Arab Feminism and the Negotiation of Gender in Contemporary Jordanian Novels

Amani Al-Serhan

PhD

University of York

Women's Studies

January 2016

ABSTRACT

Since 2000, Jordanian literature has witnessed a rise in the number of novels that address women's daily struggles with gender discrimination, marking a shift away from literary texts that overtly focus on Palestine. Yet, despite the rise in Jordanian feminist novels, there has been little cross-fertilisation between literary criticism and the perspectives of Arab women's movements. This thesis attempts to bring these fields together. My main aim is to use the lens of Arab feminism to investigate how perceptions of womanhood and manhood are negotiated in Jordanian novels (2000–2012) written by both women and men. I argue that the political debate about how tradition and modernity can advance women's status in the Arab world influences the ways in which these novelists shape and re/frame notions of womanhood and manhood. I identify three categories of novels, based on the authors' strategies for conceptualising and overcoming gender inequality. The first advocates a rebellious stance against patriarchal structures, deploying notions of sexuality, escape or suicide as available solutions. The second calls for a return to tradition, and in particular to Islamic Holy Scriptures as texts that endow women with great value and status, viewing this as an alternative to imitating or adopting forms of western feminism. The final group emphasises the need to dissociate from perceiving tradition as the antithesis of modernity. They attempt to bring together useful aspects of both paradigms in ways that help women combat gender inequality. Thus, through their various techniques, these novels offer insightful depictions of women's and men's everyday struggles and promote ideas about gender and feminism in ways that are beneficial for women. I conclude by calling for a stance in line with the third category, a middle way based on acknowledging women's everyday experiences rather than either advocating an Islamic or pro-West ideology.

List of Contents

List of Tables

Acknowledgments

I dedicate this thesis to my father and mother for always believing in me and in my potential. Their unconditional love and support is what kept me going. I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Ann Kaloski Naylor and Professor Ziad El Marsafi for their guidance and support and for the joyful supervisions and invaluable insights. I would like to express my deep appreciation for my examiners: Professor Stevi Jackson and Professor Wen-chin Ouyang for their critical feedback and suggestions. I would also like to extend my appreciation to Harriet Badger for her unwavering kindness and help. I would like to thank all my friends in the Centre for Women's Studies and I give my appreciation in particular to my dear friend, Manel Zouabi for the great moral support and for her generous efforts of reading through my thesis and providing me with useful comments and critical questions to consider. I am also thankful for the kind friendship of Ting Fang Chin and for all the lovely gatherings that we enjoyed together. I am also grateful to have had a remarkable neighbour, Blessing Chidimuro and her non-stop words of encouragement. I also feel lucky to have met Joy Ogbemudia and I thank her for uplifting my spirit and for her lovely friendship. I would also like to acknowledge the tremendous support and encouragement of my colleagues at CWS in Jordan. I thank all my friends in the UK and Jordan for their friendship and for making the journey of a PhD a delightful one.

This research would not have been possible without the funding of The University of Jordan, and for that, I am forever indebted to them.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my two beautiful sons, Sanad and Ma'en for their patience and for providing me with joy and laughter. I would also like to thank my husband for his continuous support and understanding and my lovely brothers, Yezan, Yazeed and Anwar, who I know are very proud of their elder sister. I extend my thanks to all my family in Jordan and anyone who made this project come to fruition.

Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is an original contribution to the relevant knowledge. It has been carried out maintaining the regulations of the University of York. The primary and secondary references used in the thesis have been fully cited. This work has not been submitted for any other award at this or any other institution. No part of the thesis is published anywhere else.

Chapter One: Introduction

Following four years of vigorous searching for scholarships in Jordan and abroad, this project was eventually born. I had been granted the opportunity of a lifetime: a post as teaching assistant at the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of Jordan. This meant that I could pursue my PhD at any respectable higher education institution abroad, a dream I had long harboured. With excitement, I began my search for a high-ranking British university with an independent centre for women's studies. As a member of the Centre for Women's Studies in Jordan, consisting of three academics who specialise in women in law, sociology and anthropology, I set out to explore a different field, and one I regard as immensely significant – literature. However, my choice stems not only from personal interest and from my previous academic background, it is part of the centre's policy, which aims to appoint academics from different fields of knowledge. The goal of having diversity in academic disciplines with a special interest in women is part of the centre's integral vision, which cuts across various academic fields. For myself, I have always been fascinated by the ability of literature to present and critique certain aspects of life in an innovative style. It is unfortunate that, despite literature's significance in tackling a wide array of themes pertaining to women, it is not given great attention in Jordan. Nonetheless, I was determined to explore how literature is deployed in the debate about women by investigating contemporary Jordanian novels.

Growing up in Jordan, I was always attentive to the social bias against women. From a young age, I would particularly notice the differential treatment of boys and girls. The males are endowed with great significance, care and freedom. The informal rules of parents (or guardians) tend to give them more freedom and a great sense of autonomy. Conversely, the females would find themselves competing for extra attention, are less valued and have significantly lower autonomy over the way they choose to lead their lives. Despite the great transformations in Jordanian society over the past two decades and the gradual disappearance of negative attitudes towards women, there remains an implicit sense of women being second-class citizens. To this day, Jordanian women still have to fight for their rights, including their children's right to citizenship and for divorce.

I became critical of these attitudes, perceptions and practices, and have always been a 'disguised' rebel who resents and at times refuses to conform to what I regarded as ill-perceived expectations of women. Although I sometimes managed to succeed in this endeavour, there were times when I found myself conforming against my will, and I was forced to realise the implications of a gendered society. However, despite this pessimistic picture, I refuse to believe that I am (along with other women) locked in a closed system of oppression. Education for me is the lynchpin that, if invested properly, can reverse the effects of discriminatory attitudes towards women. As a (future) academic, I see myself as a mediator, establishing a bridge between academic scholarship and students in the hopes of planting the seeds for a newly reformed society. I have always been intrigued by the origin(s) of gender inequality universally, and in Jordan in particular. While acknowledging the adverse effects of political and economic inequality on the lives of Arab women, I am specifically interested in social and cultural forms of discrimination. This interest was primarily due to the over-emphasis that Arab women, in conjunction with governments, give to economic and political issues related to women (such as rights and economic independence) at the expense of social and cultural ones (related to negative perceptions and attitudes).

Due to the changing dynamics of the Arab world during the second half of the 20th century, Arab women's call for liberation was brought to the forefront of political and social debate. Efforts were made to improve the situation of women through public initiatives and governmental directives, aided by increased research into ways of empowering women, both economically and politically. Hence, many women were mobilised and given unprecedented attention in various parts of both the public and private sectors. Yet, despite these improvements, a wide range of social and cultural problems remained inadequately addressed. These relate to perceptions of women as inferior to men in terms of both their abilities and intellectual capacities, an idea that in turn promotes reductionist views that encourage the separation of social roles as demarcations of difference. Consequently, many Arab women chose to become advocates for social change. They called for the questioning of these widely held beliefs as oppressive and unjust as part of their wider agenda to improve the condition of women. Despite the lack of evidence to justify this, I suggest that the abundance of resources on women in the common domains of education, health,

economy and politics (which usually fall under social development plans)[1] geared the focus of many Arab women (and men) to the literary as a viable field of inquiry. This was coupled with the existence of authoritarian regimes in Arab countries that deprive individuals of openly voicing their concerns, thereby encouraging literature to become a significant medium for writers to express their beliefs, to criticise certain social practices or to implicitly call for social, economic or political reforms, of which women are the primary beneficiaries. Moreover, I find that the way in which literature operates in Arab societies, where censorship and lack of freedom of speech are obstacles, is different from that in western societies. Literature in this sense becomes an alternative platform for action and for gaining a voice. It becomes perceived as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. As renowned Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz notes,

> Sometimes the artist finds it difficult to express himself, especially when we consider the state's position towards him. This is generally true in the Arab world, where we cannot dissociate art and politics…the artist's dilemma depends to a great extent on the state's position vis-à-vis freedom of expression. Should the state ignore the writer's voice, it alone is the loser, for his is the voice of truth. A voice that knows and offers what no intelligence apparatus is capable of providing. (Mahfouz in Al-Ghitani, 1987, p.9)

In Jordan, speaking about gender-related issues is usually done with extra caution. The cases of former MP Toujan Faisal and, more recently, of Professor Rula Quawas, come to mind. MP Faisal was defamed for talking about polygamy 'as an inequitable male privilege' (Alatiyat and Barari, 2010, p.361). The Muslim Brotherhood filed an apostasy case against Faisal, accusing her of 'criticising Islam and encouraging women to become polygamous as well' (Alatiyat and Barari, 2010, p.361). Professor Quawas is the founder of the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of Jordan. She was heavily criticised for helping students in her feminist theory class to produce a short film clip about sexual harassment in which a number of female students held small banners depicting the verbal abuse that they face. As a result of this clip being made public in June 2012, she lost her position as a dean. Her case caused a public debate on how to address sexual harassment. Professor Quawas has repeatedly appeared on Arab news outlets explaining that the clip was the idea of her students and that her role was to provide guidance and support. She has spoken about her outrage at how she was removed from her position, an issue that the

---

[1] I discuss this in more detail in the following chapter.

President of the University of Jordan denies, saying that it was a routine measure involving the removal of other deans and is not related to Professor Quawas in particular[2]. Whether this was or was not the case, such incidents illustrate the limitations and consequences of openly discussing issues surrounding gender (especially controversial ones). While fully acknowledging the obstacles to carrying out such debates in formal settings, I was curious to explore how they would surface in a literary one, and in particular in novels.

I was interested in how gender inequality features in Arab, and especially Jordanian, novels. How are women and men represented? What kinds of narratives are used to frame such representations? With these questions in mind, I set out to explore critical feminist work on the representation of Jordanian women and men in novels, only to discover that it was very limited. The relevant work I found did so only in passing, and focussed more on the gender of the novelists (that is, on female novelists) and less on the content of their literary work. These articles and books focused on women in Arabic literature as a whole, with a special emphasis on Egypt. The few resources that discussed women in Jordanian literature did so in a general manner that lacked depth or a firm grounding in feminist literary criticism (Al-Nabulsi 1993; Abu Nidal 2004; Obaidat 2008).[3]

However, the lack of in-depth research on representations of Jordanian women in literature, and novels in particular, is unjustifiable. This absence can be explained if we consider the prominence of the male-dominated genre of poetry. Poetry has long been regarded by Arab writers as the most prestigious form of literature. Despite the emergence of the Arabic novel during the first half of the 20th century, the genre is relegated to a secondary status compared to poetry (Bakar 2010; Saleh 2001). Such an absence could also be attributed to the numerous obstacles that stand in the way of researchers wishing to examine gender inequality, as the topic remains controversial and subject to a wider debate that is commonly framed as involving the paradigm of tradition versus modernity.[4] I use gender as defined by Joan Scott as 'a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power' (Scott 1986, p.1067).

---

[2] Professor Quawas was appointed as dean for a two-year term which began in September of 2011.
[3] I discuss these resources in Chapter Three.
[4] I discuss this in Chapter Two.

In addition to examining representations of womanhood and manhood[5] in contemporary novels, I was also curious to see how such representations were influenced by ideas of feminism in the Arab world. Arab feminists have had a substantial role in mobilising efforts and struggles against gender inequality. Huda Sha'rawi, Nabawiya Musa and Malak Hifni Nassif are names that come to mind.[6] Their persistence and perseverance in addressing the topics of women's oppression and subordination have received much attention from both Arab and western scholars. As the social and the political are closely intertwined with the literary, I set out to explore the role of the Arab feminist awakening represented in the form of social activism and feminist writing in determining the type of Jordanian novels that were being produced. I wondered if being exposed to feminist calls for social reform would leave a trace on Jordanian novelists (particularly women) and the work they produce. Thus, I was interested in investigating how novelists explore gender discrimination as their central themes: What approaches do they employ? What sorts of perspectives inform their opinions on women and men as social categories? How do they engage with ideas around feminism and gender inequality? Thus, my project aimed to account for the various approaches that were used by Jordanian novelists in their representations of womanhood and manhood and in their calls to combat gender inequality.

I focus on Jordanian novels written between the years 2000 and 2012. I start in 2000 for various reasons. I argue that this year marked a gradual shift in the subject matter of Jordanian novels from an emphasis on political themes represented in the common case of Palestine, to social ones focusing on everyday burdens, poverty, corruption and, most importantly, women's position in society. This does not mean that novels of the 1990s did not engage with topics related to women's struggles in everyday lives. Novels by Laila Al-Atrash, Ghusoun Rahal, Fairuz Tamimi, Mu'nis Al-Razaz and Haza' Al-Barari among others were capable of placing the spotlight on a number of gender related topics. Nonetheless, the novels of the new millennium were more vocal (and greater in number) in fleshing out a wide array of social and cultural restrictions that have an adverse effect on the lives of Jordanian women at the present. These include the social pressure to marry, the preferential treatment of

---

[5] I would like to clarify that, while my main focus is on women, I also touch on men in relation to women.

[6] I discuss the focus on Egyptian women in the following chapter.

boys over girls, the social division of labour, the stigma around divorced women, gendered perceptions of sexuality, and honour killings. From a pragmatic point of view, my choice of the year 2000 as a starting point is also inspired by the way Jordanian critics have commonly discussed Jordanian novels. The trend has been to discuss them in terms of specific periods (for example the novel of the sixties, seventies, eighties …etc.). From a personal standpoint, I was also intrigued to explore how the beginning of a new millennium (along with the hopes, aspirations, and expectations that usually accompanies the start of anything new) would affect the way novelists wrote about women.

The novels that I chose are not biased towards a certain gender. In other words, equal attention is given to male as well as female Jordanian novelists in an effort to focus on work that explores and advocates feminism. While fully acknowledging the argument about the dialectical relationship between gender and feminism, I was however intrigued about how a male author would raise feminist ideas in his literary work. Although I maintain the view that a woman is more capable of capturing in her writing forms of subordination and inequality due to her position as a disadvantaged member of society, I wanted to have a sense of how social privilege influences male authors to discuss women. From a pragmatic point of view, I was more interested in the rise of Jordanian feminist novels, regardless of who wrote them. I thus give more weight to feminism than to gender. It is not that the gender of the author is insignificant; rather, I want to place emphasis on work that advocates a progressive stance on gender equality. Moreover, by focusing on both women and men, I am able to have a comprehensive image of the dynamics of gender, the text and the researcher and how they work together in producing a feminist thesis.

As with any project that involves dealing with more than one language, I did struggle a bit with the translation. I would like to note that all the translated quotes are mine. There were many instances when I found translating certain words, expressions or phrases a very difficult task. This was mainly due to the loss of meaning or at times the intensity of such terminologies or expressions in the process. In an attempt to remedy the discrepancy between the different versions of texts, I have provided the original text for each quote that I used from the novels as a

footnote (for potential Arabic readers). One such term that comes to mind is *kayd*[7], which translates as 'vile of women'. Despite the numerous translations, none are able to capture the intensity that the word carries.

In addition to translation, which obscures the vividness of meanings and the connotations (of quotes), I find that labels also have a similar function. I am particularly talking about the labels 'Arab world', 'Islamic world' and 'Arab feminism'. Despite the great variations that exist in terms of dialects, ethnic groups, religious sects and various traditions, and despite many critics' and writers' objections to viewing the Arab world as one homogeneous entity, I give an account of the Arab world as one body that is comprised of various heterogeneous parts. Perhaps this arises from my deep optimism and hope for unity by focusing on elements that link the Arab countries together and strengthen ties rather than those that fragment and distort. The case is similar for the Islamic world. Although I am attuned to the various differences between countries in which Islam is the majority religion, I use the term to focus on how Islam as an ideology regulates the lives of individuals, imposes certain restrictions on women and at the same time allows room for negotiating gendered identities. I thus use the terms in a general sense to facilitate the process of research while being cautious of the limitations and restrictions that the use of these terms might entail. As for Arab feminism, I would like to clarify that this term need not be understood as denoting an inherent characteristic of feminism. I use the label to refer to the types and forms of feminism(s) that exist in the Arab world in the broadest sense.

For the purpose of clarity, I would like to offer definitions of four key terms I explore in this thesis: Jordanian, tradition, modernity and feminism. These are all concepts which are examined in more detail and complicated throughout this work. The ambiguity around the identity of 'Jordanian' particularly arises from the demographics of Jordanian society, which comprises a large number of Palestinians. My research on Jordanian novelists includes a number of writers who are Jordanians of Palestinian origin. Although they would all understand themselves as Jordanians and as Jordanian citizens, it is usual for those with Palestinian roots to recognise this aspect of their national identity. However, I identify them as Jordanian insofar as

---

[7] The word *kayd* (found in the Qur'an 12:28) has been translated to: 'guile, snare, trickery, women's plan, cunning and craft', based on the translators on Al-Tafsir website.

they themselves choose to use the label (Jordanian) and because of how they are perceived as Jordanians in Jordanian society. Regardless of their family origins, all the authors of the novels that I use are listed as Jordanians in the Ministry of Culture and in the League of Jordanian Writers and Artists.

Next, I turn to the two terms which are intrinsically woven into my arguments about changing understandings of womanhood and manhood: tradition and modernity. The first – tradition – is a crucial component in the novels I read, either explicitly or implicitly. Doris Gray, in her work on feminism and Islamism in North Africa, presents a useful starting point for my different work on Jordanian novels, 'The hallmark of societies referred to as traditional is that customs, practices and social norms are passed on from one generation to the next and are highly valued. There is also the emphasis on collective cohesion, which is seen as threatened by an overt stress on individual rights' (Gray 2013, p.5). This is helpful for me because it does not present tradition in a negative light, but rather focuses on what tradition offers – a sense of societal unity.

The most challenging term is modernity. This is mostly because of the debate around its origins, but also due to the perception of modernity in Arab countries as 'good' or 'bad', and as opposed to 'tradition'. My greatest concern was to define 'modernity' in a way that did not slip into those common dualisms. How to conceptualise modernity without seeing it as a westernised' idea? I was fascinated by how literary Professor, Hussein Jumʿa, in his article 'Modernity Does Not Mean Rupture with Tradition' conceptualises modernity as:

> a form of urbanisation and civilization in life, literature, art, habits, and thought that does not mean relying on a principle of binary opposition with tradition. But it means renewing it, renovating it using novel moulds that lead to organising/regulating advanced and organised relationships based on clear, precise and fruitful methods. In other words, modernity means establishing relativity and harmony between the old and the new within the framework of analytical criticism and openness/exposure to the cultures, literature, and the arts of nations …(2005, p.9).

I find his conceptualisation of modernity useful as it does not advocate dualisms and binaries between the 'old' and the 'new'. It is one that negotiates a common ground between two views of 'progress'. I engage with the ideas expressed within this definition and explain its implications for women in my section on tradition and modernity in Chapter Six and in the conclusion. Although these terms (tradition and

modernity) are explored in much greater detail in my thesis, I suggest that these definitions function as useful starting points.

Explorations of Jordanian feminism form the core of this thesis. As feminism is perceived differently across societies and cultures, I chose to borrow from Mervat Hatem conceptualisation of feminism as 'a set of analytical and critical tools that can be used to enhance women's understanding/consciousness of themselves , and their relations with other important national, regional, and international groups of men and women. Seen in this light, feminism can improve women's agency and inform the definition of their strategies for change' (Hatem 2014, p.4). I find it useful as it stresses feminism as 'a set of tools' thus involving some sort of 'action' based on a certain 'understanding of one's position'. More importantly it acknowledges the significations of locating ones consciousness within the national, regional and international context. Feminism is explored in more detail in my discussion of the various forms of feminisms that Arab and Muslim women utilise in the following chapter.

One of my significant arguments in this thesis is that theoretical understandings of academic gender and feminism matter to the real, material lives of women, that as a 'tool', feminist ideas can help craft difference lives. In Chapters Four, Five and Six, I explore how feminism is defined in the three groups of novels and pay particular attention to the ways in which they engage with aspects of feminism as an activist activity. In my chapter on patriarchy for instance, I look into how the novels engage with aspects of 'western' feminism and advocate a collective form of activism through joining women's organisations. In my chapter on religious discourse, I examine how methodological tools of 'Islamic' feminism are utilised to advance notions of individual activism through the publishing of articles on women in Islam in local newspapers. In my chapter on a new feminist consciousness, I investigate how a 'new' form of feminism, an 'in-between' position is negotiated and how both an individual and a collective notion of activism are advocated.

This thesis is composed of seven chapters. In Chapters Two and Three, I provide the critical context to my project. This context incorporates the two main fields of inquiry bridged by my project: Arab feminism and contemporary Jordanian novels. Chapter Two starts by explaining the relevance of Egyptian feminism to the novels

under investigation. I then highlight some of the prevalent debates around gender and feminism in the Arab world. The last section of this chapter looks into how Arab and Muslim women negotiate their place, position, and goals around the parameters of feminism and Islam. In Chapter Three, I offer an overview of the agendas of the Jordanian Women's Movement in an attempt to explain why I have chosen to exclude Jordanian 'feminism' from my readings of the novels. Finally, I discuss the Jordanian feminist novel and explain in details the methodological framework with which I am working.

In subsequent chapters I present my readings of the novels. In Chapter Four: 'Challenging Patriarchy and Social Control over Women', I explore the patriarchal social structure of Arab societies and its negative effects on the lives of women. I investigate how some women manage to deal with the strong grip of patriarchy in what is seen as a radical approach in which the patriarchal structure is challenged in two different ways. The first is through unconventional depictions of sexuality (Jamal Naji's *When Wolves Grow Old* and Taher Al-Odwan's *Anwaar*) in which taboos becomes instrumental in defying the rigid structures of patriarchy to satisfy the needs of female protagonists. Such needs do not always have to be sexual in nature; they could involve any activities that combine individual commitment with a cautious awareness of the power of authority, a balanced approach that safeguards one's personal needs. The second approach is through defiance and escape (Afaf Bataineh's *Outside the Body* and Fadi Zaghmout's *The Bride of Amman*) in which Jordanian society is presented as hostile towards women and beyond reformation. Hence, the only way out is either to flee to another country or to commit suicide. The primary theoretical framework that the chapter draws upon is Hisham Sharabi's theory of 'neopatriarchy'.

Continuing with the criticism of patriarchy, Chapter Five: 'Renegotiating Gender and Islam: The Ambivalence of Religious Rhetoric' investigates the ways in which religious texts are deployed in Jordanian literature when discussing the ways in which society restricts women's lives. Religious excerpts and the prominence of the concept of *qiwamah (القوامة)*[8] are discussed at length. In addition, a contrast is repeatedly drawn between the conditions in Jordan and an imagined, utopian Islamic

---

[8] I discuss the definition of *qiwamah* and the debate around it in Chapter Five.

existence. This chapter looks into how Asya Abdel Hadi in *The Bitter Winter* uses a progressive Islamic discourse to tackle pressing social problems related to the lives of Arab women. The Holy Qur'an, the Hadith and the life of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) provide the basis for Abdel Hadi's criticism of women's subordination, honour killings and the gendered aspects of Islamic fundamentalism.

In Chapter Six, 'The Emergence of Feminist Consciousness', I investigate how gender and feminism figure in contemporary Jordanian novels. I explore how some novelists contribute to the Jordanian feminist tradition by either introducing the terms and the concepts of gender and gender studies into their work (Rifqa Dodin's *Match Sticks* and Samiha Khreis' *The Empire of Nara's Papers*) or by positioning issues related to women as the dominant theme of their literary project (Faisal Tellawi's *The Hornet's Nest*). I then explain how both approaches together help to redefine how womanhood and manhood are represented in Jordanian literature. I also stress the significance of insights in gender theory into the way in which gender is negotiated.

The final chapter draws these themes together. I make general observations about how each group of novelists tackles gender inequality in their work. Based on their approaches, I provide my evaluation and arguments. I then shed light on what I view as a logical and palpable approach that brings more hope for Jordanian women. I offer recommendations to improve future discussions of gender in Jordanian literature. Finally, I discuss the limitations of my work and make suggestions for future research.

This thesis represents therefore a critical exploration of the way conceptualisations of womanhood and manhood are shaped in Jordanian literature in general, and the novels I focus on in particular. I commence from the close examination of these novels, and expand toward framing them within their specific socio-cultural contexts. The interplay between Arab feminism and literature has been instrumental in this analysis process, and is maintained whenever required. However, it should be noted that my focus centres primarily on Jordanian literature. My aim is to conduct an investigation of gender dynamics, rather than a holistic/generic mediation over Arab feminism and gender per-se.

Chapter Two: Feminism, Modernity and Tradition: Negotiating 'Positions' In an Age of Uncertainty

Introduction

In this chapter, I explain the relevance of secular feminism originating in Egypt, and more specifically of the awakening stage, to the feminist novels that are investigated in this thesis. I discuss why I focus on Arab feminism more broadly instead of only Jordanian feminism. I then explore the main debates in the field of feminism in the Arab world, focusing on and complicating ideas of a binary relationship between tradition and modernity. I provide a background to the problematic use of the term gender in an Arab context. Finally, I focus on the various approaches that Arab feminists deploy in their discussions about women, as elaborated in a number of studies on women in the Arab world, and point to the resemblance between some of these approaches and those used by the Jordanian novelists in my study.

The awakening: A pivotal stage in feminist thought

Arab feminists Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed and Nawal El Saadawi have been vocal in critiquing the patriarchal nature of Arab societies and the concomitant obstacles faced by women. Arab and western scholars have given Egyptian feminists precedence in discussions and research on women in the Arab world. This is no surprise as Egypt was the birthplace of Arab feminism back in the first half of the 20th century. Unlike the Egyptian feminist experience, which was first initiated by affluent women seeking social change, the advancement of Jordanian women was mostly carried out through initiatives and directives from the government in what can be characterised as state feminism. Despite the achievements of the Jordanian Women's Movement in mobilising women and in addressing a wide host of issues related to women, this movement does not sufficiently tackle the social and cultural discriminatory practices against women. Its interests remain broad and focused mainly on the political and economic empowerment of Jordanian women (Alatiyat 2003; Dababneh 2006; Al-Naqshabandi 2001; Al-Tal 1985; Department of Literature and Publishing 2001). Through my investigation of contemporary Jordanian novels that can be classified as feminist or having a feminist element, I argue that these

novels were more influenced by Arab feminism as a whole (and feminism in Egypt) than by the Jordanian Women's Movement. This is not to discredit the efforts of Jordanian women in bringing a host of issues relating to women to the forefront of political debate, but rather to stress what is more useful for Jordanian women now.[9]

While secular[10] feminism went through three main stages: the awakening, nationalism and state feminism, I give more emphasis to the awakening as a crucial stage. I illustrate how contemporary Jordanian feminist novels were implicitly drawing on key gender issues that were raised during the first half of the 20th century by prominent Egyptian feminists. Therefore, I first give a detailed overview of the awakening that originated in Egypt and then discuss the significant questions that were raised around gender.

