a collective identity, but above all to form a personal one. Thus, Djebar in this text is in an identity search as she herself asserts in an interview that *L'Amour, la fantasia* was "une quête de l'identité"[33] "a quest for identity". For this work Djebar is acclaimed to have mastered the technique of combining historical archives from

[31] Jane Hidddleston, 'Assia Djebar: In Dialogue with Feminism' *French Studies*, 61. 2 (2007), 248-249< https://academic.oup.com/fs/article/61/2/248/701764>[accessed 01 April 2019].
[32] Samia Mehrez, '*Writing out of Place: Djebar's L'Amour, la fantasia and Soueif's The Map of Love'*, *Journal of Comparative Poetics,* 24. (2004), 153-165 https://www.jstor.org/stable/4047435?refreqid=excelsior%3Aae2809e8f83a75b0adbc6b0378a1e0c1&seq=1 [accessed 11 March2017]
[33] Hiddleston, *Assia Djebar*, p. 70.

the colonial period with fictional narrative and autobiography.[34] Although, autobiography recently has been proclaimed to be associated with women writings as an initiative for "speaking out" and verbalizing women's experiences which Femmes *D'Alger dans leur appartement* revealed to be, nevertheless, Djebar in *L'Amour, la fantasia* did not position herself through the collective voices speaking in the text. Instead, her attempts were to locate both herself and Algerian women's identity in the broader postcolonial identity discussion, an issue that is treated again in Ombre, as shall be discussed.[35]

Ombre sultane: the story of co-wives

Djebar's novel appeared in English in 1993 with the title of A Sister to Scheherazade, a title that foregrounded the story's allusion to the Arabian Nights: it is a story that recounts the strategies of women to free themselves from the shadow of the sultan.[36] The sisterhood in Ombre emerges out of what could have been rivalry, yet oppression transforms the relationship into sorority where each of the sisters acts as a liberator to the other. Hadjila is replacement chosen by the first wife, Isma, who takes over and acts as a caretaker of the husband and his children when Isma retires from the conjugal life in pursuit of an independent selfhood and a personal freedom. Much has been said about the lack of sisterhood or its non-existence in the novel: criticism has sometimes maintained that Djebar refutes solidarity, portraying instead the sacrifice of one woman at the hands of another for the sake of personal emancipation.[37] Although this interpretation

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[34] Erin Peters, 'Assia Djebar and Algerian Cultural Memory: Reimagining, Repositioning and rewriting in Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade', *Bristol Journal of English Studies,* 1 (2012), 1-16 https://cpb-eu-w2.wpmucdn.com/blogs.bristol.ac.uk/dist/f/173/files/2012/07/Assia-Djebar-and-Algerian-Cultural-Memory-Erin-Peters.pdf [accesses 11 March 2017].

[35] Hiddleston, p. 72.

[36] French quotes are from: Assia Djebar, *Ombre sultnae,* 3rd edn (Algiers: Hibr Edition, 2014). Their English translation is from: Assia Djebar, *A Sister to Scheherazade*, trans. by Dorothy S. Blair (New Hampshire: Heineman, 1993).

[37] See: Ogunyemi, *Juju Fission*, pp.189-21. See also: 'Anjali Prabhu, 'Sisterhood and Rivalry in-between the shadow and the sultana: A problematic of Representation on Ombre sultane' *Research in African Literature*, 33.3 (2002), 69-96 <https://www.wellesley.edu/sites/default/files/assets/departments/french/files/prabhupdfs/09sisterhood. pdf>

can be upheld by the narrative, the novel also upholds and reinforces a notion of women's collective agency as women's salvation from the hands of patriarchy and matriarchy alike. This collectivity should not be undermined, but neither should it be glorified.

Isma and Hadjila's relationship subverts the clichés associated with polygamy. Rarely have the women met, but the pair exists vividly in each other's minds and manage to free each other from the husband's shadow, its invisibility and silence. Like the other works from her Algerian quartet, in Ombre, Djebar retrieves parts of her personal memoirs and assigns them to Isma's character to play out, creating a wide gap between the cowives. The new wife, Hadjila, is the complete opposite of Isma: she is uneducated and from a poor family. Although she endures violence and oppression to a great extent, she will set off on a journey of dissidence and resistance. She is not alone: Isma too, despite her dominant character and the privileges allotted to her, which have come at a cost, struggles with the society's shackles and attempts to free herself from it. The two are different from each other on a number of levels: age, social class, education and experience. However, such distinctions do not imply that one woman is more liberated and enjoys more agency than the other one; both are subjected to the repressive Algerian traditions and their protest against this plight renders them equals in the resistance. Their mutual exchange between the roles of Shahrazed and Dirnazad represents this idea: they safeguard each other interchangeably.

The deconstruction of private and public spaces and identities

Djebar's commitment to retrieving the history of women of her country and their bodies from the confines of silence was conducted throughout her career through all artistic media. Mani Sharpe, in her astute study of female resistance to confinement in Djebar's

[accessed 11 April 2019]. See also: Jane Hiddleston, *Assia Djebar, Out of Algeria* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), pp. 88-97.

film La nouba, argues that Djebar's successful cinematic work transforms the space of confinement to be a site of women's awakening by triggering her heroine's bodily senses and converting them into motion by dance. This conversion casts away the orientalist image of static, wretched women of the harem.[38]

Striking and often cited however, is Djebar's interpretation of Delacroix's original painting (see Figure 1) and Picasso's rival representations of Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement (see Figure 2)

Figure 1. Eugène Delacroix, Women of Algiers in their Apartment, 1834, Paris: Louvre.

The original painting by Delacroix, explains Djebar in her masterpiece chapter 'Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound' in her collection of short stories Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement, immobilises the women in the sketch and presents them as hostages with every element in the painting, from the light that seems to come from nowhere to the colours that highlight and conceal their features at once. Djebar gives the artist credit for

[38] Mani Sharpe, 'Representation of space in Asia Djebar's La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua' *Studies in French Cinema*, 13 (2013), 215-225 <https://www-tandfonlinecom.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/doi/pdf/10.1386/sfc.13.3.215_1?needAccess=true> [accessed 27 March 2019].

masterfully portraying the seraglio to his onlookers as they wish it to be seen.[39] He establishes the phantasm as a reality, and with this voyeur's forbidden gaze the women are to experience a reinforced concealment by the men of their tribe. Such a penetration of their space portrays them as alienated from themselves as they are from their society.

The painting, however, was recreated by Picasso, and here Djebar sees hope that women's reclamation of their bodies is possible.

Figure 2. Pablo Picasso, Les femmes d'Alger, Version O. 1955. WP:NFCC#4.

Djebar writes:

> Picasso reverses the malediction, causes misfortune to burst loose, inscribes in audacious lines a totally new happiness. A foreknowledge that should guide us in our everyday life.
>
> Pierre Daix remarks: 'Picasso has always liked to set the beauties of the harem free.' Glorious liberation of space, the bodies awakening in dance, in a flowing outward, the movement freely offered. But also, the preservation of one of the

[39] Assia Djebar, *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 1992), pp. 135-136.

> women, who remains hermetic, Olympian, suddenly immense. Like a suggested moral, here, a relationship to be found again between the old, adorned serenity (the lady formerly fixed in her sullen sadness, is motionless from now on, but like a rock of inner power) and the improvised bursting out into an open space.[40]

Picasso's fingerprints are left on Djebar's work and she liberates the woman in Ombre following the same techniques he used to set Femmes d'Alger free. These techniques both artists employ to break their female subject free are: awakening the women's bodily senses, the use of colours and the element of denudation.

The Algerian female body, as shown in Djebar's analysis of the two paintings, has been made, to use Foucault's expression 'the inscribed surface of events'.[41] The patriarchal culture sealed it and the orientalist artist froze it, so that later on the liberal artist could liberate it. Between these three actions, the female body was objectified by a chain of controllers, each envisioning it as they wished, contesting among each other over this surface to attain their individual purposes. Between the histories of these triple expectations, the Algerian female body, indeed, remained besieged by historical constructions, awaiting a movement and an articulation that could be, perhaps, achieved by the hands of an Algerian feminist writing.

Djebar's literature perpetuates the transgression of unleashing Algerian women from the confines of both imagination and reality. Her engagement with this topic has probed new understanding—as well as posing new questions—of the association between space and gender in Algeria. She portrays the experience of Algerian women within space as she witnessed it, as she lived it and as she imagined it, freed from the orientalist fantasy and the morality of the patriarchal community for which they have been enclosed. She

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[40] Ibid., p. 149.

[41] Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' in *Hommage à jean Hyppolite* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971), p. 83 <https://noehernandezcortez.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/nietzsche-genealogy-history.pdf> [accessed 29 March 2019].

mobilises her women as bodies free of any connections. Her characters manipulate the restrictive discourses and the boundaries to move from one binary space to another. They appropriate their bodies to erase the line that separates male and female worlds, installing themselves in the process as the primary agents in negotiating their identities.

Such an explicit subversion of gendered spatial binarism in the novel also conveys a subtle challenge to gender normative behaviours. *Ombre sultane* is productively read alongside Judith Butler's perspective on gender. Central to the works of Butler and Djebar is the 'construction' argument. Butler writes: 'policing gender is sometimes used a way of securing heterosexuality' and in Djebar's predominantly heterosexual society, bodies and spaces are policed to secure normative gender relations, patriarchal in their essences.[42] Moreover, Djebar's transgressive techniques to delineate gendered spaces resonate with Butler's disruptive methods for describing gender. Although differences between the contexts of these works and the ideas within them are vast, yet sexual hierarchy is the basis on which normative gender, which Butler deconstructs in her work, is produced and consolidated. Gendered spaces, which are Djebar's main concern in many of her works, are the culmination of sexual hierarchy. Private and public spaces in this case, are the result of expected gender performances to maintain a misogynistic culture.

Furthermore, Butler is critical of the commonality that the term 'women' has generated in feminist discussions. She states that 'although the claim of universal patriarchy no longer enjoys the kind of credibility it once did, the notion of a generally shared conception of 'women' the corollary to that framework, has been much more difficult to displace'.[43] Displacing such a notion, she maintains, is only possible if the variables that were discarded when representing the subject of women, variables that intersect with race, ethnicity, culture and social class are recognised. The model of

[42] Ibid., p. xii.

[43] Ibid., p. 7.

womanhood that has been established and purported to be inclusive has indeed proven to be less representative of many of the experiences of women.[44] Djebar is conscious of the many variables that define women within her own country as different from one another, and so in *Ombre*, the negotiation of identity is not only aimed at the 'typical' oppressed woman—Hadjila—but also at another—Isma—who might be perceived as having agency and autonomy. Upon a closer look, however, it becomes obvious that Djebar's emancipatory project is broad as it reconsiders the category of womanhood writ large. Indeed, Djebar's writings, in this sense, do not interrogate the construction of womanhood only in her society, but could serve as an effective mode of analysis of women's status in more gender egalitarian societies as well.

In the Introduction to this thesis, I have argued that the use of Western theory in postcolonial criticism has been shown to be able to conceptualise the lived experience of the 'colonised', the 'other' and the 'subaltern'. Bringing forward Butler's ideas to theorise Arab women's identity opens up a new way for thinking about Arab women's agency without appropriating their subjectivity to match Western structures of knowledge. I take by example, Saba Mahmood's brilliant use of Butler's performativity theory which informs her study of the norms of female modesty and its embodiment and enactment among Muslim female practitioners of Da'wa movements in Egypt starting in the 1970s. A brief summary of this research will be illuminating.

The Da'wa movement is part of the Islamic Revival, in which an increased sense of 'religious sociability' is witnessed permeating through the Egyptian social landscape.[45] Saba Mahmood's fieldwork, conducted at different Mosques in Egypt in 1995, revealed that the women's movement poses challenges to feminist theory, which sees patriarchal ideologies, including religion, as establishing rigid rules of conduct for the female self and

[44] Ibid., pp. 3-4-5-6.
[45] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton and oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 3.

body, depriving women of self-instruction and presentation of their corporeality and subjectivity.[46] The challenge against this feminist perception of religion is seen when women are willingly, deliberately and consciously adopting these pre-established systems of presentation in order to embody the notion of virtue and construct themselves as pious women. In this way, the mosque's participants' expose the vulnerability of patriarchal religious systems of control, revealing how agency is formed out of and by this control, and destabilising Western liberal feminists' discourse that perceives agency as an innate humane characteristic.

Mahmood's conception is guided by her careful examination and utilisation of Butler's notion of performativity. While Butler's work can accommodate the mosque participants' perception of virtue, Mahmood confirms that between Butler's theory and the mosque participants' logic, there exist 'resonances' but also, 'differences'.[47] Interesting in this regard is Mahmood use of the theory of performativity a point of departure: she supports her argument using Butlerian views but also departs from it in order to show 'the perspectival shifts one needs to take into account when talking about politics of resistance and subversion.'[48] Both Butler and Mahmood caution against taking 'technological approach' and a 'perfunctory approach' to theory and insist upon making serious consideration of the historical and the cultural specificities that might hinder from the application of theoretical formulations in particular contexts.[49] For my own analysis of Djebar's destabilisation of gendered spaces in Algeria, I have addressed the particularities and the unique histories of spatial stratification in Algeria in Chapter 1. This discussion informs and facilitates my exploration of the novel in Butlerian terms.

[46] Ibid., p. 158.
[47] Ibid., p. 163.
[48] Ibid., p. 167.
[49] Ibid., p. 163.

The construction of the new woman

In *Ombre sultane*, Djebar undermines the normative idea of gender roles and the stable notion of Algerian women's identity by localising the dichotomy of public and private spaces as one form of gender oppression. This dichotomy is transgressed early on in the novel. Hadjila is a woman who is presented from the first scenes as a stranger to herself. She wanders about, imprisoned in the conjugal household. She carries out her daily chores, stopping each time to contemplate her body and its gestures. She sees it as 'vider' (17) (an empty vessel, 8), and she is enveloped by grief from the early hours of the day. She is present in that space but absent to herself, and is constantly besieged by what comes from behind the walls: light, voices, noises and smells. In her solitary existence, she is accompanied by sounds off all sorts: shouting children, singings voices of passers-by, flying insects and whispers and weeps emerging from the hunted rooms of 'le désert de ce logis' (28) (this vast, desolate apartment, 15). Her days are monotonous and her daily tasks are repetitive and tedious. She is expected to cope with the natural role assigned to her and has no choice but to follow what is the normal lifestyle of the Algerian society. Such an inevitable structure frustrates her, and with a tone of longing and envy, she laments:

> Vous qui surgissez au soleil! Chaque matin, vous vous rincer à grande eau le visage, les avant-bras, la nuque. Ces ablutions ne préparent pas vos prosternations, non, elles précèdent l'acte de sortir, sortir! Le complet une fois mis, la cravate serrée, vous franchiser le seuil, tous les seuils. La rue vous attend…Vous vous présentez au monde, vous les bienheureux! Chaque matin de chaque jour, vous transportez votre corps, dans l'étincellement de la lumière, chaque jour qu'Allah crée! (18)
>
> (You who can all go forth into the sunshine! Every morning you splash water over your face, neck and arms. These are not the ablutions preparatory to prostrating yourself in prayer; no, they are a preparation for the act of leaving the house! Once you have put on your suits, knotted your ties, you can cross the threshold, every

> threshold. The streets awaits you… You can present yourself to the world, you fortunate males! Every morning of every day, you can convey your bodies in the dazzling light, every day that Allah creates!,) 9

This passage is significant insofar as it reveals that the spatial construction of society as masculine and feminine is a fabrication perpetuated by the act of performing repetitively gendered behaviours. The constant repetitions that men undertake in preparation for presenting one's self in the public space—this space which has been rendered sacredly masculine—is nearly the same as what one would do before presenting one's self before Allah to pray. The only difference is the latter requires the same repetition of the exact procedure from both genders. Women and men ought to repeat the same steps before performing the religious prayers, and no hierarchy or inferiority is maintained for the sexes. However, the ablutions performed before leaving the house are socially sanctified rituals that 'the fortunate males!' repeat before stepping into their holy territory. Djebar challenges and transgresses the integrity of the public space as a true male domain by comparing it to a performance of ablutions that requires repetition of acts, but the actors in this performance are bodies, not genders.

The contrast Djebar uses to show how certain expressions of gender, such as the preparations that precede stepping outside, are merely socially constructed—and thus can be imitated by the other gender—disturbs the notion of their originality. This imitation of masculinity is what Hadjila will do before she crosses over the threshold, and before she makes a habit of strolling secretly into masculine spaces. She prepares her attire: the slippers that help her develop her steps, the dress that does not slow down her movement, which becomes her 'seconde peau' (second skin), and the veil, the haik that conceals her body (18-19-43). This is her stylised gender performance to escape her confinement. Although the veil is itself established to act as a frontier between women's bodies and their surroundings, for Hadjila it is the mask that disguises her body from the public eye while allowing her access to the public space.

The second strategic element Djebar uses to prompt Hadjila to venture out is as simple as hair colour. Upon her return from a family visit, in the car with her husband, Hadjila sees a woman sitting in a garden, the most public of places. This picture leaves her with a strong impression and prompts her to make a habit of sneaking out (28). The naturalisation of the outside sphere as a masculine territory has been so normalised that a sight of a woman in the public sphere for no particular reason but to sit and contemplate makes Hadjila think she must only be a 'French woman'. The colour of her hennaed hair, however, is the symbol through which this anonymous woman is confirmed to be an Algerian. Such a minor element not only encourages Hadjila to cross the threshold of the house on the following day, but also disrupts her pre-established understanding of Algerian womanhood.

This Algerian woman with hennaed hair postured in a public place, practising motherhood by loving her child and displaying emotions with 'le visage élargi de bonheur' (48) (a face radiant with joy, 29), unlike she who has to conform passively to the law of decency of the public sphere, becomes the second subject of imitation. The outdoors seems to Hadjila accessible if the body is re-appropriated. Henna is the symbol that trembles all the walls and erases all limits. However, she will not mimic the woman by tinting her hair with henna, but by throwing off the veil altogether. In her following escapades, she carries in her memory the picture of the woman and performs some of her movements such as throwing back her head as she sits in the public garden. In one scene, in a fraction of a second and with swift hand gestures, she tosses of the veil and transforms into 'la nouvelle' (51) (a new woman, 31); she frees herself from the second boundary. Like Picasso, Djebar uses the element of denudation to liberate the women of the harem. This element symbolises in Ombre, as much as it does in Djebar's other works and in Picasso's painting, 'women's rebirth to their own bodies'.[50]

[50] Djebar, *Women of Algiers*, p. 150.

Although the acts imitated here do not drastically stray from gender norms, they do nevertheless denaturalise the idea that the Algerian public space is masculine territory, and they do mobilise Hadjila. Djebar undermines the notion of gendered spaces via subtle performed gestures. However, in the characterisation of Lla Hadja and Isma, the practice of imitation is more pronounced and visible than it is for Hadjila. In the novel, we see Djebar proving that behaviours deemed purely masculine could be easily enacted by women and, as such, they are revealed to be social constructions of gender, neither male nor female in their origins. The act of gazing is another performance that complicates the relationship between man and woman that establishes one sex as superior (the viewer) and the other as inferior (the gazed upon). Djebar demonstrates her awareness that these acts are not 'naturally' gendered, but through exhaustive rehearsal they become so.

For Djebar, the woman's surveilling eye is a means of disrupting the gender dichotomy. In the chapter entitled 'L'exclue' (the Outcast), the female staring eyes have equal power to those of men. Djebar focuses her narrative on a woman called Lla Hadj whose only purpose in her day to day life is to keep an eye on her neighbourhood and watch out for any abnormal activities. Although her description is brought into the story to highlight the damage woman can inflict on each other, and to insert the matriarchal contribution to the everlasting female enclosure, nevertheless, she is a character so powerful that she intimidates men as much she does women in her milieu. Her vigilant eyes are especially masculine. She is the new voyeur who imprisons the woman victim in the story and turns her into 'l'exclue' (the outcast). She freezes her movement and robs her of the right to speak (161).

Moreover, Lla Hadja becomes the subject who fantasises the exotic masculine. She reduces the male to a mere body accentuated by physical features that are seductive and tantalizing, objectifying him and reversing the hierarchal gaze. She scrutinises his daily practices and surveys his returns from the baths, with his moving body 'boucle noire ruisselantes sur le front juvénile, face noircie de soleil' (164) (curly hair, over his youthful

brow and his sunburnt face, 113). ‘Celui dont le corps humide ramène les odeurs, les chaleurs de la liberté’ (167) (The man whose moist body brings with it the smell, the warmth of freedom, 115) is the source of seduction and entices the victim woman’s desires. Yet as the story develops and reaches its climax, Lla Hadja proclaims the woman as the transgressor who has disturbed the honour of her husband and does not hold the man accountable. The affair, if there was ever one, will sully the reputation of the woman and that of her family if she continues to live with them, and therefore she is exiled.

Through Lla Hadja’s character, the model of the male as the active gazer and the only owner of the right to watch is reversed and the performance of staring at women’s bodies and deciphering them is enacted by a woman. This argues that practices attributed to men to objectify women are easily imitated, perhaps even parodied, by women to objectify men. Djebar, in fact, disturbs male passers-by by hunting them down from within the enclosure into which they have restricted women. Lla Hadja practices her authority from the confines of her house; she does not need to cross the threshold to render everyone fearful of her eyes and words.

This chapter in itself represents Djebar’s vision of the discursive production and the construction of women in her society. Lla Hadja’s victim is never revealed; we never learn whether she has committed the crime for which she was cast away. She is only allocated a story; her version of the events is not heard, Isma describes her as, ‘Héroïne d’avant toute intrigue, le dénouement ayant précède la naissance même de l’histoire, de toute histoire! Voici donc l’expulsée pour intention d’amour!’ (164) (A heroine who proceeded any plot, the denouement having occurred before the conception of the story, of any story! So here was the woman who has been exiled for the crime of having wished to love!, 113). Lla Hajda’s entire reality is produced, fabricated and publicised by mere rumours from another woman. Manipulating the gaze, Djebar proves that women are shaped by discourse, false in its essence. Most significantly, the entire foundation of the notion of honour has been shaken; this deeply held belief is rendered uncertain and unoriginal.

The body and its fluid passage

The innovative tactics to disturb the notion of public and private stratification continue and are best represented through Isma's character, who, from the early stages of the novel, is presented as a woman who has long claimed the possession of the outside sphere. She is a woman whose relationship with the outdoors is deeply sacred, so much so that she relinquishes her marriage to protect her rights as the owner of her body and its movements. Nancy Arenberg's study offers a new perspective on the construction of womanhood by trespassing the boundaries of the domestic sphere and exploring urban territories in,.[51] She makes a particularly significant point regarding Isma's multiple roles in the narrative. At times, she is the guide that plans the itinerary for Hadjila's strolls; she is her sister and her mother at other times; and, Arenberg aptly suggests that Isma takes on the role of husband. If so, this is a silent husband who, throughout the narrative is reduced to the pronoun 'he'. Arenberg argues, 'It is plausible to assume that his powerless condition enables the author to effectuate the subversion of the traditional couple, as Isma takes on his role by giving Hadjila her orders'.[52] Arenberg's point is fascinating but should be approached cautiously, given that she immediately cuts this argument short and ends by substituting for the role of husband that of mother, insinuating that Djebar through this manipulation of roles is effectuating a 'subversion of the traditional couple'.[53] Priscilla Ringrose, in her reading of Ombre, also makes the assumption that Isma is the new male whose treatment of Hadjila is as patriarchal as that of the husband.[54] Isma's dominant

[51] Nancy Arenberg, 'Mobile Bodies and Kindred Sisters in Djebar's 'Ombresultane' *The French review*, 82. 2 (2008), 353-365. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25481551.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A21f563cfadabe918e6589b523c7824 43 [accessed 16 April 2019].

[52] Ibid., p. 359.

[53] Ibid., p. 359.

[54] Pridcilla Ringrose, *Assia Djebar in Dialogue with feminisms* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), p. 103.

character does in fact embody masculine traits. Her longterm penetration of the masculine space aligns her with masculine control of the gaze: she, like Lla Hadja, has the ability to gaze at both sexes in the streets and looks at people with firm eyes, shaping men and women with discourse. Unlike Lla Hadja, however, Isma's eyes are more disturbing since they hunt the others' bodies from within the male space.