The awakening marked the beginning of women's awareness of the need to fight for their rights and to reject forms of gender discrimination (Baron 1994; Meriwether and Tucker 1999; Badran 1995). It can be traced back to the beginnings of the 20th century, when many argue that, 'Women and men began to raise the issues of women's status and question previously unchallenged social practices but not necessarily the social (or political) structures or institutions that govern them' (Meriwether and Tucker 1999, p.96). Many debates about women's status in society were initiated by reformists and intellectuals. Meriwether and Tucker argue that, 'this stage also witnessed the development of myriad social, religious, literary, charitable, educational and in some cases political women's organizations' (1999, p.96).

Among those calling for an improvement in women's status in Egypt were prominent liberal writer Qasim Amin and religious reformer Mohammed Abduh. The focus of these men on women was part of the popular modernist sentiment and not, primarily, a concern about women's lives (Tucker 1993; Badran 1995). As Tucker argues: 'Like all other, later writers on women's issues, including even nationalists and socialists among them, Abduh saw women's liberation from male oppression as an essential precondition for the building of a virtuous society, and not as liberation for the benefit of women' (Tucker 1993, p.10). Similarly, Amin metaphorically viewed women as gold that should not be locked up in a chest but should be wisely

---

[9] I discuss the main agendas of the Jordanian Women's Movement in the following chapter.
[10] My use of secular here is to denote a type of feminism that chooses to dissociate from religious discourse on gender and women's position in society.

invested in many positive ways (Darraj 2002, p.3). This view of women was influenced by his encounters with the West and their perceived progressive attitudes towards women (Badran 1995; Barakat 1993). His famous book, *The Liberation of Women* (1899) was a centre of debate in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century. Some went as far to regard him as the father of Arab feminism (Badran 2005; Darraj 2002; Al-Ali 2000), although many Arab feminists disagree (Darraj 2002; El Guindi 2003). Fadwa El Guindi explains that, what made Amin an iconic figure of Arab feminism, especially in the eyes of western commentators, was his somewhat controversial arguments in his book 'for a fundamental social and cultural change for Egypt and other Muslim countries, a Europeanization of Arab culture as it were in which women's issues were embedded' (El Guindi, 2003, p.594). Therefore, Leila Ahmed concludes that, 'Amin was not "the father of feminism", as so many claim, but rather the son of Cromer (British Consul General in Egypt) and colonialism' (Ahmed 1992, pp.162–163). Yet, despite the absence of genuine feminist initiatives by such men, Margot Badran argues that, 'in the early modern state-building and colonial period, during which Islamic modernism, liberal nationalism, and the feminism of progressive men were prevalent, women's causes found a positive and supportive environment' (Badran 2009, p.23).

Prominent figures within Egyptian feminism include Huda Sha'rawi, Nabawiya Musa and Malak Hifni Nassif (also known by her pen name Bahithat Al-Badiyah) (Badran 1995; Baron 1994). These women had an early sense of awareness of their gendered society and its implications for the lives of women. Both Sha'rawi and Musa had brothers, lost their fathers at a young age and were consequently raised by their mothers (Badran 1995). As children, they realised they were unequally treated compared to their brothers, who received all the attention and care. To their dissatisfaction, their brothers received primary and secondary education and were able to go to university. They even had private tutors to aid them in many subjects, such as maths and Arabic. The girls, on the other hand, were denied such 'luxuries', as they were deemed unnecessary. It was very uncommon for girls in the first decades of the 20th century to go to school or to have a formal education. There was not even a secondary school for girls at the time.

Nabawiyya Musa provides a striking example of determination combined with a desire to challenge prevailing social norms. She educated herself and, without

receiving any secondary education, she sat for the baccalaureate examination, which would open her way to gaining acceptance at a university. She was the only woman in Egypt at that time to sit for the exam and, to the surprise of many who discouraged and teased her; she was among the 34 who passed out of 200 who applied (Badran 1995, p.44). Her success story made headlines at the time. Despite the many struggles that she faced, she became headmistress of a girl's school in Cairo. Musa was very attentive to the biased treatment in favour of her male counterparts at work, especially when it came to payment. While she was earning six pounds a month, they were earning ten. She objected to such treatment and succeeded in gaining the same pay as the men. She was among the first to pave the way for equal pay for equal work in Egypt (Badran 1995, p.44).

Very critical of marriage, Musa refused to marry. She believed that, since she was employed, she simply did not need the economic support of a husband who would control every aspect of her life; thus she chose to be free. In her memoirs, she speaks of how much she resents the idea of marriage, viewing it as 'dirt' *(qadharah)* with which she would rather not soil herself. She writes, 'since childhood, I had believed that marriage was animalistic and degrading to women and I could not bear the thought of it' (quoted in Badran 1995, p.45). Knowing that marriage would have confined her to the domestic sphere, she declares that she would rather work as a master than as a slave for men (Badran 1995, p.45).

Like their western counterparts, Egyptian feminists tried to understand the nature of gender inequality and its foundations. They explored major concepts of 'feminist theory'. They were able to anticipate the differences between sex and gender and argued over some theoretical aspects of these words in the Arabic language, although perhaps not in the same terms (Badran 2009, p.194). Nabawiyah Musa and Bahithat Al-Badiyah insisted that gender roles were 'socially constructed' rather than ordained by nature or divinely prescribed. They argued that not only gender but also sexuality were 'socially defined' (Badran 2009, p.200). This constituted a breakthrough in a society where biologically determinist views of women prevailed. Badran explains that,

> A major theoretical task and strategic imperative for these turn-of-the-century feminists
> was to establish the idea of gender and sexuality similarly. This would pave the way for

the final dismantling of female domestic seclusion and would lay the groundwork for the articulation of gender equality and equal treatment. (Badran 1995, p.66)

In response to misogynist men like Tal'at Harb and Mahmoud Abbas Al-Aqqad, Nabawiyah Musa stated that, 'men have spoken so much of the differences between the man and the woman that they would seem to be two separate species ... As with animals, the human female and male are alike, as scientists confirm ... people forget that it is only when people use their gifts that they develop' (quoted in Badran 1995, p.66). She argued that,

> It is unfair to compare the mind of an urban man with that of his wife. How can one compare the mind of education and experience who has developed himself with that of his wife who has been neglected since infancy? Her mind became rusty through lack of use ... Her abilities were suppressed and she was sheltered from life's experience before her mind could develop naturally. (quoted in Badran 1995, p.66)

Musa criticised women's confinement to the home as part of their maternal duties. She argued that the responsibilities of women as mothers does not mean that they have to be imprisoned in the home and that nature has nothing to do with the linking of motherhood to the private seclusion of women (Badran 1995, p.67). In the above quote, Musa stressed the incompatibility of urban women and urban men. Her focus on the word 'urban' highlights the different types of lives that women in Egypt enjoyed. Feminists praised the life of rural areas as it was based on a principle of gender equality in the sense that both women and men were out in the fields performing their daily tasks. Women moved about freely without wearing the veil. They were widely seen in public enjoying their lives in the same way as their male partners. In addition, women were perceived as a source of wisdom that would guide their husbands and the household to a better economic life. Egyptian feminists wanted to apply those principles of equality to urban life but were met with very limited success. Along the same lines, Malak Hifni Nassif (Bahithat al-Badiyah) rejected the division of labour based on gender. She protested, 'Men say to us categorically, you women have been created for the house and we have been created as bread-winners. Is this a God-given dictate? How are we to know since no holy book has spelled it out...the division of labour is merely a human creation' (quoted in Badran 2009, p.78).

Sha'rawi, Musa and Nassif were part of a group of women who in 1923 formed the first organised feminist union in Egypt, the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU). Huda Sha'rawi was appointed president. The formation of this union marked a turning point for the founding members to call for the rights of women and to raise public awareness about gender inequality (Talhami 1996; Baron 1994). The EFU was very active in conducting seminars, raising funds and donations for poor women and organising regional and international conferences. The women of the EFU were very enthusiastic and outspoken, especially on issues regarding imperialism or colonial rule. Working hand in hand with other women's organisations that were formed a little later, they organised strikes, demonstrations and boycotts of British items as a way of condemning the prolonged British presence on Egyptian soil. Many of their male counterparts praised their activism and strong spirit for change. Gradually, the EFU started to gain recognition in Egypt and neighbouring countries. They later published their first journal, *The Egyptian Woman* (Al-Misryah) in which many women published articles relating to the cult of domesticity.

The EFU tried to make international connections with other organisations, and became a member of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAW) (Bier 2011; Badran 1995). EFU members attended the IAW's annual meetings and participated in many debates regarding women (Badran 1995, p.91). The women of the EFU were keen to benefit from the western feminist experience without losing the originality and uniqueness of their own version of feminism, which differed from western ones on many issues (Badran 1995, p.91). Huda Sha'rawi explained to the feminist congress that Egyptian women were calling for 'a restoration of their lost rights. They were reclaiming their own heritage (*turath*). *This was a national enterprise, not an imitative one looking to the West.* With these assertions, Shar'awi sent a signal both to western feminists and to Egyptian patriarchalists' (Badran 1995, p.91, my emphasis). They were open to a sisterhood transcending national borders and the importance of forging a wider gender alliance that would help them in their call for gender equality (Bier 2011). In this regard, Margot Badran argues that, 'Feminism never was or could be monolithic. It never was or could be exclusively Western' (Badran 1995, p.103).

The EFU, under the leadership of Sha'rawi, paved the way for the formation of the Arab Feminist Union in 1938. Along with other EFU members, she travelled to many

countries in the Arab world to study the possibility of cooperation and solidarity between Arab women in the hope of uniting them to fight together in their long battle to obtain their basic rights and in the hope of solving or touching upon bigger issues, such as the Palestinian case (Badran 1995, p.238). Sha'rawi successfully created an Arab Feminist Union and wrote the agenda for it. Many Arab men praised the idea and encouraged women in their countries to join and benefit from the knowledge of their Egyptian sisters, who had more than a decade of experience in feminist activism (Badran 1995).

Thus, unlike nationalism, in which women prioritised the nation over feminist demands, and unlike state feminism, in which women's political and economic demands were achieved through governmental initiatives, I argue that the awakening was the most significant stage of Arab feminism. This is mainly because it is this stage that marked a profound emphasis on philosophical questions around gender. The questions raised were not only aiming to bring about political and economic gains for women, but were also attempting to dismantle common misconceptions about women as less capable and less intellectual beings. Hence, the emphasis was deeply rooted in the formulation of a new understanding of what it meant to be a woman and how women could defend against or challenge commonly held beliefs aimed at restricting them to the domestic sphere and limiting their participation in public life. I argue that such interrogation is necessary in the long road to understanding and consequently eradicating gender inequality.

I find it unfortunate that, despite starting with the promising stage of the awakening, later stages of Arab feminism were geared to practical aspects of women's lives such as employment, political representation and legal reforms and did not concern themselves much with the social and cultural everyday experiences of women. The focus on 'equality' within the public world is significant in understanding women's place in a society, but did not go far enough. This is reflected in the number of resources on Arab women that focus on social, political and educational indicators, which more or less follow a UN report (Sika 2011; Korany 2010). It is also apparent in regional efforts that again fall under a sort of developmental agenda. Nevertheless, how can one focus on the political and the economic while ignoring the social and the cultural? Moreover, why is it that the social and cultural aspects of gender inequality are regarded as less significant than

maintaining women's basic needs? Such scarcity of resources and the lack of focus on the social and cultural dimensions of gender inequality forced me to look for sources of hope and inspiration. It made me realise that, with reference to my research interest, it is the awakening stage that is most significant. These questions that Musa and Nassif raise are similar to those raised by Jordanian novelists in their literary work. In most of the novels that I am investigating, the novelists either explicitly or implicitly pose significant questions relating to gender. Thus, the awakening provides a solid base for the interrogation of women and men as social categories.

While Egyptian feminism went through three stages, starting with the awakening, then nationalism, followed by state feminism, Jordan mostly experienced only state feminism. Yet, while state feminism involved the political, economic and social domains, I argue that, in the case of Jordan, an awakening stage can be traced in the literary field, more specifically in novels written in the past two decades. Although the Jordanian government undertook initiatives/measures towards establishing women's suffrage, political participation, employment and economic independence (Al-Tal 1985; Alatiyat 2003; Dababneh 2006), nonetheless social and cultural problems remained inadequately addressed. These include the preference for males over females, the destructive effects of patriarchy, negative stereotypes of women, and the social conditioning of women and men in ways that promote gender inequality. In this regard, the role of literature is very significant in providing a new field for inquiry that enables the questioning of prevailing social norms which place women at a disadvantage. Hence, literature – and in particular novels – become sites of struggle in which these cultural and social problems can be raised and critiqued.

This conscious attentiveness and sensitivity to women as a disadvantaged social category has allowed a number of Jordanian novelists to raise awareness about discriminatory practices, attitudes and misconceptions about women (discussed above). In all the novels I discuss in this thesis, feminism features as a significant element. Feminism, as an idea, has served as a transformative and contributory factor in changing the course of events in the plots for the benefit of women. Whether explicitly or implicitly stated, the role of a variety of feminist ideas in the novels is crucial in bringing to the surface a wide array of topics pertaining to women. However, these efforts by novelists to engage with such ideas were not devoid of

numerous obstacles; in particular, the effects of complicated and often conflicting discourses of tradition and modernity on the advancement of women, which is a debate that featured heavily in most of the novels under investigation. In order to comprehend the dynamics of these discourses, I provide a glimpse into the major issues and underlying questions that are embedded in such debates.

Feminism in the Arab world: The dilemma of the tradition versus modernity debate

Public debate about the advancement of women in the Arab world has always been controversial (Abu-Lughod 1998; Badran 2001; Haddad and Esposito 1998; Cooke 2000; Gray 2013). Far from being limited to the issue of gender inequality, it is one that extends to larger discussions about hegemony, colonialism and the constant debate about tradition versus modernity. Nowhere has the combination of these philosophical/ideological concepts been as evident as in the case of women and their call for liberation from discriminatory social norms in conservative Arab nations, and this was particularly evident after the process of decolonisation (Saliba 2000; Cooke 1999). By highlighting this debate, I intend to examine how contemporary Jordanian novels were influenced by these two paradigms of tradition and modernity.

The vast majority of resources on women in the Arab and Islamic world attribute women's social, political and economic downfall to the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity (Moghissi 1999; Abu-Lughod 1998; Mernissi 1992). Following the decolonisation of Arab countries during the second half of the 20th century and the establishment of Arab nation states, many Arab modernists wanted to see their countries advance and fully develop and argued in favour of enhancing women's lives as a primary part of this developmental process (Taraki 2008; Moghadam 2003; Kandiyoti 1991; Kandiyoti 1996; Abu-Lughod 1998; Mernissi 1987; Ahmed 1992; Barakat 1993; Roded 1999; Goldschmidt Jr. 2008). However, it should be noted that their proposals and desires to bring about changes in the conventional roles of women were not for the benefit of women per se, they were efforts to catch up with global developments at an international level (Ahmed 1982; Barakat 1993). Hence, the national interests and the efforts to promote a prosperous image abroad were prioritised over genuine feminist agendas (Taraki 2008; Moghadam 2003; Abu-Lughod 1998). Conversely, traditionalists saw these efforts to advance or to catch up

with the West, particularly with regard to women, as a form of western intrusion or cultural colonialism (Edwards 2005; Ouedghiri 2002; Sa'ar 2005; Haddad and Esposito 1998). Thus, it is unfortunate that for decades the debate about women was commonly polarised around these two main opposing ideological forces. This polarisation had an impact on the type of feminist debate that was emerging in the Arab world, where Arab feminists found themselves trapped between opposing camps.

Many Arab and Muslim writers and feminists were vocal in criticising the failed efforts to promote gender equality in their countries' reformist agendas (Moghissi 1999; Badran 2001; Roded 1999). Haideh Moghissi argues that, 'In the Islamic world, we witness modernization without modernity' (1999, p.54). This is to say that, in various parts of the Arab world, the primary focus was given to transformations related to economic and industrial changes rather than political and societal ones. Moghissi here suggests that, 'If modernization is to have real substance in the Third World[11], it must not consist merely of a transformation in norms, but includes instead industrialization and a profound democratization' (1999, p.61). She argues that 'Modernity created the modern man, leaving women behind. Hence, modernism and modernity were illusory projects. The perfection of humanity was promised but conveniently postponed to a later date' (1999, p.79). She believes that Arab women in both the Middle East and North Africa have not fully benefited from modernisation, as its projects over the past few years have excluded changes related to women and their struggles (1999, p.84). Along the same lines, Fatima Mernissi identifies the process as a 'mutilated modernity' (Mernissi, 1992, p.113). Similarly, Lila Abu-Lughod asserts that, 'the history of the "modernizing" world is often written as one of failed imitation of the West – failures of secular democracy, failures of nationalism, failures of enlightened modernity, failures due to the pull of tradition, travesties of modernity' (Abu-Lughod 1998, p.18). Thus, the advent of modernity in the Arab world did not yield much gain for women.

---

[11] I do not subscribe to this division of countries into First World and Third World, as I find it offensive and condescending. These terms not only stress the difference between countries, cultures and societies, but also imply that inhabitants of these places lead separate, parallel and incompatible lives with those in the Third World having no possibility of ever catching up. While the choice of labelling is limited, I much prefer the terms developed and developing countries because they appear to be less hierarchical and entail notions of progressiveness.

Perhaps one of the greatest problems associated with the implementation of modernity in the Arab world relates to debates about its origins. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that, 'Political modernity traces its roots back to pervasive categories and concepts whose genealogies are embedded in the intellectual and theological traditions of Europe' (2000, p.4). Fatima Seedat explains that because of such perceptions,

> Contemporary ways of being are only considered modern when they align themselves with European intellectual tradition. The danger of associating modernity with European ways of being is in the consequent devaluing of other, non-European ways of being. In other words, non-European ways of being are required to align with European ones and European intellectual traditions are posited as necessary points of reference for viable ways of being modern. (Seedat 2013b, p.29)

Moreover, as 'feminism has strong associations with political modernity, is similarly a construct associated with European modernity, and the genealogy of feminism is intimately associated with the "intellectual and theological traditions of Europe"' (Chakrabarty 2000, p.4), many traditionalists in the Arab world find it troubling (Ouedghiri 2002; Sa'ar 2005; Golley 2004; Mahmood 2005). This discomfort and unease with feminism relates to the antagonistic relationship between the Middle East and the West due to colonialism and a refusal to engage with a western ideology whose objectives remain unclear to Arab and Muslim people. Therefore, the question of whether to imitate a seemingly western ideology or find an indigenous framework to work with, one that is rooted in Arab and Islamic tradition, is commonly and routinely raised (Golley 2004).

The constant debate about finding the proper methodology to advance women in the Arab world has generated an even wider debate on the compatibility of traditional Islamic values with modern 'western' principles. Marina Larzeg for example argues that 'the fetishization of the concept, Islam, in particular, obscures the living reality of the women and men subsumed under it... Religion cannot be detached from the socioeconomic and political context within which it unfolds' (1988, p.95). Commenting on suggestions that secularisation is an optimum solution for Muslim countries, Anouar Majid argues that 'it cannot be superimposed on a culture in which human agency is constantly negotiating its boundaries with those of the Revelation, in which accommodation to divine intent is a fundamental principle' (Majid 1998, p. 340). Furthermore, Majid clarifies that, 'Yet, despite its enduring strengths, Islam is

now incontestably challenged by the universalized ideology of modernity and cannot resist its interpellating discourse simply by rationalizing the Sharia or by proving the infallibility of the Qur'an in the Revelation's consistency with modern scientific discoveries' (Majid 1998, p.343).

Mahmudul Hasan is critical of the approach of Muslim countries in their attempts to be 'modern', and argues that, 'the wave of westernization and modernization of Muslim regions in the name of women's liberations does not necessarily reflect a careful analysis or adequate knowledge of Islamic teachings, but a blind imitation of the West' (Hasan 2012, p.68). Moreover, he explains that, 'while some governments in the Muslim world have attempted to emulate the western model of modernity, especially through undermining gender-related Islamic laws, feminist scholars there have promoted a wholesale replication of western ideas in their pursuance of women's liberation' (Hasan 2012, p.65). Questioning the outcomes of modernity on Muslim countries, Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman (1993) and Abdul Rashid Moten (2011) argue that, 'In general, the replication of the western framework of modernity is not known to have made any positive impact on any Muslim country' (Abu Sulayman and Moten in Hasan 2012, p.66) This contention with modernity highlights both the cultural and political dimensions of such debates on the advancement of women in the Arab and Islamic world, making the discussion of feminism (as emblematic of modernity) an even more complex pursuit.

While such debates were most commonly taking place on social, cultural and political platforms in the Arab and Islamic world, they were also being infiltrated into contemporary Jordanian novels. In their critique of gender inequality in Arab societies, Jordanian novelists varied in how they contextualised the dominant discourses of tradition and modernity in their literary work. Yet, these are crucial debates that I discuss in this thesis. I investigate how Afaf Bataineh and Fadi Zaghmout raise important questions about the implications of tradition for the lives of women.[12] I also explore Asya Abdel Hadi's strong stance in support of tradition and against modernity, questioning its consequences for the lives of women in the

---

[12] I discuss these two novelists in detail in Chapter Four: 'Challenging Patriarchy and Social Control over Women'.

western world.[13] However, do discussions about women in the Arab world have to be contextualised in terms of these (seemingly) oppositional forces? Is there any possibility of an alternative strategy? In Chapter Six: 'The Emergence of a New Feminist Consciousness', I assess how Rifqa Dodin and Samiha Khreis provide an alternative vision for women, both in Jordan and in the Arab world more broadly. Through their work, they propose a shift in focus from wider and controversial political debates about Arab women to more practical strategies that are grounded in a national context, thereby deviating from debates conducted in international arenas. Their critique is one that seeks methods and solutions that enable women to overcome discriminatory social and cultural norms, even if it means borrowing from the western experience. Interestingly, they both maintain the significance of tradition despite criticising its repressive aspects. Hence, their proposal is one that advocates the use of 'modern' tools represented in introducing the concepts of gender and gender studies without having to revolt against traditional societies and without being preoccupied with the political dimensions of the debate on women that castigate modernity as the antithesis of women's progress in the Arab world.

Having highlighted the problematic nature of the debates on tradition and modernity that tend to position them as binaries and the controversy around the use of both the term and the concept of feminism, another topic becomes relevant: the use of the term gender in discourses that aim to combat gender discrimination. This is a central feature of the novels I investigate, and I shed light on the significance of its use by providing a detailed analysis of the connotations of gender in the Arabic context by placing emphasis on the concept and its implications for Arab societies.

Gender from an Arab perspective

This section highlights the problematics of discussing the social inequality of women and men and, in particular, using the precise term 'gender' to do so. The concept of gender as countering the notion of biology as destiny has long been present in Arab societies (Mehrez 2007; El Saadawi 2007; Badran 2009). In Jordan, both women and men have been vocal in rejecting biologically determinist notions of women (Alatiyat

---

[13] I discuss her approach in more detail in Chapter Five: 'Renegotiating Gender and Islam: The Ambivalence of Religious Rhetoric'.

2003; Dababneh 2006; Al-Tal 1985; Abu Sha'ar 2008). Women are highly visible in the public sphere, the workforce and politics and thus challenge such traditional understandings of womanhood, which reduce their roles to those of wives and mothers. The absence of an Arab theoretical work on gender by no means implies that women and men as social categories have not been a significant topic of research. Many Arab feminists, such as Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed and Nawal El Saadawi, are creating their trademark work by interrogating the social attitudes and misconceptions that affect women's lives. Yet, despite their great efforts to make a breakthrough in terms of gender in the Arab world, their work has not developed into a theory. It remains a series of attempts to establish new approaches to understanding gender inequality from an Arab and (in some cases) an Islamic perspective. Mernissi argues that the lack of understanding between the sexes is the result of inequality, 'an inequality which continues to flourish whenever economic lethargy prevails, and where the erosion of customs and traditions is all the deeper and the more insidious for being unrecognized or denied' (Mernissi 1996, p.35). Similarly, El Saadawi suggests:

> From the moment she is born and even before she learns to pronounce words, the way people look at her, the expression in their eyes, and their glances somehow indicate that she was born 'incomplete' or 'with something missing'. From the day of her birth to the moment of death, a question will continue to haunt her: 'Why?' Why is it that preference is given to her brother, despite that fact that they are the same, or that she may even be superior to him in many ways, or at least in some aspects? (2007, p.20)

El Saadawi condemns the way in which girls are socialised in Arab societies into accepting a subordinate status. She is vocal in criticising the negative perceptions about manhood and womanhood that she sees as rooted in ignorance, religion and the failure to dissociate from prevailing traditional norms. Therefore, it is not the concept of gender that is troubling in the Arab world; it is the use of this term rather than indigenous alternatives, such as 'social type' *naw' ijtima'ī* (نوع اجتماعي).

Samia Mehrez provides a history of how the term gender has been conceptualised in Arab culture. She starts by tracing the roots of the term *jins* (Arabic for sex) to the Greek word *genus,* and explains how this old term was introduced into the Arabic language through a process of 'cross-cultural communication and translation of knowledge' (Mehrez 2007, p.109). Her attempt to clarify the difference between sex

and gender is analogous to the work of western feminists, who see in this a starting point for developing theoretical knowledge about women's subordination in society. Mehrez follows the historical development of the noun *jins* and clarifies how, since it consists of three consonants (like most Arabic roots), the term was naturalised into the Arabic language more easily than other imported words. Hence the new term *jins* (which is a transcription of the Greek term *genus*), when transformed into an Arabic trilateral root, becomes *janasa*. From there the term *jins* starts accumulating a broad range of significations that do not coincide with the original Greek term *genus* (Mehrez 2007, p.109).The primary meanings of *jins* in Arabic include: gender (as a grammatical category), kind, sort, species, category, class, sex (male, female) and race (Mehrez 2007, p.109). Expressing her concerns over the translation of gender into Arabic, Mehrez raises the following important question:

> If such are the complexities of the 'original' modern significations of gender, how then can we translate it into the target-language culture in a gender-sensitive language that would help us unsettle, rather than confirm, dominant masculine values and practices without submitting to 'fluency,' 'transparency' and hence the power and dominance of the foreign text? (Mehrez 2007, p.110)

She states that the solution to translating the term gender 'places us at the very heart of the politics of translation where language, as Gayatri Spivak rightly pointed out (2000, 397), should be seen as the process of "meaning construction"' (Mehrez 2007, p.110).

Mehrez explains how, in 1999, *Alif: The Journal of Comparative Poetics* in their special issue on *Gender and Knowledge* 'decided not to arabise the term gender by giving it an Arabic pronunciation and script, but rather to derive a new word from the root *janasa* that would correspond to the etymological significance of "gender"' (Mehrez 2007, p.111). Hence, *Alif* proposed the 'neologism *junusa* which corresponds morphologically to *unutha* (femininity) and *dhukura* (masculinity)… the merit of this translation lies in the fact that it recognizes gender as a dynamic rather than a static essence' (Mehrez 2007, p.111).

The journey of the term gender into the Arab world has been surrounded by a huge amount of controversy. The problems surrounding the term are not only linked to the difficulty of translating it into the Arabic language, it also has to do with the fact that it is a foreign/western term and this, according to some people, constitutes a potential

foreign invasion into Arab culture and values (Badran 2009; Mehrez 2007). Therefore, circulating the term gender was perceived as a threat to Arab society. This threat mainly has to do with the purpose of using a term that encapsulates a wider agenda aiming for social change. Margot Badran clarifies this in the following:

> As part of academic women's studies, gender probes into the deep recesses of culture and society. Gender analysis provides a tool for critiquing received conventions. It is a tool of empowerment for citizens and civil society. For all of these reasons gender is threatening to entrenched centres of power and authority, and to political groups seeking power. (Badran 2009, p.196)

In addition to being perceived as an external threat, the term gender is also used to widen the gap between the secularists and the conservatives regarding women's call for liberation. Badran argues that,

> Many secularists who are more familiar with gender are often unfamiliar or unconcerned with Islamic epistemology. Moreover, the politicization of the secular and the religious as antagonistic have thrust 'gender' as a tool into opposing ideological camps. Secularists find it a useful tool of analysis, while the religiously oriented see it as a destructive weapon of cultural assault. (Badran 2009, p. 197)

Moreover, Badran states that, '"Naming gender" in Arabic is in many ways more problematic than the idea of gender itself. Yet, of course, naming and meaning are interconnected' (Badran 2009, p.197). By implicitly and explicitly alluding to the tradition versus modernity debate on women, Badran asserts that, 'Trying to find a word in Arabic for the English "gender" as a term that connotes cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity as distinct from sex as a biological category opens up a plethora of problems' (Badran 2009, p.197).

Speaking about the fluidity and dynamism of the term gender, Badran sees it as 'a sign of cultural vitality and the need to continue to question and to analyse in the light of shifting environments' (p.199). Moreover, she states that, the 'construct gender carries with it something of what *al-jins* constituted earlier in its pre-modern moment and continues to convey to this day.' She then makes the following important declaration, 'Gender as social construction is not alien to the arabophone world. It is "gender" as focused on cultural construction built around the biological categories of male and female that is innovative' (Badran 2009, p.199). She adds that,

The English 'sex' and the Arabic '*al-jins*' are not simple equivalents. The English term gender in some way is closer to *al-jins* in that it signifies (cultural construction), a mode of classification (and therefore possessing analytical capacity). It is somewhat ironic that the Arabic word *al-jins* originally embodied a meaning and analytical capacity more closely resembling the notion of the English word gender than it now does by primarily designating sex, and that the English term gender is taken as alien or culturally invasive and dis/credited as 'western'. (Badran 2009, p.200)

In this regard, it is important to note that the use of the term gender in the Arab context is restricted to the academic field or to governmental departments and non-governmental organisations that are usually funded by western agents targeting social development, such as UNDP, UNESCO and similar endeavours. In Jordan, the word gender is either used as a transliteration of the English word or is translated to 'social type' *naw' ijtima'ī* (نوع اجتماعي). For example, on the website of the Department of Statistics there is a section listed as *Gender Statistics* that is further divided into *Gender Indicators*. Here, the term is used to refer to statistics relating to women such as marital status, education level, economic activity and occupation. Gender indicators refer to women's statistics in education, higher education, population, politics, and law. In that sense, gender becomes synonymous with women, a rather absurd conceptualisation which implies that men have no gender. In the academic field, gender is an inescapable term, especially in the field of women's studies where it is interrogated, defined and theorised in the hope of finding solutions to the problem of women's subordination to men. Hence, both fields complement each other, whereby the first is more concerned with discourses and theories of gender and the latter is more occupied with practical solutions that can reach broad strata of society. Unfortunately, outside these two contexts, the term gender remains vague and misunderstood.

Returning to the problematic use of gender in academia, Badran asserts that,

It has been in the context of academic and intellectual work that gender has been most threatening in the Arab world. In some instances, there have been nationalist or culturist outcries against 'gender' as constituting some kind of alien invasion, an intrusion of the unwanted, the unnecessary, and the actually or potentially disruptive. If gender analysis is about opening up new potentials for women and for men, for understandings and practices of their rights, it has fundamental implications for the project of democracy and with it the potential for disturbing hegemonic power arrangements. When confined to development, with the economic and technical aid this brings, governments not only view gender as unthreatening, but actively welcome it in the context of development aid – as long as it is controlled and monitored by the government. (Badran 2009, p.205)

Discussions on the implications and problematic use of gender in the Arab world serve as a reminder of the obstacles that stand in the way of women who are anxiously calling for social, political and economic reform. This unease with a term, concept or ideology that is perceived as western illustrates the setbacks faced by numerous efforts and initiatives when the political weighs in on the social and the cultural. Being overburdened with the numerous dimensions of their struggle, how then do women in the Arab world negotiate their way into an effective and useful strategy to move forward? In the following section, I provide an overview of the various approaches that Arab and Muslim women have employed in tackling the problematic nature of gender inequality. Where possible, I attempt to make a connection between the way in which these women strategise to push their agendas forward and the methods employed by the Jordanian novelists.

A feminism of their own: Arab women and their quest for liberation

Based on their ideologies, religious background and ultimate objectives, the feminists of the Arab world can be divided into two main categories: those operating within a secularist framework and those adopting a religious one rooted in Islam (Badran 2009, 2011; Treacher 2003). As I have already addressed the first camp, in this section I focus on the second group, which represents a contemporary phenomenon. In identifying their perspectives on women, I intend to demonstrate their relevance to the variety of approaches that Jordanian novelists deploy in their critique of gender inequality. Moreover, I find that familiarising myself with the various types of Arab feminism has helped me to better understand the novels under investigation.

Despite approaching women's issues differently, these two feminisms have never been 'hermetic entities', nor have they operated 'strictly within separate frameworks that the designations of the two feminisms might suggest' (Badran 2009, p.2). Secular feminism first emerged in the Arab states in the 19th century and through the first half of the 20th century, during processes of 'modernization, nationalist anti-colonial struggle, dynastic decline and independent state building' (Badran 2009, p.3). Islamic feminism however, first arrived on the scene in the global Muslim community in the late 20th century, during the late post-colonial movement. It also

appeared at a time of 'accelerated Islamist movement or movement of political Islam' (Badran 2009, p.3).

Emerging nearly a century ago in Egypt, secular feminists sought to present their ideology by avoiding the use of religious discourse in fighting for their cause; instead, they framed their arguments within the context of international human rights (Badran 2009, p.4). Secular feminism emerged as a 'composite of intersecting secular nationalist, Islamic modernist, and humanitarian (later human rights) discourses … it signified a model of feminism located within the context of a secular territorial nation-state composed of equal citizens, irrespective of religious affiliation and a state protective of religion while not officially recognized around religion' (Badran 2009, p.3). They argue that religion is an individual matter, which should not be made collective or public. Secular feminists realise that religious issues are sensitive and often controversial, so they simply do not wish to be caught up in a heated debate on women and Islam. Realising that scholarship in the religious domain is male-dominated, they distance themselves from adopting religion as a strategic tool in the hope of avoiding any false or potential accusations of crossing traditional boundaries. However, regardless of their attempts to be understood, secular feminists are routinely accused of being 'clones of the West, implementers of imperialist agendas, and the ultimate de-legitimizer – non-believers' (Karam 1998, p.13).

This approach is the most common, taken up by the majority of Jordanian feminist novelists. In *Outside the Body, The Bride of Amman, The Hornet's Nest, The Empire of Nara's Papers* and *Match Sticks*, the novelists present their case as one that goes against oppressive patriarchal structures and seeks solutions by evoking a humanitarian sentiment towards gender inequality. This sentiment invites liberal tools that are framed within human rights discourses where women and men should be treated equally regardless of their sex or religion. In these novels, there is hardly any reference to religion as a possible solution. When religion is mentioned (as in Afaf Bataineh's novel *Outside the Body*), it is presented as incapable of reforming patriarchal societies.

However, the changing socio-economic and political situation in the Arab world and the rise of political Islam, which was accelerated by the emergence of Islamic

revivalism in the 1970s, also set their imprints on feminism in the Arab world (Ahmed 1992; Badran 2001; Moghadam 2003). These changes were responsible for the emergence of a form of Arab feminism that operated within an Islamic framework. At a global level, this new form of gender activism coincided with the rise of third-wave western feminism, which stressed difference rather than similarity among women. Difference thus became a marker, opening the gate for a multitude of feminism(s) to be born, ones that addressed the specificity of women's experiences across the globe (Gillis, Howie and Munford 2007). This was a pluralistic approach with which many feminists identified, as opposed to the previous ones in first- and second-wave feminism that were commonly accused of addressing white middle-class western women and ignoring the experiences of other women who do not fit this category (Gillis, Howie and Munford 2007; Sa'ar 2005; Larzeg 1988; Mohanty 1991; Bulbeck 1998). However, despite the arguments made against second-wave feminism and the claims about its exclusivity to a particular group/category of women, it has to be acknowledged that second-wave feminism remains a crucial stage in the feminist struggle. It provided women (who do not identify as white or middle-class) with a foundation from which to start calling for the recognition of other forms of inequality. Strategically, it was more viable to galvanise women to join a common cause. The creation of a firm foundation would then enable new voices calling for an emphasis on difference. Thus, it has to be noted that the call for difference (under third-wave feminism) would not have been attainable without the efforts of the women of second-wave feminism.

Speaking against the homogenising of women's experiences, Chandra Mohanty argues that, 'western feminism discursively colonizes the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the Third World and produces a single or a simple construct of third-world women' (Mohanty 1988, p.62). However, with the advent of third-wave feminism in the West, more emphasis was being given to African women, LGBT issues, Asian women and a great host of other feminisms across the spectrum. The rise of a feminism rooted in Islam can be contextualised through postcolonial feminism, which rejects common notions of western supremacy and is very critical of the West. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park conceptualise postcolonial feminism as 'an exploration of the intersections of colonialism and neo-colonialism with gender, nation, class, race, and sexualities in

the different contexts of women's lives, their subjectivities, work, sexuality and rights' (2000, p.53). In this context, postcolonial feminists have,

> attacked both the idea of universal "woman," as well as the reification of the Third World "difference" that produces the "monolithic" Third World woman. They have insisted instead upon the specificities of race, class, nationality, religion, and sexualities that intersect with gender, and the hierarchies, epistemic as well as political, social, and economic that exists among women. (Rajan and Park 2000, p.54)

So, while third-wave feminism 'suggests attention to the politics of difference and accountability for the multiplicity of experiences attendant to sex and gender' (Mohanty 1988, p.63), postcolonial feminism has 'challenged the way difference has been incorporated into feminism, arguing that in the recognition of other women's differences there is also a relic of the imperial dynamic of feminism's hegemony' (Mohanty 1988, p.63). Postcolonial feminism provided many women across the globe with a platform from which to advocate their views and to promote their agendas while distancing themselves from a western hegemonic discourse that dates back to the long history of western colonialism. In the specific case of the Arab world, this emerging feminist discourse gave Arab and Muslim women space to stress the multi-layered dilemma of women in the Arab world where East–West, tradition–modernity and colonised–coloniser take centre stage in discussions on feminism and gender equality.

This process of distancing need not be understood as an attempt to be apolitical; on the contrary, it needs to be seen as a very acute political stance aiming to destabilise notions of western supremacy and dominant western hegemonic discourse. Given the history of colonialism in the Arab world (and the on-going western involvement in the region), this new religious framework that many Muslim women have adopted can be seen as a political statement with which they aim to dissociate themselves from a western ideology that has become linked with exploitation, materialism, double standards and values and principles that are incompatible with Arab and Muslim ones. Stressing the political dimension of women's struggle in the Arab world, Nawal El Saadawi calls on western feminists to understand that,

> In underdeveloped countries, liberation from foreign domination often still remains the crucial issue and women in the Arab world are more interested in it than in freedom of speech and belief, 'male chauvinism', or copying the social models of affluent western societies: 'in its essence, the struggle which is now being fought seeks to ensure that the Arab peoples take possession of their economic potential and resources, and of their

40

scientific and cultural heritage so that they can develop whatever they have to the maximum and rid themselves once and for all of the control and domination exercised by foreign capitalist interests'. (El Saadawi 1980, pp. ix–x)

Although made more than three decades ago, El Saadawi's statement still holds true.

Having highlighted the political questions surrounding gender inequality in the Arab world, I suggest that problematic questions remain unanswered. How can Arab women discuss their feminism without being caught in a wider political debate about western hegemony? Moreover, how can Arab Muslim women bypass wider political debates on gender inequality? This is not to deem such debates irrelevant; on the contrary, they are immensely important in painting the overall picture and in giving a sense of the degree of complexity that Arab Muslim women face. My desire behind retaining the distinction between the political and the social is to focus on tackling gender discrimination in the Arab world rather than being consumed by wider political questions on colonisation and western hegemony that do no service to women fighting their daily battles against discrimination. This is why I argue that, despite having wider political connotations, a form of feminism rooted in traditional frameworks (whether it be in Islam or other traditional/cultural means) could potentially bring the focus from the peripheral to the central (with the peripheral representing wider political questions about gender inequality and the central representing a concern for practical and long-term strategies to tackle gender inequalities that directly affect the lives of Arab Muslim women).

There has been a shift in focus in the discussion of gender within an Islamic framework. This shift involves a retreat from the traditional narrative about how in Islam 'equality is envisioned as a complementarity of male and female roles; men and women are created in a manner that suits them ideally to their divinely ordained social roles, adherence to which is necessary to a proper Muslim life' (Seedat 2013a, p.405). It also involves a deviation from common arguments affirming that, 'the status of women in Muslim society is considered progressive vis-à-vis other religious or social systems and Muslim women would be better served by the norms of Islam than the radical freedoms of the West, especially those suggested by feminism' (Seedat 2013a, p.405). Thus, in the late 1980s and early 1990s a different narrative began to emerge amongst Muslim women (Ahmed 1992; Badran 2009; Seedat 2013b; Moghadam 2002). Arab women scholars, namely Leila Ahmad and Fatima

41

Mernissi, explored the history of Islam and wrote about Muslim women 'in a manner that no longer lauded Islam's progressive perspective on women, but implicated the patriarchal norms of early Islamic society and contemporary Islamic practice in a continuum of declining Muslim women's status' (Seedat 2013a, p.405). Tracing the route of this new approach, Valentine Moghadam states that, 'the debate proper on Islamic feminism' began at a talk in February 1994 when Afsaneh Najambadi defined Islamic feminism as 'a reform movement that opens up a dialogue between religious and secular feminists' (Moghadam 2002, p.1144).

Being optimistic about the essence of this new form of activism, Anouar Majid contends that, 'a careful articulation of an islamically progressive agenda – democratic, anti-patriarchal, and anti-imperialist – might provide the impetus for a new revolutionary paradigm' (Majid 1998, p.324). Moreover, he argues that, 'this new Islamic consciousness, firmly rooted in usable traditions but uncompromisingly universal in outlook, can redefine the very meaning of Islam without abandoning the parameters of the faith' (Majid 1998, p.324). Furthermore, Majid states that, 'depending on how it is done, and from which ideological perspective, the recovery of an Islamic past, thoroughly cleansed of the residue of centuries of male-dominated interpretations, can be useful to women fighting for freedom in the Islamic world' (Majid 1998, p.332).

While some refer to this new phenomenon as Islamic feminism, the naming remains contested (Badran 2009; Cooke 2001; Seedat 2013b). Muslim women vary in how they appropriate feminism and Islam. I find Fatima Seedat's description of Muslim women's feminist activism useful and I draw upon her classification of the various approaches that Muslim women utilise in their critique of feminism and Islam. Where other scholars (Karam 1998; Eyadat 2013; Al-Sharmani 2014; Garcia 2014) offer simplistic categorisations of feminism in the Islamic world, Seedat captures the main arguments, highlighting the multifaceted dimensions that underlie each category, one that gives a clear picture of this emerging feminist framework without losing sight of its complex nature. Therefore, based on their views of feminism and Islam, Seedat divides the approaches of Muslim women into four categories: those who oppose the convergence between feminism and Islam, those who agree that there is a convergence and choose to refer to it as Islamic feminism, those who challenge how the convergence between Islam and feminism is presented

and finally those who accept the convergence by taking Islam for granted (Seedat 2013a). Below, I provide an overview of the various arguments in each category in an attempt to map the similarities and differences among them and in order to establish (more precisely) which approach the Jordanian novelists who use Islamic discourse in their work adopt in their critique of women's social oppression.

The first group includes scholars Zeenath Kausar, Haideh Moghissi and Reza Afshari. Kausar describes feminism as an 'ideological opposite to Islam and in her later work feminism is an extreme counterpoint to Muslim ethno-cultural traditionalism' (Seedat 2013a, p.414). Moreover, she contends that 'Islam and feminism are mutually exclusive and her primary objection to feminism is in its secularism and materialism.' Instead, she argues, 'accountability to God must be the basis of Muslim women's empowerment. Thus, she advocates women's empowerment through the Islamization of knowledge' (Seedat 2013a, p.414). A staunch opponent of the convergence of Islam and feminism is Haideh Moghissi, who argues that, 'such a positioning is both unworkable and undesirable' (Moghissi 1999, p.142). Viewing the religious as 'intrinsically hierarchical and anti-feminist', she objects to combining the two together pointing out that, 'a Muslim woman cannot believe in both the Islamic and the feminist concepts of equality; the two notions of equality are incompatible' (Moghissi 1999, p.142). Nevertheless, 'while she does not exclude the possibility of gender-positive readings of Islam, she contests how those readings should be named' (Seedat 2013a, p.415).

In the opposite camp are scholars who do see a convergence between Islam and feminism and choose to label it as Islamic feminism. These include Margot Badran, Miriam Cooke and Na'eem Jeenah. In attempts to formulate a clear perception of this emerging phenomenon, Cooke proposes that, 'Islamic feminism relies, firstly, on a direct approach to the Qur'an and Sunna that by-passes religious scholarship and authority and, secondly, on an appeal to religion as the origin of social-justice struggles in Muslim societies' (Seedat 2013a, p.409). Cooke explains that 'Islamic feminism is "not a coherent identity"; it is a contingent and "contextually determined strategic self-positioning"' (Cooke 2001, p.59). In an attempt to clarify Islamic feminism, Badran identifies, 'a kind of feminism or public activist mode without a name … It is represented by Muslim women who decide for themselves how to conduct their lives in society' (Badran 2009, p.141). She describes it as, 'a feminist

discourse and practice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an and seeks rights and justice within the framework of equality of women and men in the totality of their existence as part and parcel of the Qur'anic notion of equality of all human beings' (Badran 2009, p.324). Another attempt at defining this new form of feminism is by Na'eem Jeenah, who defines it as:

> Firstly, an ideology, which uses the Qur'an and Sunnah to provide the ideals for gender relationships, as well as the weapons in the struggle to transform society in a way that gender equality is accepted as a principle around which society is structured. Secondly, it is the struggle of Muslim women and men for the emancipation of women based on this ideology. (Jeenah 2006, p.30)

However, despite the efforts made to define and conceptualise Islamic feminism, it remains highly contested (Mojab 2001; Badran 2009; Cooke 2001). Realising that there are women who resist the label feminism due to its western associations, Badran adopts the term 'gender activists' (Badran 2009, p.8) and explains the reasons behind the rejection of the label by pro-feminist women as related to being 'confining and potentially misleading' and 'superfluous or heretical' by other women (Badran 2009, p.142). Yet, regardless of these various connotations of the term feminism, Badran (2009) explains that, 'this gender activism is a new and "encumbered analytic construct,"' (p.162) and its protagonists (among them feminists, pro-feminists and Islamists) represent a convergence that "transcends ideological boundaries of politically articulated feminism and Islamism"' (Badran 2009, p.141). Moreover, she suggests that, rather than being distracted by who should speak for and analyse Islamic feminism, she is instead convinced that Islamic feminism has emerged and that it is more radical than secular feminism (Badran 2009, pp.219–220).

The third group of scholars also finds the convergence between Islam and feminism viable, but they differ in their resistance to the label Islamic feminism. Many of their arguments are directed against the use of the term feminist, which they see as 'a betrayal of Islam and an uncritical embrace of western values' (Seedat 2013a, p.415). Prominent in this category are scholars Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, who argue that, 'the motivation for their gender affirmative analysis is faith and not feminism' (Seedat 2013a, p.415). Furthermore, Wadud contends that,

> It is no longer possible to construct Third World and all other specified articulations and philosophical developments of feminism without due reference to the western origins of feminism. This is why I still describe my position as pro-faith, pro-feminist. Despite how others may categorize me, my work is certainly feminist, but I still refuse to self-designate as feminist, even with 'Muslim' put in front of it, because my emphasis on faith and the sacred prioritize my motivations in feminist methodologies. (Wadud 2006, pp.79–80)

Seedat speculates that this distancing from the label is 'a way of maintaining the primacy of a Muslim identity, Muslim societies having borne the heavy burdens of colonial and empire-based feminism' (Seedat 2013a, p.416). Clarifying this further, Seedat reiterates the common statement that, 'Academic feminism is a historically western frame of thought born from the intellectual traditions of Europe's Enlightenment and has come to share in the burden of colonialism, hegemony and imperialism' (Seedat 2013a, p.416).

Wadud's rejection of the feminist label, despite using a feminist method, raises questions about the importance of making a distinction between feminist methodology and feminist politics: can one apply feminist methodology yet dissociate from feminist politics? Or are the two inseparable? In raising these problematic questions, Wadud is explicitly drawing on the work of Mohanty, who argues that,

> Like most other scholarship, feminist scholarship is not the mere production of knowledge about a certain subject. It is a directly political and discursive practice in that it is purposeful and ideological. It is best seen as a mode of intervention into particular hegemonic discourse … thus feminist scholarly practices (whether reading, writing, critical or textual) are inscribed in relations of power-relations which they counter, resist, or even perhaps implicitly support. There can of course, be no apolitical scholarship. (Mohanty 1988, p.62)

Therefore, in light of Mohanty's argument, Wadud's discomfort with feminist politics is, as Seedat argues, 'not a denial of the politics of her own work or an attempt to render her work apolitical. On the contrary, it reveals an acute political consciousness in her work' (Seedat 2013a, p.417). Moreover, she explains that, 'Wadud is comfortable performing a feminist analysis of women and gender relations in the Qur'an and prophetic practice, but resists the feminist construction of herself by other feminists in terms which suits their political aims and transgress her own' (Seedat 2013a, p.417). This approach is highlighted in depth by Asya Abdel Hadi in her novel *The Bitter Winter* (2010), in which she echoes discomfort with

feminist ideology and its implied western roots. Abdel Hadi, thus, promotes what she sees as the ideal form of feminism that is rooted in religion.[14]

The fourth category represents Muslim feminists who, 'without asking about the place of feminism in Islam or how the two paradigms converge, explain that they are now part of the landscape of the Islamic intellectual tradition within which they "push at its boundaries and reshape its contours"' (Ali 2013, p.153). Being less preoccupied with the hegemonic politics of feminism, Kecia Ali and Ziba Mir-Hosseini 'pay more attention to its critical discourse' (Seedat 2013a, p.418). Moreover, this group of scholars is characterised by being 'open to the utility of feminist discourse and [they] offer an unapologetically feminist analysis of Islamic law. This is an "insider" feminist discourse emanating from Muslim women, through their lived experience and in conscious engagement with the Islamic tradition' (Seedat 2013a, p.418). Thus, in this setting, Islam is taken for granted as being the subject of analysis and feminism constitutes the method of analysis. A significant marker that differentiates their work from others in the previous categories is that they are not concerned with justifying possible convergences of Islam and feminism. For them, 'the quest for dignity, democracy and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported western values, but is a true part of the Muslim tradition' (Seedat 2013, p.419).

Concurring with their main arguments, Afsanah Najambadi explains how most women who self-identify as feminist do not use the label Islamic feminist. This she states is 'because they take their Islam for granted and do not see a need to mark their feminism as distinct from other feminisms. Their endeavour, at least for now, is to claim a space for women's rights activism as feminist; they need to distinguish themselves as feminist within a site whose Islam is taken for granted' (Najambadi 2000, p.43). Moreover, she makes the argument that,

> Thinking of Islam as the antithesis of modernity and secularism forecloses the possibilities of recognising these emergences and working for these reconfigurations. It blocks off formation of alliances; it continues to reproduce Islam as exclusive of secularism, democracy and feminism, as a pollutant of these projects; and it continues the work of constituting each as the edge at which meaning would collapse for the other. (Najambadi 2000, p.41)

---

[14] I discuss her approach in more detail in Chapter Five: 'Renegotiating Gender and Islam: The Ambivalence of Religious Rhetoric'.

I propose that such arguments are significant in countering the dominant political discourse that casts Islam and modernity as binary opposites. Such reductionist views of Islam need to be constantly challenged. Instead of falling into the trap of viewing them as mutually exclusive, Arab and Muslim writers need to look for a comfortable self-positioning that can enable them to be critical of discourses that attempt to attack their religious beliefs as incompatible with modern civil society.

Seedat argues that 'as a discursive intervention, the formulation of Islamic feminism as the necessary outcome of the intersection of Islam and sex-equality serves what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls a "triumphalist moment of modernity" over Islam' (2013b, p.27). Therefore, even when some Muslim scholars utilise feminist methods in their search for sources of gender equality in Islamic texts and resources, 'they resist being co-opted into an uncritical feminist framework' (p.27). Seedat contends that this resistance, 'stems from the ways in which Islamic feminism, as an analytic construct, claims Muslim women's struggles (historically and presently), and furthermore from the potential Islamic feminism holds to erase the difference between Muslim and other women's struggles for equality' (Seedat 2013b, p.27).

By providing an overview of Muslim women's arguments around the convergence of feminism and Islam, Seedat challenges Islamic feminism as a necessary framing of these two ideological domains. Moreover, she suggests that, it is 'possible to theorize sexual equality from alternative paradigms even as we work with feminist methodologies' (Seedat 2013b, p.27). Stressing the importance of difference, she proposes maintaining 'a critical space between Islam and feminism so that their coming together recognizes the different and specific history and politics of Muslim women's equality work thereby maintaining "difference in feminist endeavour"' (Seedat 2013b, p.27). This stems from her critique of Islamic feminism, which she sees as a project that, rather than recognising the uniqueness of the experiences of Muslim women, is falling into the trap of producing sameness across Muslim feminists (Seedat 2013b, p.27). Furthermore, she states that even with the presence of Muslim women who resist the label Islamic feminist and the '"genealogical heritage of Europe", their resistance should be seen as challenging scholars to "work across intellectual, cultural, and geographic spaces in a manner that recognizes difference without attempting to erase it"' (Seedat 2013b, p.30).