Djebar's characterization of the women's gaze is unique and critics have long written on her strategic manipulation and re-appropriation of women's eyes.[55] In Ombre, Isma's eyes are watchful of the male and female bodies; they are sharp and meticulous as an 'archéologue' and an 'arpenteur' when scrutinizing the male body (77). However, when following Hadjila's movements, these eyes become that of the 'voyeuse' (224). Such an expert visual attribute emerges after years of claustration. When Isma revisits her childhood memories, like Hadjila, she laments her denial of the open space. Although she escaped the confines of the domestic sphere at early age, yet the bodily repression experienced in her early years and the configuration of her body as sexual before it fully developed, and before it claimed the right to experience childhood, cause her anguish. Her ventures outside are not solely for self-establishment as a subject, but also as vengeance against the masculine domination of the outdoors. Every step she takes under the sky is intended to challenge and to contest the roles ascribed to her that determine her as a follower of a male master, or a product of conventional Algerian society. In the imaginary

[55] Mildred Mortimer, 'Asia Djebar's Algerian Quartet: A study in fragmented Autobiography' *Research in African Literature Literatures*, 28. 2 (1997), 102-117 (p. 110) <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=6d8fb08a-92f5-4bce-a91bfcf1b914a4a4%40sdc-v-sessmgr01> [accessed 01 April 2019]. See: Victoria Best, 'Between the Harem and the Battlefield Space in the Work of Assia Djebar' *Signs*, 27. 3 (2002), 873-879 (p. 874)<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.1086/337933.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A94d6f61baebfaf57b312dd7eab8c49bb> [accessed 17 April 2019]. See: Laurence Huughe and Jennifer Curtiss Gage, 'Ecrire comme un voile' The Problematics of the Gaze in the Work of Assia Djebar' World Literature Today, 70, 4, (1996), pp.867-876 https://www.jstor.org/stable/40152315?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents [accessed 17 April 2019] See also, Hidlleston, *Assia Djebar*, p. 93.

roles that she performs with her eyes, she seeks to undo any designations that limit her full experience as a subject.

To undermine the restrictive norms that deny women the right of self-identification, Djebar takes a step further and questions the relationship between the female body and social expectations placed on it, particularly after its transformation into a maternal one. What is significantly challenged is the intuitive association between biology and social roles, motherhood being the most permanent bodily inscription. The boundary that ought to construct her identity according to its normative understandings in Isma's society has to be exited and trespassed. Her role as a mother is a confining space from which a momentary escape is required to configure her past, present and future. Isma has to separate herself from her daughter. She does not abandon her but she needs to distance herself from her sex and her gender to achieve individual self-fulfilment. This is how her quest for subjectivity is initiated, by stepping temporarily outside the gendered roles associated with the sexed body within which women have been enclosed. One could imply that Djebar is here warning against firm definitions of womanhood, not only as socially and culturally constructed but biologically as well. Her disruption here exceeds the masculine/feminine gender poles; she is rather questioning biology as a determinant of gender identity. This is what Butler later urges us to consider: the body's possible subversion 'from within the terms of the law' that create identity; the subversion of the internal and the external factors shape femaleness, including biological functions.[56] Isma refuses to let her body be characterised solely by maternity. This is why she needs'd'être dehors! […] qu'on me tue' (122) (to be out of doors![...] To be annihilated!, 80). She is imprisoned behind multiple doors: the door of the institution of marriage which she realised is established and ruled by conventional norms, and the door of her body, which is rigidly configured based on its supposedly natural features.

[56] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 119.

In the chapter entitled ‘Lieu-reposoir’ (Rest by the Wayside), Isma amalgamates her frustration with the weary female maternal body with that of the frustration of women in her past. What is striking within this chapter, however, is Djebar’s deconstruction of the maternal female body as historically organised; the cycle of women’s enclosure is the same and does not change across time. From the age of ten years old she is shut away, and this enclosure is especially reinforced by the several pregnancies women go through. Isma perceives motherhood as a product of a double confining consequence; it entraps the self and the body of women. This body’s main function is to prepare men for the open space by ‘Nourrir les fils le jour, nourrir l’époux la nuit, et qu’ils puissant tous boire la lumière du vaste jour!’(185) (Nurturing sons by day, husbands by night so that they alone might enjoy the broad light of the day, 128]. Operating as such, the woman’s body also nurtures society’s preferred sexual organisation, maintaining the man as a subject of the outdoors and the woman as an object of the indoors. The pattern of female enclosure is maintained by the maternal body and its ability and will to reproduce. Once it has given birth, it will be further installed as a submissive surface. She has long witnessed the aftermath of childbirth for women in her entourage, transformed by motherhood to ‘la pondeuse’ (190) (broody hen[s], 131) with ‘corps étranger’ (190) (alien bod [ies], 131). Only at the age of sixty when ‘le corps […] lui qui n’enfante plus, lui qui n’allaite plus, lui qui ne se prête plus aux étreintes d’aveugle’ (186) (this body that begets no more, no longer gives suck, no longer bends itself to blind embraces, 128), does it emerge in the public sphere.

To Isma, motherhood will bring Hadjila back to confinement and to the wearisome daily routine she lived before her transgression of the threshold. To spare her this, she chooses the hammam, the most feminine of spaces, as a location where she hands Hadjila the key to escape the cloister and its surveillance, enabling her a liberation from a transition into a role for which she was not yet ready. Hadjila, too, is at risk of returning to the void of confinement if her body is marked by its maternal function. In the final scenes of the

novel, Isma is relieved to know that Hadjila is freed from the 'shackles' of motherhood when she is hit by a car and loses the foetus she is carrying (159).

Isma's time away from her daughter is brief, and in fact the pause in motherhood is interrupted by its instinct and its 'impulse' to claim back her child (155). Her fears and worries for the safety of her daughter bring her urgently to release herself from a miserable life she would have endured with her ex-husband. However, her quest for a self requires a detachment from all constructed discourses inscribed on her body and the need to be in another gendered space, in the masculine sphere where bodies are free from any ties and are not symbols of any control. Her inordinate fixation on open space, her jouissance in it, renders her immune to any pre-established inscriptions.

Isma and Hadjila's transgression of the private and the public sphere, their disturbance of all social, cultural, historical and biological norms, their destabilization of the notion of Algerian womanhood, could only be portrayed by a writer who has personally and vividly struggled with all of these. Djebar's raw experiences have not only served her as a material for fiction, but they were the vey limit that urgently needed a transgression to signal the emergence of the writer. Wolfgang Asholt and Lise Gauvin's recent commentary in their edited Assia Djebar et la transgression des limites:
linguistique, littéraires et culturelles maintain that Djebar's transgression of any boundary is not intended to erase it, nor does it seek to deny its existence. Rather, her narratives locate limits in their specific contexts and locate the simultaneous occurrence of the transgression.[57] The transgression of the domestic sphere in Ombre sultane reveals a second layer of limits by which the protagonists are restricted. Their exceeding the threshold of the man's house entails a dislocation and disassociation from themselves to arrive to the destination for which they set out. Yet, Djebar does not conclude the act of liberation. Complete freedom from the shackles and full acquisition of agency is never

[57] Wolfgang Asholt and Lise Gauvin, *Assia Djebar et la transgression des limites: linguistique, littéraires et culturelles* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017), pp.7-8.

entirely achieved. Hadjila's act of moving freely in the public sphere is left pending and Isma retreats from the very space for which she has challenged her surroundings. The novel rather ends by complicating the plot: two women occupy two different spaces, yet both seek self-identification in the spatial dilemma within Algerian society, Hadjila 'se présent sur le seuil, avaleuse d'espace' (227) (stands on the threshold, devouring the spaces, 159) and Isma 'dès lors peut se voiler, ou se dissimuler' (227) (can put on the veil, or go into hiding, 159)]. The acquisition of a complete agency is not achieved and the two women's identities do not reach a constant meaning but are in a prolonged process of construction.

The enigma of sisterhood in *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr* and *Ombre sultane*

In *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr* and in *Ombre sultane*, El Saadawi and Djebar place important emphasis on the oppressed characters' articulation in the face of the other who is a fellow woman, but a liberated one. The two writers allocate a double to each character who is in an inferior position; a woman who is in a superior one, confronting them to question the possibility of women's connections with each other. This is a strategic tactic on the part of the two writers, employed to show that in their patriarchal societies, women's escape from subjugation takes place at the different social strata women occupy, and there is no terminus a woman can reach where she can feel complete. Above all, this tactic serves to dismantle the idea of sisterhood prominent t in Western feminism, to counteract the hegemonic assemblage of the category of Arab woman in a static, unchangeable frame. Representation of women in the feminist texts of our two writers is sensitive and profoundly complex, revealing their fear of misrepresentation.

El Saadawi's text is structured to bring to visibility the invisible individual in Egyptian society by undermining the role of the narrator and allotting her a peripheral voice, instead placing the voiceless Firdaus as the moderator of the discussion. As Firdaus gradually develops a character and begins to reconstruct herself, she escapes the confines of silence and acquires a voice. Her ordeal from the first pages to the last is recounted from

her stand point, and her narration resembles her life. It begins with a sense of loss and bewilderment when the story revolves around her childhood years, and it retains the same pace with each memory of violence and exploitation she endures within her developing body. Her voice, however, is intense and resonates bitterly when she is no longer encapsulated by fear. As a clear picture of her is coming together, so is her voice; she sings 'I hope for nothing, I want for nothing, I fear nothing, I am free' (119) [emphasis in the original]. Firdaus is in control: she chooses the tone and the register to describe the traumatic events she goes through. While discourse might have shaped her womanhood, she chooses her own discourse to narrate her life.

The psychiatrist's opening and closing remarks on Firdaus capture and accentuate the strength and the echo with which Firdaus's voice fills her. In their first interaction, Firdaus is commanding and in authority, her pitch is 'steady, cutting deep down inside, cold as a knife' and leaving the psychiatrist in a state of obedience (10). The experience of Firdaus might have been perceived differently if it was recounted by the psychiatrist, but it is rendered even more poignant, specifically because it does not suffer from the expert's interference. She refuses to have her story be passed down from one interlocutor to another by selected words of a specialist. Her subjectivity which she struggled to attain has been fully shaped by narration. El Saadawi's choice of vocalizing the entire narrative through the protagonist's words is her attempt to prioritise experience over theory. She has for long argued that exploitation in modern times needs to be addressed using creativity, coupled with reality and based on lived experiences.[58]

El Saadawi's organization of the narrative is as much an intention to empower the powerless and give her back a voice, as it is to warn against the prevailing assumption that a woman can speak for her sister. A careful reading will reveal that the interaction between Firdaus and the psychiatrist is tense and cautious; it lacks ease and comfort which would

[58] El Saadawi, 'Dissidence and Creativity', p. 4.

have created a strong tie. While Firdaus's commanding language is at first perceived as her way of asserting herself, this imperative language also portrays her as releasing her wrath on a woman who has no previous knowledge of her. Although Firdaus has witnessed all forms of violence practiced on women who come from different social and professional ranks and her firm realisation that her plight is originally male made, yet, her sense of superiority is only reached at the expense of another female. Even when Firdaus is recounting her interactions with other women, the idea of solidarity is refuted. Instead, with each female figure brought to the narrative, the point is to stress the damage woman can inflict on each other. Although El Saadawi has called for a women's collectivity through her women's association, in the novel she is careful not to offer a utopian female agreement based solely on the axes of nationality, sex or even experience of exploitation, but she aims to stress that the experience of violence and oppression can only be adequately represented by the victim herself.

Firdaus is not the only one hindering a formation of a women's connection and construction. The psychiatrist is also responsible for this impediment, though she reduces her presence in the cell to allow Firdaus's self-expression, and shows immediate obedience. Nonetheless, her alienation from the woman beside her is clearly felt. In the first and the last chapters where she is detailing her meeting, she makes a particularly striking remark regarding the quality of Firdaus's voice. Firdaus's narration seems to the psychiatrist to have been echoed by a voice 'one hears in a dream' (11-141). Her confusion as to whether the voice of Firdaus is a dream or a tangible reality reveals the impossibility of a complete apprehension of the traumatised woman, and the alienation between the two exceeds the doctor/patient relationship. It is an alienation of a woman from another woman. The psychiatrist is only reassured of the corporeality of the woman and her story by the sudden entrance of the policemen into the cell (142).

Even though the narrative does not offer a feminist conversation, nor does it end with Firdaus's survival and the improvement of her life, yet, El Saadawi is successful in

counteracting the assumption that the category of Arab women constitutes one entity. Western feminists' tendency to approach women's oppression in the world as similar and collective is vehemently rejected, and El Saadawi questions the commonality of women within the same society, much less across the globe.

Djebar displays similar anxieties regarding the construction of an Algerian sisterhood, but portrays it in a different fashion than that of El Saadawi. Lise Gauvin argues that in *Ombre*, Djebar employs a woman's duality in which the female characters slide into each other's roles. Her role as a writer however, is her clearest manifestation of a 'glissement de l'un a l'autre' (sliding from one another), a shift back and forth between the roles of speaker and listener. The writer's passage to the role of Scheherazade is seen in her fiction but is firmly concreted in her autobiographical writings.[59] Autobiography, argues Gauvin, is where Djebar moves from a position of a speaking individual to join a social collective articulation. This is indeed a feature of Djebar's writing; she is the writer and the historian who masterfully recuperated and preserved the voice and the experience of Algerian women when these were at risk of extinction, a preservation that was meant for infinity.

As has been argued earlier, Djebar's agenda for negotiating Algerian women's identity is inclusive insofar as it considers women who are exposed to different forms and levels of oppression. In Ombre, Hadjila and Isma's transgressions for the sake of constructing their womanhood are different, and these dissimilarities are the result of social class, education and age. Djebar's deliberate creation of these doubles stems from a will to represent and deconstruct Algerian womanhood simultaneously. But this characterisation is also reflective of the writer's anxiety about the limitations of a possible Algerian

[59] Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djebar ou la résistance de l'écriture* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001), p. 60. Cited in Lise Gauvin, 'Les femmes-récits ou les déléguées a la parole' in *Assia Djebar littérature et transmission,* ed. by Asholt Wolgang, Mireille Calle-Gruber and Dominique Combe (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2010), p.55.

sisterhood. *Ombre sultane* brings women together and sets them apart, calling for junction while causing disjunction, by the very means of narration.

Hiddleston's persuasive analysis of women's solidarity in her reading of *Ombre* affirms that the notion of an Algerian sorority is troublesome due its homogenising tendencies. She approaches the novel by highlighting the instances where women's collaborative resistance is proven to be superficial and deceptive, even when women are from the same society.[60] Isma appears to minimise Hadjila's moments of unchaperoned liberation and to act as the new voyeur distressing her with her watchful eyes.

Nevertheless, Hiddleston notes that despite Djebar's call for an Algerian feminist solidarity, she is conscious that a collective mode of representation might run the risk of further muting the subaltern.[61]

Similarly, Lindsey Moore sees that Isma's role in encouraging Hadjila's getaway and unveiling is woven by Djebar to reflect the complicated 'equation between visibility and agency' she wants to create within this duo.[62] Moore argues that Isma's role has proven to be more endangering than liberating, for the two characters are placed at different positions not only socially and economically, but also through the 'positions of enunciation and spectatorship' they enact in the narrative.[63] Indeed, Isma's guidance of Hadjila appears to dismiss the specifics that set them apart: Isma reduces Hadjila's experience of oppression to merely an experience of a shared patriarch, Hadjila's entire background is ignored and, consequently, to further quote Moore, 'Isma's intervention exposes her lower-class counterpart to violence'.[64] This is the violence that arises from representation and misrepresentation that Djebar strives to avoid.

[60] Hiddleston, *Assia Djebar*, pp. 90-96.
[61] Ibid., p. 94.
[62] Moore, *Arab*, p. 69.
[63] Ibid., p. 70.
[64] Ibid., p. 69.

Yomi Olusegun-Joseph, on the other hand, makes a particularly relevant point regarding the relationship which brings Isma and Hadjila together.[65] Critics' tendency to value the role of Isma in delivering Hadjila out of her misfortune, according to Olugsegun Joseph, underestimates Djebar's intentional juxtaposition of Arab and Western feminisms in the novel.[66] Rather, he warns against viewing Djebar's 'hybrid effort' to bring feminisms in dialogue as a 'superiority of a particular brand of influence claiming agency over the other as an engagement with a hyphenated Algerian female body desperately seeking healing from any interventionist gesture'. Hadjila's own liberation, in other words, starts before Isma's interference.[67]

Hiddleston, Moore and Olusegun-Joseph capture Djebar's complexity in handling a collective representation of women, be it political or fictional. As has been noted previously, Djebar's concluding words in the novel encapsulate the dilemma: the return of women 'toutes [femmes]' (all women) to the chains of 'cet occident de l'Orient' (229) (this West in the Orient, 160). It is these very anxieties and worries about the unknown future of all Algerian women, literate or not, from all parts of the country and from all social classes that motivates the transgressions Djebar describes. Because women are multiple, their oppression is disparate and because limits are ever-present, Djebar's literary transgressions are multifaceted and constant.

Literary representations of Arab women in the novels of El Saadawi and Djebar are conducted with great delicacy and a careful construction. Both authors display caution for fear of further muting the subaltern. Brilliantly, consciously, they have used their novels as replicas, miniatures of some sort, to depict the greater danger caused by the notion of universal oppression used by Western feminists. Nevertheless, they remain pioneer writers

[65] Yomi Olusegun-Joseph, 'Differing from her sister's voice: (Re) configured womanhood in Assia Djebar's A Sister to Scheherazade' *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54. 2 (2018), 226-238 < https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2017.1383300 > [accessed 26 April 2019].
[66] Ibid., p.231.
[67] Ibid., p.232.

in the Arab world, the first to use the medium of literary writing to represent the experience of Arab womanhood with all of it peculiarities. Each writer transgresses distinctive limits to produce an identity for her women beyond the specificity of the boundaries they have crossed. Transgression despite its degree, the noise it causes, the punishment in which it results, is a similar mode the writers use to efface local and global discursive creations of Arab women. If sisterhood is rightly to exist, according to our authors, it needs to account for the confinement from which each woman has departed.

Conclusion

This chapter has identified boundaries and their transgression in El Saadawi and Djebar's novels and followed the protagonists' journeys of self-construction after their movements beyond these limits. The heroines of the two narratives are thrown into the shadows of society, and they emerge from their unique zero points to establish themselves as owners of their bodies, minds, sexualities and spaces. Their journeys vary according to their backgrounds; each rebels against the norms that have robbed her of the right of self making, and each appropriates her identity according to her own desires. For El Saadawi and Djebar, writing provided a unique juncture where the self is reflected and an attempt to understand it could be achieved. Along the way, however, they became burdened by the responsibility of the imaginary to do right by those who reality has done wrong. Their world of words became crowded by others who were deprived of a voice. El Saadawi and Djebar attempt to make language bear witness to the lived experiences of marginalised, hegemonised and silenced others. *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr* and Ombre sultane offer glimpses of the diverse experiences of women in the Arab world and the norms that have shaped

their lives.

Chapter 3 Fadia Faqir's and Rajaa Alsanea's fictions of counteraction

Chapter 2 addressed literary transgressions in fiction of women from countries with long-established histories of feminism. My attention in this chapter, by contrast, shifts to writers from countries where changes in women's situations have only recently begun to take place. This part of the research, then, turns to novels that appeared at times when women from Muslim societies were under global scrutiny. In the post 9/11 world, the Muslim region, despite its diverse national, histories, cultures and languages, has become an increasingly discursive entity, and has been assigned meanings and definitions far from its realities. As Edward Said argues in the 2003 edition of Orientalism, the common perception of the Arab world, particularly after the events of 2001, and especially in the United States, has continued to be seen as a 'semi-mythical construct which […] has been made and re-made countless times' and a truer vision of this part of the world has been ignored.[1]

After 9/11, in general and without exception, as Evelyn Alsultany indicated that 'Muslim men (as a whole)' came to be talked about increasingly as violent, oppressive, sex-deprived terrorists, in America.[2] Muslim women are often stereotyped in a sympathetic mode. They are either portrayed as invisible, voiceless and oppressed, in need of Western liberation, or complicit in terrorist ideologies.[3] Such a reductive image has been challenged

[1] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 5th edn (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), pp. xv-xvi.
[2] Evelyn Alsultany, *The Arabs and the Muslims in the Media: race and Representation after 9/11: Regulating Sympathy for the Muslim man, Critical Cultural Communication* (NYU Press: Ney York University, 2012), p.100.
[3] Mervat F. Hatem, 'The Political and the Cultural representations of Arabs, Arab Americans, and Arab American feminisms after September 11, 2001' in *Arab& Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, & Belonging*, ed. by Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadibe Naber (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), p. 13. See also: Shakira Hussein 'From Rescue Missions to Discipline Post-9/11 Western Political Discourse on Muslim Women' *Australian feminist Studies*,

by the fiction of Arab women writers who use literature as a site for the representation of Arab women in order to formulate change and exchange. However, some writers, including Fadia Faqir and Rajaa Al-Sanea, the subjects of analysis in this chapter, have been regarded as orientalist insofar as their fiction consolidates stereotypical images which do not do justice to the realities of Arab women's lives. The persistence of these images in their works, particularly in this period fraught with tension and dissension, has been widely declaimed.

This chapter argues against this charge, demonstrating instead that Fadia Faqir and Rajaa Alsanea in their novels *My Name is Salma* (2007) and *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), respectively, show nothing but opposition and resistance to biased descriptions of women from the Arab world. They narrate stories of women who, although subjected to patriarchal control and violence, are neither passive nor submissive to the status quo. They are portrayed as active agents challenging all forms of social gender construction and discrimination practiced on them in the different settings they occupy. This is enacted by employing orientalist tropes, but manipulating them to offer a counteractive presentation of Arab women.

The chapter brings two forms of writing, diasporic and chick lit literature, to analyse transgressive resistance. In *My Name is Salma,* Fadia Faqir creates a narrative that combines the Arab World and the West in the character of Salma, an Bedouin Arab woman from an unidentified Levantine location in exile in Exeter. Throughout the story, Salma is portrayed as enduring an identity crisis aggravated by each moment and event in her life. Her journey from her old tribe to the new society might have rescued her from physical punishment following the transgression she committed—her engagement in a sexual act—

28.76 (2013), (p.144). < http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=8795bfe91b98-450d-8a56-802ee3be40b2%40sessionmgr104> [accessed 09 May 2019].

but the transition from one location to another has extinguished her soul. She is lost to herself and struggles to form an identity. To reconcile her past and present, Salma embarks on a quest to establish her sense of self. This journey is characterised by behaviours deemed forbidden in her native culture, such as unveiling and engaging in sexual relations. However, I argue that these acts are conventions practised in situations of ambivalence and estrangement caused by displacement. Salma's bewilderment is what prompts her to attempt to construct an identity that embodies the cultural differences she has experienced.

The narrative moves back and forth from the orient to the occident and from the past to the present. This strategy invites a reading that makes use of Said's idea of orientalism and Homi Bhabha's hybridity theory. Faqir, however, intensifies the plight of her protagonist and impedes the reconciliation of Salma's double identities by weaving a thread of issues that exceeds the Arab World/West, coloniser/colonised dimensions of violence that Said and Bhabha explore in their works. The subjugation of Salma's character is based on gender, sexuality, social class and illiteracy, and these are paramount to consider when analysing her negotiation of identity. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality allows us to achieve a thorough understanding of Faqir's strategies in delineating Salma's transgressive resistance to hegemony. I will therefore demonstrate how Salma's transgression in her new setting is her strategy to overcome intersectional difficulties faced in migration and encumbering assimilation.

As the primary focus of this chapter is Muslim women's representation in post 9/11 women's fiction, the chapter moves to analyse *Girls of Riyadh*, examining the ways in which Rajaa Alsanea candidly defies Saudi Arabian society and provides an alternative perception of Saudi women. Alsanea chooses the genre of 'chick lit' fiction—a style which, since its appearance in the 1990, has generated academic disapproval but cultural appeal—to tackle modern societal issues. Her protagonists are drawn within a narrative which argues that women's agency is achieved by willingly meddling with the forbidden. With each woman's tale, Alsanea condemns the contradictions within Saudi society,

speaking unconventionally on the tradition of arranged marriages, casting light on the marginalization of homosexual identities, and reflecting on the clash between religion and normative societal restrictions. I follow these themes to demonstrate how her usage of the chick lit commodity allows her to discuss these issues, constituting an eloquent transgression to challenge the agreed stereotypes of Saudi women.