I find Seedat's arguments immensely significant, and I agree with her about the importance of maintaining a distance between Islam and feminism in order to allow for different voices to be heard and for new ones to emerge. Moreover, I suggest that this emphasis on difference among women and in how they utilise or engage with Islam is a safer approach that could minimise the danger of falling into the trap of essentialising women's experiences. Realising that the term Islamic feminism is problematic, as it raises more questions than answers, I argue for the necessity of focusing on how Arab and Muslim women employ the religious rather than being occupied with categorising their work and arguing about or justifying whether their work is Islamic or not. I am in favour of an approach that recognises the importance of difference as opposed to homogenising the experience of Muslim women. Equally, I am in favour of approaches that deviate from the wider political questions involved when discussing gender inequality in Arab and Muslim societies. I find that being consumed with making a case for or against the use of Islam as a potential strategy for some women does no service to the struggles that women encounter in their daily lives. What is significant is to focus on how women strategise in order to push forward their agendas, rather than placing more emphasis on why they did so.

In this context, Haideh Moghissi argues that, 'It is wrong in my view to advise advocates of women's rights, as Anouar Majid does, that Islam and Islamic view is the only culturally legitimate frame of reference within which to campaign for women's rights' (Moghissi 1999, p.136). She argues that a better reading and understanding of one's history and culture is an essential task in order to discover one's roots. She states that, 'this historical identification is needed for any progressive movement in order to maintain its perspective, specificity and originality' (Moghissi 1999, p.136). Islam alone is simply not the answer. Moreover, 'both secularists and Muslim modernists stressed that women's degraded conditions were the result of a gender-biased misreading of the Qur'an, not the text itself' (Moghissi 1999, p.130). Equally, An-Na'im argues that Islam is not the best solution but, under current circumstances, it could be seen as the most likely method to be understood (An-Na'im in Moghissi 1999, p.136). This clearly shows that the battle of Arab women is not against Islam; it is against the interpretations of Islam in a patriarchal society that uses it as an excuse for oppressing women. Summarising the complex nature and challenges of Arab feminism, Mai Ghoussoub argues that,

The bitter reality is that Arab feminism, in the modern sense of the term, exists as a force only in the student milieu of Europe and America to which a privileged few can escape, and in a growing but still modest academic literature. The double knot tied by the fatal connexions in Arab culture and politics between definitions of femininity and religion, and religion and nationality, have all but throttled any major women's revolt so far. Every assertion of the second sex can always be charged – in a virtually simultaneous register – with impiety to Islam and treason to the Nation. (1987, p.17)

Mahmudul Hasan criticises the manner in which El Saadawi discusses the situation of women in the Arab world in her book *The Hidden Face of Eve*, arguing that, 'Much like El Saadawi, most feminists who castigate Islam for gender oppression are flawed confounding true Islamic teachings and Muslim cultural practices' (Hasan 2012, p.69). Moreover, he concurs that,

Such feminist writers largely promote the concept of sexual revolution and their feminist ideas have created social unrest and augured the constant threat of backlashes. By following such a trajectory, they may have received accolades from the regional and western establishments, but their feminism has done nothing towards ameliorating women's position in Muslim societies. (Hasan 2012, p.70)

In his harsh critique of secular feminists, Hassan asserts that, 'Denigrating Islamic principles is not only unwise and disrespectful to Islam and Muslims, but also fruitless and disruptive. It causes unnecessary troubles in society and gives a bad name to the noble efforts of numerous scholars and activists who struggle for gender justice' (Hasan 2012, p.71). Thus, such criticism by scholars attests to the complex nature of feminist endeavours in Arab and Islamic societies, in which Arab women are caught between imitating a western experience and the assertion of some writers that 'feminist scholars in Muslim societies should insist on "a feminism that is indigenous"' (Bullock 2002, p.xxii).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have offered an overview of feminism in the Arab world. I focused mainly on the awakening stage in Egypt as I have argued that it witnessed a profound questioning of gender, which was more robust than that of later stages. More significantly, I discussed the polarisation of the debate on women in the Arab world into tradition versus modernity, which forms the backbone of this thesis. I also highlighted the problematics of gender as a concept from an Arab perspective, and its implications for women, in the hope of providing a background to the arguments that I will make in subsequent chapters. Finally, I explored the myriad approaches that Arab and Muslim women employ in their discussions of feminism and attempted to relate these approaches to the novelists that I investigate.

I have deliberately and somewhat provocatively neglected the Jordanian Women's Movement (JWM) in these discussions on feminism within the tradition /modernity debates. I have argued that their concentration on the political, economic and educational aspects of gender equality has come at the expense of attention to shifting cultural understandings of women. In the next chapter, I attempt to explore these arguments more closely by focusing on Jordan. I start with the JWM and then move from the 'real' to the 'imagined' and discuss the Jordanian feminist novel.

Chapter Three: Jordanian Women: Between 'Real' Struggles and 'Imagined' Realities

Introduction

Having explored some of the major issues that Arab and Muslim women face in pushing forward their feminist agendas along with how they strategise to achieve their objectives, I now turn the focus to the specificity of the Jordanian women's experience. I thus start this chapter by discussing the Jordanian Women's Movement and its main agendas. I do this for two reasons: to provide a context of the materialistic conditions of Jordanian women and to explain why I chose not to engage with Jordanian feminism and chose instead Egyptian feminism as the most helpful framework for engaging with my chosen Jordanian novels. . I then move into identifying and contextualising the Jordanian feminist novel, describing my process of gathering, surveying and selecting the novels for this research. Finally, I discuss the theoretical framework informing my analysis of the novels.

Feminism or empowerment? Mapping the agendas of the Jordanian Women's Movement

The women's movement in Jordan was made possible through three main factors: the establishment of quasi-governmental organisations, nongovernmental organizations and royal patronage. However, as Warrick (2009) suggests: the 'largest organisations are usually called NGOs, but they are strictly speaking not nongovernmental but rather quasi-governmental' (p.144). The political activity of women's groups started as early as the 1940s when the Jordanian Women's Movement (JMW) began as 'a nationalist and charitable movement among upper- and middle-class educated women whose main aims were to provide (Palestinian) refugees' families with first aid, food and shelter' (Dababneh 2006, p.88). Their activism was primarily a reaction to the political and economic situation in Jordan at that time. Foreign (British) occupation was perceived as the main obstacle facing Jordanian women's struggles against inequality. Amneh Zu'bi, Head of the Jordanian Women's Union (JWU) writes, 'Occupation and conflicts, which the region suffered

from, were a major reason to postpone women's struggle for their own cause and their own freedom. All this was reflected in the empowering of patriarchal domination, and it even augmented women's inferior regard for themselves' (Zu'bi in Dababneh 2006, p.90). Yet, Jordanian women's involvement in nationalist struggles, along with the spirit of liberalisation that swept the region, 'made them think about their own demands and rights and consider ways to put an end to gender inequality' (Dababneh 2006, p.90). As Slawa Zayadeen, a founder of the Jordanian and Palestinian Women's Movement stresses, 'As a result of the occupation and its resistance, Arab women's awareness of the concepts of repression, reasons for poverty, freedom, and women's rights has increased' (Zayadeen in Dababneh 2006. p.91).

In 1944, the first women's association in Jordan was established under the name of the 'Women's Solidarity Society'. It was founded by the headmistress of the Al-Zahra Primary School along with other female teachers. Princess Misbah, King Talal's mother, was made its honorary president. The main goals of this association were to care for children and to help the poor (Brand 1998, p.120). In 1945, in a formal visit to Jordan, prominent Egyptian feminist activist Huda Sha'rawi requested Prince Abdullah bin Al-Hussein to establish a Jordanian women's union in order to become part of the Arab Women's Federation. The prince agreed, and later that year the Jordanian Women's Federation was established (Dababneh 2006, p.92). The federation was concerned with increasing women's educational levels, improving children's health and helping poor mothers (Brand 1998, p.121). Its' activity was directed at 'making women better mothers, and at rearing the next generation, not at substantially changing or improving women's socioeconomic or legal position' (Brand 1998, p.121). Providing a description of the JWM at that time, Salwa Zayadeen comments 'By the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, Jordanian women did not have any feminist political interest. Women were still under the control of the tribal and social norms. The JWM was still an infant charitable movement' (Zayadeen in Dababneh 2006, p.93).

With the promulgation of the new Jordanian Constitution in 1951 (after the official announcement of the unity of the East and West banks), many changes to political life in Jordan were witnessed. These included increased political freedoms, such as freedom of speech and the press, freedom of association, academic freedom, political

parties, freedom of religion and the right to elect parliamentary and municipal representatives. These factors, coupled with the active political Arab movement (especially in Egypt and Palestine) instilled in Jordanian women the urge to strategise in order to demand more rights and improve their socially and politically disadvantaged situation (Dababneh 2006, p.97). Consequently, in 1954, a group of about one hundred educated and politically motivated Jordanian women gathered in Amman and established the 'Arab Women's Union' (AWU). Emily Bisharat, the first female lawyer, was elected president. The establishment of the union came to be seen as the 'real beginning of the JWM, of which the main aims were to grant women the right to vote and to be elected to public office' as Al-Rashdan explains (quoted in Dababneh 2006, p.97). Among the main aims of the AWU were: 'fighting illiteracy; raising women's socio-economic levels; preparing women to exercise their full rights as citizens; and developing bonds of friendship between Arab women and women around the world to improve the situation at home and strengthen peace' (Brand 1998, pp.121-122).

Establishing its branches in major cities (Amman, Irbid, Salt, Karak, Zarqa), the membership of AWU grew to thousands. Efforts were mobilised and the women of the AWU demanded a change in the Personal Status, Labour and Electoral laws. They were also active in conducting seminars, workshops and in participating in regional and international conferences. In November of 1954, they presented their first memorandum to the Prime Minister demanding changes to the Electoral Law that would enable women to run for public office and their right to vote (Brand 1998, p.122). To AWUs dissatisfaction, the government has stipulated that under proposed changes, only educated women would be granted the right to vote. However, any illiterate man has both the right to vote and be elected to public office. Based on her research (and after reviewing issues regarding the union's membership, the objectives of women's suffrage at that stage and the response of the state) Dababneh contends that,

> One can describe the ideology adopted by Jordanian feminism in the early stages of the movement's history as not only being Marxist feminist but also containing socialist feminist ideology. This assumption can be justified by observing that the main founders of the movement were important figures in the communist party (Emily Bisharat and Salwa Zayadeen). Through this union, these women's demands reflected their belief that not only patriarchy but also the political and economic status of women are the reasons behind women's oppression. They believed that women's education is necessary to assist

them in winning new opportunities for work, which undoubtedly would shape women's thoughts and provide them with independence. By demanding the right to vote, women proved their absolute faith that the rights of a citizen were not exclusive to men. Such political ideology was the main reason for the union being dissolved by the state in 1957. (Dababneh 2006, p.100, my emphasis)

This is the particular stage that witnessed the transformation of the JWM from being solely a charitable movement to a more political and specifically feminist movement. This was when Jordanian women were mobilising to call for their right to engage in public life, to eliminate gender discrimination and to demand their right to vote and their opposition to polygamy (Dababneh 2006, p.101).

From 1957 until 1974, no women's movement organizations existed in the country and there was almost no political activity of any kind to promote women's rights (Al-Naqshabandi 2001; Al-Atiyat 2003). Democratic liberties were missing and political oppression was dominating the government policies. As Brand describes, 'for several years, activist women had limited options: to work with one of the underground parties or with the charitable society of their choice' (1998, p.124). However, Zayadeen confirms that women continued to meet secretly through an unofficial society (not permitted by the government) called 'Defending Women's Right League' (Dababneh 2006, p.101-102). This was not a new society, but was the new name given for Al-Yaqada Women's Society, which was a part of the communist party in Palestine. Due to the difficulty of conducting secret meetings, these women decided to establish a non-political party aiming to reduce illiteracy between women, called Illiteracy Elimination Society. The establishment of this society has enabled women to resume their meetings without greater governmental suspicion.

In 1974, the 1954 Arab Women's Federation (AWU) was re-established under the name of The Society of Women's Federation of Jordan (WFJ). This event was combined with the amendment of the Election Law that granted women the right to vote and run in parliamentary elections (Dababneh 2006, p.103). According to Al-Tal (1985), the main factor that helped to re-establish the association was the 1972 United Nations Resolution 3010 which declared 1975 as women's international year. The goals of the WFJ were familiar:

to raise women's educational and socioeconomic levels; to supports women's exercise of their full rights as citizens, workers, and heads of household; to strengthen bonds of friendship and cooperation with Arab and international organizations; to represent women

in Jordan in international Arab and women's conferences; to support Arab solidarity in the economic, cultural, educational, and social fields; and to support women's effective participation in building the Arab homeland. (Brand 1998, p.125)

The regular activities of the WFJ included 'weekly seminar, lectures, story or poetry reading, trips, fundraising dinners, and annual charity bazaars to sell the products of the various training centres' (Brand 1998, p.125).

Marking a milestone in women's activism, in 1979, the first female minister, In'am Al-Mufti was appointed to head the newly created Ministry of Social Development. However, while her appointment first seemed as a move forward, it was mainly intended to 'incorporate all women's activities into a single organizational framework directly under the control of Mufti's ministry' (Brand 1998, p.125). In 1981, the Ministry of Social Affairs established a new governmental women's organization in Jordan by the name General Federation of Jordanian Women (GFJW). 'Unlike the Women's Union, GFWJ was designed as an umbrella organization for all women's organizations. Individual membership was allowed, but individuals with a background in oppositional politics were unlikely to be accepted as members' (Dababneh 2006, p.104).

As Dababneh describes,

The GFJW largely dominated the area of women's politics for the rest of the 1980s and both the Jordanian Women's Union (JWU) and GFJW viewed each other as competitors rather than complimentary movements. No real cooperation took place between them as each reflected different dimensions in women's struggles. The JMU adopted an independent stance, whereas the GFJW was state originated (2006, p.105)

Nonetheless, in the 1990s the JWM has witnessed substantial progress in addressing issues related to women's rights in: legislation, labour market, political participation and education.

The most prominent women's organisation in Jordan is the Jordanian National Committee for Women JNCW (a quasi-governmental organisation) that was founded in 1992 by the Cabinet and chaired by Princess Basma Bint Talal. Its original task was to create a 'National Strategy' for women in Jordan (and more recently) providing legislative and policy recommendations to the government. The JNCW also represents Jordanian government in numerous forums (UN, CEDAW). The legal

committee of the JNCW is of particular significance as it is in charge of examining the Prime Minister's particular agendas, reviewing proposed legislation and providing suggested amendments (Warrick 2009, p.145). Functioning as an umbrella organisation, the JNCW organised an NGO Coordinating Committee whose task is 'to coordinate the activities of various organisations dealing with women's issues in order to avoid duplication. The Committee is also in charge of providing evaluation and feedback on the activities of these organisations' (Warrick 2009, p.145). Among the recent programs of the JNCW was updating the National Strategy for Women, which started in 2000. They also worked on a document entitled 'frequently asked question' with assistance from the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of Jordan as part of a campaign to promote awareness of the legal rights of women and children (Warrick 2009, p.146).

The JNCW worked on a wide array of issues both legislative and social. The legal committee was effective in amending a number of discriminatory laws on labour legislation, social security, income tax, penal code, personal status code and civil status code (Warrick 2009). The amendments have granted women paid maternity leave , better pension provisions, better access to divorce and improved (although not equal) rights to family books   (an important identity document that is needed to obtain certain public services).

With regards to their agendas on a social level, they participated in 'awareness-raising events and policy advocacy as well as practical efforts to support women's greater public roles' (Warrick 2009, p.146). The JNCW also established the Women's Knowledge Network in order to enable women 'in local government to share their experiences with one another thus promoting solidarity and developing professional skills' (p.146). The legal coordinator of JNCW, Ra'edah Freahat, lists the following as the organizations most important issues: 'work-related issues, personal status issues, and criminal law issues (such as honour crimes, rape and domestic violence)' (Warrick 2009, p.147). Despite being criticised as an elitist (in terms of its orientation) organisation, Warrick argues that the JNCW 'is an excellent example of the character of the Jordanian Women's Movement. It exists because the state chose to create it, and while its advocacy of greater equality for women is sincere and often effective, where the organisation finds itself at odds with the state's own agenda, it acts as, at most, a loyal opposition' (2009. p.148).

In 1995 (and following the Beijing Conference) the Jordanian National Forum for Women (JNFW) was established. The JNFW is also a quasi-governmental organisation and shares numerous agendas and activities with the JNCW. However, unlike functioning as an umbrella organisation like the JNCW, the JNFW is conceived as a 'grassroots organisation, with individual members around the country' (Warrick 2009, p.148). The JNFW 'works with the government, other civil society organisations, and international bodies in advocacy, training programs and awareness-raising projects' (p.148).

Among the legislative and policy priorities of the women's movement as a whole are family books, passports, the labour law and social security law, the establishment of a shelter for victims of domestic violence, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Warrick 2009, p.152). The family book is a form of identity document that is issued to families, not individuals. The holder of the book is the man responsible for the family *'rab al usra'*, and the subsequent pages are for his wife and children. This document is used for children's enrolment in school, and for accessing public funds such as food assistance or health care. Children remain in their parent's family books until they are married. Despite the presence of identity cards for (male and female) adults, the family book is still used for many purposes. This creates practical problems who do not have access to the document (either because they are divorced, widowed or whose husbands will not give them the document) (Warrick 2009, p.152).

A similar case is observed when applying for a passport for the first time. Unlike men, women are required to have the husband's or guardian's signature in order for the application to be processed. The efforts to allow adult women to obtain passports without the consent of their (male) guardians began in the 1990s. In 2002, the government announced a temporary change to the law, which removed the gendered requirements for passports, but in 2003, this was rejected as a permanent measure, though now, women no longer require the permission of a guardian to apply for a passport.

A slightly more optimistic picture can be observed in relation to the amendments to the Labour Law. In 1996, women became entitled to ten weeks of paid maternity leave as well as time during their working hours to breastfeed their children. The

Law also restricts the ability of employers 'to fire pregnant women and grants women up to a one-year leave of absence for childcare purposes, with the right of returning to their job after the leave' (Warrick 2009, p.155). However, article 69 of the Labour Law determines the activities and the hours in which women are prohibited from working on the basis of women health and safety which bears resemblance to regulations enforced on child labour (p.155). The Labour Law recognises women as different, and in need of special, advantageous rights.

In terms of Social Security Law, women are considered at an advantage. In order to be eligible for pension men must complete 18 years of employment, whereas a women are only required to complete 15. Moreover, women may retire earlier than men, at the age of 45 and also (in certain cases) have the choice of having their pension paid in one single payment. A woman (and her children) can inherent the pension of her deceased husband, whereas the same is not true for a women's death. 'A husband can only inherit his wife's pension providing he shows sufficient proof that he is disabled and has no income' (Warrick 2009, p.155).

Another primary concern for the JWM has been the establishment of a shelter for victims of domestic abuse. Despite the early efforts to open shelter in the 1990s, they establishment of shelter was delayed due to the 'constraints faced by the state with regards to gender issues, in this case because of internal divisions among various actors'(Warrick 2009, p.155). Among the reasons for opposing the plan was that 'it would contribute to family breakup by permitting public interference in private family matters and encouraging women to leave their homes' (p.155). The shelter was eventually established in 2007.

More recently, the JWM have been preoccupied with the law surrounding women's right to pass their Jordanian citizenship to their children. Many members of parliament argue that passing such a law would constitute a threat to the country's hegemony and stability due to the influx of refugees coming from Syria, Iraq and Palestine. Allowing the children of non-Jordanian fathers but Jordanian mothers to have Jordanian citizenship would affect the demographic balance of the country, leading to the number of Jordanian citizens no longer constituting the majority of the population. While granting citizenship to the children of Jordanian mothers would in reality increase the number of Jordanian citizens, the primary concerns are related

to the Palestinian case. As the largest numbers of refugees in Jordan are Palestinians, passing this law would be an explicit denial of their right to return to Palestine which is seen as granting Israel its ultimate goal of resettling the original inhabitants and establishing their so-called 'state' over the occupied territories of Palestine. Members of parliament also voiced their concerns over Jordanians having to compete with new Jordanian citizens over resources such as job opportunities, land and property if the law is approved. Liberal members of parliament on the other hand, along with women's rights campaigners, argue that preventing Jordanian women from passing on their citizenship conflicts with gender equality, which is clearly enshrined in the Jordanian Constitution. Chapter 2, Article 6 states that all citizens are equal before the law; and there shall be no discrimination between them in terms of their rights and duties on grounds of race, language or religion. Moreover, objecting to the law of citizenship contradicts Jordan's international agreement under CEDAW, where gender equality is key. Therefore, advocates of the law condemn the paradoxical stance of the Jordanian government in the way in which it claims that women and men are equal under the Constitution on the one hand, while discriminating against Jordanian women on the grounds of sex on the other hand.

Unlike women, Jordanian men do have the right to pass on their nationality to their children if they marry a non-Jordanian. Recent efforts were made in which children of Jordanian mothers and non-Jordanian fathers were given civil rights but denied political ones. Under civil rights, they are granted the right to education, employment in non-governmental sectors and certain property rights, while being denied the right to vote and hold public office, which is chartered under political rights.

A similar situation is witnessed with regards to the *khula'* law, with a slight complication due to the fact that marriage and divorce fall under Shariʿa courts and not civil ones, as in the case of citizenship. The *khula'* law calls for the right of a woman to divorce her husband if she can no longer sustain a marriage relationship and in the event of the husband being found guilty of not performing his duties under Personal Status Law. Despite granting women the freedom to terminate their marriage contract, this law is contingent on the wife giving up her right to alimony from the husband and her dowry (حق النفقة والمهر المؤخر). At first glance, this law may seem to benefit those women who are trapped in an unsatisfactory marriage relationship when, in reality, it only serves the interests of certain groups of women:

59

those who are economically capable of managing the cost of living, on their own or with their children, after divorce. As it falls under Shari'a law, another dimension is further added to this debate involving 'isma (عصمة). In Shari'a law, 'isma is placed in the hands of a man upon marriage, meaning that it is he who possesses the power to terminate the marriage contract. Those who oppose the law then ask: how can women initiate a proposal to end their marriage when such a power has been given only to men under Islamic law and tradition? The controversy surrounding this law stems from concerns over women's ability to maintain a decent living after divorce, viewing such a law as granting women too much freedom, which could have destructive repercussions, and many more, and it remains a topic of debate in the Jordanian Parliament.

   The JWM had to endure numerous obstacles, among these were the state's interference, which frame and regulate the work of the various women's organisations. As explained earlier, most of these organisations are either state regulated or have indirect ties with the government (through non-governmental organisations that have royal patronage RONGOs) the aim is to ensure that all organisations fall under the authority and supervision of the state. The existence of patriarchal institutional culture is another major hindrance. Although Jordanian women are stated as equal in the Constitution, a number of laws are still discriminatory. In addition to the patriarchal nature of Jordanian society, tribalism is another debilitating social force. Its preoccupations with gender roles, women's participation in public life and sexuality has proved destructive in the face of real tangible progress. Explicit in the tribal and patriarchal nature of Jordanian culture is the notion of guardianship, which is a fundamental factor that underlies the way women are perceived in society and the way laws are constructed (Almala 2014). On an attitudinal level, JWM has had to struggle with being perceived as adopting a western mentality. This was also augmented by the presence of a number of women who are 'anti-feminist', ones who resisted legal changes aiming to improve women's lives (including some women MPs) (Dababneh 2006, p.201). As for the obstacles that are internal to the women' movement, these included: lack of funding, lack of voluntarily sense of work, lack of coordination and insufficient grass rooting (Dababneh 2006). This perhaps explains why the women's organisations and movement as a whole,

are characterised by a moderate, incrementalist approach that achieves small and steady gains over time but does not make radical demands or challenges to the political order. This moderation has led to some criticism of the women's movement as too bourgeois ad too state-controlled to achieve significant change. Yet, if the movement were to adopt radical demands and tactics, its effectiveness would considerably be reduced, its organizations disbanded and its members silenced. The moderation of the movement has in so many other contexts in the Jordanian political system, been a necessary condition for its success. (Warrick 2009, p.144)

Having surveyed the agendas of the JWM throughput the past decades, it becomes clear that their primary focus remains on legislation, policy making and improving the materialistic conditions of Jordanian women. I argue that their primary purposes thus revolve around notions of empowerment (in the economic, political, legal and educational domains). The JWM has to be credited for transforming women's lives and most significantly, it proved efficient in influencing policies and laws that have a direct effect on the lives of Jordanian women. Nonetheless, and in spite of their numerous contributions, the JWM has either (unintentionally) ignored or neglected a wide array of feminist debates about the cultural and social dimension regarding women's daily battles with gender discrimination. So for example while it has lobbied to amend the law regarding reduced sentence for perpetrators of honour crimes, it did not delve into finding ways to eliminate the problem by shifting social and cultural opinions about this serious matter. The methods, for instance, could have included discussions and debates about the way sexuality is perceived in Jordanian society. A similar case is that of Labour Law. Again, JWM was able to grant women many gains in this regard (as discussed above) however, little has been done to tackle the on-going and pernicious problem of the social division of labour in which women are still having to attend to their traditional roles of cooking, cleaning and rearing the children (in addition to the added hours and pressure of work). These examples demonstrate the ways in which women's problems are most commonly addressed through providing legal solutions without a thorough and a firm grounding in feminist research that targets the root cause rather than the end result of issues. Perhaps what I am suggesting here is that in the Jordanian context serious investment is needed in feminist sociological research that could identify and address the major obstacles that women face in society in order to utilise methodologies that would hopefully prove useful in improving the lives of Jordanian women. This is precisely why I chose to engage with Egyptian and Moroccan research on women, as this is

more deeply engaged in social and cultural debates about the dilemmas of Arab and Muslim women.

The Jordanian 'feminist' novel: An exploration of challenges and the theoretical framework of the study

Before providing an overview of the Jordanian feminist novel, I would like to discuss some of the challenges that I have encountered in this thesis. Assessment of the Jordanian novel tends to focus on the development of the genre (Al-Nabulsi et al. 1993). Thematically, the vast majority of Jordanian novels discuss the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and its effect on Arab unity and sense of identity. While it is understandable that such a conflict would leave its imprint on Jordanian literature owing to the strong bond between Jordan and Palestine, this pre-occupation has overshadowed Jordanian attempts to raise other social and cultural issues. Moreover, with the gradual shift from the political to the social, little critical focus was given to novels that discussed women as a disadvantaged social category. Resources that did discuss women in the Jordanian novel focused on their contribution to the field as female writers and not as feminist ones. Hence, emphasis was given to the number of novels that were published by women, regardless of their content.