Crucial to my discussion of Alsanea's text is Gayatri Spivak's notion of the possibility of the subaltern's speech, specifically because it serves as a useful formula to trace Alsanea's discursive itinerary. Spivak's seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' ends with a doubtful answer, but not simply because the subaltern is mute. On the contrary, Spivak sees that there is the potential for speech within subaltern subjects, but the speech is hampered by the interlocutor's filtration tendencies, which allow certain discourses to pass and block others.[4] Alsanea's *Banat Al Riyadh*— the Arabic original of the English translation— constitutes the Saudi woman's voice. The writer's engagement with gender, social, religious and political issues, and her participation in the tradition of fiction writing are the tokens of her articulation. Although capable of speech, however, her voice is profoundly mediated in the text's translation into English as *Girls of Riyadh.* Hence, this chapter proves the corporeality of Alsanea's speech act as demonstrated through the topics she touches upon in the narrative. At the same time, it registers a hearing impediment attending the delivery of an orientalist text to Western audiences. The implications of this process of translation will be discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

Deconstructing Orientalist Discourse in *My Name is Salma*

In a non-linear narrative that constantly shifts from the past to the present, Fadia

[4] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *A critique of postcolonial reason: toward a history of the vanishing present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 35.

Faqir tells the story of a woman whose life is miserable and ends tragically.[5] In the first few pages of the novel, we are presented with Salma's first and major act of transgression: she falls pregnant out of wedlock, an act that goes against the norms of her Bedouin tribe. To restore the family's honour from the shame brought on them by the transgressive woman, Salma has to be killed. Luckily, she is saved and helped to flee her village. She spends some years in protective custody in a prison in the Levant, where she gives birth to her daughter, Layla, who is removed from her immediately after delivery. Salma is helped to leave the prison and flees to Lebanon to escape death by taking refuge in Britain.

When *My Name is Salma* was translated from Faqir's original English into Arabic, it generated positive criticism, especially from male critics.[6] Faqir commented in her interview with Lindsey Moore that 'I expected an uproar because of the way it portrays some aspects of the culture'[7]. The novel is certainly challenging for those whose consumption of literary material is only limited to admiration and praise of Arab culture. The writer does not shy away from identifying patriarchal as well as colonial conspiracies in the subjugation of women. Her novels, including My Name is Salma, offer dissident heroines whose resistance to oppression challenges both local patriarchy and colonialism. The position of the writer, who is an immigrant from Jordan residing in Britain where she teaches, writes and publishes, situates her work within the category of 'minor literature' introduced by Giles Deluze and Felix Guattari. [8] This genre of literature, mostly written in a major language, reflects the writer's experience of coming from a different cultural

[5] Fadia Faqir, *My Name is Salma*, 2nd edn (London: Black Swan, 2008).
[6] The Arabic version appeared in 2009 by Dar Al Saqi publishing house in Beirut, Lebanon. Other editions followed, the most recent was in 2015. For Arabic reviews see: Ibrahim Hadj Abdi 'Ismi Salma of Fadia Fqir…Hikayat Sawsana Sawdae' *Al Hayat*, (2009) http://www.alhayat.com/article/1437040 [accessed 21 May 2019].
[7] Lindsey Moore, 'You Arrive at a truth, Not the truth': An Interview with Fadia Faqir', *Postcolonial Text*, 6. 2 (2011), 1-13, (p.10) < http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/1320/1157> [Accessed 3 December 2017].
[8] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 16.

background, a minor one, to produce literary expression in a major language. As her narrative attempts to amalgamate the two cultures of the minor and major languages, a negotiation of identity becomes the recurrent theme. This is challenging for the migrant author because, as Wail S. Hassan argues, Arab immigrant writers carry the heavy task of translating their culture to the West.[9] Writing in English, Faqir offers insights on Arab culture to Western readers. As such, she is not only a writer, but a cultural translator and representative, with all the burdens these roles involve, particularly subverting the stereotypes informing the situation of women in the region.

In their article on *My Name is Salma*, Sally Karmi and Ayman Yassin argue that Faqir's narrative is stereotypical and aimed toward gaining ground in the Western literary market.[10] The authors contend that Faqir is 'selling stereotypes and preconceived notions about the representation of Arab Muslim female subjects to the West.' This is produced, they maintain, by presenting a character who reiterates for Western audiences their convictions about Arab women.[11] The novel engages primarily with two themes: honour killings and Arab women's migration. Faqir offers the story of a woman who escapes death in the desert of the Levant and finds refuge in the arms of a white Western man in Britain. Summarising the story in these terms can only locate Faqir within an orientalist framework as an Arab writer who is self-orientalising. Yet, this simplistic summary robs the text of its artistic, thematic and linguistic sophistication. Though the text is not free from stereotypical images, their usage serves to counteract the orientalist characterization of the muted woman. Salma, the heroine, is presented time and again in contradictory terms: she is confused but composed, weak but brave, lost but serene, lifeless but alive. Faqir's point is to remind us that in the metropolitan Western world, one cannot be completely a whole

[9] Wail S. Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 33.
[10] Sally Karmi and Ayman Yassin, 'Literary Marketability in Fadia Faqir's My Name is Salma' International Conference on Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, London (2017).
[11] Ibid., p. 6.

unit, especially when she has crossed countries and experienced trauma from which she has not yet recovered.

The fate of Faqir's heroine, like that of El Saadawi's and Djebar's, is determined by her gender. Salma remembers being under constant surveillance in her Bedouin village by her mother, father and brother as soon as she starts to show signs of puberty. 'Your breasts are like melons, cover them up!' her father would command, and her mother adds 'your tuft of wool is red […] you are impulsive' and Mahmoud, her brother 'kept an eye on me while brushing his horse; I started hunching my back to hide my breasts' (13). The transformation of Salma's body from its infant state to a more mature feminine figure subjects her to restrictions and she is constantly cautioned by her mother while growing up to protect her virginity or else 'they will shoot you between the eyes' (28). Meanwhile in Exeter, she feels as restricted as she was in her country, but in a different manner: her new culture imposes different regulations on the female body to achieve desirability and appreciation, from dress code to cosmetics and products that 'turn skin smooth silk', 'iron out any winkles' and are expected to make Englishwomen 'look ten years younger' (1920). Through a conversation with her boss, John, regarding the photographers of 'the princess in the bikini' she learns of the strict rules imposed on women in the public eye and their deprivations of normalcy and privacy (275). Faqir demonstrates that systems of oppression practiced against women exist within both oriental and occidental societies, though each is manifested differently. In her interview with Moore, the author has herself stated that oppression of women is not characteristic of Arab society but certain 'penalties for not conforming' are imposed on women even in Western societies.[12]

By 'orientalising the orient', Said explains, the West attributes to itself a privileged status by means of which it is distinguished from the orient as being a 'self-sustaining,

[12] Moore, 'You arrive', p. 8.

autonomous, and sovereign subject.'[13] The orient in essence is dependant, inferior and lacking the ability to control itself. Western knowledge and wisdom alone can save the orient from its backwardness and drag it out of the darkness. By gendering orientalism, Faqir presents a character who stands for the orient and bears heavily orientalist descriptions: she is a subject who sustains endless distorted orientalist discourses. Salma, the oriental woman, is vulnerable and in desperate need of aid. She is rescued when she is smuggled from Lebanon to Exeter by an English nun, Miss Asher. Once in Britain, she is hired to be the assistant of a tailor named Max, and later by Allan to work as a waitress in his bar, both of whom grant her economic salvation. Not until she marries John, her English tutor, does Salma experience moments of belonging. The oriental woman is thus saved by the Christian missionary, uplifted by the better economic prospects of the Western world, and gently loved and cared for by the white man. Arab writers composing literature in English and inhabiting Western countries, as Geoffrey Nash argues, invariably bear influences of orientalism in their writings.[14] In his reading of Ahdaf Soueif's In the Eye of the Sun and Diana Abu- Jaber's Crescent, Nash maintains that the orientalist tropes the writers deploy continue to offer the Arab women as 'victims and escapees, only functioning on a broader stage'. He groups Faqir with other writers whose novels, including My Name is Salma, are among the literature that perpetuates the cliché of women's rescue from the violence of indigenous men.[15] Faqir does indeed exploit orientalist discourse, but crucially, she does so in order to deconstruct it. Thus, Faqir's story of an English woman who has endured patriarchal oppression and has been denied autonomy and free choice runs parallel to that of her protagonist.

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[13] Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.14.

[14] Geoffrey Nash, 'Arab voices in Western writing: the politics of the Arabic novel in English and the Anglophone Arab novel' *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 39. 2 (2017), 27-37, (p. 10) < https://sure.sunderland.ac.uk/id/eprint/7746/> [accessed 15 May 2019].

[15] Ibid., p. 10.

The narrative of Salma's traumatic life caused by forbidden love resembles the story of Elisabeth, Salma's landlady, who is a drunken old woman and severely melancholic; a woman who cannot escape her past. She grieves for the end of the British colonial period in India and, with it, the end of her illicit love for her servant Hita. Gradually in the story, Elisabeth's mental and physical health deteriorate and she begins to show hallucinatory behaviour, where we learn of the violence she has endured as a female colonial subject. The norms of the British Empire prohibited any relations that exceeded the hierarchical status of the colonised and the coloniser, and this prohibition terminated Elisabeth and Hita's love, leaving her in a state of aggravated melancholia. Faqir transforms Elisabeth's depiction from the racist, abusive woman she appears to be at first, replacing her with a picture of a human who experienced her fair share of subjugation. Upon seeing her state, Salma responds with feelings of sorrow and pity. When Elisabeth drinks herself to death, Salma inherits some of her belongings. Among the inherited items is a medallion engraved with the letters V and I, which stand for 'Viceroy to India'. As Roxanne Bibizadeh suggests, Salma's inheritance of this object symbolises the right of the colonised to claim back their selfhood from the coloniser.[16] It is thus arguable that Faqir's characterization of the oppression of women is even-handed. On the one hand, she does not deny that women's inferior status in oriental societies exposes them to extreme violence, such as honour killings. On the other, she portrays how Western society's unfair treatment of women also positions them at sites of inferiority and vulnerability.

Faqir's representation of the topic of women's sexualities is deployed specifically to counteract the dominant orientalist description of women. The orientalist fantasy, as argued in Chapter 2, misrepresent Arab women and offer them through visual art as exotic but unresponsive subjects lacking agency. This image was commonplace in orientalist writings of great literary figures, such Gustave Flaubert and his everlastingly negative portrayals of

[16] Roxanne Ellen Bibizadeh, 'Women in Exile: Islam and Disempowerment in Fadia Faqir's My Name is Salma' in *Islam and the West: A Love Story?,* ed. by Sumita Mukherjee and Sadia Zulfiqar (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2015), p. 128.

oriental women. In Orientalism, Said examines Flaubert's stories of his travel to the orient and his encounter with Kuchuk Hanem, an Egyptian dancer. The account demonstrates, as Said indicates, the orientalist association between sex and the orient:

> Woven through all of Flaubert's Oriental experiences, exciting or disappointing, is an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex. In making this association Flaubert was neither the first nor the most exaggerated instance of a remarkably persistent motif in Western attitudes to the Orient.[17]

In his report of his encounter with Kuchuk Hanem, as Said argues, Flaubert reduces her to a mere 'machine' for sexual pleasure. She is characterized by 'sensuality' and 'delicacy' but as lacking the ability to think and speak for herself.[18] In My Name is Salma, Faqir illicitly subverts this image of the passive, sexual Arab female by delineating two scenes of women's sexuality. In the first one, she shows how Salma engages actively in her lovemaking to Hamdan, even though in their sexual intercourse he repeats to her that she is his slave girl. Salma, nevertheless, is not submissive. Rather, she is in control of and orders the acts he performs: 'more, I would whisper' (36). In the second instance, Faqir shifts the image of passive sexuality from the Oriental women to a Western one. Elisabeth recalls her affair with Hita in India, where power moved from the hands of the English lady to her Indian servant. In their act of lovemaking she recalls: 'he became the master and I, the slave girl attending to his every need. He whispered orders and I, the English lady, obeyed' (299).

As shown in the previous chapter on Nawal El Saadawi and Assia Djebar, Arab women writers tend to attribute great importance to the female body and its freedom to move and to experience all its natural aspects, from sexual intercourse to pregnancy to breastfeeding. Their divulgence of women's private and most intimate experiences has frequently been regarded as manifest transgression and has subjected these authors to

[17] Said, *Orientalism*, p. 188.
[18] Ibid., pp. 186-187.

censorship and other consequences. As Miral Al Tahawy explains, women's writing about the female body is likely to be regarded as indecent because conservative tendencies either link women's writing and the female body in a pornographic frame or render it a 'metaphor for homeland and the nation'.[19] Yet, it is exactly in these revelations and public transgressions that issues of stereotyping and negative perceptions become the counternarrative enabling women to challenge them. An alternative perception of the female body, its right to autonomy and an independent identity construction, can only, henceforth, occur via a public discussion concealed behind the imaginary element of fiction.

In her novel, Faqir criticizes both the Arab World and the West for their treatment of women. Both are represented as reinforcing patriarchal structures throughout time. Therefore, Faqir cannot be accused of contributing to orientalism by stereotyping women in her narrative. My Name is Salma treats gender and orientalism in terms similar to her 1996 novel, Pillars of Salt, which was regarded by Angela Carter as a counter-orientalist narrative that resists colonial and native male-domination.[20] What might be considered as a self-orientalising attitude is Faqir's effort to dismantle historical and imagined images on women in the Arab world. Specifically because the narrative takes place in a Western setting in modern times, it is mandatory to consider past historical constructions in order for their deconstruction to occur.

Identity construction in diaspora

Migration is not a new phenomenon in the history of humanity. Displacement of people across different locations in the world existed in ancient times and continues to exist

[19] Miral Al Tahawy, 'Writing the Body and the Rhetoric of Protest in Arab Women's Literature' *Journal of Levantine Studies*, 7 (2017)< https://levantine-journal.org/writing-body-rhetoric-protest-arab-womensliterature/> [Accessed 15 May 2019].

[20] Fadia Faqir, ' Granada: Migrations, Hybridity and Transcultural Encounters' in *Adventuring in the Englishes: Language and Literature in a Postcolonial Globalized World*, ed. by Ikram Ahmed Elsherif and Piers Michael Smith (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013), p. 72.

in modernity. As Said notes, 'Our age—with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers—is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration.'[21] Identities, therefore, are reshaped and refashioned to belong and to establish 'home' in the host country. Furthermore, migration to the West has not been a new theme in Arab fiction, whether by male or female writers. Yet Faqir's novel stands alone in its characterization of this topic. Unlike other Anglophone Arab novels, My Name is Salma sheds light on migrants, particularly women who come from the lower stratum of society. The heroine of the novel is a poor, illiterate Bedouin woman. Fleeing for her life, her settlement in Exeter is intimidating as she lacks the language and employment skills, finances and appearance to succeed; shortcomings which further contribute to her feelings of alienation. Indeed, as noted by Camelia El- Solh, the experience of migration for Arabs from the lower classes of society can be marginalising in comparison to that of members of the middle and upper classes.[22] The underprivileged status ascribed to Salma's character subverts engrained images of Arabs, whose presence in Britain has often been assumed to be motivated by investment or luxurious vacations, and casts light on Arab refugees, particularly female, and their struggle for settlement and assimilation. Salma's narrative, despite its status as fiction, draws attention to the invisibility of the gendered marginalisation of Arabs in British society.[23]

Salma's entrance into the UK is under a new identification document: adopted by a British nun, she is now Sally Asher. Her new name only escalates her identity crisis. To forge an identity original and authentic to herself, she embarks on familiarising herself with the new culture she inhabits through a set of behaviours often deemed contradictory to the codes of her Bedouin culture. She is, however, torn between the dichotomy of Sally and

[21] Edward Said, *Reflection of Exile and Other Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2000), p. 174.
[22] Camelia El Solh 'Arabs in London' in *The Peopling of London*: Fifteen Thousand years of settlement from Overseas, ed. by Nick Merriman and Colin Holmes (London: Museum of London, 1993) p, 78.
[23] Yousef Awad. 'Cartographies of identities: Resistance, Diaspora, and Tran-cultural Dialogues in the Works of Arab British and American Women Writers'. (Unpublished PhD thesis Manchester University, 2011).

Salma: her past life and her present one are utterly different. She realises that 'Salma resisted, but Sally must adapt' to reconcile and come to terms with her divided self (9). She therefore consciously and willingly engages in the process of adoption and adaptation.

This issue of identity loss surfaces frequently in Faqir's writings. She has stated publicly that living in exile as a woman writer entails engaging in the painful process of constructing an identity that harmonises the Arab World and the West. In the Arab world, a woman writer is, as Faqir has stated, in a state of 'bondage' enclosed by social, religious and political boundaries, and should she write from within her country, she has to endure mounting contempt and obloquy.[24] Restrictions and attitudes such as these left Faqir with no choice but to seek exile in order to write freely on the Arab world. In her scholarly essay on the situation of the Anglophone Arab book of/in diaspora, she states: The writing of some Arabs in the West treads the divide between two cultures and suffers as well as benefits from occupying such a dangerous site. Displacement urges transcultural writers to revisit their culture of origin by the essential questioning of their relationships with their body, faiths, rites, languages.[25]

As an immigrant writer in the West, Faqir attests that even her writing bears traces of the Arab and the Western encounter, and the final product is an 'intercultural literature' that harmonizes previously contesting poles.[26] In *My Name is Salma*, the influence of cultural differences is evident throughout the protagonist's spatial and temporal passage to construct an identity that reconciles the subject of Salma and her past and embraces Sally and her present. The continual passage from the memories of the Bedouin life to the current metropolitan reality is overwhelming and characterized by self-loss and bewilderment.

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[24] Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, p.52.

[25] Fadia Faqir, 'Lost in Translation', *Index on Censorship*, 33. 2 (2004), 166-170 (p. 168) < http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03064220408537345> [accessed 15 May 2019].

[26] Fadia Faqir, 'Granada' pp. 77-75.

Faqir explores exhaustively this notion of constructing an identity during a passage which is never an easy and a smooth one. According to the Western orientalist perspective 'the world is made up of two unequal halves, orient and occident'; hence, Salma's departure from the inferior culture to the superior one involves confronting intersectional injustices and boundaries of social structures which must be transgressed.[27] The passage, as Bhabha argues, allows hybrid identities to emerge, because it prevents fixed notions of identity 'at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities'.[28] Salma makes frequent movements which blur the Arab/West boundary and enable her to develop a double perspective. It is precisely her non-linear narration of her life that reflects the loss and the gains she has made as a new subject located in between cultures. This split, fragmented articulation of her story is an effective way to grasp her subjectivity as a woman who strives to reject fixed designations and aspires to establish 'a new name and history' for herself (58).

Salma's resistance to essentialist definition remains, indeed, only an aspiration, for her efforts to merge with the new society as a woman with her own past and with markers unique to that past impede the process of settlement. Faqir locates her protagonist at a crossroad of multiple axes that expose her to multilayered forms of oppression, trigger transgression and enable the construction of a hybrid identity. Salma's identity is shaped by overlapping matrices of race, class, gender and faith: the writer shows that in Salma's everyday life she is racialised, sexualised and classed as an other. This system of oppression is what Kimberlé Crenshaw identifies as intersectional violence, organised against women of colour. Crenshaw's point is that race and gender should not be approached as separate categories investigated in isolation from each other.[29] Rather,

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[27] Said, *Orientalism*, p.12.

[28] Bhabha, *The Location*, p. 4.

[29] Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color' *Stanford Law review*, 43 (1991), (pp. 1244-1245)< https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1229039.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ae65eabae427a21e7a5cd003ae6b61c b8 >[accessed 21 May 21, 2019].

Crenshaw argues that there exist 'various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political and representational aspects of violence against women of color' and a full understanding of this violence should overcome the boundaries of each category.[30]

Although Crenshaw looks at the specific intersection of race and sex, she invites a wider scope for including different factors shaping the experience and the representation of women.[31] By this standard, Salma is faced with multiple forms of subordination. While her experience is analogous to that of any underprivileged immigrant woman in the metropolis, she is exposed to a particular prejudice that complicates the web of intersectional oppression. She is at once a woman, a woman of color, illiterate, poor and a Muslim who endures unique forms of marginalisation.

The 9/11 and 7/7 bombings of New York and London, respectively, have influenced the image of 'the Muslim woman' directly, and the Western news media coverage has reshaped 'her' profile and revitalised her orientalist depiction.[32] With the racial and sexual dimensions of her identity, the religion that the Muslim woman embodies contributes further to her subjection to intersectional violence. Through Salma, Faqir illustrates how minority women, particularly those singled out by race and religion, are alienated. Salma's transgressions are committed at times of bewilderment and confusion about her identity; they are transgressions toward self-assertion. They are also transgressions to subvert intersectional definitions limiting her based on race, gender and sex: she is a woman who is seen as an 'inflexible Muslim', 'dark, immigrant, with minimum wage' (66-72). Werbner argues that hybrid identity embodies subversive power that challenges cultural norms, explaining that it is crucial to highlight 'the transgressive

[30] Ibid., p. 1244.

[31] Ibid., p. 1245.

[32] Heidi Safia Mirza, 'A second skin': Embodies intersectionality, transnationalism, and narratives of identity and belonging among Muslim women in Britain'. *Women's Studies International Forum,* 36 (2013), (p.516) < https://www-sciencedirect-com.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/science/article/pii/S0277539512001525 >

power of symbolic hybrids to subvert categorical oppositions and hence to create the conditions for cultural reflexivity and change'.[33] The racial and sexual 'double discrimination against women of color,' Crenshaw points out, 'has not received attention either from antiracist or feminist discourses.[34] These women have been silenced, she argues, by the very systems acting against discrimination. Only by challenging internal marginalization—or what she refers to as 'home' subordination—will it be possible to challenge external power.[35] Salma becomes cognizant of the oppressive dynamics subjecting her to subordination. To conceptualise her identity as hybrid, she challenges, through a set of transgressive behaviours, the intersecting Arab/Western forces marginalising her.

Salma's financial situation especially undermines her attempts to a smooth settlement. The minimal income which she gets from her job as a seamstress at John's cannot cover her needs and a second job is her only solution for a decent life. In her search for a job, she realises that living in a secular society requires a particular appearance. Her Bedouin clothes and her veil act as obstacles that prevent her from acquiring her rights as a British citizen and as an individual who is immersed in a particular cultural context. To make her way through the job market, Salma discards the veil and changes her looks to appear presentable by British standards. Her veil, to which she was tightly attached when Miss Asher tried to convince her to remove it, has now been taken off, folded and set aside; actions based not on cosmetic motives or stimulated by an influence of the new surroundings, but because of dire need for economic stability and in hopes of employment. The act of discarding the veil, despite its 'serious spiritual and psychological

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[33] Pnina Werbner and Tariq Mamdood, *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-racism* (London, Zed Books 2015), p. 1.

[34] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics'. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*,
1 (1989). (pp.149-150).
https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf

[35] Crenshaw, Mapping the Margins, p. 1299.

repercussions', is motivated by the pressures of the Western life that resists her as she is.[36] Salma's decision, however, is inevitable since her survival depends upon her bodily appearance. Her Bedouin appearance renders her visible, but at the same time vulnerable: she is subjected to more alienation and rejection.

Unveiled and in modern clothes, she is invisible because she performs what Bhabha identifies as mimicry; behavior that presents her as an 'almost the same but not quite'.[37] She perceives her unveiling as a transgression and sees herself as 'dirty' and a 'sinner' when in fact her unveiling is a mere imitation of women's dress in her surroundings to afford life and make ends meet (129). Although Bhabha argues that mimicry for the colonised subject is undertaken as a means to achieve recognition by the coloniser, Salma does not seek recognition per se, or only insofar as she must be seen enough to be offered a job. On the contrary, she longs for invisibility. Faqir effects this representation to show that the reconstruction of the migrant's identity does not happen in isolation from the newly inhabited culture. It has to come into close contact with the other, and has to try out new modes of life, even those judged to be prohibited, in order to independently construct her individuality. The transgression, therefore, is not a disavowal of her ethnic and religious principles; it is, rather, for the sake of blending in without fully submerging. Thus, for instance, Salma comes to realise that her faith and the veil which signals her Muslim identity have to remain private and personal since in public they are the subject of discrimination. This constitutes Salma's ambivalence: she is in between traditionalism and modernity, but in that 'enunciative present', she is provided 'a political space to articulate and negotiate such [a] culturally hybrid social identity [ies]'.[38]

Dress not only features as an element invoking experiences and constructing identities in Faqir's *My Name is Salma*, but the writer attributes attire a significant role in

[36] Esra Mirze Santesso, *Disorientation: Muslim identity in Contemporary Anglophone Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2013), pp.121-122.
[37] Bhabha, *The Location*, p.122.
[38] Ibid., p.359.

both *Pillars of Salt* and *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (2014). In the latter, Najwa, like Salma, makes modifications to her looks in order to fit in well within the cultural contexts where she finds herself. In her journey to find her father, Najwa is presented in a similar fashion as Salma, torn between the two binary poles represented through her religious father and her secular mother and their contradictory expectations of her look. Najwa explains: 'My father must be a strict Muslim and wouldn't approve of uncovered hair, make-up, a low-cut top or tight jean. But, my mother's ghost skulking in the room would be offended if I changed my secular appearance and hid my arms'.[39] Unlike Salma, however, Najwa's changing appearance is unchallenging since she has grown up accustomed to swapping attire to accomplish her missions, Salma's new look is forced and unwilled. It is Maha, however, in *Pillars of Salt* who takes a strong stance against discarding her traditional custom and maintains it even tightly to challenge the coloniser and refuse assimilation. Maha develops stronger attachment to her traditional attire and holds on firmly to her shawl, refusing the modernity brought to her country by Englishwomen. Mocking them, she says:

> One of them was wearing a tight dress with a wide, shamefully short skirt…I felt like heating some water and washing the colours of their faces. Maybe I could give them long black Qasimi robes and headdresses. The shame of it! By the Grey hairs of my father, these women were not shy of showing their bodies to the gazing men…I started laughing at city women who had no sense of shame.[40]

In her jeans or most formal dress, with her long hair dangling behind her shoulders, Salma secures a job as a dishwasher at a hotel bar. The transformation of her appearance increases her awareness of her body. For her first few months in England, she wishes to 'walk out' of her body and turn to into 'an English rose, white, confident, with an elegant English accent and a pony' (10). She is now a woman who is 'neither white nor

[39] Fadia Faqir, *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (London: Heron Books, 2014), p. 240.
[40] Faqir, *Pillars of Salt*, pp.33-34.

oliveskinned nor black' (179). Her self-confidence begins slowly to settle in. Her body, which she consciously used to hide, is now marked by a femininity to which she had been oblivious, and she shifts to a new gendered identity. The bodily awareness she develops brings her a different kind of attention and gaze as well. The alien being by which she had seemed to be is replaced by 'curves, flesh and promises' (179). Her new selfhood takes a surprising turn when she adopts a more sexually open lifestyle, despite the fact that the sexual interaction in which she engages is the same taboo for which she was cast away from her country and daughter.

Poverty, therefore, turns out to be one dimension of intersectional domination strictly connected with other dimensions that restrict Salma's subject formation. Her race as a black Bedouin Arab, her faith as a Muslim, and her body as gendered limit her assimilation and render her vulnerable to racism and alienation. To form new social relations in the new land, she has to present an image of herself as a beer consumer to appear 'open-minded'(66), and to support herself financially she has to transform from a ' Shandy', a 'black doll' and 'an incomprehensible foreigner' to 'a Sandy, a white beautiful doll' (178-179). Faqir has stated that she envisioned My Name is Salma as 'a novel about the constraints of the human condition, migration and racism', and indeed the patterns of race, sex, social class and faith make this vision concrete by presenting Salma as a subject struggling with the situation of migration unique to her background.[41] Her transgressions are her means of adapting and adopting a new life style that would facilitate the integration into the new country which, for Salma, 'was the only home' she has (78).

In his reading of the novel, Alaa Alghamdi convincingly shows how the transformation of the physical appearance has stimulated an inner personal transformation, seen through her sudden desire to pursue an education.[42] Indeed, illiteracy is another factor

[41] Rachel Bower, 'Interview with Fadia Faqir, 23 March 2010' Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 48. 1 (2012), pp. 3-12, p. 7 < https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17449855.2011.569380> [accessed 17 May 2019].

[42] Alaa Alghamdi, *Transformation of the Liminal Self: Configurations of Home and Identity for Muslim Characters in British Postcolonial Fiction* (Bloomington: IUniverse, 2011), p. 119.

exposing Salma to discrimination, and thus her next strategy to counteract racist identifications is the acquisition of the English language. She makes a considerable effort to have control over it, using all available media to assist her in reaching a satisfactory level, or so she believes. After her enrolment at university, her language accomplishment seems to her futile, as if even the language appears to be class divided. Her Bedouin tongue prevents her from achieving mastery of or even a modest fluency in English: The problem with my Newsight English was that I could not pronounce most of the words. I tried to twist my tongue around 'supremacy', but couldn't so I sat there as if dumb and deaf listening to John telling me how

'ignorant, simplistic and subjective' the writing was. (276) Salma grows frustrated at her own dialect and native language, which constitutes an impediment exposing her 'true' identity, an identity she strives to conceal. Besides her physical appearance, her language skills categorise her in the lower caste of society; natives would be 'looking down' on her, she imagines (195). In her inability to express herself fully in English, Salma crafts a way out for herself by appropriating the English language to improve her communication skills. She integrates, but at the same time infuses, the English language with Arabic words and Arabic linguistic varieties that only emphasize her hybrid identity. Bhabha, quoting Bakhtin, notes:

> The […] hybrid is not only double-voiced and double accented […] but is also double-languaged; for in it there are not only (and not even so much) two individual consciousness, two voices, two accents, as there are [doubling of] socio-linguistic, consciousness, two epochs […] that come together and consciously fight it out on the territory of the utterance […] It is the collision between differing points of view on the world that are embedded in these forms.[43]

[43] Homi Bhabha, 'Culture's In-between' in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart hall and Paul du Gay (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), p. 58.

Indeed, the linguistic collision occurring within Salma is a further reflection of an emerging hybrid persona. Language becomes for Salma a liminal space, a tool for interstitial agency that moves her back and forth and allows her an opportunity for negotiating her subjectivity as a woman between two worlds.

At times Salma is seen to resent the two identities she carries within her; both of the conflicting personas of Salma and Sally are rejected. Her body in both of these identities is robbed the right of wholeness and life. 'I stopped locating myself,' she states, 'I became neither Salma, nor Sal and nor Sally, neither Arab nor English' (191). She chooses to be a new woman who does not conform to the norms that have designed and shaped Salma and Sally. Yet her mind still veers between past and present, specifically after giving birth to a second child, Imran. The fully lived experience of motherhood increases Salma's longing for her lost daughter and carries her back to her village. Finally, she makes a trip to Hima because she 'had to go find her, she [I] had to go find me'. However, she chooses to return disguised as 'a khawajayya: a foreigner' (italic in original) in 'a dyed short hair, straw hat, sunglasses and short sleeves' (316). Although married to John and being the mother of Imran, she wishes for death and each time she recalls her daughter, she aspires for disappearance and annihilation. Her camouflage of her looks conveys her desire for life and her aspirations to reunite with her daughter, to bring her back to Exeter, to 'help her settle in the new country, teach her English, register her in a college' (318). These precise aspirations that she expresses present Salma, ultimately, as woman who maintains the oriental part of herself, represented by her attachment to her daughter, alongside her embrace of the Western identity she has formed. These desires reveal the state she has reached, a woman inhabiting two worlds and inhabited by these two. Faqir validates Salma's embodiment as a hybrid woman when she expresses her preference for the illustration on the cover of her work's French translation:

> In France they opted for a glass of Moroccan tea, gold-rimmed and colorful, next to a bland mug of coffee with the union jack on it, a dig at the British perhaps. In

many ways it captures the essence of the narrative and the duality of vision and allegiance of the character.[44]

Salma's hopes are demolished when she learns from her mother about the fate of her daughter. 'Two months ago, her good-for-nothing uncle threw her [Layla] in the Long Well. 'Like mother, like daughter', he said' for the crime of the mother (325). When asked about the choice to end the story tragically, Faqir responded that incidents of honour crime are not exclusive to the Arab world but found 'in Sweden, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Greece, Turkey and many other countries'. Because it is an ongoing crime committed against women, it would not be 'politically accurate' to offer an alternative ending to the story. [45] This affirmation indicates that her performance of writing becomes, towards the end of the text, an act committed to symbolising the 'birth of the author' when writing ends.

'Dishonour can only be wiped off with blood' are the last words Salma hears before Mahmoud shoots her between the eyes (327).

Though Faqir's dominant theme is Muslim women's migration and the hardships they face, the novel also serves as a model for engaging with social issues in hopes of changing women's treatment in Arab society. Telling Salma's story enables Faqir to go back to her native country and reunite with her son from her first marriage. She discloses that part of Salma's story is autobiographical: Faqir's need to reunite with her child echoes that of her character. In her conversation with Moore, Faqir states: 'I decided once again to go back for him, to reclaim him as my flesh, and blood'.[46] Faqir's narrative technique, she asserts, is intended particularly to address realistic themes; themes that cannot be glorified but can only be represented and articulated by a woman writer, since literature remains the only domain where the lives of women are spared. Referring to herself as a Scheherazade,

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[44] Fadia Faqir, 'Oriental Clichés in Literary Publishing: A Dalek in a Burqa' *Quantara.de* (2011) (para 19) < https://en.qantara.de/content/oriental-cliches-in-literary-publishing-a-dalek-in-a-burqa> [accessed 03 August 2019].

[45] Bower, 'Interview', p. 9. See also: Moore, 'You Arrive', p. 8.

[46] Moore, 'You Arrive', p. 9.

Faqir autobiographically writes: 'Shahrazad suffered the consequences of living as a woman [writer] in a conservative Muslim society [Jordan]' but to write freely and critically, she needed to migrate.[47]

Saudi Chick lit: a path out of silence and invisibility

Despite the translation of *Banat Al-Riyadh* (2005) into 40 languages, including English with the title of *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), the novel remains understudied and has received minimal academic analysis, mainly because it has been viewed as 'chick lit'.[48] Despite the fact that Alsanea is the first Saudi woman and Arab woman writer to have produced a novel in this genre and introduced it to Arabic literature, the work has generated wider pop cultural attention than scholarly critique. This is understandable, since chick lit as a new mode of fiction is still combatting globally for its right to be regarded seriously.[49]

Like other recognised novels in this genre, Girls of Riyadh is presented in a style close to diary form in which the narrator recounts the lives of four Saudi girls—Sadeem, Gamrah, Lamees and Michelle—in a confessional and comic way.[50] The plot of Girls of

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[47] Faqir, In the House, 53

[48] English Quotes used in the text are from: Alsanea, *Banat Al Riyadh*. Some Arabic translation are my own, unless otherwise noted, their translation is from: Raja Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, trans. by Rajaa Alsanea and Marilyn Booth (London: Penguine Books, 2007). Some of the scholarly works that have studied the novel are: Moneera Al-Ghader, 'Girls of Riyadh: A New Technology or Chick Lit Defiance Banat al- Riyadh [Girls of Riyadh], Raja'al Sani' *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 37. 2 (2006), 296302, (p.297). See also: Joel Gwynne, '"The lighter that fuels a blaze of change" Agency and (cyber) spatial (dis) embodiment in Girls of Riyadh' Women Studies International Forum, 37 (2013), 46-52, (p. 50). < https://pdf.sciencedirectassets.com> [accessed 23 May 2019]. See also: Jean Kane 'Sex and the city of Riyadh: Postfeminist fabrication' in Islam and Postcolonial Discourse: Purity and Hybridity, ed. by Esra Mirze Santesso and James McClung (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 113.

[49] For more information on the emergence of chick lit see and its criticism see: Staphanie Genz andBenjamin A. Brabon, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 84-90. See also: Stephanie Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (Chalottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

[50] Bridget Jones's Diary by Helen Fielding is recognized as the first novel to have established this genre, and other novels that followed such as Sex and the City by Candance Bushnell or Love in a Headscarf by Shelina Zahra Janmohamed adhere to the standard of chick lit found originally in Bridget Jones's Diary. See: Susanne Gruss, *Pleasure of the Feminist Text: Reading Michele Roberts*

Riyadh features other qualities that firmly situate it in the canon of chick lit, such as an emphasis on feminine adornment and the protagonists' search for romance. The girls belong to the higher class of Saudi society, or what the narrator refers to as 'the velvet class'; they are addicted to fashion and dress in the most expensive designer clothes; they attribute great importance to their appearance and they contest daily with calories (110). Three of the girls are university students, and the fourth, Gamrah, gives up her education to go with her husband to America.

Alsanea portrays the life of a group of young Saudi women looking for adventurous romantic relationships despite the restrictions placed on them as young, single females, with hopes that these relationships end with marriage. The plot of the narrative details the girls' fixation on landing the right partner and their fear of a life of spinsterhood. Finding the right man is, therefore, the inevitable element involved in the writing of a chick lit work. As Mary Ryan argues:

> Many chick lit novels include scenes where the heroine, accompanied by a gang of her friends (and, of course, her obligatory gay best friend), 'goes on a man-hunting expedition to a bar, speed-dating event or internet dating site. During the course of these adventures, she runs into one 'Mr. Wrong' after another.'[51]

Instead of bars, the Saudi squad stroll in coffee shops and malls where phone numbers are 'generously showered upon them by the guys' (17). Though their society is severely

and Angela Carter (Brill, 2009), pp,234-241. See also: Lucinda Newns, 'Renegotiating Romantic genres: Textual resistance and Muslim chick lit' *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 53, 2 (2017), 284-300. < https://journals-sagepubcom.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk [accessed 27 May 2019].

[51] Mary Ryan, 'Trivial or Commendable? Women's Writing, Popular Culture, and Chick Lit' *452F Electronic journal of theory of literature and comparative literature*, 3 (2010), (p. 75). https://452f.com/images/pdf/numero03/ryan/03_452f_mono_ryan_eng.pdf [accessed 27 May 2019].

gender segregated, this does not stop them from hunting for potential suitors in the limited spaces where they can interact with the other sex, and they continue to long for love, which struggles 'to come out into the light of day in Saudi Arabia' (300).

However, the girls of the novel do not solely aim for marriage; their stories reflect their struggle with and ambivalence toward living in a society that claims to treat them as queens and encased pearls, when in reality they are its victims. Therefore, Alsanea has presented a cutting-edge novel that carries with it meaningful discussions about Saudi women's struggle to assert agency using the chick lit genre. The resonance of the novel among Saudi and Arab readers was so powerful that many claimed that Dr Ghazi Al Gosaibi, one of Saudi Arabia's prominent male authors, had written the novel.[52] Other allegations that surrounded the book include the assumption that Alsanea, eighteen years old at the time of writing the novel, was helped by a male writer. However, as Moneera Al Ghader explains, these speculations routinely appear when an 'unusual text' by a woman writer is published.[53]

What is paradoxical regarding the criticism directed against the novel is that because of its chick lit style, it is assumed to be lacking sophistication in ideas and to be superficial in its discussions. Yet, because of its critical commentary on aspects of the Saudi society—such as arranged marriages, blurred lines between culture and religion and strict codes applied on bodies and sexualities—all rigorous and challenging ideas—Alsanea had to endure the repercussions following the publication of the book. The controversial novel, Alsanea explains, almost denied her a scholarship that she was awarded to pursue her medical studies in an American university.[54] Even after she obtained her higher degree from the University of Chicago in one of the most difficult areas of

[52] Rajaa Alsanea, 'My novel almost denied me the scholarship and the job' *Al-Arabiya. Net* (2013) http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/saudi-today/2013/11/05/رجاء.html. [Accessed 27 May 2019].
[53] Moneera Al-Ghader, 'Girls of Riyadh: A New Technology or Chick Lit Defiance Banat al-Riyadh [Girls of Riyadh], Raja'al Sani', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 37. 2 (2006), 296-302, (p.297).

[54] Alsanea, 'My novel'.

dental sciences and with publications in her field, and despite the passage of time since the publication of her novel, Alsanea returned to Saudi Arabia only to be denied the ability to work in her profession due to the novel. Thus, she underwent a similar experience to that of Nawal El Saadawi, when literary works expose their writers to social sanctions.

The debates *Girls of Riyadh* embodies are political at their core, concealed however, by the comic and sardonic features characterising chick lit. Joel Gwynne, who is among the few scholars who have examined the novel, concludes that Alsanea's themes do not exceed 'girl power maxims', and that the text fails to adequately offer 'any strong feminist ethic'.[55] This is a problematic analysis of the novel, though Gwynne makes a compelling point regarding the narrator's strategic choice of cyberspace as a podium from which the unique Saudi female dilemma is recounted, only to question further down his article the aim of such a strategy. The narrator's public recitation of the girls' stories should not be regarded as trivial, for it is the first major transgression against the rule of silence imposed to contain the lives and experiences of women. Writing the stories of the four girls and sharing them on the internet is, for the narrator, an act that liberates every one of her girlfriends who 'lives huddled in the shadow of a man, or a wall, or a man who is a wall, or simply stays put in the darkness' (2). She perceives writing the public emails as 'the matches that set your [her email readers'] thoughts on fire, the lighter that fuels a blaze of change' (2). This modern means of narration is appropriated by the narrator to act as a performance of dual objectives: to speak out and to control the speech and the act of speaking. This is a fresh perspective presented in the text that shows how the globalising world with all its technological madness—and despite its neo-colonial implications— has facilitated the articulation for the narrator and allowed her an uninterrupted, uncensored and self-monitored access to vocalisation, declaring the emergence of new forms of

[55] Joel Gwynne, 'The lighter that fuels a blaze of change': Agency and (cyber) spatial (dis)embodiment in Girls of Riyadh' *Women's Studies International Forum*, 37 (2013), 46-52, (p.50) < https://pdf.sciencedirectassets.com> [accessed 28 May 2019].

women's agency. The medium does not diminish from the seriousness of its contents. As Al Ghadeer notes, 'if we take the framing email, we will recognize the compatibility between Raja'al-Sani's chatty chick lit tone and its true-to-life thematic concerns.'[56]Likewise, the novel in its chick lit form should be appreciated for its ability to break away from the common genre used by Arab women writers, and for its originality in manoeuvring gender discourse through modern technologies.

Furthermore, the novel stands in clear defiance of the literary expectations placed on both male and female writers in Saudi Arabia. If this were not the case, the work would not have been banned in the country. Daphne Grace explains that the nature of the Saudi society is extremely conservative and does not tolerate publicising topics deemed best concealed. She notes: 'when Saudi writers, either male or female, commit their inner thoughts or experiences to paper, they violate a culture that is based on concealment, the repression of emotions and feelings, a culture where expressions of love are taboo'.[57] The narrator in Girls blames Saudi society for proscribing romance by stating that: 'genuine love had no outlet or avenue of expression in this country. Any fledgling love relationship, no matter how innocent or pure, was sure to be seen as suspect and therefore repressed' (97). Hence, the novel's form, as an example of the chick lit genre, which emphasises mainly romantic traits, is an intelligent choice to write of matters previously kept silent. Moreover, Alsanea's novel is an original contribution to world literature, since it takes part in establishing what Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young identify as the 'new woman's fiction'; writing carried out by a new woman author to a new woman reader.[58]

If romance is the dominant element, then, that renders chick lit fiction superficial for its reiteration of heterosexual, patriarchal tropes, Alsanea's text acutely engages

[56] Al Ghadeer, 'Girls of Riyadh', p. 296.

[57] Daphne, Grace, *The Woman in the Muslim Mask: Veiling and Identity in Postcolonial Literature* (London: Pluto Press; 2004), p.105.

[58] Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.12.

romance as a means of counteracting clichés about Arab men; particularly, the Saudi man. As the writer explained in one of her interviews, the events of 9/11 impacted negatively on the image of the Muslim man and Saudi Arabia became associated with terrorism, specifically with Bin Laden.[59] This image, however, was prevalent even before these events: as Said explains, the Arab world has been reduced by the Western entertainment media to being a region of terror and barbarism, a region that functions by Islamic preaching which promotes violence and force. He notes that these portrayals present an image of Arabs as people who only 'understand force; brutality and violence'.[60] The novel is indeed timely in offering a truer vision of the Saudi man. In the character of Faisal—although his appearance in Girls of Riyadh is limited to few pages—Alsanea attempts to redeem the image of the Saudi man and invites readers to reconsider 'stereotyping all Saudi men into cold and insensitive creatures' (96). Rather, the narrator attests that the Saudi man is 'as romantic as young men everywhere else in the civilized world (96).' A second male character, Firas Al- sharquawi, also embodies fine qualities, such as a 'sophisticated' passion for classical music and art: his particular interest in Mozart's works renders him, in the eyes of Sadeem, 'the most cultivated men she had ever met' (117).

In his introduction to the Arabic edition of the novel, Gazi Al Ghosaibi states that Alsanea 'draws the curtain and uncovers what is hidden behind it, the exciting world of young women in Riyadh'.[61] Al-Ghazi's words validate the voyeuristic experience Alsanea both exploits and challenges in her novel. The Saudi woman has always been a mysterious subject, concealed and shadowed; she has therefore been pursued by the other's gaze, and in the novel this other becomes the Saudi male. Saudi men, as the narrator explains, constitute her most enthusiastic and devout readers, 'most of the encouraging letters I get

[59] Lesley Thomas, 'Sex and the Saudi Girl: the writer who brought chick-lit to Arabia tells about passion behind the veil' *The Sunday Times* (2007) < https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sex-and-the-saudi-girlm9qstds3mkf> [accessed 30 May 2019].
[60] Edward, Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 21.
[61] Ghazi Al Ghossaibi, *Banat Al Riyadh* (Lebanon, Saqi: 2005), p. 1.

are from males, bless them!' who await the reception of the emails impatiently each Friday (119). While these men are corresponding with to demand more revelations on women of their country, other correspondents write to condemn her for 'deliberately attempting to sully the image of women in Saudi society'. Some go as far as calling for her blood for publicising the life of the Saudi women on the World Wide Web (30).

What is challenging about these revelations is the narrator's discourse when recounting the events and the provocative language she uses in describing the 'most explosive scandals', and laying down 'the naked truth' on the web to tease her male readers. Her intention with these emails is to participate in 'reforming our society', a mission that can only be conducted through 'bold writing' on ''taboo' topics' (104). Yet this reformation is not tolerated when the subject involved in it is an 'ordinary' and a 'young' woman. Her age and sex are disadvantages that deny her the right to speak, especially when her discourse is said to call for 'vice and dissolute behaviour' (159). As a consequence, she is exposed to ruthless condemnations for her 'boldness in writing at all' (105).

Compared to El Saadawi's, Djebar's and Faqir's texts—or for that matter, to any chick lit novel Girls is said to resemble—Al Sanea makes minimal reference to the topic of woman's sexuality, and any divulgence of this sort is cautiously and narrowly directed towards specific episodes. Smoking and drinking alcohol, often in the privacy of their own space, unveiling when abroad and driving are the most rebellious behaviours the girls display. Writing of these matters, however, metaphorically in the emails and literally in the novel, is a taboo revealing the image of the Saudi woman which social, religious and political institutions veil. The sassy modern writing employed by the writer is counteractive to the practice of veiling the Saudi woman.

The chick lit convention exploited by Alsanea is an appropriation of the genre that serves the writer's purpose of proposing an alternative discourse on Saudi womanhood. In

strictly conservative Saudi Arabia, where woman as a topic of public discourse is taboo, the chick lit novel is a mode that highlights and revolves around the private and the intimate life of women. Alsanea's work has indeed caused a major destabilisation of society and of Saudi literature. Its potency lies in decentring the image of the mysterious woman in black veils, which has for so long shaped the reception of Saudi women, offering instead a portrait of women dealing with their daily lives. However, the chick lit genre in particular permits the writer to convey a punitive social criticism, and to take up taboo topics which are concealed behind the wit and the light humour expected by chick lit criteria.