   The limited resources that do exist on the Jordanian feminist experience in the field of the novel are structured in the form of case studies. Thus, the resources end up being a showcase of critical analyses of novels written by women, of which a small number can rightly be regarded as feminist. So, rather than critics tracing the beginnings of the Jordanian literary tradition with a special emphasis on the contribution of women (and men) in raising feminist issues, the result becomes individual attempts by critics to analyse a group of novels written by women without making any clear connection to the wider social picture. This is clearly apparent in the works of Nazih Abu Nidal (2004) *The Rebellion of a Female in the Novels of Arab Women and a Bibliography of Arab Feminist Novels (1885–2004) Tamarud al-Untha Fi Riwayat al-Mar'ah al-'Arabiyya Wa Bibloghrafia al-Riwaya al-Niswiyya al-'Arabiyya* ١٨٨٥- ٢٠٠٤), Abu Nidal (2009) *Gardens of a Female: Theoretical and Applied Studies in Feminist Creativity (Hada'iq al-'Untha Dirasat Nazariyya Wa Tatbyqiyya Fi al-'Ibda' al-Niswi* , Ibrahim Khalil (2007) *In the Arab Feminist Novel (Fi al-Riwaya al-'Arabiyya al-Niswiyya)* and Arwa Obeidat (2008) *The Jordanian*

Feminist Novel: Between Commitment and Narration (Al-Riwaya al-Niswiyya al-'Urduniyya: Bayna al-Iltizam Wa al-Sard). Yet, ironically, despite discussing the difference between the feminist and the female novel at the beginning of their works, Jordanian writers and critics seem to struggle with these two definitions. This is apparent in the difference between what they explain at the beginning of their work and what they actually then do in the body of their study, something that I found confusing as both a reader and a researcher. This oscillation between the feminist and the female poses many questions about what is considered a more valuable contribution from the Jordanian perspective: to see a rise in the number of women writing about topics that were previously monopolised by male writers, or to see an increase in the number of women writing in order to advance women's cause against gender inequality and social and cultural discrimination. While I regard both as significant, I give more weight to the second group of writing. Based on the limited resources available, it appears that the first group of novels is given more attention and prominence than those that speak about the uniqueness of women's experience (although this is not explicitly stated).

This failure to differentiate between the female and the feminist has been a common trap that many Jordanian writers fall into. Even when attempts are made to document women's contribution to the feminist struggle, they are done in passing, giving very little detail about the name of the literary work, its date of publication or its major themes. Therefore, this confusion between the female and the feminist has made it a daunting task to pinpoint the emergence of the first Jordanian feminist novel. A good example of such confusion is Obaidat's claim that the first such novel was *The Girl of the Disaster (Fatat al-Nakba)* by Mariam Mesh 'al, published in 1957 (Obaidat 2008, p.65). This novel, as studies indicate, is a political one dealing with the aftermath of the Israeli wars on the Palestinian people and their sense of identity (Al-Sa'afin, 1993). It is therefore the first novel written by a woman and not the first feminist novel. Studies about the Jordanian feminist novel continue to follow the same technique by emphasising the gender of the novelists at the expense of the content of the novels.

I was disappointed to find myself reading work that merely documents the writing of women by emphasising the quantity of work published and hardly anything about the quality or the genre of their literary work. So, for instance, writers would provide

a trivial account of the novels published by female authors. Following Mesh'al's novel, further novels written by women were published; *Farewell, There Is A Remainder* (1970) *(Wada'an Hunalika Bakiyya)*, *Always Yesterday* (1973) *(Da'iman al-'Ams)* and *The Palm Tree and the Hurricane* (*al-Nakhla Wa al-'I'sār*) (1974) by Hiyam Ramzi; in 1979, Julia Sawalha published two novels: *The Magnanimous (al-Nashmy)* and *Will You Return? (Hal Tarjy'īn)*. She later published two more in 1984: *The Lost Right* (*al-Haq al-Da'i'*) and *Fire and Ashes (Nar Wa Ramad)*.[15] During the 1990s and up until 2002, novels written by women witnessed a clear surge in number.[16] This time however, (almost) half of them were judged by literary critics 'as progressing to literary work with a firm structure, that deviated from the traditional novel, and that leaned more on the experimental side' (Obaidat 2008, p.66).

Jordanian writer and critic Nazih Abu Nidal argues that literature cannot be classified as masculine or feminine; however, an author is more capable of depicting certain aspects of life considering his/her intimate or personal gendered knowledge (2004, p.11). He argues that, 'in our estimation, a female writer is the most capable of capturing the details of a woman's life and her internal dialogues and in exposing her changing worlds' (2004, p.11). Along similar lines, renowned Jordanian novelist Ghaleb Halasa expressed the value of the added knowledge that a feminist novel gives about women. He states, 'through the novels written by women, I felt like I was learning things about women that I had never known before' (Halasa in Abu Nidal 2004, p.11).

Following the critique of western literary critics, Abu Nidal affirms that a novel cannot be labelled as feminist simply because its writer is a woman. Rather, 'it must be involved either fully or partially in addressing women in the sexual or gendered sense and not as a classification based on the presence of male and female characters in the literary text' (2004, p.12). He gives the examples of *Granada* (1994) and *Siraj* (1992) by Radwa Ashour, *Sarawraqa* (2001) by Zahra Omar, and *Shajarat al-Fuhūd* (1995) by Samiha Khreis, none of which fit the category of feminist novel. In

---

[15] During the 1980s, only 11 novels were published by female authors and, according to studies of literary criticism, they were mostly weak and lacking in a number of elements of artistic structure and narrative techniques (Obaidat 2008, p.65).

[16] 25 novels by 12 novelists were published.

making this distinction, his ideas are in accord with those of Toril Moi, who explains that,

> we can now define as female, writing by women, bearing in mind that this label does not say anything at all about the nature of that writing; as feminist, writing which takes a discernible anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist position; and as feminine, writing which seems to be marginalised (repressed, silenced) by the ruling social/linguistic order. (Moi 1986, p.220)

Moi clarifies that female is not analogous to feminist and that feminine is not analogous to female. She stresses the importance of making a distinction between these three main categories, which in many cases people take for granted or use without a clear understanding of how different each one may be from the others. In this regard, substituting or using the female to stand in place of the feminist (as is mostly done by Jordanian writers) obscures a wide array of literary work that discusses women's struggles and their unique experiences as disadvantaged members of society. A woman writer does not equate to feminist nor does her sex mean that she has to produce feminist work. Therefore, it becomes necessary to draw a line between female, feminist and feminine since each term carries with it different connotations and different agendas.

Abu Nidal attributes the emergence of feminist writing to the growing awareness of Arab writers about the destructive effects of gender socialisation (Abu Nidal 2004, 12). He describes how, from early childhood, women in the Arab world are conditioned to fit their socially ascribed roles, how they engage in domestic activities from an early age while their male siblings are playing outside and enjoying their time. This social programming then begins to have an impact on women, who become active contributors to perpetuating the status quo. Consequently, girls are taught how to dress modestly, to behave politely, and to talk quietly while boys are subjected to a different and less pressurised set of rules. He argues that this destructive process of social conditioning thus reproduces men and women who, despite living in the same society, grow up with realities and perceptions of life that are starkly different (Abu Nidal 2004, 13). Moreover, this process of socialisation is among the primary reasons 'behind the formation of patriarchal ideologies that oppress women and that makes men live under the illusion that they are intellectually and socially superior beings' (2004, p.13).

For decades, Arab feminist novelists have been trying to speak against society, patriarchy and the 'disillusioned men' who hold negative views of women, as Abu Nidal argues (Abu Nidal 2004, p.14). They also wanted to dismantle the reductionist perspectives that many male Arab novelists take of women in their depictions of the wife, the mother, the sister, or the sex-worker figure. Among such writers accused of misrepresenting women was renowned Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz, whose depictions of women failed to transcend stereotypical images (Abu Nidal 2004).

Thus, Abu Nidal sees the situation of Arab women as part of 'a comprehensive and oppressive organisation that reaches into all aspects of our social lives' (Abu Nidal 2004, p.14). Responding to the reality of oppression against women should be part of a social and comprehensive struggle against all forms of oppression, backwardness and darkness, he argues (Abu Nidal 2004, p.14). Moreover, he asserts that, 'If an innovative writer does not realise the position of her gender battle in its social and historical context, then she may drift away from her domain' (Abu Nidal 2004, p.15). He attributes this error, into which many Arab writers fall, to 'their privileged social class, which leads these writers to be unconcerned with the struggle of other, less privileged classes in the material and economic sense. This is why the topic of women's social oppression in the writings of Arab feminists takes the form of calls for liberal freedoms' (p.15).

Acknowledging the hardships that Arab women face, Abu Nidal argues that there is a harsh reality that imposes its iron grip on women, and at the same time there are women whose consciousness has not fully matured or developed. These two factors combined will produce women who in their writings want to rebel against their reality, but do not know how (2004, p.16). This is why the image of women in novels written by women is that of an angry outcry revealing the presence of a real crisis but lacking the objective ability to resolve it (2004, p.16). Moreover, he argues that this lack of maturity that is found in some writers is responsible for work that lacks the artistic touch in addition to the emergence of novels that resort to the body as a source of social protest (2004, p.17). This can be highlighted in the character of Lina Fayad in *I Survive ('Ana Ahya)*, who sums up her struggle against patriarchal society[17] with the words, 'my father is an idiot … I have always wanted to spit on my

---

[17] I provide a definition of 'patriarchal society' in Chapter Four, page 81.

father's hand.' This technique of rebellion is also seen in the character of Rasha in Colette Khouri's novel *One Night (Layla Wahida)* (1961), who sleeps with the first man she meets in Paris in revenge for the long history of social pressure that women have experienced (Abu Nidal 2004, p.18).

Realising that individual attempts to rebel against oppressive patriarchal structures, principles, and regulations are doomed to fail, Jordanian feminist writers resort to the literary text in order to protest their lack of freedom in society. Ghousoun Rahal in *Mosaic (Musaīk)* declares, 'I am in need of a few white pages that historians have not contaminated with illusory glories of victories in which no one has triumphed in order to write until I perish' (1999, p.8). Fairuz Tamimi in *Thirty (Thalathūn)* makes the statement 'It is my attempts one after the other to say what I want and to fail' (1999, p.11). The burning feminist desire for rebirth cannot be isolated from the dramatic changes that the Arab world was going through, especially in Jordan, which has witnessed tremendous social transformations over the past fifty years due to the events of May 1948, June 1968 and the repercussions of August 1990 and the continuous migration from rural to urban areas.

While Abu Nidal and Obeidat have provided some useful background to the Jordanian feminist novel, I remained somewhat disappointed by the lack of resources. I therefore sought to embark on a journey and to discover for myself contemporary[18] Jordanian feminist novels. The process of gathering resources went through many stages. Firstly, I explored the website of the League of Jordanian Writers and Artists and viewed the personal page of each member. It is the duty of each Jordanian writer to register with the League in order to gain recognition as a writer and to obtain certain benefits, including publicity. Consequently, belonging to the intellectual stratum of society, writers or members of the league are able to transmit their views and messages to the public in a facilitated manner.[19] As this website includes writers of poetry, short stories, novels, journals, articles and many more, it took me some time to pinpoint the novelists. So, from 319 writers (on the website), the number was narrowed down to 77 novelists. These writers were then investigated in depth. From 77 writers, 40 were chosen based on their actual body of

---

[18] I use the term contemporary to refer to novels published in the new millennium.

[19] This does not preclude the fact that there are novels that are published independently through straightforward copying, bypassing censorship. I was able, for instance, to find *The Bride of Amman* by Fadi Zaghmout which is not found on either website. I managed to find it online.

work, since some of them were listed as novelists whereas what they have actually written is collections of short stories. The names of writers from this website were then checked against the names listed on the Ministry of Culture's website in order to verify the information relating to individual writers. Most of the names matched on the two websites but there were cases where a writer's name appeared on the League of Jordanian Writers and Artists' website and not on the Ministry of Culture's, and vice versa.

The remaining novelists were then researched based on the topics of their novels. Novels that addressed the Palestinian–Israeli war, or that focused on features of the capital city Amman and other related themes, were eliminated. The topics that were chosen mainly related to social life and social phenomena and practices as these demonstrate a closer look at the interactions between individuals compared to more political topics, which tend to focus mainly on general themes instead of characters. *The Rebellion of a Female in The Novel of The Arab Woman and a Bibliography of Arab Feminist Novels (1885-2004)* by Nazih Abu Nidal (*Tamarud al-Untha Fi Riwayat al-Mar'ah al-'Arabiyya Wa Bibloghrafia al-Riwaya al-Niswiyya al-'Arabiyya* ١٨٨٥- ٢٠٠٤) (2004), and Arwa Obeidat's (2008) *The Jordanian Feminist Novel: Between Commitment and Narration (Al-Riwaya al-Niswiyya al-'Urduniyya: Bayna al-Iltizam Wa al-Sard)* were very useful books in providing me with the names of novels and general themes that were present and a bibliography covering the period from the beginning of the 20th century until the early 2000s. I also visited the websites of a number of publishing houses in Jordan and contacted them by email to ask about the novels that I could not find in bookstores.[20] I managed to find 40 novelists and their 44 novels. Feeling a bit optimistic about the large number of novels, I began looking for more information about them in synopses published in national newspapers, in books and online. I was then able to find and purchase 36 novels.[21] After months of reading, I managed to narrow down the number from 36 to 20 that highlighted the pressing social problems that affect women's lives more than the others. Finally, after rigorous close reading, eight were chosen for the analysis. The novels that were excluded were based on their lack of a feminist element. So, for

---

[20] These publishing houses include: Wa'el, Al-Shouroq, Al-Saqi, Fada'at, Al- Azminah, Dar Nara, Al'Adab, Al-Waraq, Al-Yazouri, Al-Farabi, Al-Ward, Al-Karmel, Al-Kunouz Al-Adabia, Al-Moua'sasa Al-Arabia, and Al-Arabia Le Al-Aloum.

[21] I would like to clarify that the novels that I have purchased were ones written in Arabic. I excluded ones written in English as they are limited in number and in order to maintain coherence

example, amongst the excluded were novels that deal with corruption, tyranny, death, diaspora, immigration and fantasia. In order to facilitate my reading of the novels, I tried to group them based on common themes, as shown in the table below. The three main recurring themes were: challenging patriarchy, negotiating gender through religion and the emergence of a feminist consciousness. Of these 20 novels, I looked for stories that flesh out these themes more than others. This was when I narrowed down the novels to my final choice of eight (the ones that are highlighted in bold in the table). I provide plot summaries of the novels at the beginning of each chapter in which they are discussed.

Table 1. **Recurrent Themes of Novels**

Theme	Challenging Patriarchy	Negotiating Gender through Religion	The Emergence of a Feminist Consciousness
1.	*The Plate*	***The Bitter Winter***	***The Empire of Nara's Papers***
2.	***The Bride of Amman***	*The Witch*	*The Bitter Sack*
3.	***Outside The Body***	*The Thirst of Wheat*	*Salma*
4.	*As If It's a Joke*		*Faded Shadows*
5.	*Scheherazade in the Presence of His Excellency*		*Ahlam Yousef*
6.	*Faces In Broken Glass*		***Match Sticks***
7.	***When Wolves Grow Old***		*The Balcony of Disgrace*
8.	*Dancing With The Devil*		***The Hornet's Nest***
9.	***Anwaar***		

Although not strategically planned, I find it useful to have ended up with an equal ratio of male to female novelists because having that balance in the gender of the novelists helps to provide a more comprehensive illustration of the Jordanian feminist novel and also sheds light on how feminism is prioritised over gender. Yet, although not a focus of this research, it remains intriguing to consider how gender affects the approaches that novelists employ in discussing feminist issues.

Nonetheless, these themes are not rigid. They overlap so much that it was a challenge trying to place the novels into themes. So, for instance, in tackling the destructive consequences of gender inequality, patriarchy featured as a dominant theme in the majority of novels under investigation. The novels highlight patriarchy as a social fact. Although it may not be the central theme, the novels all present patriarchy as an important structure upon which their plot relies. Nevertheless, approaches to depicting this social order in Jordanian novels differ greatly. The majority of novelists embrace patriarchy as an essential social structure, for example: Asya Abdel Hadi in (*The Bitter Winter*, 2010), Ibrahim Awad Allah in (*The Thirst of Wheat*, 2007) and *Ahlam Yousef* (2011) and Ibrahim Nasr Allah in (*The Balcony of Disgrace*, 2010). Others criticise patriarchy, often using satire as a way of expressing their social protest against male domination, a technique used mainly by women writers Samiha Khreis in (*The Empire of Nara*'s *Papers*, 2006), and Rifqa Dodin in (*Match Sticks*, 2000). Still others take a radical approach, with novelists Afaf Bataineh in (*Outside the Body*, 2004) and Fadi Zaghmout in (*The Bride of Amman*, 2012) offering a strong critique of patriarchal control, addressing patriarchy by destabilising social values and imagining new ones that they see as more liberating for women. Thus, despite the pragmatism of investigating each theme through a pair of novels, this does not preclude the fact that within these pairs there are (in addition to similarities of approaches) differences in how these themes are explored by the novelists.

My readings of the novels focus primarily on the ideas they raise and less on how they 'work' as fiction. By this, I mean that my focus is on plots and characterisation, rather than, say, on allegory and word play. I identify major themes and examine how they depict, reflect or challenge certain perceptions, attitudes and practices affecting real-life women and men. I therefore read fiction alongside everyday Jordanian experiences and social theories. Although I am working with novels, I do

not identify my work as purely literary. I situate my thesis as an intersection between the literary, the social and cultural, and the feminist. I argue that fiction is a genre that can explore more controversial ideas than non-fiction within the social and cultural context of Jordan, as I have discussed in the introduction. While fully acknowledging the limitations of my method, I argue that my deliberate choice of not delving into the world of the novels could perhaps be explained as an attempt to avoid depoliticising my work. I believe that an emphasis on the techniques used by the writers would give more weight to the literary at the expense of the polemical aspects of the majority of novels under investigation.

However, using the words of Samia Mehrez,

> I do not wish to reduce literature to being a direct representation of reality, whether that be a social or a political one. For the relationship between the text and the world it represents is far more problematic and complex: it is a dialectical and dialogical relationship in which each develops the other. (1994, p.6)

Moreover, this complex relationship varies from one society to another depending on the number and size of the obstacles to which an author is subjected. Thus, a lack of freedom of speech, censorship and the presence of authoritarian governments are all factors that in one way or another interfere with the function of literature in a given society and how it is perceived. While I can understand that some may take issue with the idea of the novel as polemical, I argue that the issues raised are so important for Jordanian women, and are represented in novels in such a vibrant and thought-provoking way, that this 'mimicking' of real life cannot be ignored.

My understanding of literature and my choice to focus on the ideas it raises are also influenced by how novelists have come to be identified in the Arab world. Richard Jacquemond argues that the writer has,

> A dual identity: on the one hand, he is an omniscient being who is able to adopt an all-encompassing point of view on the social world, and on the other, he is a social actor with a precise function, an intellectual worker who is responsible for communicating the words of the dominated to the dominant classes. (2008, p.4)

Furthermore, he makes the following observation,

> The continuing power of the classical conception of *adab* [literature] as 'instruction through entertainment' can be seen in the still-important idea that good literature harmoniously combines didactic aim (*tarbiya*: to instruct) with aesthetic pleasure *(tasliya*:

to entertain) … In other words, though the ideologies might have changed, the way of thinking has remained the same. A preference for didacticism can also be found in the debates on the novel's legitimacy that accompanied the form's emergence at the turn of the twentieth century, and which were resolved through the paradox of realism – that fiction could seek, and attain, legitimacy by claiming to correspond to reality. (2008, p.10)

Indeed, 'it was by presenting itself as moral or didactic, and not as fiction, or as being as far removed from fiction as possible, that the novel attempted to gain admittance to Arabic literature' (Deheuvels in Jacquemond 2007, p.10).

This perhaps justifies the way in which the function of writers in the Arab world is described. Bahaa Taher describes the intellectual as 'the conscience of his society, since he is the first to sense the signs of an upheaval or of backwardness in the social order, and the first to suggest remedies for them' (Taher in Jacquemond 2008, p.87). Furthermore, the significance given to realist and didactic literature also explains the way in which literature is perceived in the Arab world. As Jacquemond argues, 'Such representations of the intellectual or writer, interchangeable terms in this discourse denoting the holder of spiritual authority or expertise built upon his unmediated comprehension of the social world, define the "legitimate problematic" that dominates the literary field.' In this sense, 'Literature should model itself on reality, and the writer has a moral obligation to intervene in society' (Jacquemond 2008, p.88). While he argues that these two postulates, 'realism and commitment, constitute the Egyptian literary *doxa*' (Jacquemond 2008, p.88), I would extend his thesis further and argue that the same is also true for Jordanian literature.

Muhammed Al-Muwaylihi writes,

Even though the narrative itself is presented in an imaginary and figurative form, it is also a true picture which has been dressed up in an imaginary garb, or rather a fantasy shaped in a realistic form. We have tried to use it to comment on the morals and conditions of present-day people, to mention the shortcomings of various classes of people which should be avoided and the qualities which should be maintained. (Al-Muwaylihi in Jacquemond 2008, p.88)

Although this description of literature was made more than a century ago, the gist of it still holds true for many contemporary writers in the Arab world.

Thus, 'By filling in the lacunae and silences in these forms of discourse, or by taking an opposing point of view, the writer becomes the "underground historian" or "parallel sociologist" of his or her society' (Jacquemond 2008, p.90). However,

> While this kind of theorization of the dominant ideas within the literary milieu certainly takes for granted more than it brings into question, it does at least emphasize the extent of the freedom and autonomy that writers have been able to attain over the past generations, as well as the elevated ideas they have of their social role. (Jacquemond 2008, p.90)

Yet, with this kind of theorisation, one could legitimately argue that, 'when fiction's only function is to report on reality, the boundary between the two is lost and literary discourse loses its own proper identity' (Jacquemond 2008, p.90).

While the metaphor of the mirror is commonly invoked by Arab writers in denoting the function of literature; for instance, Gamal Al-Ghitani remarks, 'True literature is the mirror of reality. It can initiate the reform of society, and it can contribute to the reform of difficult situations' (Al-Ghitani in Jacquemond 2008, p.91), the function of literature is far more complex. Critical of the mirror metaphor, Nadje Al-Ali suggests that the function of literature is to 'both reflect and mis-reflect life; it refers to it. Literature presents mis-reflections that magnify or diminish certain aspects of reality, twist some or leave others out altogether' (Al-Ali 1994, p.10). Along similar lines, and with reference to women's writing, Anastasia Valassopoulos argues that, 'it is critically stifling to assume that Arab women's literary writing only has one thing to offer: an affirmation of oppression' (2007, p.4). Commenting on the work of many novelists whom she has read, she notes that they 'reveal a deep-seated mistrust of any foreclosing arguments that would seek to predetermine their meaning' (2007, p.4). Concurring with the arguments of both Al-Ali and Valassopoulos, I choose to view literature (and in particular novels) as 'mimicking' real life, in a way that deviates from direct reflection, to distorting, challenging and creating new worlds for the purposes of criticism and evaluation.

The Jordanian novels discussed in this research offer diverse representations of women and of the relationships between the sexes. They explore new worlds and reify old ones. Nonetheless, the various portrayals of women are always reflective of socially constructed gender stereotypes. Similar to novels written by prominent Arab women, these literary works contain either 'reproductions or deconstructions of prevalent discourses on gender, though in some cases there is a modification

characterised by a vision of a new order and identity that does not totally overturn the existing gender and power ideologies' (Al-Ali 1994, pp.114–115).

By analysing the novels in this thesis, I construct an argument that literature is one specific site where the ideological construction of gender takes place. 'Rather than reflecting or expressing socially produced or "essential" womanhood, literary, like other forms of discourse, constructs apparently "natural" ways of being a woman or a man. Fictional texts offer readers subjective positions and modes of subjectivity that imply particular meanings and values' (Al-Ali 1994, p.115). In this regard, my particular readings of these literary texts shows how they are sites for reproducing, questioning, and challenging wider discourses in Jordanian society and, consequently, the social and political order underlying it. Ultimately, I argue that in one way or another, all the authors discussed in this research, to borrow from Al-Ali, 'subvert prevailing discourses, though they differ in the extent of their subversion' (p.116).

Conclusion

In the novels I investigate, the writers all condemn social practices that discriminate against women and support male privilege over females, the circulation of stereotypes about women and the restriction of women's roles to those of wives and mothers. However, they offer very different perspectives on, and solutions to these forms of discrimination. The first approach is, I argue, an extreme stance of rebellion. This perspective highlighted the constraints of Jordanian society as seeped in traditions which are oppressive, and compares such practices very unfavourable to the modernity of the 'West'. The second approach adopted a defensive stance by explaining the need to look for answers from within and to stop looking to the West as a model of gender equality. The solution to the social discrimination of women is thus presented as embracing the traditional values espoused by Islam that endow women with great value and respect. The third approach invites a new, 'modern' understanding of manhood and womanhood that is more liberating towards women. This is illustrated in the focus on the significance of gaining an academic insight into gender if material progress is to take place, or through highlighting women's social

oppression as central themes. The emphasis on this new insight into gender is contextualised through an exploration of how aspects of tradition and modernity might be negotiated for the benefit of women. I now turn to the first set of Jordanian novels in order to investigate how the novelists explore themes of patriarchy, and gender inequality in their work.

Chapter Four: Challenging Patriarchy: The Social Control of Women

When Wolves Grow Old by Jamal Naji (2008)

This novel revolves around Sundus, a divorcee faced with the limited option of marrying a man 27 years older than herself. Not happy in this marriage to Rabah and unfulfilled sexually, she develops a lustful interest in his son, Azmi. Her persistence in pursuing Azmi causes him to succumb. Azmi is a mysterious young man who is drawn to a Sheik, Al-Jinzeer. This sheik recruits young men to aid in his religious projects and charities. However, despite presenting a respectful, decent image in public, Al-Jinzeer is a lustful, corrupt and vile man who finds himself competing with Azmi over Sundus. A sub-plot concerns Azmi's uncle Gibran, who is depicted as a Marxist fighter who will utilise all his capacities to leave his working-class neighbourhood and background to settle in the upper classes of the capital. His sudden transformation and the lavish lifestyle that he and his wife Rabia enjoy make their source of wealth suspicious in the public's eye. Azmi's knowledge of Al-Jinzeer's evil intentions towards him and his interest in Sundus leaves the two fighting to showcase their power and influence. Al-Jinzeer is later found dead. Sundus returns to live with her mother as Azmi has explained to her that they have no chance of living together.

Anwaar by Taher Al-Odwan (2002)

This novel is about the suffering undergone by a young woman, Anwaar, as the result of her marriage to an older man, Samir, and her relocation to a place a long way from home. There she discovers her husband's strange habits and vile nature. Dissatisfied with her marriage to Samir, she becomes interested in a young teacher who lives across the street. This interest then develops into a love story and both Anwaar and the teacher, Majid, are placed in the difficult situation of having to suppress their emotions in public. After her attempt to flee with Majid fails, Anwaar's father takes her back to their village.

The Bride of Amman by Fadi Zaghmout (2012)

This novel is about an Iraqi man and four women from Jordan, and recounts their stories from a social perspective through various daily incidents that are constructed through traditions and social norms. The characters are examples of individuals who find themselves positioned outside of these accepted social and cultural norms. The novel explores the clash between the moral systems of the characters and social reality, and the need to either play along, rebel or manipulate a way out.

In this novel, Laila acts as the link between the other characters. She is the narrator, a sister of Salma. She describes many details of her life and her passionate desire to be a successful woman in a patriarchal society. She explains her worries about this passion to be successful compared with society's idea of a successful woman, which is limited to her being married. She ends up married to a man who does not match up to her ambitions and aspirations. She joins feminist organisations and notices a positive shift in her life and the way in which she deals with people.

Salma, Laila's elder sister, suffers from social pressure to get married as she is approaching the age of 30. She greatly fears becoming a spinster. At the wedding of her sister Laila, Salma wears a bridal dress and commits suicide, making sure that she captures this action on her laptop as a way of condemning society for its lack of understanding of the social pressures that women face.

Hayat is a friend of Laila who ends up in a disturbing relationship to get rid of her 'ugly' past. She suffered from sexual abuse from her father, which had a very negative effect on her and her perception of men.

Ali also suffers from social pressures to get married. He battles with his emotions and marries Laila, only to discover after marriage that he is unable to make peace with himself since he is gay. Laila sacrifices her sexual needs and decides to remain in the relationship with Ali for the sake of their children, a situation with which they both seem content.

Rana is also a friend of Laila. She describes her admiration for Stockholm and compares it to Amman. Rana escapes to Stockholm to save herself and her unborn child as a result of a sexual relationship before marriage. Rana discusses the conservative aspects of Jordanian society, which want her dead to wash away the

shame. She constantly makes comparisons between Jordanian and Swedish society. She is comforted by a Swedish friend, Charlotte, who enjoys listening to her story. Charlotte is planning to marry the man she is living with and who is the father of her two children. Despite not being in a marriage relationship, Swedish society treats them as normal citizens who have full custody rights. This leads Rana to ask the question, as Arab women, 'do we have the ability to change reality and impose new values on our societies? Or is the only option to escape from this society to other, more welcoming, ones?'

Outside the Body by Afaf Bataineh (2004)

This is the story of Muna, who lives in a traditional rural family that is an extension of a well-known family in Jordanian society and has a strong presence in the political arena of the kingdom. Muna suffers greatly from her father's control and harshness, which makes the entire family victims of his blind and cruel power. After graduating from high school, Muna meets her friend Sadiq in a coffee shop and this leads to a circle of accusations, which in turn lead her father to prevent her from obtaining a university education, instead forcing her to marry Mahrous. This marriage does not last long but she manages to use it to take revenge on her father and finish her education at university. While pursuing her education, she receives the most horrible kind of treatment from her father, who abuses her physically and verbally. This leads her to get married again, to Suleiman, a man in his forties who lives in Scotland. He also owns large commercial stores. She marries him against her family's wishes and moves with him to Scotland. After several months of marriage, the true intentions of this man are revealed. He simply wants her to be a submissive and subservient wife who can fulfil his sexual desires. When he discovers that she is pregnant, he becomes completely mad and demands that she has an abortion since having children is not part of his equation of marriage. Muna refuses, gives birth to Adam and gets a divorce from Suleiman after endless battles in court. She then meets Stewart and decides to marry him, breaking all Arabic traditions and religious beliefs, to which she simply refuses to conform. Her uncle Salem pays her a surprise visit and tells her to ask for divorce from Stewart. He warns her of her fate at the hands of her siblings, who will kill her if she remains with him, but again she

refuses. She sells her house and disappears from her husband and public view. Her brother then arrives looking for her but fails to find her.

Muna later decides to undergo plastic surgery to change her appearance, changes her name to a western one and returns to live with Stewart, her son Adam and the new-born infant. She later dedicates her life to defending women's and children's rights at various international conferences. She decides to pay a visit to Jordan to discuss these issues and her family fails to recognise her.

Chapter Four: Challenging Patriarchy: The Social Control of Women

Introduction

In this chapter, I investigate representations of patriarchy in contemporary Jordanian novels from a neopatriarchal perspective. Although it offers a robust critique of patriarchy from an Arab context I am, however, critical of the way this particular 'theorisation' projects modernity as only a western project. I therefore, engage with the critique offered about patriarchy. My emphasis is on novels that are critical of patriarchy and highlight women's varying modes of negotiating their way through this system. I have divided these novels into two categories: in the first, I discuss how patriarchy is challenged through depictions of sexuality (Jamal Naji's *When Wolves Grow Old ('Indama Tashīkhu al-Dhi'āb)* and Taher Al-Odwan's *Anwaar (Anwār)*) and in the second, I explore how this challenge is effected through representations of defiance and escape (Afaf Bataineh's *Outside The Body* (*Kharij al-Jasad*) and Fadi Zaghmout's *The Bride of Amman* (*'Arūs 'Amman))*. My theoretical framework centres on Hisham Sharabi's *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in The Arab World* (1988) in which he attempts to explain the social structures prevalent in Arab societies. I start by defining patriarchy within an Arab context and assessing its implications for women. I then explain the relevance of Sharabi's critique in relation to the novels under investigation. Next, I explore the two different literary approaches to challenging the patriarchal structure. Finally, I attempt to contextualise these 'modes of resistance' within the social and cultural context of Jordanian society.

Patriarchy in the Arab context

Many attempts have been made to define patriarchy in the Arab world. However, I find the following definition by Suad Joseph particularly helpful: 'the prioritising of the rights of males and elders (including elder women) and the justification of those rights within kinship values which are usually supported by religion' (Joseph 1996,

p.14). Joseph quotes Peter Knauss[22], an academic and political scientist, who defines Arab patriarchy as, 'a hierarchy of authority that is controlled and dominated by "males", originating in the family' (Joesph 1996, p.14). Focusing on the Arab father figure, whose role is crucial in the novels I am investigating, Halim Barakat contends that he 'has authority and responsibility… and expects respect and unquestioning compliance and supports his power by control over land, resources, and income generation' (Barakat 1993, p.100). Barakat also claims that the reason patriarchy is so evident in the Arab world is because the family is considered the basic unit of society. Because such a system also promotes the superiority of men over women, patriarchy has a tremendous effect on the lives of Arab women, legitimising male control and making any act that defies it seem impossible. It presupposes unquestioning obedience to the male as head of the family. Moreover, Abla Amawi describes a patriarchal society as one that,

> For the most part, does not acknowledge any role for a woman except within socially accepted conditions and within the limits of certain confines that they should not violate. Within this structure, relationships are organized in a vertical manner, where the paternal will of the father is absolute and further strengthened by tradition and/or coercion. (Amawi 2001, p.11)

Shifting the focus from the wider, more comprehensive picture of the dynamics of patriarchal societies to the implications that these have on women, Catherine Kikoski provides a useful analysis of women's situation. She argues that,

> the cultural backdrop of the Middle East is traditional, and much influenced by the conservatism of prevailing religions…traditional cultures, irrespective of religions, tend to be patriarchal, to mute women's voices, and to place them into positions submissive to men. (Kikoski 2000, p.134)

I find her emphasis on tradition as an impediment to women's social progress very significant. This is because it raises questions about the role that tradition (or more specifically traditional norms, perceptions and practices around women) plays in agendas aiming to improve women's everyday lives. Are traditions and social and cultural progress mutually exclusive? This is an important question that the novelists discussed in this chapter address.

---

[22] According to the New York Times, Peter Knauss is considered an expert on Africa. He has written *The Persistence of Patriarchy: Class, Gender and Ideology in Twentieth Century Algeria* published by Prager in 1987.

Patriarchy is also a controversial topic among western feminists, although for different reasons. For instance, Michelle Barrett argues that the term should be avoided because, 'the use of the term patriarchy assumes that the relation between men and women is unchanging and universalistic' (Barrett 1980, p.15). However, Sylvia Walby, unlike some of her fellow feminists, argues that the problem is not with the term itself but, 'it is in the way it is used in specific texts as it involves problems of reductionism, biologism, universalism, and therefore the inconsistent definition of patriarchy needs to be overcome in an adequate analysis of gender inequality' (Walby 1986, p.28).

Many Arab feminists, notably Nawal El Saadawi, see patriarchy as a huge obstacle that hinders women's progress in society (El Saadawi 2007). Other Arab and Muslim intellectuals blame this social system for the failure of Arab countries to embrace modernity (Moghissi 1999; Abu Lughod 1998; Sharabi 1988). Although it is understandable why some western feminists have developed various ways of evading the term patriarchy, I use it to highlight the social struggle between women and men precisely because of its potency in Arab societies.

Moreover, because tribalism (as well as family) is also one of the main features of Jordanian society and culture, patriarchy in this context gains tremendous force. Despite the socioeconomic changes that have taken place in Jordan over the past several decades as a result of globalisation and modernisation, tribalism has remained a dominant characteristic and an important part of Jordanian identity (Pettygrove 2006). This social structure, composed of individuals belonging to groups which have close kinship, becomes occupied with gaining power and influence. The prestige and significance of a tribe in turn depends on many factors, particularly reputation (Baffoun 1982). Unfortunately, this reputation is not solely dependent on the attributes of the male members of the family, but is also reliant on the females; for instance, if a woman makes a 'mistake' of a sexual nature,[23] this is capable of destroying the entire reputation or honour of her tribe unless it is regained through blood: that is, by the killing of the woman concerned (Abu-Odeh 2010; El Saadawi 2007; Ghanim 2009; Faqir 2001; Zuhur 2008).

---

[23] This includes a wide range of actions, from talking alone to a male stranger to having sexual intercourse before marriage.

The presence of a strong tribal system in Jordan has served as the backbone for patriarchy, in which the patriarch is a man who is controlling and massively powerful. The relationship between tribalism and patriarchy is causal, whereby the over-emphasis on the prestige and status of the tribe at the macro level becomes responsible for the increase in domineering patriarchal attitudes towards the nuclear family, of which women are the primary victims. The large-scale structure of society becomes responsible for the domination within the nuclear family. At a different level, it is important to mention how tribalism becomes a tool in maintaining and reinforcing Jordanian identity against the growing number of Palestinians, who pose a serious concern due to the Israeli Alternative Country Scheme,[24] in addition to the growing influx of refugees from Syria and Iraq. The primary concerns about the number of Palestinians in Jordan need not be understood in negative terms, it is a common shared fear about the future of the land of Palestine, which is being taken at an alarming rate by the Israelis. Moreover, the lack of resources and the poor economic situation in Jordan has made life a bit harsher for Jordanians.[25] This perhaps explains why patriarchy is so deeply entrenched in Jordanian society in a manner that is slightly different from other Arab nations. In addition to tribalism, the population's relatively small size is another contributory factor as it means that tribes and individuals are easily recognisable. This, in turn, exerts extra pressure on individuals to adhere to moral values and norms.

Although many writers have defined and discussed patriarchy in the Arab world, I find Hisham Sharabi's analysis the most useful in explaining the type of patriarchy found in Arab societies. Whereas the majority of academics focus on the social implications of the patriarchal structure on individuals (including women) (El Saadawi 2007; Joseph 1996; Mernissi 1982; Moghadam 1992; Badran 1986; Minces 1982; Ghanim 2009; Joseph and Slyomovics 2001), Sharabi's assessment is distinctive. He explains patriarchy in a comprehensive way, not only focusing on its regional implications but also investigating the external and global factors that he

---

[24] This is a plan proposed by the Israeli government that involves the displacement of all Palestinians to Jordan; thus Israel would dominate all of Palestinian land and claim it as theirs. In this proposal, Jordan becomes the alternative country for Palestinians, a plan that is rejected by both the Jordanian and the Palestinian side.

[25] It is important to mention in this context that, despite feelings of frustration, the overall sentiment about refugees in Jordan is one of moral commitment owing to the strong Arab and Islamic bonds between the countries. Many people share the view that borders are imaginary and a product of colonialism and that all Arab countries are indeed one entity spread over a large area of land.

sees as implicitly responsible for the presence of this social order. His approach of comparing and contrasting Arab societies with western ones and then formulating a new understanding of the social, political and economic situation of the Arab world has facilitated my understanding of the novels I examine. In particular, these perspectives are helpful in exploring novels involving plots in which the notion of East and West as binary opposites directly affects protagonists' lives. However, as much as I find Sharabi's analysis and critique beneficial, I take issue with his overtly positive perception of western modernity and his assertion that modernity is only a western construct. He fails to provide a comprehensive view of modernity and chooses to focus solely on the benefits that it has brought to western societies (Sheehi 1997). Therefore, while I draw upon his description of Arab societies in facilitating my understanding of the novels, I also provide a critique of his overtly ambitious views of modernity.[26]

Sharabi's neopatriarchy: A useful point of reference

Sharabi provides a critical analysis of what he sees as the deteriorating social, political and economic situation in the Arab world. His primary focus lies in analysing the relationship between modernity and patriarchy. He then attempts to explain what he sees as the disappointing effect of modernity on the Arab world. After tracing the history of Arab society and culture from the Arab renaissance in the 19th century until the 1980s, he argues that the primary cause of the Arab world's political, social and economic regression lies in its inability to fully embrace modernity. He explains that when Arab society – which is patriarchal in structure – was confronted by modernity, the outcome was a distorted form of modernity, which he refers to as 'neopatriarchy' (Sharabi 1988, p.4). By this, he means that modernity did transform many aspects of Arab lives through the introduction of western lifestyles, western education and enhanced technologies, but it did so while maintaining the patriarchal structure intact. Providing a useful summary of Sharabi's main arguments, Halim Barakat explains,

> Because of the prevailing patriarchy, modernization could only be 'dependent modernization,' that is, distorted and inverted modernity. In other words, this modernization has failed to break down patriarchal relations and forms, it has provided

---

[26] I offer this critique on the section on tradition and modernity in Chapter Six, pages (194-200).

the ground for producing a hybrid – the present neopatriarchal society, which is neither modern nor traditional, but which limits participation by its members because of the continued dominance exercised by single leaders. (Barakat 1993, p.23)

For Sharabi, this inability to fully transform in the same way as their western counterpart is the primary reason behind Arab stagnation.

In providing a clearer picture of the neopatriarchal model that prevails in Arab societies, Sharabi explains the difference between autonomy and heteronomy. He defines autonomy as 'based on mutual respect and justice, adheres to an ethic of freedom' while heteronomy is 'based on subordination and obedience, upholds an ethic of authority' (Sharabi 1988, p.43). He then argues that the heteronomous model of society is common in the Arab world, where its members are unable to break free from others and are always dependent on other people for change. To clarify this concept, he compares Japan and the Arab world and evaluates the ways in which the two differ greatly in terms of dependency from state level to individuals. The prevalence of heteronomy as a characteristic of individuals and states is one of the primary pitfalls of the Arab world, he argues. Individuals lack the extra initiative required to break away from family bonds and to act as transformative social agents. Heteronomous societies are therefore far more resistant to change than autonomous ones (Sharabi 1988, p.45).

Moreover, he suggests that his evaluation of the current Arab situation could serve as a pretext for future revolutions to bring about social change. He argues that the first steps in moving forward – and, more optimistically, becoming modern – are to learn how to be critical of the social and political structures of patriarchy, and in then having the psyche to develop and the will to change or to be a part of a revolution that would ultimately transform society (Sharabi 1988, p.151).

Although Sharabi's evaluation dates back to the late 1980s, many of his arguments are still pertinent and this validity, in fact, supports his main argument about the speed of development, which tends to be slow in neopatriarchal Arab societies. Despite the Arab Spring, which proved capable of bringing down many dictators in Iraq, Tunisia, Yemen and Egypt; the rise and fall of Islamists; and the massive transformations that took place at the political level, such changes were unable to transform the social make-up of Arab countries. In this sense Sharabi's argument is

helpful in showing how Arab societies still cling to a neopatriarchal model that appears to be stubbornly resistant to change.

Challenging patriarchy through depictions of sexuality

In an attempt to investigate how Jordanian novels engage with heterosexual relations in a patriarchal society, this section explores the way in which male novelists Jamal Naji and Taher Al-Odwan 'challenge' patriarchal control by stressing the capacity of female 'active' sexuality. In some ways, *When Wolves Grow Old* and *Anwaar* could be viewed as erotic novels because they illustrate an indulgence in male fantasies around female sexuality. Nonetheless, I suggest that these novels provide good examples of literary work that stresses the capability of women to break boundaries through their depiction of female characters who are not traditional. The novels present female protagonists, Sundus and Anwaar respectively, as women who are capable of negotiating their way within the existing patriarchal structure. Their enjoyment of their desirability as 'sexy' women and sexual pleasure is one way in which these characters are depicted as different from traditional women. One means at their disposal is sexual pleasure enjoyed in secret.

In their work, Naji and Al-Odwan present a new image of women. Yet, far from appearing solely as sex symbols, Sundus and Anwaar are presented as strong, intelligent, self-conscious characters who choose to have things their own way. However, in what sense is it liberating to have male authors (Naji and Al-Odwan) exploring the overt sexuality of female characters? It may even be legitimately argued that such depictions are not only disempowering, but also serve as methods to further reinstate male dominance over women. Speaking about the sexualisation of western culture, Feona Attwood states that, '"fetishistic sexual imagery", in popular culture has become another form of textual disavowal, recasting power relations between the sexes as a series of glossily stylized sexy encounters, thereby diverting attention away from real gender inequalities' (2006, p.83). Moreover, Judith Williamson explains that 'both retro and fetish images are seen as working to disguise sexism. They succeed too, being mistakenly perceived by many academics as "cutting edge and radical" as a result of a misplaced theoretical focus on sexuality rather than gender' (n.p.2003). Rosalind Gills makes the argument that, '"the sexual subjectification" which new popular representations appear to offer women are

simply mechanisms of "objectification in new and even more pernicious guise"' (2003, pp.103–104). While this may be the case for a number of novels written by male authors (El Saadawi 2007), I argue that in these two novels the situation is more complex. I suggest that this is because of the cultural and social context of conservative Arab societies, where female authors face a number of obstacles when using sexual depictions in their literary work. So women who choose to defy the norm are likely to have their work banned, and undergo a smear campaign, as happened for instance to *The Origins of Desire ('Asl al-Hawa)* by Huzama Habaib (Al-Naimi 2011; Al-Qasim 2008). However, male authors do not experience the same backlash for using sexual references and depictions in their work. Thus, while one ponders the thought of what such novels would have been like had they been written by women, it is important to remember that, despite the gender of the authors, these novels offer depictions of female sexuality that are presented as 'liberating' in various ways. Despite having some elements of an erotic novel, I argue that the novelists' representations of female sexuality serve as 'tentative' tools to defy patriarchal control, albeit leaving the social structure intact.

Defying normative depictions of sexuality

These two novels are distinctive in breaking away from stereotypical representations of male and female sexuality in Jordanian fiction; firstly, in presenting both women and men as initiators of sex, and secondly in destabilising the categories of sexual partners; that is, sex is occurring between son and mother-in-law and between a religious figure and a married woman. The Arab reader has been accustomed to the image of male characters whose libido is unquenchable. They are often portrayed chasing after women and initiating heterosexual activity (Coccato 1995). The most common descriptions of female characters show them as weak, vulnerable and passive (Cohen-Mor 2005). The power dynamics in these stereotypical depictions of women are to the benefit of men. It is important to note that these negative stereotypes originate from traditional essentialist perceptions of women, ones that have commonly been held for generations by a wide array of the Arab public.

In both novels, sexual representations of women are destabilised. Sundus and Anwaar are presented as active agents in their heterosexual relationships. They are

no longer perceived as victims of male sexual pleasure, but as women looking for ways to satisfy their sexual desires on roughly the same terms as men. In *When Wolves Grow Old*, Sundus is the initiator of a sexual relationship between herself and Azmi, whereas in *Anwaar*, it is the male neighbour who opens Anwaar's eyes to the pleasure of desire. The significance of such depictions is in highlighting the balance between the sexual desires of both men and women, whereas in traditional Arabic fiction the sole emphasis is on the desires of male characters (Coccato 1995). Expressing her sexual frustration, we read, via Sundus:

> What do I say about this unfair life? What do I say about the women of our neighbourhood who forced me to marry Rabah despite his being 27 years older than me? Their detailed talk about what happens between them and their men in bed used to torment me. They used to talk with boldness and joy about husbands who suddenly return from work just to have sex with their wives and others who become exhausted in bed and they would mention details that would arouse me and torment me. … *I am in need of a man who can protect me and quench my thirst.* (Naji 2010, p.35, my emphasis)[27]

On a similar level, the character of Al-Jinzeer, who is shown as desperately trying to pursue Sundus, complains: 'I have forgiven Azmi for everything except for Sundus, who is the *nectar that brings my soul back to me*, a *soul* that is close to *drying up* and abandoning me' (Naji 2010, p.192, my emphasis)[28]. Both characters are depicted as tormented by their sexual deprivation.

Through these depictions, age features as a significant factor in the enjoyment of sexual pleasure. Youth becomes associated with higher sexual desirability and sexual drive. Moreover, the emphasis that is placed on youth helps in constructing a specific version of heterosexual sex involving what I would call 'compatible sexual partners'. This compatibility is closely linked to similar age groups. So, for example the sexual desire that Azmi and Sundus are shown to have for each other is depicted as normative, as opposed to the desire that Al-Jinzeer and Rabah have for Sundus, which is implicitly presented as 'absurd' and 'repulsive', due to the large age gap between them.

---

[27] ماذا أقول في هذه الحياة الظالمة؟ ماذا أقول بنساء حيِّنا اللواتي أرغمنني على الزواج من رباح، مع أنه يكبرني بسبعة وعشرين عاما. كانت أحاديثهن المفصلة عما يجري بينهن ورجالهن في الفراش تعذبني، كن يتحدثن بجرأة واستمتاع عن أزواج يعودون من عملهم فجأة كي يضاجعوا نساءهم، وآخرين يهلكون في الفراش، ويذكرون تفاصيل تثيرني وتعذبني...كان لا بد لي من رجل يحميني ويرويني.

[28] سامحت عزمي على كل شيء إلا سندس، فهي الرحيق الذي يعيد الىَّ روحي التي تكاد تجف وتهجرني

When Wolves Grow Old has been described as a bold novel that depicts the intersection of sex, politics and religion (the so-called forbidden triangle) in an untraditional way (Al-Ma'ini 2010; Bin Shawi 2010; Al-Salhout 2011; Al-Qadoumi 2013; Abed 2009)[29]. What I find striking in Naji's work is the way in which he chooses to criticise both religious figures and religious practices. He sheds light on groups of individuals, represented by Sheikh Al-Jinzeer, and how they manipulate their position and religion for their own benefit. Al-Jinzeer is presented as the corrupt man with no ethical grounding who indulges in sexual pleasure under the protective cover of Islam. Hiding behind his religious title and authority as a sheikh, he has no doubt that his lustful actions will pass undiscovered. I argue that this is crucial in denoting how defiance of the religious, which from an Arab perspective is understood to encompass the moral and ethical base line, acts as a pretext for other forms of defiance, including the sexual. Naji's choice to invoke religion is also significant in clarifying that in conservative Arab societies sexuality cannot be viewed outside of the religious framework, within which engaging in sexual activity is only permissible between women and men after marriage. As Moghissi explains, 'Islam, however, is a religion as well as a legal and political tradition. It also embodies sexual, moral and ethical principles which are strictly enforced' (Moghissi 1999, p.26).

One of the defining characteristics of the novel is the thin line that exists between what is regarded as taboo and what is acceptable social behaviour. It might be imagined that a novelist writing about a conservative Arab society would present a clear division between the permissible and the forbidden in his/her culture, yet in Naji's case these lines are blurred. A good example is the depiction of Sundus' fascination with her son-in-law, Azmi. From a religious and social perspective, her fascination is considered taboo, but in the novel it is – surprisingly – presented as a possibility. 'I don't know what goes through his [Rabah's] mind after his libido has declined and his manhood has been shattered. Did he ever think about what could happen if he left me alone in the house with Azmi, who is a fountain of youth and

---

[29] This was based on articles published in regional newspapers and online blogs.

strength despite being a calm person?' (Naji 2010, p.54)[30] Thus, Sundus describes her bewilderment about her husband's willingness to leave her alone with his son.

Moreover, the destabilising of the concept of taboo does not stop with this portrayal of Sundus pursuing Azmi, but continues in depicting his reaction to his mother-in-law's attempts to seduce him; despite resisting at first, he eventually succumbs. When he is explaining their difficult situation to Sundus, the religious aspect of their sexual relationship is not Azmi's priority. He stresses how it would be impossible legally and socially and this is why they decide to please each other sexually without being committed through a marriage contract. 'Firstly, you are my father's wife and secondly, what you desire is against the law' (Naji, p.96).[31]

Marriage as a protective cover

In both novels, marriage is presented as an important social institution that brings the hope of a more satisfying life to women. This is partly because it allows for the transition from an extended family to a nuclear one, which is depicted as a positive step. This transition also relates to the power dynamics that becomes clear in the shift from a daughter to a wife; from a daughter who has very little power and authority to a wife who enjoys more authority and who can influence the decision-making processes of her man. While this may not necessarily be seen as a positive step, Sharabi argues that moving from the extended to the nuclear family brings more hope for women due to three main factors. The first involves economic independence, in that members of a nuclear family are not as dependent on the father for financial support. The second factor is related to democratic relations, which are more visible in nuclear families and are almost non-existent in extended families, where the patriarch is constantly reinforcing his power and domination. This economic independence and enhanced democratic relations between members of a family will consequently have a positive effect on the position and situation of women, granting them more space to negotiate and assume some form of social power (Sharabi 1988, p.31).

---

[30] لم أدر ما الذي كان يجول في خاطره بعد أن هزلت فحولته وتكسرت رجولته أمامي. هل فكر بما يمكن أن يحدث معي بعد تركه لي وحيدة في البيت، مع عزمي الذي يفيض حيوية وعنفوانا وقوة رغم هدوئه؟

[31] استحالة تحقيق ما أريد "انت زوجة أبي أولا، وما ترغبين به مخالف للشرع ثانيا!"