A society riddled with contradictions

Girls shows the predicament of being a young individual from a technological era trapped in an old society which holds tightly to outdated practices, beliefs and traditions. It focuses on women, as well as referring to men, grappling with societal discrepancies and hypocrisies. Even though the narrator values Saudi patrimony and praises its folklore, a mordant tone shapes her portrayal of that society. In her description of Gamrah's 'traditional Najdi wedding' the narrator is careful to detail the Saudi wedding ceremony, highlighting women's contentment in that seclusion and their appreciation of the ceremony as a moment of private women's union. It is on these occasions that any masculine restrictions on the Saudi female body are subverted, and femininity is emphasised and celebrated. Alsanea is critical however, of 'the old ladies' and their mutterings and truly sharp stares' if a young woman does not conform to the customs (6-10). She also mocks these women's use of weddings as an opportunity to hunt for daughters-in-law. They become the second gazer as they scrutinise the young girls' bodies, expecting them to display forms of obedience and reduce their appearance to a bare minimum. To appeal to a potential mother-in-law, the girls are told: 'You barely walk, you barely talk, you barely

smile, you barely dance, be mature and wise' and are instructed to please these 'motherswith-sons and capital funds' (6).

The text challenges one of the most long standing traditions among the Saudi Arabian elite: arranged marriage.[62] Alsanea shapes Gamrah's story to shed light on the consequences of denying one's autonomy in choosing a life partner. Gamrah was introduced to Rashid by both of their families. When they have only seen each other once, they are married and move to live in the United States, where Rashid pursues his PhD. Gamrah's life not only lacks romance but also communication and interest on the part of her husband. Her character is portrayed as a repressed woman whose sole hope is to attain her husband's love, a love he shares with a Japanese woman. The narrator recounts Gamrah's final attempt to steer her marriage towards continuity and, in a mocking tone, describes the futility of trying to keep a man in the marriage institution through pregnancy: 'She [Gamrah] had long heard her mother and female relatives repeating the wisdom of previous generations that, if all else fails, pregnancy was the only way to ensure that marriage continues. (Notice I say continues and not succeeds)' (emphasis in original) (91).

In an interview with Lesly Thomas published in the Daily Times magazine, Alsanea explains that her writing is a representation of modern Saudi society, with its merits and demerits.[63] Upon the publication of the book, women who were victims of outdated social norms wrote to her to narrate plights similar to those depicted in her text. She states: 'At one point, I was getting 1000 e-mails a day. Women who were divorced in an arranged way and didn't like their husbands; those who were struggling with their families were reaching out'.[64] This underlines how the novel proposed an alternative vision of marriage by breaking the silence around this issue and portraying the repercussions of arranged marriages. Gamrah's story thus offers an image of a woman who is denied an

[62] Dalya Abudi, *Mothers and Daughters in Arab Women's literature: The Family Frontier* (Boston: Brill, 2011), p. 74.
[63] Thomas, 'Sex and the Saudi Girl'.
[64] Ibid.

opinion; she is wed to a man she did not choose, she is instructed to fall pregnant to save the marriage, she is divorced without her knowledge, and because she now holds the status of a divorcee, she is socially surveilled: 'all eyes were fixed on her, waiting for a single misstep and prepared to spread the most lurid rumours about her' (133). She is indeed a mere body under a series of directions to live a life that has been scripted for her.

Saudi society, as the narrator puts it, is 'riddled with contradictions' (119). In the story of Faisal and Mashael (or Michelle, as her family and friends refer to her), the narrator criticises the hypocrisy of society and explores the shackling of the young generation of contemporary Saudis by old beliefs which clash with the millennial era. Michelle is a daughter of a Saudi father and an American mother who settled in Saudi Arabia after years in the States. She attempts to cope with the Saudi environment and succeeds in integrating despite her great ambivalence. Her fury at Saudi society reaches its peak when traditions stand in the way of her love life. The narrator recounts Michelle's and Faisal's romance, which ends before it even started because of the Saudi fixation on maintaining family clan. In his attempt to obtain his mother's approval to marry Michelle, Faisal informs her of his lover's background, but 'as soon as she heard that the girl's mother was American, she decided to bang the door shut for good on this fruitless dialogue around this utterly ridiculous topic' (102). To the mother this marriage could not happen since there are no genealogical affiliations between the two families.

Michelle's hybrid character is a representation of the hybrid society of Saudi Arabia as the older generation confronts the younger one. Many young Saudis who have earned scholarships to pursue higher education in Arab and Western countries have come back to their country not only with degrees but with wives of other nationalities and with children who are, according to Al Rasheed, 'halfies' embodying two identities.[65] Michelle quickly develops an ability to share with Faisal her authentic opinions regarding society and its

[65] Al Rasheed, *A most masculine State*, pp. 213-214.

strict traditions. This not only suggests the existence of an open and a frank crossgender dialogue about the restrictive Saudi milieu, but also reflects on males' conscious awareness of the obstructions to social reform. Since Michelle 'was not of their sort' the mother took it upon herself to find him 'the best girl' who is of similar status to that of Faisal's family (102-103). Reform, Alsanea suggests with this story, is not solely political but ought to emerge from the family first. As Thomas puts it, 'The government does not force change on the Saudi people. If families are willing to change, then the laws will too'.[66]

In her sixteenth email, the narrator directs severe criticism to her male readers, addressing them as 'crocodiles' ignorant of the social faults such as 'outdated traditions' and 'racial prejudice' present in the Saudi society (105). In the Arabic version of this email, the narrator expresses her frustration with the youth's disinterest in social reform and denounces their efforts to silence the voices of those who seek change. She refers to Martin Luther King's role in ending racial segregation in America and sees that her story, like King's, will be recorded in history. This excerpt is particularly crucial in its attack on the social discrimination within Saudi society, which to the narrator does not differ from racism in the United States, and can only be eliminated through 'resistance' a 'belief in a cause' and 'sacrifice'.[67] The narrator's reference to this particular historical figure is to emphasise that her activism, represented through serialised emails, is not undertaken for fame. Aware of the repercussions of such a revolutionary project, she strongly believes that her own form of activism could be the 'starting point for every drastic social change' (105). The excerpt gives the novel a more complex dimension, reflecting a brilliant amalgamation of pop culture themes alongside historical, social and cultural ones, both catering to the tastes of mass readers and reflecting the potency of the narrator's voice. The English translation dismisses this passage, flattening the discussion and obscuring the voice; indeed, the translated version more broadly tames the narrator by undermining

[66] Thomas, Sex and the Saudi girl.

[67] Alsanea, *Banat Al Riyadh*, pp. 57-58.

major excerpts where the spirt of challenge and subversion she embodies—the element of her identity she strives to disseminate to her readers—are cut out. This is an issue I will explore fully in Chapter 4.

The writings of Saudi women have undergone three stages. In each of these stages, themes and topics on the subject of woman have been discussed, initially in less daring narratives, developing to become realist, and finally reaching a bold and transgressive stage.[68] The transgression of Saudi women's literature is especially related to topics of sexuality. Women authors whose work touch upon sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, often chose anonymity and publish under pseudonyms.[69] Like other Arabic novels on the topic of homosexual relations, whether by male or female writers, Girls of Riyadh does not delve into great detail: opaque references appear mostly through secondary characters.[70] The depiction of homosexual identities is curtailed and limited.

Um Nuwayyir is the mother of Nuri, the son with 'an odd story' (22). She provides the girls a safe refuge at her house where they can meet and share their stories. Yet, Um Nuwayyir's mind is not at ease, for her only son while growing up developed 'the persona of a sweet, soft, pretty boy rather than the tough masculine young man he was supposed to turn into' (22). While, the mother perceives his feminine behaviour as a 'tragedy' and 'a trial visited upon her by her lord', the rigid father reacts violently and exposes his son, whom he thinks of as a 'faggot boy who was such a freak of nature', to serious physical violence: Nuri 'suffered fractures in the rib cage and a broken nose and arm' (22- 23). His

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[68] Hend T. Al-Sudairy, *Modern women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Rights, Challenges and Achievements* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), pp. 61-68.
[69] Ibid., p. 68
[70] Perhaps no better fictional work dealt directly and frankly with homosexuality in the Arab world better than Alae Al- Aswani's The Yacubian Building 2002 did. The novel generated extraordinary success in Egypt and made its way to some Arab countries where censorship is not maintained, it has also been made into a movie that received local and international praise and prizes. For more information on sexuality in the Arabic novel see: Hanadi Al-Samman, 'Out of the Closet: Representation of Homosexuals and Lesbian in Modern Arabia Literature', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 39 (2008), 270-310. < https://brill.com/view/journals/jal/39/2/article-p270_5.xml> [accessed 09 May 2019].

mother's concerns, however, stem from the negative societal attitudes confronting her, and she decides to send her son to a boarding school in the United States. There, he will be helped to figure out his gender identity—a masculine one preferably, for signs of homosexuality in Saudi Arabia is, as the narrator puts it, 'an utter calamity, an illness worse than cancer' (132). Alsanea is indeed brave to present males in the Saudi society struggling to identify their sexual identities, though the individual for whom this is a concern is never heard. Although his story is only communicated through the narrator, the author's reference to this taboo subject, despite its short description, is dissident in a country that prohibits homosexuality and persecutes individuals engaging in homosexual relations with jailing or lashing.[71]

Pursuing the theme of non-conforming sexual identities, the novel offers—briefly, abruptly and narrowly—a glance of the lesbian minority in Saudi society. The narrator recounts the story of Arwa, who goes to the same university as the four girls. Arwa is described as a beautiful girl but displaying masculine behaviour, with short hair, men's underpants spotted once underneath her skirt and 'dubious manners' (50). The four girls avoid her, because she displays what is referred to in Saudi as the buyat performance of gender, in which signs of femininity are masked by masculine attire, hairstyles and ways of walking and talking.[72] Performance of the opposite sex does not always entail homosexuality, and although the fact that Arwa is seen sliding her hands around another girl's waist, these displays are not indicative of a particular sexual orientation. Yet in the final excerpt devoted to Arwa's story, the narrator refers to her as 'Arwa the lesbo', implying her homosexuality (51). Through these two secondary characters, Alsanea's theme of homosexuality remains insufficiently explored, modest and, at instances,

[71] Samar Habib, *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representation* (Routledge: New York 21012), p.16.

[72] The buyat is derived from the English word 'boy' with the Arabi suffix 'at' that refers to femininity, the buyat began to be seen increasingly in Saudi during the mid-2000s. For more information see: Amelie, Le Renard, *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia* (California: Stanford University Press, 2014), p.146.

conservative. It is nonetheless daring enough to set the ground for other women writers to explore it even further.[73] Despite its reluctances at times to engage fully with omnipresent issues in the Saudi milieu, the novel is a means to highlight and interrogate unjust, unequal and suppressive practices.

In her attempt to represent women's vulnerability due to cultural and religious practices, Alsanea tells the story of Sadeem, criticising social misogyny that justifies itself based on religion. Sadeem is engaged to Waleed; their relationship is based on love and is due to end happily, if not for Waleed's patriarchal mind-set. The couple are officially married and sign the contract that acknowledges their marital status. However, the downfall of the marriage occurs before the wedding, for the marriage has been consummated prior the wedding night. Although their sexual act is deemed religiously licit, traditions prohibit them from engaging in sexual activity before the wedding ceremony. Waleed had long made sexual advances, but when Sadeem refused, 'he criticised her every time she put a stop to anything, saying that she was his wife according to the religion of God and his prophet' (36). Sadeem, however, was expected to resist in order to conduct herself in a manner that does not give her away as an 'easy' woman with 'experience' (36). To maintain her status as chaste and proper, she should not yield to his demands, but the moment she surrenders, he disappears and sends her divorce papers. Sadeem is confused and bewildered and wanders about 'the fine line between what was proper behaviour and what wasn't?' (36) The line that determines the permissible and the prohibited is perplexing: the 'psychological makeup of the young Saudi man' is ambiguous and impenetrable, whereas the woman is left wounded and exposed to serious hardships.

[73] A year after Alsanea's novel appeared, another woman from Saudi with the pseudonym Saba Al Hirz published her novel entitled The Others (2006), which recounts the life of a Saudi lesbian girl and engages with the theme of lesbian's sexuality thoroughly. The narrator in this work, like Alsanea', uses social media to publicize her narrative. See: *A Most Masculine State*, p. 236-237.

Sadeem barely recovers from the psychological damage she has been through before she experiences another rejection from another man because of her status as a divorced woman.

As argued earlier, *Girls* is a novel that recounts the lives of young women seeking to establish successful romantic relationships in a society that censors romance. The unique social segregation between the sexes is the main obstacle preventing independent relationships from emerging. The strict gender segregation has indeed isolated women and allowed them very limited access to particular institutions. However, Saudi religious scholars have recently spoken out against 'woman phobia' and explained that such an abnormal gender stratification was not common during the Prophet's life.[74] The novel represents this phobia, but also offers a glimpse of how women deal with and escape the exclusion. Lamees, the only girl in the group who achieves success in love, claims that this happiness is based on the mind instead of the heart. Lamees's search for the right partner leads her to pursue medical studies, for only in medical schools can Saudi men and women intermingle. The narrator explains: 'The thought of finally mixing with the opposite sex was a grand dream for many, many students−guys and girls alike. Some joined these colleges primarily for that reason'. Even if the interaction and the mixing are severely circumscribed, yet contact with the opposite sex, even if limited, is 'better than nothing' (52). Lamees's narrative displays that even in the most restrictive of spaces social boundaries can be circumvented. Her objective, which is choosing her life partner, is fulfilled by joining medical school, and with her husband, Nizar, they managed to achieve

[74] The liberal Saudi Sheikh Adel al-Kalbani provoked a heated debate after his appearance on one of the Saudi channels disassociating the social segregation from religion. Al-Kalbani made the following comments when asked about women's right to the public space: 'Sadly today, we are paranoid−in a mosque−a place of worship [women] are completely separated from men…in the Prophet's era…the men used to pray in the front and women prayed in the back of the mosque without a partition, not even a curtain'. See: 'Senior Saudi cleric urges end to women phobia' https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news [accessed 31 May 2019].

a ‘greater agreement about everything . . . more in tune with each other’s needs than any of the married couple around them’ (262).

Along with the works of other Arab women writers who published in the 2000s, such as Ahlam Mosteghanemi and Alawiya Sobh, Alsanea’s novel has been welcomed in the Western market for the testimonial accounts it gives of gender relations in the Middle East.[75] Mashael A. Al-Sudeary argues that Arab women writers who made their way successfully into Western markets and universities, such as Djebar, Faqir, Fatema Mernissi, El Saadawi and Huda Sha’rawi, are placed within a particular position in the West where they are held as saviours of fellow oppressed women of the Arab region.[76]Alsanea presents a text that indeed introduces the subject of Saudi women to the world and provides a glimpse of what has always been deemed mysterious. Moreover, her contributions to the Saudi novel cannot go unnoticed. By vocalising Saudi women’s stories, she participates in a global discussion on the fate of women in the Middle Eastern and Western worlds. Her narrative is projection of a voice that has long been talked over or silenced.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined Fadia Faqir’s *My Name is Salma* and Rajaa Alsanea’s *Girls of Riyadh* focusing particularly on the writers’ strategies to manipulate and reject orientalist depictions of women that circulate in the Western media in the post 9/11 era. Although Faqir and Alsaneaa’s employment of stereotypical images has been regarded with suspicion and controversy, yet their embrace of this discourse is an intelligent

[75] Nikita, Dhawan, and others, *Global Justice and Desire: Queering Economy* (Routledge: London, 2015), p. 13.
[76] Mashael A. Al-Sudeary. ‘Rethinking Muslim Woman’s Agency in Modern Literature’ *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 21(2012) http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_2_No_21_November_2012/9.pdf. [accessed 31 May 2019].

deconstructive engagement with the Arab and the Western societies and cannot be overlooked. In Faqir's *My Name is Salma*, the chapter has shown the ways by which identity is constructed in the narrative of diaspora, the ambivalence caused by forced migration and the transgressive behaviours that result. The multicultural writing of Faqir contributes to the creation of hybrid identities that occupy liminal spaces, transgressing restrictions that favour communal identity.

As focus moved to investigate the new genre of writing introduced to Arab literature by the Saudi writer Rajaa Alsanea *Girls of Riyadh*, this chapter demonstrates how a work viewed as chick lit not only proves its power to criticise the flaws of Saudi society, but also stands as an example to show the validity and the edginess of the Saudi woman's speech. Alsanea's characters display a vital issue facing the younger generation, not only in Saudi Arabia but in Arab societies as whole: the attempt to balance between modernity and conservatism. They are presented as women struggling with culture and traditions that have over the years shown little tolerance towards women, they are denied autonomy and as a consequence they are exposed to sufferings caused entirely by their repressive environments. *Girls of Riyadh* and *My Name is Salma* open up a dialogue, and invite Arab societies to reconsider the understanding of values and traditions controlling gender discourse in the region. Their writers' aim is to rewrite the unique experience of the Arab female, proving that under Western and Middle Eastern eyes, speaking is possible.

Yet, in what language is this speech articulated? How is it received and translated? These are the guiding questions of Chapter 4. The following chapter of the thesis looks at three factors playing prominent roles in establishing the literary identity of women writers from the Arab region: language, translation and reception.

Chapter 4 Language and translation: The reception of Arab women's novels

In this chapter, my interest shifts from a thematic study of Arab women's novels to examine the politics of language and translation which must inform any discussion of Arab women writers' identities. Through an analysis of the issue of language in Djebar's and Faqir's works, the first part of this chapter argues that a woman's decision to write in a language other than her native tongue enacts a double transgression. In the first act of transgression, the writer adopts the master's language and proves mastery over it, thereby subverting the notion of inferior and superior cultures, undermining this hierarchy and enabling the speech of the formerly colonised women. In the second act, the writer publicises the experience of Arab womanhood, which has long been the most concealed of subjects, using a 'lingua franca', thereby departing from the norms of her society to counteract and correct false images of Arab women in other societies. The major language is a transgressive tool enabling Arab women writers to construct their identities.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the translation of Arab women's texts into English and its role in the reception of these writers. What is particular about the recent interest in translating Arab literature and its publication globally, is that the motifs and strategies through which this project has been conducted tend to construct a hegemonic image of the region. A careful examination of El Saadawi's and Alsanea's texts will reveal that their translations have been carried out using a 'domesticating strategy' a process by which a literary text is inscribed with linguistic and cultural values that conform to the expectations of the new reader. Lawrence Venuti cautions that this strategy has 'violent effects' on the translated text as it is aimed 'to bring back the cultural other as the same, the

recognizable, even the familiar; and this aim always risks a wholesale domestication of the foreign text, often in highly self-conscious projects, where translation serves as an imperialist appropriation'.[1] Among the abusive appropriations perpetuated by this method, as I will demonstrate, is the erasure of the subaltern's voice and its power. That is, this tendency has the danger of eliminating what women writers have so far established; specifically these writers' transgressive power in resisting cultural inscription and inscribing their unique identities. Hence, the aim is to assess how translation risks rewriting agency in a manner which manifests, to borrow Spivak's phrase from her 'The Politics of Translation', 'the good-willing attitude "she is just like me" of the translator.[2] This attitude as Spivak has argued, elides the specificity of the original author's experience and experimentation with agency toward her shared identity with (female) Western readers. The chapter concludes by arguing that the transgressive writing of Arab women is hampered neither by language—be it Arabic, French and English—nor by translation.

Locating the self in other languages: Francophone and Anglophone literature of Arab women writers

The previous chapters of this thesis have established that the primary transgression in the novels of the writers studied here resides in the themes these women tackle in their narratives. Violating social, political and religious boundaries in their texts is an intentional strategy that stems from the writers' vigorous desire to narrate troubling stories, to allow their characters to perform detestable behaviours and to challenge normative discourses on Arab women in both culture and literature. El Saadawi revolts against the long-ingrained understandings of women's bodies and sexualities in her society. Djebar calls for effacing illusive public/private boundaries established to segregate women in Algeria. Faqir focuses on the struggles of Arab women in diaspora. Al-Sanea speaks out

[1] Lawrence Venuti, 'Translation as cultural politics: Regimes of domestication in English' *Textual Practice*,

[2] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation' in her *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York and London, 1993), p. 182.

against the plight of women in what she regards as a hypocritical society. In this hubbub of transgressions, identity is contested and negotiated; these novels become sites for displaying their authors' individuality. This study has also demonstrated that these writers' constructions of femininity, agency and identity differ from one writer to another, for, even Arab women's writing in its most unified state is a not a monolithic entity. Through transgressive writing, the politics of identity is approached distinctively by each author. One aspect of this politics is the language in which theses authors choose to write. Djebar and Faqir opt for foreign expression by writing in French and English, respectively, while El Saadawi and Alsanea break ground in their native literatures.

Critics have shown that the first modern novel by an Arab author was written in English rather than Arabic, followed a year later by one written in French.[3] Thus, the Arab novel in a different language claimed the right of affiliation both with Arab literature and the foreign literature production a century ago. Since its first appearance, the Francophone Arab novel never ceased to increase and flourish in quantity and quality, compared to the Arab Anglophone novel, which remained in low production until recent years.[4] Yet, both were stimulated and encouraged by cultural encounters and political histories: male and female writers of the Middle East and North Africa took up another language, most often the coloniser's language, for narration. However, the Arab novel composed in a different language has increasingly had to justify itself and prove allegiance to the Arab world to be awarded the merits it deserves.

[3] Ameen Rihani, a Lebanese American writer, was the first Arab to have written an Anglophone Arab novel entitled: The Book of Khalid. The first Francophone novel was by Ahmed Bouri from Algeria with his work Musulmans et Chrétiennes which was published serially in 1912. For more information see: Nouri Gana, 'The Intellectual History and Contemporary Significance of the Arab Novel in English' in *Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 1. See also: Wail S. Hassan 'The rise of Arab-American Literature: orientalism and Cultural Translation in the Work of Ameen Rihani' *American Literary History*, 20. 1 (2008), (p. 245). https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/20492219.pdf [accessed 1 February 2019].

[4] Gana, 'The Intellectual', p. 2.

Although, the topic of Anglophone and Francophone writing by Arab writers is a broad one and requires careful and lengthy examination, this chapter carves out some space for this matter and raises the question of language in relation to the major theme of this research: women's writing of identity through transgression. It attempts to find an answer to these questions: how does the negotiation of identity occur in Arab women's novels written in a non-native language? And, does foreign expression provide a more liberated ground for transgressive writing to emerge? This chapter demonstrates that major languages are manipulated and rendered malleable by the Arab women writer to serve the cause of liberating the voices of women from a history of double silencing, and to acknowledge the traditional female experience in modern terms. Here, it is important to stress that these reflections do not imply that other writers whose works are written in Arabic are any less transgressive. Indeed, El Saadawi's *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr* and Balabaki's I live are among the first and the most polemical novels written in Arabic by women writers: transgressive fiction of Arab women manifested itself initially through Arabic, as explored previously.[5] However, as Arab literature is not solely produced in the Arabic language, it is imperative to raise questions regarding the relationship between the writer's use of the Western language and her transgressive fiction.

Silence and French: Djebar between Two languages

It has been more than half a century since Algeria gained its freedom, but issues created by colonialism during the occupation have not been resolved in this period of independence. Still persistent is the language conflict that divided Algerians in the 1950s and 1960s, which reached its peak in the 1990s, and which continues to hover, less violent

[5] There is now a plethora of works in Arabic by women whose topics could be described as utterly challenging and transgressive, such as those of the Algerian Fadila Farouk, the Iraqi Duna Ghali, the Syrian Linda Hawyan Alhassan and Mansoura Ez-Edin from Egypt. For more information on these writers see: https://www.banipal.co.uk/back_issues/82/issue-44/

but equally troubling, in these first two decades of the new millennium. Mohamed Benrabah's remarks, in his meticulous investigation of the linguistic trauma in the country, accurately claims that language conflict in the country is a 'phenomenon introduced by imperial France into communities unaccustomed to politicizing linguistic issues'.[6] Indeed, language in a multilingual society becomes an issue when it is no longer a personal possession, but an instrument for practicing and claiming power and dominance. Caught up in this are generations of Algeria's intellectuals, whose choice of one language over another exposed them to criticism, denunciations, threats and death.[7]

For the postcolonial writer, a confrontation of the native and the colonial language ultimately provoked the confrontation of the colonised and the coloniser's cultures. The writer is placed in a delicate situation and is expected to forge an authentic identity that strengthens her/his ties with the nation, while doing so in the language of the former coloniser. This crisis is best expressed in the words of Chinua Achebe. When asked about his use of English, he stated:

> Is it right a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it.'[8]

Franz Fanon, on the other hand, writes: 'to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.'[9]Fanon moves the language beyond its linguistic aspect, tying it intimately to culture and stressing the role of the subject within

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[6] Mohamed Benrabah, *Language Conflict in Algeria: From Colonialism to Post-Independence* (Bristol:
Multilingual Matters, 2013), p. xii. From EBook Library.
[7] Ibid., pp.146-156.
[8] Chinua Achebe, 'English and the African Writer' *Transitio*n, 75.76 (1997), 342-349, p. 348. < https://www.jstor.org/stable/2935429?seq=4#page_scan_tab_contents> [accessed 31 July 2018]
[9] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), p. 8

the culture of that language. Thus, central to the discussion of Djebar's French expression is her inscription in and assertion of French culture.