90

Thus, in the novels, marriage is presented as women's ultimate goal, as married women have more autonomy and are socially more valued than single women. Marriage brings hope for a fresh new beginning that could have more promising outcomes, especially if it is based on good ethical foundations. Moreover, with marriage a woman is under the control/guardianship of (only) her husband, whereas, when she is single, she is under the control/guardianship of her father and brothers (and in some cases uncles and close relatives as well). Because of the nature of the relationship with her husband, a married woman will usually find it easier than a single woman to negotiate her needs and desires. Even more depressing, the significance of marriage in conservative Arab culture also stems from the difficulty of perceiving women as independent functioning beings. In other words, women in nearly every case are identified in relation to the men with whom they are associated; before marriage this is predominately their fathers and after marriage it is their husbands (Barakat 1993). Hence, marriage becomes an important marker of identity, in which a woman finds it easier to feel more complete and socially acceptable than when she was single.

Clarifying a woman's lack of an independent social identity, Barakat explains that the wife joins the kin group of her husband and their children take the surname of their father. The father is assigned the role of breadwinner; consequently he is positioned at the top of the pyramid of authority. Assuming the role of a housewife, the mother becomes tied to her husband and will therefore be referred to as *aqila* (tied), *qarina* (linked), and *hirma* (prohibited) (Barakat 1993, p.101). Hence, marriage functions as a transformative agent that can change a woman's life. This change relates not only to her newly acquired identity status, but also to better economic and social circumstances. As Juliette Minces explains,

> Once she is married and has her own household her rule over it is undisputed. The house, and all it involves, is her domain. Within it, she enjoys considerable respect and real power in family matters … Simply because she is a married woman and a mother, she acquires a specific position within the parental household …Within her home, a woman does not feel subordinate, oppressed, inferior or powerless compared to men. (Minces 1982, p.44)

The obsession with being married can be clearly seen in both novels. In *Anwaar*, the protagonist's family are so eager to have her married that they arrange her marriage to a wealthy old man who lives in a distant village and already has another

wife. However, while Anwaar is depicted as fulfilling her social duty of getting married, such an action is taken at the expense of her own happiness and desires. Her feelings against marriage and her desire for a 'proper' suitor are presented as irrelevant when weighed against the need to marry. This pressure to get married is further reinforced if the groom is wealthy.

In *When Wolves Grow Old*, upon realising that she is trapped in a firm patriarchal structure and an unsatisfactory position as a single woman, Naji's protagonist, Sundus, is depicted as yearning for love and, more precisely, for sexual pleasure under the protective cover of marriage. She is distraught at being single at 26 while the girls of her neighbourhood are married, not because of her ethical grounding or her perception of marriage as a sacred union through which sexual pleasure can be achieved; rather, it is a feeling of disappointment in her inability to enjoy the pleasures of the body, the one thing that she sees as belonging to her and her alone. She expresses her continuous frustration, 'Five years have passed after my failed marriage without anyone who is willing to consider me for a wife. What happened to all the men? Have they disappeared? I would ask myself this all the time' (Naji 2010, p.10).[32] Here, the longing for a man (in most cases) is taken as a yearning for sex in the Arab context. While this might not seem radical to a western reader, it is important to note that her sense of discomfort marks a deviation from traditional depictions of unmarried women who yearn for marriage.

In such representations, the main motivation for marriage is to obtain a sense of security and to avoid social scrutiny, whereas in this novel marriage is mainly desired as a gateway to sexual pleasure. 'Before Rabah asked for my hand in marriage, the years used to pass by very slowly and my feeling that the *train of marriage*[33] has passed me by would grow before any man would marry me and do to me anything that he desires; those things that men do to their women' (Naji 2010, p.34, my emphasis).[34] In this depiction, Naji fleshes out two issues concerning women: one about the fear of spinsterhood and the other about the enjoyment of sex. Both are intricately related. Being a spinster or unmarried deprives a woman of

---

[32] خمس سنوات عجاف مرت على فشل زفافي من دون أن يسومني أحد. ما الذي جرى للرجال؟ هل انقطعوا؟ سألت نفسي مرارا،

[33] 'Before the train of marriage passes' is a common expression in Arabic culture to stress the notion that marriage is a valuable opportunity in life and that, the younger a woman is, the more likely she is to be granted the 'privilege' of being married.

[34] قبل أن يطلب رباح يدي من أمي، كانت السنوات تمر بطيئة، ويزداد معها إحساسي بأن قطار الزواج قد يمضي، قبل أن يتزوجني رجل يفعل بي ما يفعل الرجال بنسائهم،

engaging in sex in traditional conservative societies. Adding to the complexity of the situation in this case and in the precise use of the term '*train of marriage*' is the social pressure placed on women to be married before they reach a certain age (usually in their twenties). Moreover, while the image of a woman being an object of sexual encounters in 'and do to me anything that *he* desires' relegates a woman to being a passive performer in the sexual act, in the novel, this is not the case. The image of being acted upon needs to be understood in light of exploring and 'activating' a component of sexuality[35] (through heterosexual marriage) in ways that are otherwise socially and culturally impossible.

Thus, marriage in *When Wolves Grow Old* is presented as an outlet for sexual frustration. Because pursuing such desires outside marriage is close to impossible in conservative Arab and Muslim societies, and especially in working-class neighbourhoods[36] where everyone keeps a close eye on one another, the protagonist opts for the safer option of commitment. Marriage enables Sundus to experiment with her sexuality in order to satisfy her curiosity about the sexual act and associated matters. As Naji and Al-Odwan's work attempts to establish a connection between female sexuality and notions of autonomy, we might want to ask, why the emphasis on heterosexuality as opposed to lesbian sex or masturbation? (Which would avoid a relationship with a man.) Attending to these absences would again involve acknowledging the cultural and social background that renders heterosexuality the norm and others forms of sexuality unacceptable or even 'unimaginable'. Moreover, heterosexual marital relations are the sole sanctioned form of sexuality (El Feki 2013; Ali 2013; Mernissi 1987). Extra-marital liaisons represent a violation of the socio-cultural code (Dunne 1998; Ilkkaracan 2002).

Therefore, despite conforming to the heterosexual model of sexuality, the yearning for (heterosexual and extra-marital) sex in both novels is implicitly presented as liberating as it involves challenging conventional norms about (repressed and regulated) female sexuality. It also represents a clear defiance of the moral, ethical and religious guidelines that regulate the 'sexual' in Arab and Islamic societies.

---

[35] As sexuality is not limited to the sexual act.
[36] Due to low financial budgets, working-class houses are built in close proximity to surrounding houses, forming a cluster with very limited space.

These acts of defiance and the transgression of boundaries is what marks these novels as distinctive.

In *Anwaar*, Al-Odwan presents marriage as a safe route to enjoying the pleasure of sexual desire for women. The novel seems to suggest that fulfilling the social expectation of being married facilitates any act of sexual defiance that might follow. Hence, marriage acts as a protective cover that brings more sexual gains for women. These benefits lie in conforming to the patriarchal system, and as a result becoming more valued and respected by the public, and in manipulating this system in private (by engaging in *secret* sexual encounters) through the resources and authorities they have gained as married women. This can best be illustrated by this scene, in which Yusra is depicted giving advice to Anwaar,

> Live like you are married and not married … Live your life like other women in Murjan[37]; they fake their niceness and warmth towards their husbands while their hearts are hard as rock. Become half woman half tongue.[38] Jealousy is not allowed for the women of Murjan; what is permissible is what you succeed in doing away from the eyes of your husband. (Al-Odwan 2002, p.39)[39]

The novel then explores how Anwaar considers these words and surveys her available options to achieve satisfaction, 'She had spoken to herself and previewed the choices of her fate. The only thing that occupied her mind was Yusra's advice "live your life as a married and an unmarried woman just like the women of Murjan and *move between the sweet and sour*"' (Al-Odwan p.49, my emphasis).[40] The act of outwardly conforming to social expectations by being married and inwardly manipulating this social institution for individual purposes is a recurrent theme upon which both Naji and Al-Odwan shed light. They depict the inability to escape the patriarchal structure, coupled with the ability to find alternative sources of enjoyment as possible ways to alleviate the pressures that such a structure imposes on women.

Yet, it is important to understand more clearly the function of sexuality in this regard. While the authors could have used other forms of defiance, their emphasis on

---

[37] Murjan is a fictional place in the novel.
[38] Here, the character is referring to the power of words by which women would verbally deceive their husbands about their love for them while secretly pursuing pleasure with the people they desire. [39] عيشي مثل نساء المرجان يصطنعن اللطف والدفيء للأزواج بينما قلوبهن كصخرة في قعر التنور. كوني نصف امرأة ونصف لسان، الغيرة غير مسموحة لنساء المرجان، حتى التذمر غير مسموح، المسموح هو ما تنجحين بفعله بعيدا عن أنظار الزوج [40] خاطبت نفسها وقلبت خيارات مصيرها، لم يشغلها أمر أو فكرة بقدر ما أشغلها كلام يسرى ونصيحتها! عيشي كأنك متزوجة وغير متزوجة، عيشي مثل نساء المرجان، تنقلي بين الحلو والمر

94

sexual defiance needs to be understood within the wider social and cultural context of conservative Arab societies. The depiction of economic defiance, for example, would not trigger a strong reaction in the reader, nor attract much readership or attention. In contrast, Naji's novel was shortlisted for the Arabic Poker Prize in 2010 (Mamdooh 2012), and Al-Odwan's was turned into a television drama series in 2006 (Al-Rai 2006). Moreover, as sexuality is part of the forbidden discourse, writing about it adds an element of shock and amusement to the reader and consequently creates an impact. Another contributing factor to their choice is the distorted perceptions of (female) sexuality that exist in Arab culture. Before Marriage, a woman in Arab and Islamic countries is taught how to repress her sexuality and to refrain from any sexual activity in order to maintain her virginity (Abu-Odeh 2010; El Saadawi 2007; Minces 1982). As Lama Abu Odeh explains, 'Arab women, according to the ideal model, are expected to abstain from any kind of sexual practice before they get married. The hymen, in this context, becomes the socio-physical sign that signifies virginity and gives the woman a stamp of respectability and virtue' (Abu Odeh 2010, p.917). Yet, the moment she marries, she suddenly needs to become an expert on sex. She is expected to show interest in sex and to expose her sexual appeal to her husband (El Saadawi 2007). Interestingly, the novels challenge this notion of 'repressed' and 'regulated' sexuality by stressing the necessity of women exploring their sexuality in ways not confined to 'acceptable' norms, limited to sex with their husbands. Nonetheless, such 'an act of defiance' would be carried out while adhering to the rigid perceptions around (visible) 'permissible' sexuality, which must not be violated. These extremes – from being forced to be 'asexual' to becoming sexual – happen almost overnight and as a result contribute to a woman's growing sense of confusion about her sexuality and how she should deal with it. Therefore, the limited understandings of sex, and in particular female sexuality, mean that they remain intriguing topics for writers and novelists to explore (Abu Khalil 1997).

Pushing small boundaries within a patriarchal system

Naji's and Al-Odwan's depictions of Sundus and Anwaar are central to their novels. Their characters' wit and boldness are among the primary reasons that make me view their work as feminist or, perhaps more accurately, as having a feminist element. It also stems from the way in which these novels focus the spotlight on gendered aspects of women's everyday struggles with patriarchy. This is done through constructing/employing female characters who are not only conscious of the gendered world in which they live, but also ones who are also willing to do something about it. Despite being depicted as living under unsatisfactory circumstances, Sundus is not presented as weak, vulnerable or passive. Instead, she is described as someone who recognises her desirability as a young, attractive woman, and thus is able to use her sexuality as instrumental in defying the ethical foundations of the rigid patriarchal structures in order to satisfy her own needs. Sundus could not care less about falling in love with her son-in-law or enjoying the touch of the sheik's hand as he tries to heal her back.[41]

> He inspected my back like someone inspecting a plastic bag, while a warm pleasurable current spread through my vertebrae, spreading towards the rest of my body until I almost lost memory … every time his fingers moved from one vertebra to another asking me about the source of pain, rebellious vibrations spread through my body, disabling me from thinking of anything. (Naji, p.80)[42]

For her, what matters most is that she achieves her desires. She not only pursues Azmi in their home when her husband is away, but she later visits him in an apartment in Amman, far from her neighbourhood and, most importantly, in broad daylight. Naji's portrayal of Sundus' actions gives a clear message about what the social structures signify to some women in his society.

More significantly, in the characters' constant efforts to challenge patriarchal norms, in both novels, gender emerges as an interactive element in the protagonists' identity. Both Sundus and Anwaar are depicted as self-conscious characters who are well aware of their social positioning as women. They realise that belonging to the category of women means complying with the social expectations that are

---

[41] Sheikh Al-Jinzeer is presented as a religious man who has the power to heal people by reading verses from the Holy Qur'an and then gently pressing against the source of pain.

[42] يتحسس ظهري بطريقة من يتحسس محتويات كيس، بينما سرى في عمودي الفقري تيار دافئ ممتع انتشر في جسدي فأظلمت ذاكرتي... وكلما انتقلت أصابعه من فقرة إلى أخرى يسألني عن مكان الوجع المتبقي في ظهري، بينما تنتشر في أنحاء بدني ذبذبات طاغية لا تسمح لي بالتفكير في أي شيء

compatible with this label. Yet, despite their prior knowledge and the social pressure to adhere to their roles as women, they choose to deviate from what is regarded as acceptable social behaviour. They are, in fact, depicted as women with some agency.

This particular notion of agency can best be understood by thinking about the social construction of gender via engaging with feminist ethnomethodology. To clarify this, ethnomethodologists:

> see individuals as 'members' (of society) whose everyday interpretive practices collaboratively constitute the social. Members are 'practical methodologists' engaged in active sense-making, but as competent members of society we share basic assumptions, common-sense ideas about how things are and how things are done. Our shared social knowledge makes daily life intelligible to us, and we expect people's actions to be 'accountable', to be understandable in terms of accepted views of social reality (Rahman and Jackson 2010, p.160)

In this sense, ethnomethodologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman, for example, view gender as independent of any biological differentiation by sex: it is an 'emergent feature of social situations' (West and Zimmerman 1987, p.126). Moreover, they argue that, 'doing gender means making it happen, "creating" differences between men and women that have nothing to do with biology. Yet, once created, these differences reinforce the "essentialness" of gender'. Therefore, what we regard as natural is a product of our own collective social creation (1987, p.137).

Liz Stanley and Sue Wise argue that we become social through 'the acquisition of a social self, which is reflexively constructed through everyday interactions with others. Rather than being socialized into predetermined norms and roles, self and social milieu are interdependent, both constructed through ongoing social interaction in which selves subtly evolve and change' (Stanley and Wise, 1993, p.110). Thus, they argue that gender should not be perceived as static and unchanging; it should be understood as 'situationally variable' (Stanley and Wise, 1993, p.110).

Therefore, conceptualising gender as 'interactive' and changing implies active involvement and engagement in one's social identity. The process of negotiating and creating new ways of being, although limited, allows room for flexibility and change. While understanding gender in this light does not account for why individuals react differently based on an awareness of their gender, the perception of gender as a 'doing' could be viewed as a prerequisite for agency. Through the realisation that

biology is not destiny, individuals have more autonomy to forge their path in life based on their conscious choices as well as societal restrictions.

In *When Wolves Grow Old*, the agency of the female characters is the centre of attention. The novel clearly presents the ways in which social control functions in the novel. While, on the whole, these methods (of monitoring women's behaviour, regulating women's sexuality and restricting women's choices) prove effective in controlling women, they fail to subjugate the protagonist and instead instil in her a deep desire to eradicate them. These acts of defiance can be achieved by manipulating the patriarchal system using sexuality as an effective tool to achieve what they desire; a desire that may surpass sexual pleasure per se, as in the case of Gibran's wife, Rabia, in Naji's work. From the beginning of the novel, Rabia is presented as someone who is not satisfied with her life. After her husband becomes wealthy and they move to an upper-class neighbourhood, she relies on her sexual appeal to demand more from him. Unable to resist her seductive clothing and appearance, Rabia's husband explains how her strategy is effective in resolving any dispute. When he decides to abandon their marital bed, Rabia's counter strategy turns the overall situation in her favour. 'Sex is a direct and successful way to end marital quarrels. Although I thought that abandoning her would bring her back to her senses and would allow me to defeat her, it has only occurred to me that abandonment has caused me to be defeated and bring me back to my senses and not vice versa' (Naji, p.89).[43] Yet, it is important to distinguish between the use of sexual desirability by the characters of Rabia and Sundus. So while the first relies on sexual appeal as a means to achieve non-sexual desires, such as purchasing a car, a cat or additional valuable belongings, Sundus makes use of her sexual desirability for the sole purpose of sexual pleasure.

It could be argued that this approach of using one's body and giving pleasure to men is not a liberating one for women. Nonetheless, I argue that, despite this, the outcome of the sexual encounter is more significant in this context. In traditional representations of sexuality or sexual acts, a female character is commonly depicted as a passive sex doll or sex icon whose limited function is to please the male character (Ceccato 1995). Therefore, it is only the males who are benefiting from the

---

[43] الفراش طريقة مباشرة وناجعة لإنهاء الخلافات الزوجية. مع أنني كنت اعتقد بأن هجرها سيعيدها إلى صوابها وينصرني عليها، ليتبين لي بأن هذا الهجر قد أدى إلى هزيمتي وأعدت أنا إلى صوابي وليس العكس.

sexual acts in these representations. However, in the case of Rabia, not only is her husband depicted as a victim of her sexual appeal, but she is also presented as a winner by gaining what she wants (albeit by using manipulative methods). While it is not mentioned whether both characters are in fact enjoying sexual pleasure, I find Rabia's manipulation of her husband to be a 'win-win' situation, or more of an exchange of services in which sex or sexuality becomes devoid of its intimate/spiritual meaning and instead is used for satisfying certain materialistic needs. In the case of Rabia, sexuality becomes a trope. It is also important to remember that both Rabia and Sundus are described as uneducated, unemployed and economically dependent on their husbands, thus in that sense sexuality is all they have to fulfil their desires. Thus, unlike other characters in traditional Arabic fiction who have sex (or in some cases are forced to have sex), Sundus and Rabia strategise in order to gain the maximum benefit (even if partially) towards their objectives.

From the very beginning of the novels, the distinctive characteristics of Naji's and Al-Odwan's protagonists can clearly be pinpointed. Naji portrays Sundus as someone who is critical of her society and the expectations it places on women. Apart from her unorthodox sexual activity, her lack of interest in motherhood and her indifference towards her social reputation as a divorced woman represent clear markers of a rebellious character from the perspective of a traditional Arab society. The separation of sex from motherhood is emphasised via Sundus: 'I neither love children nor the idea of motherhood but Rabah has told me of his desire to have *a son*… My mother too insisted that we have a child and convinced me that *it will compensate me for what I have lost*' (Naji 2010, p.49, my emphasis).[44] Despite motherhood functioning as the backbone of marriage in Arab societies, and as a 'social security system' that helps safeguard women's chances in a successful marriage, Sundus does not show much concern. Sex, for Sundus, is detached from its function as a reproductive tool; it is perceived as a bodily encounter between a man and a woman involving pleasure, desire or romance, as opposed to what it signifies or stands for in the social sense. Yet, after her failed attempts to marry Azmi, she gradually finds some logic in her mother's advice. Interestingly, motherhood here is viewed as compensation for the lost opportunity to indulge in extra-marital sex.

---

[44] لا أحب الأطفال، ولا تستهويني فكرة الأمومة، لكن رباح أخبرني أنه يتمنى لو أن الله يرزقه بولد...أمي أيضا أصرت على أن ننجب طفلا، وأقنعتني بانه سيسليني ويعوضني عما فاتني

Moreover, the compensation that could only be achieved by the birth of a 'son' sheds light on sexist, ill-conceived assumptions about gender that exist among certain members of society in which males are regarded by some people as more valuable than females.

In *Anwaar*, we read a male character saying, 'When a woman is imprisoned between four walls, she will start to dig in the walls until she finds a hole through which she can overlook this world' (Al-Odwan p.57).[45] I argue that the emphasis on a woman's determination to defy restricting circumstances is a significant point in denoting the interactive nature of gender. Thus, 'a woman's perceived social role' is not inevitable and can be altered through her continuous action and interaction with those around her and in accordance with situated circumstances. The narrative development of the protagonist in *Anwaar* becomes a turning point in the novel.

> She was looking for a convincing answer inside herself, and from all the strong emotions of hatred towards her perverted husband she wondered if a human has a right to evade this hell and to look for all the possible ways to make that escape, and she wondered am I not human? *She sensed the birth of new things in her soul* and she realised that within weeks she had greatly matured. She moved from one generation to another, *she is no longer a naïve child. She has to control her life* without naivety and *without falling into ways that are considered sinful*. (Al-Odwan 2002, p.60, my emphasis)[46]

These confessions are immensely significant in illustrating the agency that Anwaar has over her life. The protagonist is not only depicted as being aware of her social disadvantages as a woman, but she is also willing to step up and do something about them. She refuses to succumb to reductionist views of gender and decides to actively take control of her life. She does this by avoiding 'falling into ways considered sinful', and thus maintaining a cautious balance between her awareness of gender inequality and ways to combat such injustices without outwardly rebelling against social norms and expectations. 'Sinful' in this regard, is taken to encompass both the social and the religious.

In a scene in *When Wolves Grow Old*, Sundus reflects on her experiences as a woman in a conservative society, 'It is certain that he does not know that negligence

---

[45] عندما تسجن المرأة خلف جدران أربعة تبدأ بالحفر حتى تجد ثقبا تطل منه على الدنيا

[46] كانت تبحث عن إجابة شافية مقنعة في ذاتها، ومن بين كل التعابير المضطربة بالحرقة والسخط على الزوج المنحرف تساءلت إن كان من حق الانسان أن يهرب من الجحيم وأن يبحث عن كل السبل التي تساعده على ذلك، وتساءلت هل أنا انسانة أم لا؟ أحست بولادة أشياء جديدة في أعماق روحها، وأدركت أنها خلال الأسابيع الأخيرة نضجت كثيرا، قفزت من جيل الى آخر لم تعد طفلة بلهاء. وعليها أن تدير حياتها بلا سذاجة لكن بدون أن تسقط بالمحظور.

100

has transformed me into a different woman. It makes me burn with fire that cannot be extinguished' (Naji 2010, p.53).[47] Such confessions are significant as they stress how resistance to social circumstances becomes a site of change. This resistance and the active involvement of the female protagonists in negotiating their place in society is what marks these novels as feminist from my perspective. Naji and Al-Odwan deviate from previous Jordanian novels by choosing female protagonists who are adamant about finding a form of satisfaction from within the strong grip of a neopatriarchal structure. Because openly challenging such a social system is a very difficult task, covert manipulation becomes an alternative and an outlet whereby a form of fulfilment is achieved by relying on sexual appeal as an available option. The characters could in that sense be viewed as 'active' victims of patriarchal control; agents who, despite their social disadvantage as women, are attempting to defy and challenge the status quo using the limited resources available to them.

While both writers stress the centrality of sexuality to gender equality, I suggest that sexuality in the novels also functions as a trope. Contrary to traditional thought, I do not see the writer's position as one that advocates moral decay and corruption; rather, I argue that it is a call for women to emerge from their passivity to a more vibrant role through which they challenge existing social circumstances in the hopes of living satisfying lives. This is to say, my emphasis is on the acts of defiance in the novels and not the methods (using their sexual appeal), as defiance can take various shapes and forms and is not limited to the use of sexuality. Such needs do not always have to be sexual in nature; they could involve any activities that combine individual commitment with a cautious awareness of the power of authority, a balanced approach that safeguards one's personal needs.

Challenging patriarchy through defiance and escape

In this section, I turn to two new novels in order to explore a different approach to challenging patriarchy as presented by Afaf Bataineh in *Outside the Body* and Fadi Zaghmout in *The Bride of Amman*. Both writers provide a robust critique of Jordanian society: the novels make a strong case for how the failure to modernise

---

<div dir="rtl">

47 من المؤكد أنه لم يعرف أن الإهمال يحيلني إلى امرأة مختلفة، ويوقد في نفسي نيرانا لا تنطفئ بسهولة

</div>

and transcend tradition in terms of both thought and structure can have devastating effects on individuals. These authors start by painting a suffocating image of Jordanian society through plots that depict the strong grip that patriarchy holds over women. They then provide alternatives, developing their narrative in ways that each present single and dramatic 'solutions' for women in a society that refuses to eliminate discriminatory gender practices.

Patriarchy and the emergence of feminist consciousness

Outside the Body and *The Bride of Amman* highlight patriarchy as the main source of women's subordination. Bataineh develops her critique by creating a protagonist who not only criticises various social practices that act against women, but also takes it a step further by abandoning the present Jordanian society and adopting a new one, which she suggests is less oppressive and less patriarchal. In their literary work, both novelists project conservative Arab societies and modern western ones as opposites and they criticise their societies for not progressing and emulating the western approach towards women. They focus on normative depictions of womanhood and manhood, virginity and honour killings, all for the purpose of criticism and re-evaluation. Through the narrative, they provide an alternative to this model of society, which they depict as suffocating and unjust to women. They do so through creating characters who defy existing social structures surrounding sexuality, patriarchy and marriage, and thus choose to advocate a western model of gender equality.

Bataineh and Zaghmout adopt a radical approach to presenting gender discrimination. The severe practices of patriarchal control represented by Muna's father in *Ouside the Body* play a vital role in the novelist's critique of society and in crystallising basic conceptions of gender. Despite the harsh picture that Bataineh paints of the character of Muna's father, the patriarch, or patriarchy in the novel as a whole, this representation is a crucial element because it serves to expose the ills of conservative Arab societies. This exposure generates feelings of distress in the protagonist, making her look for solutions either in escape or through other means. 'I have not looked at my father's face in ages and I have never shared a conversation with him. What kind of connection did we have, since *I am the one who desired to*

eradicate the term fatherhood and patriarchy from the dictionaries of all languages?' (Bataineh 2004, p.8-9, my emphasis).[48] The way in which Muna's story is told gives a vivid representation of the kind of resentment that builds up under 'everyday' familial patriarchy, an exploration of this emotion which not only sheds light on the destructive nature of patriarchy and of (some) fathers as agents of this social structure, but also serves to demonstrate how individuals, and particularly women, have a strong sense of awareness of their social identity. In addition, it also highlights a woman's deep consciousness of her less advantaged status in relation to men. This outcry is also a denunciation of a sexist society, or of 'a man's world' where women are perceived as 'the second sex'. Such revelations of inner conflict are crucial, as they can act as precedents for transgression. Through her experiences with her father and a society that pressures women and is biased in favour of men, Muna is depicted as gradually developing her ideas about gender.