Ever since her debut work, Assia Djebar confronted such condemnation and, like many postcolonial writers, she was called upon to justify her choice of one language over the other. Throughout her life, she was not spared; the question of why she wrote in French indeed haunted her. I have chosen to dwell on this question in Djebar's works by moving beyond investigating the reasons behind writing in a particular language to focus instead on how the language is used when describing the female experience in fiction and reality.

A major issue faced by early Algerian Francophone writers was the expectation placed on them to show loyalty to the Algerian cause, even when using the coloniser's language. As Valerie K. Orlando notes, support for these writers by the nationalist movement of the country was uncertain, since their views were articulated in the language of their oppressor.[10] Writers such as Kateb Yacine and Assia Djebar used the medium of French language not only to denounce the occupation of their country but also to show opposition to the regime installing itself immediately following independence as the sole dominant power and to criticise the totalitarian face the country was adopting. This denunciation, argues Orlando, is visible in Djebar's work *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* (1962) and Boudjedra *La Répudiation* (1969).[11]

Upon her election to the Académie Française, Djebar expressed her fear of the Algerian reaction to this news, a fear that had accompanied her throughout her life.[12]

[10] Valerie K. Orlando, *The Algerian Novel: The Poetics of a Modern Nation 1950-1979* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2017), p. 5-6.
[11] Ibid., p. 18.
[12] Amara lakhous, 'Assia Djebar… wa lissanoha el jarih'. *Al Araby* (2015) <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/culture/2015/2/20/الجريح-ولسانها-جبار-آسيا> [accessed 2 August2018].

Describing herself, Djebar stated, 'Je ne suis pas une écrivaine française, je suis écrivaine Francophone' (I am not a French writer, I am a Francophone writer).[13] However, even this identification and affiliation with Francophony did not escape criticism, for the linguistic identity of Algerian writers became highly contested in the years following independence. This issue was especially fraught due to the Algerian government's encouragement of the use of Arabic only. In a strategy to move beyond the colonial past, erase all its remains, proclaim independence and establish an authentic identity, the Algerian government under the presidency of Ahmad Ben Bella in 1963, strove to reinforce a system of Arabization based on monolingualism.[14] Such an official political position generated the conflict of language and identity to the extent that it became a cultural and an intellectual conflict with severe repercussions. Arabic writing was urged to fight the 'onslaughts of Francophony and its diverse temptation', implying that the cohabitation of French and Arabic was non-existent.[15]

In fact, such a stance is an obvious distortion not only of a language but of an entire history, for there is no denial that Francophony constitutes a part of Algerian heritage. It is also a clear suppression of Amazigh languages, on which another part of Algerian identity rests. The predicted death of Francophony with the end of colonialism proved false, and instead a spectacular renaissance of Francophone literature was witnessed at exactly the

[13] This quote is from Amara lakhous' talk at Cornell University on April 17, 2015. The talk is not published but I obtained it directly from Lakhous, who is an Algerian writer and journalist residing in Italy. In this piece, which was received via email on 2nd August 2018, Lakhous makes references to his encounters and his personal conversations with Assia Djebar in their meetings in Rome 1995 and 2000, and in Turin in 2006. Permission has been granted to quote some parts of the talk.

[14] For more information see: James McDougall 'Dream of Exile, promise of Home: Language, Education and
Arabism in Algeria' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 43. 2 (2011), 251-270. < https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/23017397.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A097245519010afd03476640e2e6c3 b4a> [accessed 02february 2019].

[15] Ahlam Mostagnemi 'To colleagues of the pen' *Al-Ahram Weekly On-line*, 409. 24 (1998) <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/1998/409/cu1.htm > [accessed 02 August 2018].

time when Arabic began to be promoted.[16] During the introduction of this system, Djebar was teaching history at the University of Algiers. As soon as the system was imposed, she resigned from her position, since it was impossible to teach history in Arabic because all archival works and historical materials about the country were available only in French. She explains: 'J'ai toujours pensé que c'était important pour un pays fraichement indépendant de prendre en charge sa mémoire collective et de repenser son histoire. La méthode était plus importante que la langue.'[17] (I have always thought that it was important for a recently independent country, to have control over its collective memory and to rethink its history. Methodology has always been more important than language.) For Djebar, Arabization meant silence, a feature for which she is not known.

Djebar is often located in the centre of discussion around foreign language and literature in postcolonial writing. Like many postcolonial writers, she was expected to vindicate her choice of French as a medium for artistic creation. Her engagement with this language was not voluntary. Rather, her relationship with French began the day she was escorted to the French school by her father, which led her to commit two transgressions concurrently: stepping into the public eye and developing a voice in a foreign tongue. She reminds us in *Ombre sultane* through Isma's character who retains so many of Djebar's traits, that withdrawing from the women's space to enter the men's milieu is regarded by fellow women as a violation of the traditional social norms that prepares girls for marriage, not for school. Upon learning about the decision of Isma's father to send his daughter to a boarding school to acquire education, Isma's aunt makes an interjection which implies that women also view female education as a stigma: 'étudier'? she protests, 'est-elle un homme? Hélas, tout change de nos jours, tout va à l'inverse aujourd'hui !'(189) ('study'?

[16] Charles Bonn, 'Maghreb et émigration maghrébine' in *Auteures et livres de langues française depuis 1990*, ed. by Dominique Wolton (Paris: ADPF Ministere des affaires etrangeres 2006), pp.70-80, p.37.
[17] Hamid Barrada, Ti, 'Assia Djebar' *Jenune Afrique* (2008). https://www.jeuneafrique.com/57084/archives-thematique/assia-djebar/ [accessed 18 October2018].

Is she a man?...Alas! Everything is changing nowadays, everything is upside down' 130). Not only was Isma going to frequent public spaces, but she was also going to acquire an education, that is a masculine attribute, and moreover this acquisition of knowledge was going to happen in the language of the 'Roumis' (189).

The French language imposed on Djebar by her father and by colonialism—for during the French occupation, the coloniser deprived the indigenous of literacy in Arabic and allowed only minimal French education—became her sole mode of expression, and lasted throughout her life.[18] She is among the most recognizable Francophone writers in the world, but her personal relationship with the language, as she reflects upon it in her fiction, autobiography or the rare interviews, could only be described as ambivalent.

French enabled Djebar to reflect on imagined and real experiences; it constituted simultaneously a space of familiarity and strangeness for her. It was the language that allowed her full divulgence of her thoughts and the ability to bring back to the centre the forgotten and the marginalised stories of women in her country. Conversely, it is the same language that was the primary factor behind her alienation from her society. Her detractors complained, 'Ah! Elle parle français, donc c'est le parti de la France.'[19] (Ah! She speaks French, so she belongs to the French party). As her loyalty was questioned, she reflected on the theme of language forcefully in her works: *L'amour, La Fantasia* (1985), Ces voix qui m'assiègent (1991) *Vast et la Prison* (1994) and *La Disparition de la langue française* (2003) all contain autobiographical reflections revolving around her relationship not only with French and Arabic, but with the Algerian female dialect, which to Djebar, was exceptionally influential to her writings. Harrison points out that her post-1970s writings

[18] On the French colonial system of education in Algeria, see: Nicholas Harrison, *Our Civilizing Mission : The Lessons of Colonial Education* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019).
[19] Lise, Gauvin, 'Territoires des langues: entretien avec Lise Gauvin Assia Djebar', *Litérature*, 101 (1996), Littérature, 101 (1996),pp. 73-87 <https://www.persee.fr/docAsPDF/litt_0047-4800_1996_num_101_1_2396.pdf > [accessed 30 July 2018].

bear the trace of feminists' and women's writings', which empowered her to migrate between languages, as do Cixou and Irigary. Her close interaction with women during the making of her films, Harrison adds, was effective in evoking 'women's oral culture vehicled by languages—colloquial Arabic and Berber—that are normally unwritten'.[20]

Unlike other Algerian writers who have chosen silence rather than using the language of the former coloniser, Djebar continued to defend and promote linguistic pluralism.[21] In her *Ces voix qui m'assiègent* she condemns the politicisation of language and shows that a shift to a monolingual society constitutes a silencing of a long history of multilingualism in a country that exemplifies the coexistence of different tongues for centuries.[22] This view challenges the political goal of denying the ethnocultural multiplicity of the country. It also clashes with the 1990s religious views of Islamists who opposed the secular state, represented by its French speaking authorities.[23] Intellectuals who voiced aspirations for a tolerant, multilingual nation that rejets s linguistic conflict were confronted with intense violence that ended with the assassination of some, including one of Algeria's most outspoken journalists, Tahar Djaout, and the exile of others, such as the candid journalist and novelist Anouar Benmalek.[24]

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[20] Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p. 120-121.

[21] Malek Haddad is among the generation of Algerian writers who was educated during the French colonial system and subsequently his writings appeared in French. Mostaghanemi dedicates her Memory in the Flesh to Haddad 'a martyr of the Arabic language' who, with the end of colonialism refrained from writing in French and chose silence. See: Tanja Stampfl, 'The (Im)possibility of Telling: Of Algeria and memory in the Flesh' *College Literature*, 31.1 (2010), 129-158, (p. 130). http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=fef397da-0cf440e0-95a6-bb97d9d0b0c8%40sessionmgr103 [accessed 30 October 2018]. On Ahlem Mostaghanami's Dhakirat al-jasad and Its French Translation see : Elizabeth M. Holt, ' "In a language That was Not His Own": Memoires de la chair' *Journal of Arabic literature*, 39 (2008), 123-140, (p. 125). http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/content/journals/10.1163/157006408x310 861 [accessed 30 October 2018].

[22] Djebar, *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, p.32.

[23] On the targeting of language during the 1990s see: Luis Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War, 1990-1998* (London: C.Hurst & Co, 2000), pp. 50-51.

[24] See for example: James D. Le Sueur, *Algeria since 1989: Between terror and Democracy* (Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2013), pp. 192-208. See also: Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, *Algeria in Other Languages* (New York: Cornell University Press 2002), p.4. See also: Hiddleston, *Writing*

Yet, what is the most disturbing issue surrounding the public's understanding of Djebar's adoption of French language is the conflation of the French language with Western feminism. As is particularly visible in *Ombre Sultane*, Djebar draws upon her society to shape her narrative. She neither promotes a Western, gendered ideology, nor does she condemn Islam. Her female protagonists are not shown to be victims of religion, but victims of patriarchy, colonial violence, social and economic class hierarchies and illiteracy. They are not passive characters; rather, they are portrayed as women enacting change and claiming agency. Yet, these issues, when addressed in the colonial language, might be misread as being fuelled by Western beliefs, especially since French language became increasingly associated with military and cultural violence in independent Algeria.

What is particular about Djebar's French, however, is her strategic adaptation of this language, by moulding and altering it to inscribe the Algerian female voice. She appropriates the language by referring to it as 'mon Français' (my French), and deploys it to record the stories of women from traditional communities, forcing the language to hear out the voices of women whose articulation never made it beyond the thresholds of the spaces where it circulated.[25] In fact, she infuses French with words from Algerian dialect and religious references, her protagonists are seen murmuring prayers and passing blessings, and to maintain this authenticity she transliterates from Algerian dialect, both colloquial Arabic and Tamazight. French, specifically, is a means through which the language of Algerian women is favoured, appreciated and allowed recognition precisely through French. This visible attachment to the women's colloquial language and its preference over masculine speech is captured in the following passage in *Ombre Sultane*:

After Postcolonialism, pp.4-5. < https://www-bloomsburycollections-com.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/book/writing-after-postcolonialismfrancophone-north-african-literature-in-transition/introduction> [accessed 30 July 2018].

[25] Irene Ivantcheva-Merjanska provides a thorough and an excellent analysis on Djebar's French language purification method, see: Irene, Ivantcheva-Merjanska, *Ecrire dans la langue de l'autre: Assia Djebar et Julia Kristeva* (Paris: L'Harmattan 2015), p.45.

> Il t'aime si bien que, grâce a Dieu, il ne parle pas l'arabe avec l'accent du père, hérité de sa ville frontalière quitté il y a au moins vingt ans ; un accent qui rend la langue pédante, accentuant les dentales, avalant les gutturales. Un arabe qui ne sonne pas comme le tien et, particularité que l'homme doit sans soute a ses errances, une longue qui met tout au masculin. (46)
>
> (He loves you so much that, thank God, he does not speak Arabic with his father's accent, inherited from that city on the border which he had left at least twenty years ago: an accent that makes the language sound pedantic, with emphasised dental and slurred gutturals. An Arabic that sounds quite different from yours, and with a peculiarity due probably to his peripatetic life—he puts everything in the masculine.) (27-28)

In this passage, Djebar's description of the man's utterances implies that the masculine spoken language—even when this is the mother tongue, and even though it is the same language spoken by both genders—is out of tune and sounds controlling, oppressive and authoritative. 'The peripatetic life' that entails a constant movement in the public sphere seems to have disfigured the Algerian dialect and has created a gendered one. The role of the domestic space and its inhabitants in this instance becomes the protection of the dialect from any masculine scowl and coarseness that may threaten it. This unpleasant image of the Algerian dialect is, however, immediately redeemed by a description of Nazim's first learning stages of the mother tongue. Because he is receiving the language from Hajila, the young interlocutor, 'épelle les vocables sur le ton de la tendresse, avec la note de familiarité chuintante qui est celle des tiens, de vos voisins chez la mère, de tant d'autres' (47). (Spells out the words lovingly, with those soft intimate sibilants, such as your own people use, your mother's neighbours, and so many others, 28.) It is not surprising therefore, that Djebar, designates both Isma and Hajila as the guardians of the maternal language. This is clear when Hajila's importance in the house is recognised, for she has been chosen as 'institutrice à demeure, "maitresse Hajila" (a governess "Miss Hajila"). As

was discussed in Chapter 2, Hajila sets out to claim an identity for herself as a subject, and through teaching the maternal language to the man's son, she further asserts her presence and her voice (47). Isma, on the other hand, an intellectual woman well-spoken in French, returns to the natal town to be 'institutrice (je reprendrai l'enseignement de la langue maternelle' (108) (I shall start teaching the mother tongue again, 70). In his excellent article commemorating Djebar's death, Waciny Laredj attests that Djebar and her colleagues of the generation of writers who lived during colonisation and witnessed its aftermath were largely misunderstood for their French usage.[26] He writes that this generation valued the spoken Arabic dialect and envisioned it to be the national language and the signifier of Algerian identity. They passed away, however, he claims accurately, leaving behind an issue that was never resolved.[27]

Hence, Djebar's intentions in making use of the French are to attribute importance and recognition to the neglected Algerian women's language, and to force French, this central language, to contain and hear out the stories of peripheral women. She maintains in her interview with Mildred Mortimer that her French writing aims, 'd'ancrer cette langue française dans l'oralité des femmes traditionnelles. Je l'enracine ainsi' (to anchor this French language into the orality of traditional women, I root it hence).[28] The language Djebar utilized, as Winifred Woodhull notes, is deterritorialized: it is, 'in [and] of French'.[29] Claims that Djebar's Francophone writing conveys ideas which are abstract and alien to her society are void of authenticity.

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[26] Waciny Laredj, 'Assia Djebar…jil a logha al firanssiya ghanimat hareb' Al Quds Al Arabi (2015) https://www.alquds.co.uk/%EF%BB%BFآسيا-جبار-جيل-اللغة-الفرنسية-غنيمة-حرب/. [accessed 20 February 2019]

[27] Ibid., (para 4).

[28] Mortimer, 'Entretien Avec Assia Djebar', p. 201.

[29] Winifred Woodhull, *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: feminism, Decolonization, and literatures* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press 1993) p, 50. This quote was originally cited in: Ronnie Sharfman ' Starting from "talismano" Abdelwahab Meddeb's Nomadic Writing' L'Esprit Createur, 26.1 (1986), 40-49 (p, 41). < https://www.jstor.org/stable/26284573?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3A8b73c3b5fa786d5d38467c659a8f23ec&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents> [accessed 4November 20118]

French offered to Djebar a splendid space for female empowerment to arise, but on the other hand, it offered little of that space to express fully certain women's sentiment

Despite her usage of this language as a sole medium of expression, Djebar encountered difficulties when writing of love and affection using French. The language was bereft of words that would express female tenderness, desire and pleasure freely. For Djebar, French did not contain any equivalents that guarantee a genuine transmission of the experiences of traditional Algerian women. She explains:

> Je me suis rendu compte, à partir d'un certain moment, que le français était ma langue pour penser, pour avoir des amis, pour communiquer avec des amis, mais que, dès que l'affectivité et le désir étaient là, cette langue me devenait aphasique […] Donc je n'ai jamais pu dire l'amour en français.[30]
>
> (I realised, at a certain time, that French was my language to think, to have friends, to communicate with friends, but, as soon as affectivity and desire were here, this language would become to me aphasic […] Therefore, I could never speak of love in French.)

Critics have speculated that such an impediment might have been the reason for Djebar's ten-year hiatus from writing and the driving force behind her filmmaking.[31] Djebar has certainly turned to the screen to bring Algerian women back into their 'proper place', perhaps hoping that she could communicate with her fellow Algerians, particularly those who spoke in dialects.[32] But this ambivalence regarding her choice of language

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[30] Lise, Gauvin, 'Territoires des langues', pp.79-80

[31] This information was communicated at a national conference held in Algeria, at Bejaia University on May 2, 2018. The conference was entitled Assia Djebar: 'Une femme, une écrivaine, plusieurs voix' [Assia Djebar:
a woman, a writer, and multiple voices] http://webtv.univ-bejaia.dz/index.php/2018/05/ouverture-ducolloque-national-sur-assia-djebar-qui-sintitule-une-femme-une-ecrivaine-plusieurs-voix/

[32] Mildred Mortimer, 'Zoulikha, the Martyr of Cherchell, in Film and Fiction' *Publication of Modern Language Association of America*, 131 (2016), (p.137).

seems to have been resolved in later works. What was once the language of the other shifts to become her own property. The distinction seems to have faded and the disturbance of the dual tongue settled neither on her mother tongue, nor on French but, as she often repeated, entre deux langues, between these two.[33] Her voyage between languages is a linguistic transgression, but above all, it is a transgression against silence.

Djebar's French might have alienated her from her non-Francophone Algerian readers; it could have made her exclusive to the French reader; or distanced her from international readers spread across London, Berlin, or New York. But to the latter, Djebar was brought closer by translation. Her translation to Arabic, therefore, could have transgressed the borders existing between her and Arabophone readers; it could have filled the gap that parted them. Yet, after years of writing and numerous published works, it was only after Djebar's death that projects of translating her into Arabic began. The first of her works to have seen light in Arabic is her Nulle part dans la maison de mon père, translated by SEDIA Publishing House in 2014.[34] This work is the last Djebar wrote, and perplexing as this choice may seem, nevertheless it stimulated the translation of other works into Arabic. Among those chosen are her Le blanc d'Algérie, La femme sans sépulture and l'Amour, la fantasia.[35]

Djebar's writings have been challenging for the fact that they emerged at times when her society permitted only one discourse to exist, that which voiced out nationalist meanings and messages. The defiance is seen in the very act of writing in a culture where

[33] Djebar, *Ces voix*, pp. 30-51.
[34] Saad Mohamed, Rahim, 'Whispered language and a bit of chastity: The Gate of Memories for Assia Djebar.' *Alarab*. (2017). https://alarab.co.uk/-الحياء-من-وقليل-مهموسة-لغة-جبار-لآسيا-الذكريات بوابةالشرق [accessed 7 August 2018].

[35] This information has been retrieved from the online article entitled 'Les oeuvres de Kateb Yacine et Assia Djebar traduites en Arabe et en Tamazight', which is an interview with Hamidou Missaoudi who is a managing director of ENAG (an Algerian publishing house of Arts) *Radio Algérienne* (2017). https://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2017/12/23/les-uvres-de-kateb-yacine-et-assia-djebar-traduites-enarabe-et-en-tamazight_n_18899792.html [accessed 16 October 2018]

one gender has the right over another to participate in the production of knowledge and its dissemination to a mass audience. The fact that these acts are conducted in the language of the former coloniser is a further disruption perpetuated by her power over words. Her transgressions then are multifaceted; having to write, unconventionally, on issues regarded as taboos, in a society that prides itself on the silence of its women. Her rising voice has liberated female voices of besieged and buried women preserving them from denial and abandonment. As a minority woman in a major language, Djebar sets an example for women to take up parole—with both the English and the French connotations of the word. Her writing released Arab women's literature out on parole from the penalty of silence with works that manifest poetic and thematic mastery. It inspired Arab women writers scattered across the territory to produce feminine, transgressive, multilingual, literary parole.

Arab Anglophone literature by women writers of the Middle East has proven to perpetuate the same transgressions as Francophone literature. It has also proven to be highly multicultural and complex in negotiating its affiliations, ideologies and belongings. Fadia Faqir's works have contributed to the rise of Anglophone literature by Arab writers in ways that invite readers to engage with stories of hybridity, displacement and identity, as has been established in Chapter 3. However, her fascinating employment of English to inscribe minor female voices within a major language remains to be discussed.

In search of a shelter: Faqir and the English language

In an article published in The Guardian, Fadia Faqir recalls her disagreement and quarrels with her father over her travelling to England to pursue higher education. To the 'reluctant tyrant', Faqir protested: 'you cannot stop me. As long as there is pen and paper

in the world you cannot stop me from becoming a writer'.[36] And she was not stopped. Faqir is now among the most recognised Anglophone Arab writers who came to prominence during the last years of the 1990s. Since then, her books have been bestsellers. Yet, her father's prohibition was not the only obstacle she had to overcome. Censorship is a common practice in the Arab world, and has for long denied the existence of great books by Arab writers.[37] Fearing this may happen to her books, Faqir opted to write in another language, and publish outside the Arab territory, which seemed to her the only way to escape the confiscation of ideas.[38] Like the Francophone novel by Arab writers, the Anglophone novel emerged with what Young refers to as a 'language anxiety' which accompanies the postcolonial writer in her literary journey.[39] For some writers of the Middle East, the coloniser's language became a fundamental tool for creativity, and despite their awareness of its imperialist past, it was regarded as a point of departure. Unlike Djebar, Faqir's blogs reflect her ability in Arabic language construction as she has written

[36] Fadia Faqir, 'As soon as the fresh air touched my hair I began to cry' *The Guardian* (2007) < https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/oct/22/religion.familyandrelationships> [accessed 3 March 2019].

[37] Naguib Mahfouz, as an example, was among the first writers who had his books confiscated in Egypt, and was only able to publish them years later in Lebanon. Mahfouz was not only halted by censorship, his writings exposed him to a serious attack that required long medical treatment, and has sadly affected his writing process and production of his works. See: Raymond Stock, 'Naguib Mahfouz and the Nobel Prize: A Blessing or a Curse?' Middle East Forum, (2018) < https://www.meforum.org/7644/naguib-mahfouz-andthe-nobel-prize-a-blessing-or> [accessed 4 February 2019]. In 2000, in Egypt, a reprinting of the 7th edition of the novel of the Syrian writer Haydar Haydar caused a furore initiated by students who took to the streets in demonstrations demanding authorities to ban the book. This necessitated police investigation, and journal articles made it the subject of the hour, although the novel appeared in 1983 but the fracas took place after the publication of its 7th edition. Banquet for Seaweed, was highly praised by academics and scholars for its thematic discussion of the wars in Iraq and Algeria and its advanced reflections on gender roles in these two countries. Sabry Hafez in his most acclaimed article 'The Novel, Politics and Islam' writes: 'Banquet for Seaweed, on the other hand, is a political novel about communism and nationalism, the Iraqi and Algerian revolutions-themes which, two decades after its publication, in a context so reactionary that even the memory of these great movements has largely disappeared, were all but completely displaced by a grotesque fixation with an exclamatory aside of no structural significance for the work, as if religion is now the only issue left in the Arab world.' This however, did not stop Haydar from writing and publishing more novels with taboo subjects. See: Sabry Hafez, 'the Novel, Politics and Islam' *New left Review*, 5 (2000) < https://newleftreview.org/II/5/sabry-hafez-the-novel-politics-and-islam> [accessed 4 February 2019].

[38] Faqir, 'Lost in Translation', p. 2.

[39] Young, 'English literature' in *Adventuring in the Englishes*, p.13.

on that space various blog posts demonstrating Fusha Arabic mastery.[40] But for fiction, Faqir turns to English. We might say she voluntarily 'foreignises' her tongue and, according to some critics, estranges Arab readers.[41]

Faqir has herself written extensively on the subject of language for the Arab writer. She states: "many Arabs living in the West have decided […] to create an 'Arab book' in the language of the other. The reasons behind this decision vary'.[42] When asked, 'Why do you write in English?', Faqir responded that the English language is the language of her PhD in creative writing from East Anglia University, and thus it seems logical to her to use it for fiction. [43] However, in some of her writings, she reflects on the topic in a more elaborate and a complex manner and links it firmly to the subject of freedom of expression achieved in artistic productions in English.[44]

This is understandable, for, intellectuals of the Arab world have always been robbed of their right to speak freely. In Peace and its Discontents, Edward Said argues that literary contributions from the Arab world, until the early 1990s, lacked recognition when compared to other global literary productions due to censorship. He states: 'Our best writers, intellectuals, and artists are either silenced and tamed or imprisoned and in exile'.[45] Opinions that deviate from the established discourse are rarely tolerated in Arab nations.

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[40] See for example her blog post written in Arabic on the Jordanian capital Oman and its social class hierarchy in: Fadia Faqir, 'Oman Omanan: gharbiya wa charkiyah' [Oman two Omans: Western and eastern] *Almeisan* (April 2014) < https://almeisan.fadiafaqir.com/2014/04/> [accessed 6 September 2020]. See also: Fadia Faqir, 'adad al a'mal sathiya alati toncharo fi al 'alam al 'arabi mofiji' [the number of the superficial works that are published in the Arab world is terrifying] *Almeisan* (October 2016) < https://almeisan.fadiafaqir.com/2016/10/> [accessed 6 September 2020].

[41] Nader, Rantissi, Faqir: 'Nohawil tahsin al sora al namatiya li al insan al arabi…wa nai'sho ala', *Al Ghade*.

[42] Faqir, 'Lost in Translation', p. 168.

[43] Rantissi, 'Faqir', p.1.

[44] Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, p. 61.

[45] Edward Said, *Peace and its Discontents: essays on Palestine in the Middle East Peace Process* (New York:
Vintage Books 1996), p. xxvi.

Though Said was writing decades ago, freedom of expression does not seem to have gained any ground in the region. The tragic murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, is a case in point. [46]

Perhaps what renders freedom of expression increasingly unattainable in the region, is the equally increasing efforts to obtain it, particularly through the arts. Faqir points out that literature from the Arab world, whether composed in Arabic or in a different language, now more than before reflects the struggles and the miseries of the Arab people. She states: 'Our troubled histories, difficult lives, the way we get brutalized, the serious issues which burden us, are now being reflected in literature'.[47] She further stresses the role Arab Anglophone literature has had on changing common perceptions maintained about Arab culture, as she does in *My Name is Salma*. An Anglophone novel by an Arab woman writer seeks to make space in this major language, attracting major readership for an Arab text that resists hegemonic discourses. As English is currently the major producer of knowledge, deploying it by an Arab writer through fiction is beneficial for providing an alternative impression on this part of the world.

Existing scholarly analysis of *My Name is Salma* recognises Faqir's originality and her critical role in offering a new insight on Arab women's identity construction under differing intersectional structures. Moore, for example, notes that the novel employs humor, seen through Salma's descriptive account of her diverse experiences in Britain, as one way for capturing the untranslatability of two different cultures.[48] Humor is employed to capture Salma's, continues Moore, 'expressions of sorrow, pain and fear and a stern

[46] Saudi Writer and journalist Jamal Khashoggi has been declared missing since October 2, 2018, before the Saudi consulate in Turkey admits his was killed there. Khashoggi's blog writings and articles cost him his life, his critical and opposing opinions conflicted with Saudi authorities, which eventually mercilessly ended his life. For more information see: BBC News, 'Jamal Khashoggi: Saudi journalist in his own words' (22 October 2018) < https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45900684> [accessed 30 October 2018

[47] Moor, 'You arrive', p. 9.

[48] See: Lindsey Moore, 'Space, Embodiment, Identity and resistance in the Novels of Fadia Faqir' in *The Edinburgh Companion*, pp. 246-268, (p. 260).

reminder that she must express herself in the "proper" manner'.[49] Salma's self-expression in English is indeed an experience of loss and ambivalence. In this diasporic novel, the heroine is subjected to multiple intersecting forces that work together to marginalise her, and to rob her of her right of selfconstruction. Salma has received minimal education in her village, and a very basic one during her trip to Exeter. Once there, she struggles to fit into an environment where education is paramount, and where, she notices that 'everyone knew everything about anything', this state of illiteracy inflicts further damage on her psychology, and while her ordeal is a consequence of betrayal, the threat of murder, the loss of a child, an arduous asylum process and racism, these are all aggravated by her lack of education (195). From the early pages of the novel, Faqir places education, or the lack of it, alongside other factors which act as an obstacle to her self-construction. Faqir does not propose that literacy is the ultimate saviour that will grant Salma peace and a better life: Salma's story does not end with a happy ending, with or without education. However, what Faqir fascinatingly stresses, is that women's agency occurs with the acquisition of education, and she highlights this in the novel at the stage where Salma enters the university, and her first assignment is to write an essay on 'Shakespeare's sister'. Woolf's classic A Room of One's Own is brought forward at a later stage in the novel to signal a shift in Salma's persona.

Woolf's masterpiece constitutes a breakthrough in feminist writing and in the world. It is s a timeless, urgent call for women to learn and to write, for these are the bases upon which women can engage in re-evaluating their subjectivity.[50] This direct reference to Woolf in the novel happens at an integral phase in Salma's life. This occurs when she finds a second job that grants her a better financial situation, further illustrating the influence of Woolf's work on Faqir by stressing the importance of financial stability for women's

[49] Ibid., pp. 260-261.
[50] See: Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. by Morag Shiach, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

writing. After returning with an exhausted body and soul from her both day and evening jobs, Salma starts reading for her essay, she first learns that Woolf's thesis revolves around the need of 'having a room of one's own and enough money to be able to work' (210). Woolf's assertion of this argument is highlighted from the first paragraphs of her work, where she stresses that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'.[51] The entire plot revolving around Salma's production of her school essay is organised to emphasis the vitality of a space and a decent economic condition for women's intellectuality. Salma struggles to accomplish both of these conditions, the two low paying jobs robs her of any physical strength by the end of each day to be able to focus on her studies, and her drunken landlady makes constant loud noises which deprive Salma of the silence and serene environment required for construction and creativity. This also occurs at a time when Salma's English undergoes a significant improvement. Although not adequate to enable her to write with the fluency of the academic books she reads, her language qualifies her to engage with broad issues. This minimal English language acquisition is of striking importance for Salma. When writing the essay, she concludes that Arabic and English literatures have both historically ignored the presence of women, and were both the monopoly of men. She refers to two great figures when drawing attention to this similarity, Shakespeare and Abu Zaid El Hilali. She contemplates:

> Why was I asked to write about Shakespeare's sister not Shakespeare although so much has been said and written about him? He must have had friends and women to help him. Nobody talks about the women. I remembered the stories of Abu-Zaid El-Hilali, the hero whose adventures were memorized by both the young and the old. Nobody ever mentions his wife, daughter or mother. (220-212) (Italised in original)

[51] Ibid., p.4.

This is a significant point in Salma's life, indicating her transformation from the moment she set foot in Exeter to the time when she joins university. Her persona has developed in a manner that allows her to pose questions about gender issues throughout history and, most importantly, to locate herself within these issues. Education has enabled Salma to shift positions. Although she remains marginalised, she moves a fraction closer to the centre of English society when she concludes her essay by writing about her own experiences as an alienated individual in both her old and new societies. In this way Faqir includes Salma's voice within a bigger, transcultural narrative and adds her story to a long list of marginalised women in the patriarchal histories of both the Middle East and the West. Further, the choice of English for Salma's education is a successful attempt to allow the subaltern the right of self-representation. By having direct access to a major language, she can guarantee the conservation of the quality of her voice and all its messages, without the danger of fading away.

With the acquisition of knowledge, Salma begins to assert herself as a woman in Exeter. Not only is she aware that others treat her as an alien, but she also comes to the realization of her own self-alienation, and she no longer accepts this as the status quo. The act of writing at this stage in her life allows her a space where she can affiliate with other 'women who were ignored in these tales' (221). Writing is a space where she admits her own self-alienation in the new society. She states 'They, and I, think I don't live here, but I do' (221). This grasping of her status, realised in the private of her own room, is a turning point in Salma's life. Although her misery is not terminated and the fate she set out to escape is eventually met, yet writing is a temporary shelter for her peace of mind. Above all, it allows her to communicate with the other (for this assignment will be submitted to her white male university tutor), breaking the stigma of the subaltern's inability to speak. Like Djebar, Faqir forces the major language to contain and to acknowledge the voice and the presence of the subaltern.

Faqir's text, with its hybrid language and heroine's hybrid character, shows that identity is not bounded; she invites the reader to think of the unbounded identity as an identity in its own right. Like Djebar, Faqir regards English as a component of her identity and a reality that is not in competition with Arabic. Both are available whenever one is needed. She explains:

> One day I wake up craving Arab coffee and jokes, and wanting to wrap myself in the beauty of Arabic language. Other mornings my English education kicks in, and I crave English books, the English language and maybe even an afternoon tea.[52]

However successful Faqir has been in introducing new themes in Anglophone Arab novel, and in contributing to the dissemination of such a minor literature to global readers, she worries that her fiction might be reduced to a mere documentary work about the Arab culture. In fact, this is an issue that has revolved around literature from Arab world, be it in a foreign language or translated from Arabic, and which will be discussed in the following section. Faqir admits that her position as an Arab feminist writer in the West is as complex as it would be in the Arab world. She is well aware that fictional characterisations of Middle Eastern societies, with all their negative and positive aspects, might be taken at face value. Finding herself in a delicate situation, she acknowledges that her fictional words might have consequences in reality. She asks, 'How do you criticize the Arab and Muslim world, without your words being used by Orientalists to justify dropping bombs on Baghdad, or continuing the war in Palestine?'[53] In response, she chooses to speak in parallel terms about the faults of 'the new country and the country of origin', as has been illustrated in Chapter 3.[54]

[52] Chambers Claire, *Muslim British Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 60.
[53] Ibid., pp.58-59.
[54] Ibid., p. 59.

Writing in French and English for Djebar and Faqir was not motivated by the desire to secure a great readership, although writing for a larger readership and gaining global reputation should not be discounted. Nor was it used to tarnish Arab culture. Rather, fiction in French and English has been used by these authors as a space where fusion, tolerance and conversation are possible. They bring to Francophone and Anglophone literature their unique linguistic experiences and their unique perspectives as subjects, artists, women and citizens. The language of these writers should not be regarded as a scale upon which their patriotism is measured, but an instrument that enables the materiality of their creative genius.

The public's misconception about Francophone and Anglophone women writers turn out to be the same issues faced by Arabophone women writers whose works are translated into European languages. In the latter case, misinterpretation and mythification results from specific methods of translation aimed to present the writer and her text to the new reader within a particular cultural narrative. Naturally, the audience's perception of the writer's agenda is affected creating a reaction of mistrust, as is strikingly clear in the cases of Nawal El Saadawi and Rajaa Alsanea.

Women writers or double agents: the politics of translating and marketing Arab women's writings

'Well, you see, Arabic is a controversial language', Edward Said was told by an American publisher.[55] The unidentified publisher was putting together a series of Third World writers to have their works translated and marketed in America and sought Said's recommendation. Among the names Said included in his proposed list was that of the Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz. Mahfouz, however, did not appear in the series, which was

[55] Edward Said, *The Politics of Dispossession: the struggles for Palestinian self-determination, 1969-1994* (New York: Pantheon Books 1994), p. 372.

published in 1981. Seven years later, Naguib Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. Since then his works have been translated worldwide, recently reaching the 100th language. Today, Mahfouz stands as the most translated Arab writer in history. Yet his case is an exception to the rule. As Said asserts:

> Of all the major world literature, Arabic remains relatively unknown and unread in the West for reasons that are unique, even remarkable, at a time when tastes here for the non-European are more developed than ever before and, even more compelling, contemporary Arabic literature is at a particular interesting juncture.[56]

It has been estimated that only 460 Arabic works were translated into different languages between 1947 and 2003—indeed a small drop in a large ocean.[57]

The Mahfouz case has had a role in bringing Arabic literature out of its hibernation. The prestige of the Nobel Prize has stimulated the translation of Arabic writers and has increased interest in the literature from the region. Yet, this increase in translation and marketing has raised questions about the selection criteria employed by publishers. While men were at the forefront of translated Arabic writers, attention has shifted to their female counterparts, for it has been argued that the writings of Arab women feed into the popular needs of the Western reader. Peter Clark, a prominent critic and translator who has worked extensively on Arabic literature, reflects on his own experience with an editor who refused to publish a translation of the Syrian Abd El Salam Al Ujaili's work, despite the fact that he is a leading figure in the contemporary Arabic short story. According to the publisher, translating Al Ujaili is a misguided idea, because 'he's male, he's old and he writes short stories. Can you find a young female novelist?' Clark was instructed.[58] The publisher's

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[56] Ibid., p. 372.

[57] Mustapha Ettobi, 'Aspects et Enjeux De La Représentation Culturelle dans La Traduction Du Roman Arabe Postcolonila En Francais et En Anglais' (unpublished doctoral thesis, McGill University, 2010), p. 31.

[58] Peter Clark, *Arabic Literature Unveiled: Challenges of Translation* (University of Durham: Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 2000), p. 3.

wish came true. Arab women writers were found, and translated: in fact, they have become more translated than their male counterparts and their writings now 'sell more!'[59]

During the 1990s, translation and publication of Arab women writers reached an unprecedented success, and even more works have appeared after 9/11. As the perturbed political situation between the West and the Middle East made its way to literature, and boosted the number of translations, Arab women's works were used as part of an attempt to seek truth on the region.[60] In recent years, critics and scholars in the field have been examining this sudden interest, and particular focus has been placed on El Saadawi.[61] She is the most translated woman writer from the region and her works have been introduced to the global market and are successful in claiming global readership. [62]

Yet, this success has not gone unquestioned. Much controversy surrounded the canonization of El Saadawi.[63] Critics argue that she was marketed to Western audiences through a narrative that presented her as the lone female in the Middle East speaking up for the cause of women. This was in spite of the fact that other prominent women writers had long ago initiated the discussion of women's status in the region, as has been shown in Chapter 1.[64] This is not to undermine El Saadawi's contribution: indeed, she has revolutionised gender discourse in the Arab societies. Yet, it is pertinent to ponder the

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[59] Moore, 'You arrive', p. 2.

[60] Sherif H Ismail, 'Arabic Literature into English' The (Im)possibility of Understanding' *Interventions:*
International Journal of Postcolonial Studies 17. 6 (2015) (p,916) < https://www-tandfonlinecom.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/doi/pdf/10.1080/1369801X.2014.994546?needAccess=true> [accessed April 12, 2018]

[61] Amal Amireh, 'Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World, *Signs*, 26. 1. (2000), (p. 1)< https://www.jstor.org/stable/3175385?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents> [accessed 07 August 2019]. See also: Valsupolous, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers*, p. 31.

[62] Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, States, and Society in Modern Egypt* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), p, 279.

[63] Therese Saliba and Jeanne Kattan, 'Palestinian Women and the Politics of Reception' in *Going Global,* p. 93.

[64] Sabri Hafez, 'Intention and realization in the narratives of Nawal eL Saadawi', *Third World Quarterly*, 11. 3 (1989).

factors that allowed El Saadawi's books to reach the hands of Western lay and academic readers alike.

During the 1990s, El Saadawi established herself as an international figure and an icon of Arab feminism. A decade later, Rajaa Alsanea seemed to be walking in the footsteps of her predecessor, and what is remarkable about Alsanea is the speed with which her novel reached global shelves. Unlike generations of authors in the past, whose books in their original language were separated by at least a decade from their translations into other languages, Alsanea's novel was translated into 40 languages in only over a two-year period. As I have established in the preceding chapters, the writing of Arab women writers carries heavily transgressive notions, which, in turn, trigger interest in translations and broader dissemination to larger audience. Some novels after having undergone translation, established their writers as internationally acknowledged figures. It is crucial to ask, how are these writings translated so that they achieve such bestseller status? The translations of these two writers, El Saadawi and Alsanea, illuminate the politics of this practice.

Lawrence Venuti argues that there has been a tendency among editors and translators to revise translated texts, at minimum and maximum levels, to increase appeal to the intended audience.[65] This practice, explains Venuti, represses the literary genius of the writer, tames the narrative and at times diminishes the aesthetics of the text.[66] What is more problematic with translation, however, goes beyond linguistic transformation: a work's cultural components are re-negotiated to render the text familiar to the targeted reader. The work is shaped by a particular social and cultural identity which excludes the cultural values and the uniqueness of the foreign text. Instead, it tends to reinforce familiar Western ideologies. Such a performance of translation, which to Venuti is a 'source of scandal', emanates certain power in 'the formation of cultural identities'.[67] By selecting

[65] Lawrence Venuti, *The scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (London: Routledge 1998).
[66] Ibid., pp. 4-5.
[67] Ibid., p. 67.

specific texts for translation, especially to English as Venuti shows, the texts undergo a second authorship in which the themes, values, structure of the text, are refined to conform to the agendas of the target audience, constructing thus the identity of the subject.

El Saadawi is among those most affected by censorship of Arab publishing houses and equally affected by policies and interests of Western ones. El Saadawi's writings are the first of their kind to tackle matters deemed publicly undiscussable. Both her fiction and non-fictional writings touch upon serious topics that are challenging to the conservative nature of the Arab region. Transgression is then a decisive factor that urged the translation of her works, which has had a strong impact on their reception. The passage of her texts from one language to another necessitated an adjustment, a tailoring that appeals to the new reader. *The Hidden Face of Eve* has undergone visible alterations in translation for the Western market. The Arabic title of this work, used in Chapter 2, is *Al Wajeh Al Ari lil Al Maraa Al Arabiya* which translates literally to English as the naked face of the Arab woman. The translated title has been the subject of much discussion regarding the potential *faux pas* of translation. The Arabic title moves beyond the hegemonic imagination of Arab women's faces and their association with discretion and veiling: in fact, the Arabic title shatters the longstanding image of the Arab woman wrapped in black veils. It focuses instead on baring the face and revealing it. The Arabic word 'عاري' 'Ari' used in the original version which translates as 'naked' in English has a strong resonance for the Arab reader and its usage is to a inflict a sort of shock and effect a certain confrontation between the reader and the book, triggering the imagination and assailing the sensitivity. The English version, however, reproduces the exact idea that the original title aimed to unsettle: it recites a stagnant discourse of a covered Arab woman, renders her mysterious and exotic, triggering an imagination of a very different kind. The title becomes the first site from which the readers' imagination is oriented and orientalised. It is only the first instance of many in which the content is domesticated to guarantee smooth and easy passage from the source culture to the target one.

The text has also witnessed a reduction and an omission of chapters, particularly those that celebrate the achievement of Arab women and the improvement of their status over time. In these chapters, such as 'Woman's work at home' and Arab Woman and Socialism', El Saadawi praises Arab women's awareness of feminism which she says, it predates that of Western women. Such passages are omitted. In these parts also, El Saadawi voices her opposition of different policies introduced in Egypt at the time.[68] These passages too, never made it to the translated version. Conversely, topics that were given only small passages in the original version have been fleshed out and turned into whole chapters. These include 'The Grandfather with Bad Manners' and 'Circumcision of Girls'. Re-arrangements and new organisations of chapters were also made to highlight one issue over another. The account of Arab women's history with which El Saadawi starts the book, and which is important to understanding patriarchy and women's oppression in Arab countries, was placed at the end of the book, while the parts that address sexuality were advanced to the early parts of the book, in the translated version. The result is to cut off the text from its context. This readjustment is said to be "suitable for a Western audience less interested in history than in satisfying an insatiable appetite for an exotic and oppressed 'other'".[69] These major changes have indeed reshaped the text completely. In its new face, it meets the expectation of the audience and it reinforces prevailing orientalist perceptions of the Orient.

All of these amendments were examined exhaustively and brought to attention by Amel Amireh in her much-quoted article, 'Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World' and their appearance here is an intentional reiteration aimed to

[68] Her outspoken opposition of the Camp David Agreement, which at the time transgressed laws that regulate freedom of speech, is among the passages cut out in translation. For more information on the laws banning Intellectuals from criticising politics in Egypt during the Sadat's reign see: Edward Cody, 'Sadat Presses Bill to Punish Dissent' *The Washington Post* (1980) https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/02/21/sadat-presses-bill-to-punish-dissent/9595ded2-b59c-4780-92e1-544322019878/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.31c3764709d1 [accessed 18 October 2018]

[69] Amal Amireh, 'Framing Nawal EL Saadawi', p. 226

show that even the process of translation perpetuates the notion of transgression. The success of the book with non-Arab readers increases its discreditable status with the Arab reader because the assumption is that if it is compliant with the Western culture, it is transgressive of the Middle Eastern one. Today, although El Saadawi's name resonates strongly within the orient and the occident, persistent mistranslations have caused colleagues, scholars and critics to question the nature of this international recognition.[70]

A decade later, history seems to have repeated itself. Alsanea's Girls of Riyadh has undergone a similar fate, and translation was made to cater to the demands of the Western reader, as has been revealed by the first translator of the text, Marilyn Booth.[71] In the prologue to the translated version of her novel, Alsanea writes the following:

> It seemed to me, and to many other Saudis, that the Western world still perceives us either romantically, as the land of the Arabian Nights and the land where bearded sheikhs sit in their tents surrounded by their beautiful harem women, or politically, as the land that gave birth to Bin Laden and other terrorists, the land where women are dressed in black from head to toe and where every house has its own well in the backyard! Therefore, I knew it would be very hard, maybe impossible, to change this cliché.[72]

Indeed, the novel is an attempt at subverting ingrained images on Saudi life as much as it is an attempt at engaging in a dialogue with Alsanea's own society. The novel is written in a style that Booth praised for its mastered use of puns, a technique that was used by poets in

[70] In her interview with Amal Amireh, Ahdaf Soueif noted that: 'El saadawi writes scientific research which is good. But she writes bad novels and it is unfair that the West thinks that what she writes represents Arab women's creative writing. See: Amireh, 'Arab Women Writers' Problems and Prospects'.
[71] Marilyn Booth, ' "The Muslim Woman" As celebrity Author and the Politics of Translating Arabic: Girls of Riyadh Go on the Road' *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 6. 3 (2010), 149-182.
[72] ALsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, p. vii.

medieval Arabic literature, and that the English version of the book seeks to convey.[73] The edgy language that dominates the text displays the bold and daring voice of the author and narrates engaging tales of twenty first century humans, as discussed previously. The fracas it generated, and the bestselling status it reached, attracted big international publishing houses to commission translations.

The published English translation of the text presented it in a form of just another example of chick lit text, instead of 'Saudi' chick lit, as it clearly is in the original Arabic. In translation much of the original's edgy language, puns and satiric tone were diluted. The narrator's voice, who recounts the stories of four Saudi girls, is neutralized, flattened and rendered less powerful and provocative. The translator opted for a safer voice, one that merely recounts rather than reveals, for the power of this narrator lies at the act of speaking, voicing out the unspoken and divulging the private matters of the four girls. In the English translation, her narration sounds conservative, almost submissive. This is most apparent in the following excerpt:

بعد السوق و كمية مناسبة من المغازلات البريئة و غير البريئة اتجهت الفتيات نحو أحد المطاعم الراقية لتناول العشاء[74]

The translated version reads as:

'The girls made their way toward the elegant Italian restaurant they had picked out for dinner' (25).

Here, much of the narrator's sassy language has disappeared: the literal translation of the above excerpt includes a description of the girls' 'flirtations that are innocent and not so innocent'. Such passages which are reflective of the narrator's teasing language throughout the text, are cut out. It has been shown in Chapter 3 that the narrator speaks out against the social issues in an unapologetic and fearless manner, attempting to promote the spirit of

[73] Marilyn Booth, 'Translator Vs Author (2007) Girls of Riyadh go to New York' *Translation Studies*, 1. 2 (2008), p. 2.
[74] Alsanea, *Banat Al Riyadh*, p. 25.

revolt amongst her email readers, yet the domesticating strategy of translation changes this voice and presents her as a millennial complaining passively. This is indeed the damage of translation, the reconstructing of identity that Venuti speaks about.

In light of the prevailing images of Arab women in general and Saudi women in particular in the Western media, the translation falls short of its goal of offering a different perspective on gender. Reviews of the book confirm that the novel accomplished the mission of 'accurately' representing the Saudi society, a representation that is already embedded in the imagination of the Western reader. Fatema Ahmed, writing in The Guardian, comments: 'Alsanea takes us on a wide-ranging tour of regional and class stereotypes in the kingdom: Jeddah is much more liberal than Riyadh; Bedouins are usually chauvinists; openly liberal men are sexually puritanical in private'.[75] Another comment by the same newspaper states that: 'Girls of Riyadh is much more a love letter to America than a poison pen to the Saudi establishment.'[76] The misleading translated version seems to steer its readers towards a heavily ideological reception.

In one major cut, the translated text was voided of its sophisticated gendered discussion. This is a passage that laments the situation of politics and gender in the region in recent years. In the Arabic version, Alsanea writes of an acclaimed feminist poet in the Arab world. Through his story, she critically voices her opinion of social constructions that rule the life of women and mourns the political situation of the Middle East that claimed the life of innocent people. Nizar Qabbani, referred to in the region as the women's poet, is known for his protest against all restrictions imposed on women. Alsanea praises his commitment to the cause of feminism and refers to two incidents that affected his life and were the motives behind his writings: the suicide of his sister and the murder of his wife.

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[75] Fatema Ahmed, 'velvet Lives', *The Guardian* (2007). <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jul/14/featuresreviews.guardianreview20> [accessed 9 April 2018].

[76] Rachel Aspden, 'Sex and the Saudis', *The Guardian* (2007). https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jul/22/fiction.features [accessed 9April 2018].

The former was due to oppressive traditions that denied her marriage with the man she loved, the latter caused by the bombing of the Iraqi embassy in Lebanon in 1981. The Arabic version criticises the social constructions of love in the region that deny women their right to choose their life partner, and also inserts a political discussion into the novel by referring to the violence inflicted on people during and in the aftermath of wars. To entirely remove this passage in translation robs the novel of its significant political and gendered dimensions.

A further damaging cut is perpetuated to change from the construction of the narrator, a performance of translation that seems to destroy her character instead of reconstructing it in English. Her seventh email in Arabic offers us an insight into the narrator's persona as we learn that her unconventional writing style is not a recent phenomenon, but a habit nurtured from her elementary education years. This comes in a response to her readers when they accuse her of imitating the writing styles of polemic writers. She defends her self and explains that:

> أنا اكتب بهذا الأسلوب المصرقع ...منذ صغري، و لدي ما يثبت ان صرقعتي قديمة [...] دفاتر مادة التعبير المليئة بخنبقاتي عبر السنين. كان اكثر ما يغيظني المدرسات اللواتي لا تستهويهن تعليقاتي و كتاباتي المرجوجة.(24)

This excerpt approximately translated as follows, is not present in the English version of the novel:

> (I write using this maverick style…since my childhood, and I have the proof that testifies of this ancient maverickness…My notebooks from creative writing course are full of years-long exposés. What most irritated me was my female teachers who were not keen on my commentaries and my jolting writings.)

The words highlighted in bold in the original version are Saudi slang invented by the new generation and are not found in Arabic dictionaries, but could have these meanings:

'المصرقع' al-mosarqua' for example, refers to someone with an independent mind who acts as he or she wishes, caring less for what people have to say;

' خنبقات'khanbaquat is used to define the quality of speech that tends to be too revealing ,or a speech that digresses from conventional discourses.

المرجوجة'al-marjouja is used to describe sudden, shocking behaviour.[77]

Although these very youth-specific Saudi terms might have acted as an obstacle against their exact transportation into English, this does not justify their total suppression. A competent translator would easily find alternative expressions that further celebrate the boldness of the narrator, preserve her character and defend her attitude as the original text does. When asked about the equivalent vocabulary that smooths the Arabic English translation of any work, Humphrey Davies, a pioneering literary translator who has translated Arabic classics into English, notes that what should be prioritised is 'the function of the phrase, the metaphor [or] the proverb. […] [If] you carry over that function by using something which may be formally quite different, but which has exactly the same impact in English' then the goal of the translator has been achieved.[78] The translator of Banat, downplayed, undervalued this narrative simply so that, as Luise Von Flotow and Farzaned Farahzad, state; the 'conventions of English' are preserved, and the 'writer's work is made to conform to the expectation of academic English publishers and readers'.[79] The eradication of this passage is not only a moment of subduing the narrator's voice and eliminating the features that makes her narrative Saudi chick-lit, it is a moment of denying her a past, a history that has made her who she is. It is a clear act of negligence in which the narrator's self-explanatory comments are deemed trivial, superficial and hence,

[77] As these are new terms used by the younger Saudi generation with inaccessible formal definitions, I have relied on social media platforms to obtain their meanings.
[78] Humphrey Davies, 'Translating from Arabic: Humphrey Davies talks about the realities and challenges' *The American University in Cairo Press*, (2014) < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5nSYvglVAk> [accessed 08 September 2019].
[79] Luise Von Flotow and Farzaned Farahzad, *Translating Women: Different Voices and New Horizons*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), p. xiv.

erasable.

The issue with these additions and omissions is twofold: first the change of content renders the translated work as plain and simple, free of its sophistication. The Saudi chick lit with the particularities of Saudi Arabia, was swept away to gain access to the Western chick lit market. This is the instance of the 'betrayal' that Spivak points out, perpetuated by the politics of translation that reduces 'otherness' into English, squashing 'all the literature of the Third World . . . into a sort of with-it translatese, so that the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel if its prose, something by a man in Taiwan.'[80] Banat Al Riyadh, which was once, and could be termed again, Saudi shock/chick lit becomes just another chick-lit novel that only happens to be translated from Arabic. Second, such changes in translation are performed in order to consolidate particular ethnic images. When translation is enacted through a domesticating strategy, there is the danger of invoking what Venuti calls 'the violence that resides in the very purpose and activity of translation: the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs and representations that preexist it in the target language'.[81] Spivak's vital statement that the subaltern cannot speak exposes a same violence of representation that the translation perpetuates. When the patrons of translation refuse to hear what the original text is saying, the voice of the writer fades away. Moreover, the domestication strategy of translation helps in the consumption of the text. The texts usually selected for translation are those that guarantee a financial profit. This is the case of El Saadawi's and Alsanea's: their selection was based on particular themes which agree with common knowledge about the orient and use minimal literary stylistics and aesthetic effects. Since publishers are inclined to market works that have an economic value, translators have to meet the requirement of the

[80] Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation', p. 182.
[81] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p.18.

publisher and supply the reader with what is needed. What, then, is the role of the writer in this process?

Surprisingly, Nawal El Saadawi and Rajaa Alsanea have both played major roles in the translation of their works. Most of El Saadawi's writing, including The Hidden Face of Eve, were translated by her ex-husband Sherif Hatata. Thus, the major alterations performed on the text could not have escaped El Saadawi's attention, and her approval of the final translated version must have been sought and obtained for the translation to see light. Much could be said on the involvement of Alsanea in the translation of her work as well. *Girls of Riyadh* was initially translated by Booth, but upon its submission to Penguin, Booth was informed that revisions were to be made to her copy by the author. Because her translated version did not meet the approval of the writer and the publishing company, it required alterations.[82] All the alterations referred to above were in fact conducted by Alsanea, who apparently saw it better to opt for the domesticating strategy, the less reliable method, instead of Booth foreignising techniques of translation which force the new reader—should it have been followed— to see the Saudi society as it is verily, realistically.

It might seem, therefore, that packaging the text to the global reader necessitates adjusting it to the demands of the new reader, which raises questions about the writers' relationships to their literature. For, the crucial argument in this thesis has maintained that the selected authors transgress established presumptions about Arab women in order to challenge them. These presumptions include Western understandings of Arab femininity. Translated literature should maintain its authentic aim to destabilize the Western perception as much as it confronts the Arab reader. The transgressive text in a new language should perpetuate the same aim as the original, to shock readers and force them to widen the horizon of their expectations. Spivak writes:

[82] Booth, 'Translator Vs Author', p. 209.

> I think it is necessary for people in the third world translation trade now to accept that the wheel has come around, that the genuinely bilingual postcolonial now has a bit of an advantage. But she does not have a real advantage as a translator if she is not strictly bilingual, if she merely speaks her native language.[83]

Indeed, the postcolonial bilingual writer does have the advantage of being able to preserve her words, especially since, as Susan Bassnett argues, the 'hegemonic distinction' between writing and translation has been challenged since the Middle Ages, since both original writing and translation are means of mediation.[84] Bassnett makes a fascinating linkage between the performances of writing and translating and their leverage on the writer's voice. She sees that writers with the ability 'to speak in different voices' are likely to 'identify a distinctive voice of their own'.[85] The voice is the problematic element in the context of our two writer—though less so in El Saadawi's case and much more in Alsanea's. The English rewriting of their texts seems to send the message to the new reader that says: 'I am just like you'.

This message is perplexing since it has been shown throughout this thesis that these writers do not write to placate; they write to revolutionise. We do, however, know that patrons occupy positions of power which force the submission of these transgressive writers into the rigid rules of the translation market should they wish to attain international readership.[86] The situation of an Arab text in translation looks promising as recent projects of translating Arab women writers' works seem to be aware of the imperatives that have for long shaped the reception of Arab women novels by international readers. Chip Rossetti explains that publishers are aware of the damage to which translated text may be exposed,

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[83] Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation', p. 187.

[84] Susan Bassnett, 'Writing and Translating' in *The translator as Writer*, ed. by Susan Bassnett and Peter Bush (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 174.

[85] Ibid., p. 174.

[86] on the economic value of the translated text from Arabic se: Richard Van leeuwen, 'The Cultural Context of Translating Arabic Literature' in *Cultural encounters in Translation from Arabic* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2004), pp. 15-25.

and stresses that the practice is changing. Mainly because, he notes: 'there are too many good translators out there, and more genuine curiosity about this literature from US and European publishers these days'. He concludes that Arabic literature should be appreciated for its own merits.[87] This is the situation on the one hand. On the other hand, specialists in the field of Arab literature, whether in Arabic, translated or in foreign languages, are striving for their own part to generate a discussion of the right ways of reading Arab writers and particularly of teaching their works in Western universities, as argued in Introduction.

Especially at times like these, when the Arab world does not cease from making the news, and when its literature is undergoing an unprecedented surge in translation, fiction from this region should maintain its status as such and promote a cultural conversation.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that women writers of the Arab world who have transgressed linguistic boundaries and founded the tradition of the Arab women's fiction in a foreign tongue have been key actors in asserting the existence and the visibility of Arab women in culture and literature. French and English act as masks behind which writers disguise themselves to shape their transgressive narratives. However, the relationship with the colonial language allowed these writers to use it as a medium to restore the traditional marginalised and forgotten women's voices in major languages. If foreign language in the case of Djebar and Faqir is a winning strategy, it has been seen as more fraught and a source of major losses in the case of El Saadawi and Alsanea. The translation of their texts into English reflects the 'violence', the damage' and the 'abuse' that Venuti describes when a domesticating strategy is deemed a better approach to a text to guarantee its access to the Western market. The appearance of the text in its new form leaves behind it the

[87] Chip Rossetti, 'The Arabic Translation Boom' *Publisher Weekly*, 260. 4 (2013) (p, 14)< http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=823dcb53-

original meaning that carries its own agency, and seems to replicate what Spivak sees as the '(common) sense' of subjectivity—a turn to the common denominator that prevents the passage of the subject's specificity in the master discourse.[88] This discussion of translation has revealed that contours of the roles of writer and translator assumed by assumed El Saadawi and Alsanea are blurred, leaving us to ponder the question: Are these writers or double agents?

[88] Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation', p. 193.

Conclusion

> To write is to grasp this tiny, mini-mini microscopic chance to express yourself. It is to take the risk of communicating with someone who doesn't give a damn for what you think and doesn't want to listen to you…Writing (good writing, the sort that grabs you) is the act of a lost soul; the approach is that of someone fragile, who has no message, someone in search of herself, someone sure of nothing, expect that something isn't right and it hurts…writing is one of the most ancient forms of prayer. To write is to believe communication is impossible…True writing is never a recipe. It is always a quest!
>
> Fatima Mernissi, Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory[1]

Nawal El Saadawi, Assia Djebar, Fadia Faqir and Rajaa Alsanea employ thematic, aesthetic and linguistic transgressions to construct the female identity in their narratives. These narratives also mirror their writers' attempts to negotiate their identities as writers influenced by the unique cultural, historical, political and religious makeups of their societies, and specifically by gender roles which are rigidly prescribed and preserved. The fictional performance of transgressive acts by the protagonists in the stories, and the actual transgressions by the writers seen through the act of writing itself, show us how literature offers a space for female resistance and agency when reality limits and denies these. Writing, thus, is the terrain where women explicitly, poetically exercise their right of independent self-formation.

On the agenda of transgressive literature of Arab women writers is the socially constructed taboo, the female body, and this taboo is the main subject of interrogation and

[1] Fatima Mernissi, Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory (London and New Jersey: 1996), pp. 4-6.

deconstruction in their works. As the writers of my corpus perform a destabilisation of the notion of stable, conforming and fixed identities, this destabilisation can only be effectuated via a transcendence beyond confining boundaries and borders. Towards a gendered liberation, these writers pushed the limits of distorted discourses on women's sexuality, divided public and private spaces, bodies embedded with mythical norms and values, such as honour, and mute voices prohibited from articulation and self-expression. While each of the writers takes up varying degrees of challenge to these limits to portray the specific transgression in her text, they do all, nevertheless, prove that the taboo of the woman's body is a discursive one, void of any essential truth and merely socially established. The quest for identity, hence, can only be undertaken after a confrontation with the taboo and a movement beyond this limit.

The transgressive writing of our authors has responded to all forms of subjugation to which Arab women are exposed. The social sphere and the lived realities of women stimulate the creative mind and these women's writing is seen as a site of transformation where traditional roles, social creation of subjects and hypocritical norms controlling women are deconstructed. Instead, these works offer spaces where a new construction of women can be performed. The fiction of El Saadawi, Djebar, Faqir and Alsanea depicts the experiences of women living beyond social conventions. They do so by targeting the limit and effectuating the female transgression. The transgression is portrayed as an eruption of a woman who has been made silent, captive and inferior; the emergence of a self she has yearned to shape herself independently. Their transgressive writing sets forth an outbreak of ideas kept long repressed by a reality that does not allow deviations from the norm—especially when the deviating act is conducted by a woman. Hence, fiction is employed to unleash their unorthodox vison of womanhood while acting as a relatively protective shield from public condemnation.

Nawal El Saadawi's *Imra'ah inda noktat al sifr*, for example, destabilises the normative understanding of women's sexuality generally, and that of the female prostitute

specifically. Her dystopian portrayal of women's bodies as site of sexual and economic exploitation holds a variety of representative figures, such as the imam and family, as responsible for the creation and organisation of women's bodies and sexualities. The female body of her protagonist that has undergone violent cultural construction uses the same locus—the body itself—to resist and counteract that violence. El Saadawi's novel is a revolutionary work in Arab literature. When it appeared, the Arab literary milieu was only beginning to tolerate the presence of women within it—only to be disrupted and turned upside down by EL Saadawi's work, signaling the rise of unconventional Arab feminist writing.

Djebar's writings have been her means to evoke the memory of the past female experiences that have been marginalised by the colonial and patriarchal histories of her country. This retrospection, using the power of her words, leaves an indelible mark, as though the present seeks an acknowledgment of the historical women's roles and a correction of the distortion to which their stories were exposed. Indeed, Djebar's literature has played many roles including those of mediation and arbitration between the present and the past. Discussion of *Ombre* has shown how her writing is provoked by restrictions ruling the lives of women in postcolonial Algeria. She has made of transgression an art that is practiced by extracting and highlighting its ingenuity from Algerian women's reality while simultaneously imagining its possible transformation. Such an imagination is evoked through making a radical deconstruction of the Algerian social order, disrupting its sacred spatial division into masculine/ public, feminine/ private.

Without exaggeration, one could say that Djebar's fictive construction of womanhood is surely apt for social and political transformation, as it provides a concrete visualisation of Algerian gender cohabitation. This is specifically because Algerian society is not new to harmonious gender relations. The war of independence has proven that equality and equity can exist between Algerian men and women. Djebar's fiction thus envisages the reproduction of a type of gender discourse that once upon a time

characterised her society. Her writing challenges the deliberately conducted postcolonial patriarchal intention to monopolise power. Her works stand against the traditions, the laws and the culture that disempower women using various pretexts. She debunks these ruses by revitalizing history, and by relying on Islamic principles.[2] It comes as no surprise that such an intentional use of fiction resulted in her marginalisation from the Algerian intellectual sphere. She was only credited with recognition after her death.

The Arab women's transgressive novel has also taken up a correctionist approach to rectify modern disfigurations of the Arab Muslim image that emerged at the turn of the new millennium. Faqir's *My Name is Salma* has been seen as engaging this issue by replicating orientalist tropes for representing the Arab Muslim woman. However, the originality of the work lies in the employment of this discourse for the counteraction of negative images perpetuated on Arab women. Orientalism in Faqir's narrative is a parody that mocks the Arab World for its mistreatment of women, and mocks the West for its inflexible imagination of the Arab women.

Published four years before the Syrian refugee experience that started at the onset of the Syrian civil war of 2011, *My Name is Salma* masterfully predicted the plight of the displaced Levantine woman seeking refuge in a society shutting down on itself. Faqir's narrative has led us to see the double efforts in which Arab women must invest in order to escape patriarchal and political subjugation, the perils of transgressing boundaries and borders and the struggle to form a self against dual social constructions. Exactly at times when mass human mobility is seen as a crisis, geographical and social borders are constructed and their protection from infringement is carefully scrutinised and controlled, Faqir's fiction transgresses political and social barriers carving a space for the displaced to form a self and be part of a community through the shared location of subalternity.

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[2] Clarisse Zimra, 'When the Past Answers our Present: Assia Djebar Talks about Loin de Médine', *Callaloo*, 16. 1 (1993), 116-131 < https://www.jstor.org/stable/2931821?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents> [accessed 29 August 2019].

Marginality in the narrative has been made a tactical central point from which the writer disturbs Middle Eastern/Western principles that aim to render the human living experience normative, perpetuated only to meet standard Arab and Western expectations.

Confrontational in its style, Rajaa Alsanea's novel has been shown to reflect the new experimentation of the Arab woman writer. The young Saudi writer has appropriated the genre of chick lit and utilized it for multiple purposes. What seems on the surface to be a work that has been academically marginalized for embodying themes against feminist credentials, in fact presents a robust feminist commitment and reflects a profound awareness of gender issues present in the Saudi society. While this genre is frequently seen as devoid of seriousness, what appears to be a mere superficial discussion in Alsanea's text carries beneath sophisticated social critique hidden behind pop culture techniques for depicting women's lives. Alsanea's adoption of this literary style establishes her in the Arab literary arena as a woman writer from the youngest generation who deploys new modes of fiction writing to engage with and reflect on the specific Saudi women's experience lived in the era of globalization.

Alsanea has successfully juxtaposed the use of humour and satire to expose the hypocrisy dominant in her country that targeted women and made of them subject of deceitful control. The subversive satiric techniques are employed to speak out scathingly about outdated social practices established by predecessors and continuing to govern the lives of millennials. The generational clash is portrayed not only to capture the ambivalence sensed by the younger generation of the Saudi kingdom, but also it is seen as an open, an honest dialogue with elders severely traditionalist, patriarchal imposing a listening of what the youth has to say. Above all, the appropriated chick lit fiction is a symbol of the Saudi woman's deconstruction of the long held voiceless subaltern image. Indeed, if this myth limits the identification of Saudi women, it is the endorsement of this genre of fiction that helps the writer to counteract false beliefs and confront her society.

Arab women's subversive use of literature has been carried out in different languages, further complicating the use of feminist literature to establish agency. French and English have been pivotal for Djebar and Faqir, for they allowed them access to uncensored articulation that liberates their unorthodox ideas from the Arab social conventions which sees in a woman's public speaking of matters regarded with much silence and privacy, a shame. The adopted language was especially rendered a tool of demarginalisation. Not only was this appropriated language of the master a means for challenging stereotypes, but also a means for imposing recognition. Djebar and Faqir produced Francophone and Anglophone literature that preserves the subaltern woman and her own specific language. On the other hand, the task of Arabophone women writers such as El Saadawi and Alsanea has been much more turbulent since their transgressive writing is carried out in Arabic, and hence it is more accessible to the great majority of readers in this territory. Their curse is double, writers in conservative societies and writers of radical ideas. These two characteristic, particularly the former, renders them worthy of broader readership and as such its translation is direly commissioned, causing further complications surrounding their subjecthood with many questions regarding the kind of writing, its purpose and the identity of its producer.

It is with this enquiry in mind that this research has set out deliberately to situate Arab women writers between transgression and identity. Transgressive writing signals the moment our writers erupt from a personhood in which they were enclosed to embark on a trajectory that enables the construction of an individuality by means of nonconforming words and thoughts. But transgression is a generative action: its occurrence crafts other limits. The writings of El Saadawi, Djebar, Faqir and Alsanea capture this spiral performance that subjects the female, writer and character, to more limits, traversable, time and again in myriad ways of resistance. They are in constant pursuit of an unachieved self. The world of fiction has been to them a tumultuous space crowded by words, sounds, languages and identities, all waiting to escape the confines of silence.

These figures, each in her society, and all collectively and globally by breaking into the literary arena, made of transgression the only sacred tradition by which to abide. In the past two decades, the number of Arab women using writing as a revolutionary commodity has grown in an unprecedented manner. Following the steps of their predecessors, Leila Slimani, Kaoutar Adimi, Ghada Abdel Aal, Samar Yazbak and many others continue to compose fiction that is aesthetically, thematically and linguistically transgressive, and that merits a study of its own. Research such as this guarantees the growth and enrichment of the field of Arab women writing.

The Algerian Kaoutar Adimi is an emergent Francophone writer with a corpus of three novels, each reflecting novelistic approaches to women's construction. Adimi's novels are a particularly rich juncture for examining recent Francophone literary publications by Algerian women in order to explore its stylistic and thematic engagements in comparison with the pioneers in this literary arena. Striking, however, is her 2017 Nos richesses, which takes a unique style not only to stand out from her contemporaries and predecessors, but also to differ radically from her previous works, such as her Des pierres dans ma poche (2015) by underplaying contemporary gender issues and focusing her narrative instead on a white, male colonial subject, bringing his story out of silence and marginalisation. A critical scholarly engagement with new literary figures such as Adimi and many others, will produce in the future illuminating discussions, specifically on the longevity and continuity of French as a language for a new generation of transgressive women writers of this region.

It also remains fascinating to continue tracing the development of transgressive techniques and ways of subverting gender expectations in Arab societies using public writing. Humour in the feminist novel of emergent Arab women writers continues to be a refreshing element through which many Arabic writers have chosen to subvert the developing conventions of femininity. The Egyptian Ghada Abdel Aal's novel *Ayza Atgawiz* published in 2010 was so well received among readers of the Arab territories that

its translation into English as *I Want to Get Married* was commissioned in the same year, prompting subsequently, Italian, German and Dutch translations. The strategic use of ridicule in Abd Aal's story reflects the raw experiences of a woman who makes satire her means of surviving daily familial and social pressures. Even though Abd el Aal's novel has generated a positive response and inspired others to follow in the same style, it is still marginalised by scholarly discussion. Casting light on this novel and its contemporaries with similar forms will unravel original ways through which Arab women writers continue to renovate literature and the worlds in which they write.

Whether through recent or former techniques of subversion, women writers of the Arab world have produced nonconforming fiction, making of writing a practice for self-discovery and resistance and making with writing, troubles. Perhaps the troublesome writing of Arab women could enable the recovery of women's empires, their bodies. Helene Cixous's words capture the potential power of the written word:

> Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writng, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies […] And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. [3]

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