> I have remained in the room to the left, although once I would have preferred to live in a grave rather than there. A room filled with the echoes of *my repeated deaths that formed me and moulded me* and made me realise the hidden joy that the normal, healthy and happy cannot notice. The room of worry and scepticism that transformed my belief into suspicion, my weakness into strength, my retreat into progress. Today, I deserve to call it the room of certainty that leads to madness and confusion. My stay in this room has taught me to evade coincidences as much as possible and forced me to create isolation and solitude for myself, *which later on enabled me to visit the stream of serenity, glow and spark*. (Bataineh 2004, p.13, my emphasis)[49]

After being subjected to verbal and physical abuse from her father and forced into solitary confinement in her room, Muna narrates her feminist awakening. She describes her rebirth from 'repeated deaths' to envisioning 'serenity, glow and spark'. A feminist consciousness thus enables her to transform her weakness into strength. By re-evaluating her situation as an oppressed individual, Muna is able to find reconciliation and to transform what looks like unbearable circumstances into a situation that gives hope for a better future.

In *The Bride of Amman*, Zaghmout explores how long exposure to gendered attitudes and biased practices affects women. He does this through the stories of

---

48 لم أنظر في وجه أبي دهرا ولم أبادله الحوار يوما. أي رباط كان بيننا وأنا التي اشتهيت وأد لفظ الذكورة من قواميس كل اللغات

49 لبدت في الحجرة الغربية التي كنت فترة أفضل سكن المقابر على سكنها. حجرة مليئة بصدى ميتاتي المتكررة التي عجنتني وشكلتني وجعلتني أبصر البهجة الخفية التي لا يبصرها الأصحاء والسعداء والمرتاحون. حجرة القلق والشك التي حولت إيماني شكا، وضعفي قوة، وتراجعي تقدما، يحق لي أن أسميها اليوم حجرة اليقين الذي يقود إلى الجنون والإرباك. علمتني إقامتي في الحجرة الغربية أن أتجنب قدر الإمكان المصادفات، وأجبرتني على خلق عزلة أو الانغلاق على الذات مكنني فيما بعد من زيارة ينبوع الصفاء والوهج والألق.

Laila, Salma and Rana, demonstrating how conscious they are of the society in which they live. At the beginning of the novel, Zaghmout presents ill-conceived notions of womanhood and manhood in a typical scenario between Laila and her male colleague, Louai, at university, in which the social conditioning of women as less intellectual is criticised.

> My colleague Louai has created an anxiety and a motivation for me at the same time and the fact that he is a man has increased my determination. My challenge against gender discrimination has increased from the day that Louai decided to share his father's thoughts about my success. 'Shame on you, you let a girl beat you!' From that day his father's scorn kept resonating in my ears like a dynamo that pushes me with massive force to run and succeed and beat Louai and his father and everyone of their gender. I am a woman and success is an attribute that I want to add to my identity in the eyes of everybody. (Zaghmout 2012, p.7)[50]

Such remarks about women as less competent than men are crucial in clarifying what the protagonist is trying to challenge in the novel. Moreover, I argue that denigrating a woman's success in order to augment a man's sense of virility or superiority is very problematic. Equally, I find this absurd construction of shame as not only destructive for women, but also for men. Such visions endorse biologically determinist notions of gender. However, while these traditional views are challenged in the novel, Zaghmout illustrates how they also become sites of struggle, by presenting Laila as a character who decides to fight back and take action. She is depicted as someone who accepts the challenge and is more than willing to prove that traditional perceptions of womanhood are not only wrong, but outdated and in desperate need of reform.

Stressing the prevalence of misconceptions that have harmful consequences for women's lives, Zaghmout explores marriage. The novel depicts the great number of misconceptions that Jordanian society has about a social institution that should (according to liberal perspectives) be built on the basis of equality. The protagonist is depicted as critical of the huge amount of pressure that is exerted on women to get married. Furious about the social obsession with marriage, Salma protests:

> I would hold my laptop and sit on my bed … I would open the internet at my blog page 'The Jordanian Spinster.' I started this under an alias last year. I wanted to connect with

---

[50] كان زميلي في الكلية ، لؤي يشكل لي هاجسا وحافزا في نفس الوقت. كونه رجلا زادني إصرارا. تحديي للتمييز الجنسي ازداد يوم قرر لؤي مشاركتنا رأي والده في تفوقي عليه الفصل الماضي. اخس عليك، بنت تبطحك! منذ يومها وسخرية والده ترن في أذني. كأنها دينامو يدفعني بقوة رهيبة للعدو والتفوق وبطح لؤي ووالده وكل بني جنسه. أنا امرأة ومتفوقة صفة أريد أن تضاف إلى هويتي في عيون الجميع.

people. I wanted to express what I was going through as a Jordanian woman from feelings of fear and dreams in this age and according to the norms of Jordanian society in addition to demands, constraints and responsibilities. I always wonder about the secret behind Jordanian women's obsession with marriage. What are the reasons that force us to behave with such obsession and away from any logic or reason most of the time? (Zaghmout 2012, p.14)[51]

I find the idea of blogging significant. The deep urge to connect with people, share with them certain concerns and hear their views, transforms what is perceived as an individual case into a collective one. Thus, the notion of shared pain and suffering is stressed. This move from the personal to the social is important as it pushes forward ideas of feminist activism. Blogging in this sense becomes a 'modern activist tool' that enables the protagonist to disseminate her thoughts and critique gendered social perceptions around marriage with an audience. Moreover, anonymity (that is made possible by use of the internet) is also a contributing factor in allowing the protagonist to raise her concerns in the first place and in mobilising people and gathering support for a common cause. This notion of 'disguised' social activism is also presented in *The Bitter Winter* in Raja's choice of writing about women in a newspaper using the alias of Khalida[52], and in *Outside the Body* when Muna joins a women's organisation and discusses women's rights through her new identity of Sara Alexanders.[53]

The depiction of Salma's frustration from the social pressure to be married is significant in highlighting one of the main social burdens that many Arab women face. As explained earlier in this chapter, marriage is perceived as a woman's ultimate goal. No success achieved by a woman, whether economic or professional, matches that of securing a marriage contract. The use of the term 'obsession' does not emerge from a vacuum. It is the product of endless social efforts to instil a feeling of insecurity and low self-esteem in women who are single, either by choice

---

[51] أحمل اللاب توب وأجلس في سريري. أفتح الانترنت على صفحة مدونتي الأردنية العانس كنت قد بدأتها تحت أسم مستعار السنة الماضية. أردت أن اتواصل مع الناس، أن أعبر عما أمر به أنا كامرأة أردنية من مشاعر مخاوف وأحلام، في هذا العمر ضمن معطيات المجتمع الأردني من متطلبات وضغوطات وواجبات. أتساءل عن سر هوس المرأة الأردنية في الزواج. ماهي الأسباب التي تدفعنا للتصرف بهوس بعيد عن المنطق والعقل في أغلب الاحيان

[52] I discuss this in the following chapter.

[53] In this regard, it is worth mentioning that Zaghmout is himself a blogger, using The Arab Observer as the name of his blog. He has declared that *The Bride of Amman* started as a blog about marriage in Jordan and later was turned into a novel. In addition to describing himself as an author and blogger, he also refers to himself as a social activist, which resembles what his character is attempting to be through her blog, The Jordanian Spinster.

or chance. This over-emphasis on marriage generates fear in women at the thought of remaining spinsters and accordingly of losing the 'privilege' of being married.

In *The Bride of Amman*, not only is the social preoccupation with marriage criticised, but all the preconditions that precede it are also undermined. Through the character of Salma, the novel paints a picture of the harsh reality that many women experience both before and after marriage. Salma describes how a woman's right to work becomes a problem after marriage and how a working wife is expected to carry out multiple tasks, including household chores and rearing children, in addition to excelling at her profession, all at the same time. She is presented as critical of traditional Arab men who cling to social conceptions regarding work and explains that a man is not so much embarrassed by his wife contributing[54] to the household income as he is about helping her with domestic chores. Moreover, the novel illustrates the process of selection that precedes marriage and how a woman's ambition of gaining employment could reduce her chances of getting married, stemming from the common belief that a man will refuse to marry a woman who earns a higher salary because it would undermine his manhood. The protagonist refers to this phenomenon as the 'success complex'.

> A man in our social consciousness is *the best* and the woman is envied and appreciated only when she is lucky by *winning a man*. The man is the *master* of the house and, as master, he has the *keys to power*, which includes the financial power even if this has become difficult for men these days. (Zaghmout 2012, pp.31–32, my emphasis)[55]

Salma is presented as critical of this model of manhood in a patriarchal society that remains submerged in traditional thought that is incompatible with new liberal modes of life and thinking. This is particularly so in Jordan's current situation, in which the high cost of living and limited income has made it difficult to maintain a decent life based solely on the earnings of the husband.

---

[54] This is based in the prevalent old belief that man is the sole breadwinner of the house.

[55] فالرجل ما زال في وعينا الاجتماعي هو الأفضل، والمرأة تحسد وتقدر فقط عندما يحالفها الحظ وتفوز برجل. الرجل هو سيد المنزل وعلى السيد أن يمتلك مفاتيح القوة ومن ضمنها القوة الشرائية حتى لو أصبح الأمر صعبا على رجال هذه الأيام

Criticising normative depictions of womanhood and manhood

In both novels, various social depictions of womanhood and manhood are presented focusing on how women's heterosexual relationships are constructed in an attempt to reshape the hierarchal nature of such relationships to the advantage of women. The most distinctive male characteristic is represented as the complete control over all members of the household, and especially women. Manhood is also highlighted as meaning that the man is the financial provider for women. Womanhood on the other hand is linked to subordination, submission, docility and shame, and a woman is regarded as secondary to a man. Both novels expose male and female representations and relationships in an elaborate manner and thereby emphasise the significance of social and cultural notions of womanhood and manhood on members of an Arab society as I demonstrate in this section.

By relying on satire as a technical device, both novelists criticise normative gendered ideas. This is done by focusing mainly on the negative attributes of traditional gender and by presenting it to readers in a provocative manner with close emphasis on details. For instance, in *Outside the Body*, Muna's mother, Umm Mansour, is represented as a submissive wife who accepts all forms of abuse and torture at the hands of her controlling husband, Abu Mansour. Despite her deep disgust and hatred for her husband, she retains her patience and carries on with her life because she fears divorce. When her husband is asleep, she constantly expresses her emotions by cursing him and wishing he would die.

> I would lie on my bed and look at the ceiling. I would pray to God that his breathing would stop before the call to prayer at sunrise … My mom has vowed to apply henna to the entrance of the mosque and to sacrifice a lamb the day he dies. Thirty years have passed and the day has not come for her to fulfil her promise. (Bataineh 2004, p.22)[56]

While being presented as outwardly submissive, Umm Mansour is psychologically resistant to her husband. For the rest of the time, she is a devoted mother who attends to the needs of her family and who channels her energy towards her children. Balancing her fear of becoming divorced with her devotion as a mother and her patience under current circumstances, Umm Mansour hopes that her children will end up with a better future than hers. 'Your education is a weapon that you have in

---

[56] أتمدد فوق فراشي وأنظر إلى السقف. أدعو الله بأن تسكت أنفاسه قبل أن يرتفع أذان الفجر. أقسمت أمي أن "تحنِّي" بوابة المسجد، وأن تذبح خاروفًا يوم يموت. ثلاثون عامًا وما جاء وقت أداء النذر.

your hands that will not allow any bastard to control you later,' is the common advice that she gives to her daughters (Bataineh 2004, p.31).[57] It is thus social and economic reasons that force her to submit to abuse and torture and this is why she stresses education as a way out. In Bataineh's portrayal of the mother's role, this version of motherhood is condemned and held accountable for the distressing lives of the female members of the family. Moreover, the generational difference between how women respond to patriarchal control is also stressed.

Another example of an older woman is that of Umm Mansour's mother-in-law, who is depicted as someone who preys on her family's miseries and enjoys spreading her venom, especially when she interferes in issues related to the females of the family. The reader becomes puzzled as to why a grandmother would want to see her granddaughter killed for speaking to a male neighbour, rather than protecting and defending her. By emphasising the negative attributes of such female characters and how they have internalised patriarchy, Bataineh highlights the difficulty of breaking free from the vicious cycle of abuse, especially for women of the older generation, and how such women are the main contributors to perpetuating the status quo. She clearly has hope for younger women, as represented by Muna, a character who is portrayed as having the capability and boldness to challenge the patriarchal system in the hope of finding a more promising life.

Similarly, in *The Bride of Amman*, the negative influence of Salma's and Laila's mother and grandmother are highlighted. This can be seen in the mother's obsession with getting her daughter married and how she torments her about still being single. 'I hope that your luck will be better than your sister or else you will both lose all hope of marriage,' is a typical comment that the grandmother would make when addressing Laila (Zaghmout 2012, p.11).[58] Expressing her frustration about society's limited perception of success, Laila protests:

> With the songs of women, I entered the house like a bride, very proud of myself and my accomplishments and delighted to see this great number of women gathered to celebrate my success … my mother embraced me and whispered in my ear 'I hope that it will be the bridegroom next.' She left me and then my aunt embraced me and whispered 'I hope to see you in your own house.' I looked into the eyes of the other women and was lost in their whispers, 'may God protect her, look she has become a bride', 'If God wills you will have her married', 'let's hope that she is also successful in the kitchen' … I was no

[57] الشهادة سلاح بأيدك، ما بقدر ابن الكلب يتحكم فيك بعدين

[58] يا الله انشاالله يكون حظك أحسن من اختك بلاش تبورو إنتو الجوز

longer the bride of the party, for a bride is not crowned without a man. This is a reality I realised in a moment that shook my foundations. I spent years of my life trying to prove my success. I thought that my certificates would earn me status in the eyes of everyone and to solidify me as a complete individual. But in one quick moment and like thunder, I was shocked by the reality that my certificates are simply another step towards a bigger one, and that is marriage. (Zaghmout 2012, pp.10–11)[59]

Such remarks are indicative of traditional gendered perceptions of success. The social notion of success when referring to women is narrowed to the ultimate goal of marriage and any other achievement, whether professional or economic, is regarded as secondary. Here, the novel emphasises such misconceptions and blames traditional modes of thinking for this flawed understanding of success and the refusal to value women as individual beings rather than associating them with a male figure. Although it may not be explicitly stated, Zaghmout portrays this dilemma as a clash between tradition and modernity. Notions of 'individual' (or modern) success (represented in earning an education, or achieving a successful career) are contrasted with traditional perceptions of a successful woman which are reduced to securing a marriage contract.

The manhood of male characters in *Outside the Body* is not spared from criticism. This denunciation centres on the characters of Abu Mansour and Suleiman. The cruelty of Abu Mansour can be observed in his family's reactions and emotions towards him,

> Muna's dream in her past years of adolescence and in her lost youth was to look her father in the eyes and to place her hands over his nose and mouth until he enters the channels of death. This was the wish of all members of her family to say farewell to the *dictator* who forbade them to breathe. (Bataineh 2004, p.10, my emphasis) [60]

His eldest daughter describes his controlling attitude thus, 'Why was your presence an absence of my freedom? Why were your orders stronger than my will? Why did you create your heaven from my prison? Does my ill father hear my questions?'

---

[59] دخلت البيت كعروس على زغايد النساء. معتزة بنفسي وبإنجازي. فرحة هذا العدد من النساء المجتمعات للاحتفال بنجاحي. زغردت أمي بصوت عالٍ. ضمتني إلى صدرها وهمست بأذني عقبال العريس تركتني أمي فتلقفني صدر خالتي التي ضمتني هي الأخرى وهمست عقبال ما انشوفك في بيتك نظرت إلى عيون النساء الأخريات وسرحت في همساتهن ما شاء الله صايرة عروس إن شاء الله بتزوجيها وبتفرحي فيها إن شاء الله شاطرة في المطبخ كمان؟ اجتمعت معظم النساء حول هبة هبة كأنه الاحتفال معد لها. لم أعد أنا عروس الحفل، فالعروس لا تتوج بدون رجل. حقيقة أيقنتها في لحظة خاطفة هزت عرش كياني. سنين عدة أهدرتها أحاول أن أبرهن تفوقي. اعتقدت أن شهادتي سترفعني في عيون الجميع وترسخني كيانا كاملا مستقلا. لكن وفي لحظة خاطفة كلمح البرق، صعقتني حقيقة أن شهادتي ما هي الا خطوة أخرى نحو الهدف الأكبر...الزواج

[60] كان حلم منى في مراهقتها المنصرمة وشبابها الضائع أن تنظر في عيني أبيها، وأن تضع يدها فوق فمه وأنفه إلى أن يدخل قنوات الموت. كانت أمنية أفراد عائلتها أن يودعوا الظالم الذي يمنعهم من تنفس الهواء

(Bataineh 2004, p.17)[61] The great feelings of hatred that the protagonist holds for her father should not be read as solely because of his abusive attitude (this is manifested in verbal and physical abuse, depriving his daughters from university education, and monitoring his daughters' behaviours); it is also symbolic of resentment against the underlying social structures that give rise to patriarchal societies, ones that empower men at the expense of women.

Apart from dedicating a great proportion of the novel to criticism of the father figure, Muna's second husband, Suleiman, is also condemned for assuming that a woman's role is associated with domestic duties and rearing children. He is depicted as failing to transform his ideas and views about women and for clinging to his reductionist understandings of what constitutes manhood and womanhood. He is therefore condemned for failing to become 'modern' despite living in a modern western country where certain values of gender equality are espoused. The character of Suleiman thus becomes symbolic of the 'neopatriarchal' man whom Bataineh criticises.

Female virginity (honour) as a turning point
In *Outside the Body*, female virginity plays a key role as the turning point, transforming the life of the protagonist from bad to worse. As in the works of Naji and Al-Odwan, in Bataineh's *Outside the Body*, the notion of defying taboos is highlighted. Bataineh chooses to depict the unthinkable by allowing her protagonist Muna to have a premarital sexual relationship with a Scottish Christian man and as a consequence she bears a child who is deemed illegitimate and socially unacceptable. In *The Bride of Amman*, Zaghmout also chooses a radical approach in which he depicts two women engaging in illegitimate sexual relationships with men. Rana, a Christian, falls in love with Janti, who is a Muslim, and they are forced to flee Jordan to Sweden in fear of their lives.

In *Outside the Body*, Bataineh's protagonist protests: 'A membrane decides my fate? I wanted to insert my fingers in my vagina and rupture my hymen so death can be my destiny. I wanted to take revenge on my father because I knew that this would

---

[61] لماذا كان حضورك غيابا لحريتي؟ لماذا كانت أوامرك أقوى من إرادتي؟ لماذا بنيت جنتك من سجني؟ هل يسمع أبي العليل أسئلتي

put his head in the dirt forever' (Bataineh 2004, p.44).[62] She later expresses the psychological fear that she goes through while her future is being discussed:

> I know that the tribe is gathering to decide my fate. The screaming faces of many girls whose names I do not know are reaching out to me. Their warm blood that once fell on the hands of the males of their families is mixing with my blood. I fear that my bones will join theirs and that their fate will be mine. (Bataineh 2004, p.38)[63]

Such fears not only signals on the doomed fate of the character, but also illustrate the individual versus community complex. In the majority of cases, a person is seen as part of a family, a clan or a tribe, and is seldom viewed as an individual (Grafton 2012; Barakat 1993). The self thus becomes a collective one consisting of a multitude of components. Consequently, a person is required to be conscious of all the layers that make up his/her identity at all times. Clarifying this, Sharifa Zuhur explains that, 'the Arab states embody various patriarchal structures and Arab society clings to a patriarchal system in which women's position within and duties toward the family precede their rights as individuals' (Zuhur 2003, p.2). The depiction of the fear that Muna experiences illustrates this complex construction of social identities. Thus, what is initially perceived as an individual action by one person becomes a communal one involving not only the person in charge but also the immediate and extended members of their family.

Outside the Body condemns various factors behind a cultural normative perception in Arab countries of female virginity and how both women and men are socialised in ways that justify radical solutions to suspected sexual activity by women. This is illustrated in the reaction of Muna's paternal grandmother to the accusations that were levelled against her, during a conversation with her sons. 'I swear if she was one of my daughters I would make her bleed in order to cool my fire. Go and shave your moustaches and hide in your houses like women, for none of you are men!' (Bataineh 2004, p.39).[64] The presentation of this ferocious reaction by a female family member towards another female member and close relative stresses the significant impact that culture has on the attitudes and behaviours of members of

---

62 غشاء يقرر مصيري؟ أردت أن أدخل أصابعي في فرجي وأمزق الغشاء وليكن الموت مصيري. أردت أن أنتقم من والدي. كنت أعرف أن تمزيق الغشاء سيضع رأسه في التراب إلى الأبد

63 أعلم أن القبيلة تجتمع لتقرر مصيري. صراخ فتيات كثيرات لا أعرف أسماءهن أو وجوههن تصل دمي. دمهن الدافئ الذي سال على أيدي ذكور عوائلهن يختلط بدمي. أخاف أن تشتبك عظامي بعظامهن، وأن يكون مصيري مثل مصيرهن

64 والله لو كانت وحده من بناتي غير أسيّل دمها وأبرد ناري. روحوا احلقوا شواربكوا واتخبوا بالبيوت مثل النسوان، ما فيكوا ولا زلمة.

society and on women as agents of patriarchy. In condemning honour killing, the protagonist complains:

> Why didn't my father defend me in front of people? Why didn't he stand by my side rather than become my enemy? Why? What if I had really lost my virginity? Does that mean I am less worthy of living? Does that mean that he has the right to kill me? Why does he give himself the right to defend my membrane as if it is his own? Why is his honour and that of the family linked to my hymen? What a valuable membrane it is! More valuable than human life! (p.45)[65]

Knowing the social and cultural make-up of Arab societies and their endorsement of notions of community (or more commonly tribalism) as opposed to individualism, the actions of the protagonist's father can hardly be seen as surprising. When the priorities and prestige of a tribe supersede individual desires, such tragic outcomes become normative/normalised.

Providing another dimension of the social preoccupation with female virginity, Zaghmout presents the character of Salma, who undergoes tremendous social pressure to get married. The narrative then introduces the idea of death as a 'solution'. This is explored in a scene in which Salma, unable to bear this situation, commits suicide. Although the author may not be presenting death as an explicit response to female virginity, I see it as an implicit response to remaining a virgin and hence becoming a burden on society instead of being married and becoming a reproductive member of that society. The decision to end the life of his protagonist in this dramatic death, and Bataineh's choice of metaphorically eliminating the identity of Muna (through plastic surgery) to allow space for the birth of Sara Alexander,[66] are suggestive of the issues that the novels are attempting to raise. The actions of the two characters could perhaps serve as a precedent for transgression in a society that has become so alienated from the primary concerns and well-being of its individuals. In both novels, death represents a cry for social liberation and an awakening from archaic and destructive practices that are causing tremendous harm. Death can also serve as an escape from the schizophrenic neopatriarchal system that only serves to complicate the lives of its female members.

---

[65] لماذا لم يدافع عني أمام الناس؟ لماذا لم يقف إلى جانبي بدل الوقوف ضدي؟ ... وماذا لو كنت حقا قد خسرت عذريتي؟ أأصبح أقل استحقاقا للحياة؟ أيصبح من حقه أن يقتلني؟ إن كان الغشاء سيمنع الرجال من الزواج مني فما علاقة والدي؟ لماذا يعطي لنفسه حق الدفاع عن غشائي وكأنه مالكه؟ لماذا يرتبط شرفه وشرف كل العائلة بغشائي؟ كم هو ثمين هذا الغشاء! أغلى من حياة إنسان!

[66] The new name that the protagonist adopts in order to conceal her identity from her family, who want to have her killed for having an extra-marital relationship with a Scotsman.

The rigid social conception of virginity and its preservation are crucial factors supporting the domination of women and reinforcing patriarchy. Virginity becomes a very powerful patriarchal tool to subjugate women and restrict their social activity. Apart from the various practical duties of the male patriarch, which include providing food and shelter, preserving female virginity is perceived as the ultimate and most sacred responsibility (Mernissi 1982; El Saadawi 2007). It is a marker of social status, virtue and most importantly honour, a concept that both novels heavily criticise. As Mernissi explains,

> Virginity is a matter between men, in which women merely play the role of silent intermediaries. Like honour, virginity is the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation in societies where inequality, scarcity, and the degrading subjection of some people to others deprive the community as a whole of the only true human strength: self-confidence. The concepts of honour and virginity locate the prestige of a man between the legs of a woman. It is not by subjugating nature or by conquering mountains and rivers that a man secures his status, but by controlling the movements of women related to him by blood or by marriage, and by forbidding them any contact with male strangers. (Mernissi 1982, p.183)

Family and tribal honour is directly linked to the sexual activity of a woman (before and after marriage) and she thus reaches the realisation that even her sexual life, and more precisely her hymen, is a communal asset. Similarly, Naila Minai states that, 'with the first drop of her menstrual blood, every Muslim girl becomes a temple of her family's honour' (Minai 1981, p.100). The hymen becomes so precious that its defloration outside marriage could result in the death of the woman (El Saadawi 2007; Faqir 2001; Abu-Odeh 2010). Honour killing is a serious issue in Jordan and continues to be a widely controversial topic (Ghanim 2009; Faqir 2001; Goodwin 2003; Araji and Carlson 2001; Mansur, Shteiwi and Murad 2009; Nsheiwat 2004; Ruane 2000). This is mainly due to Article 340 of the Constitution, which grants the perpetrator of an honour killing a reduced sentence and has been widely debated (Faqir 2001).[67] Fortunately, social perceptions of female virginity are gradually changing and moving towards a more promising approach as opposed to the radical ones that existed a few years ago.

---

[67] For more information on the legislative dimension of honour killings in Jordan refer to 'Chapter Seven: A Case study of Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Law: The Phenomenon of Honour Killing', in Abeer Dababneh's Thesis, The Jordanian Women's Movement: A Historical Analysis Focusing on Legislative Change.

Despite the steady progress, the concept of female virginity still plays a crucial role in restricting women's freedom and determining a woman's future, which perhaps explains the novelists' preoccupation with this matter. *Outside the Body* and *The Bride of Amman* are not the only novels that address female virginity; for example, Ibrahim Nasr Allah's *Shurfat al-ʿĀr* (*The Balcony of Disgrace*) is dedicated to this issue. In his novel, Nasr Allah is critical of Arab society for punishing innocent women who are subjected to rape and through his novel he presents a sympathetic approach to Arab women. He calls for the re-evaluation of social measures revolving around honour killing, but fails to question patriarchy as the primary cause. What distinguishes Bataineh's and Zaghmout's methods of handling the topic of virginity is their emphasis on radical approaches to resolve it. They both use the trope of female virginity as a tool to identify ways to defy social structures and to criticise this obsession with preserving a small, thin membrane that becomes more valuable than life itself.

Providing a useful analysis of how virginity is a central feature for women in Arab culture, Lama Abu Odeh explains:

> The discourse on gender and the discourse on virginity in Arab culture overlap so broadly that they are hardly distinguishable. To be an Arab woman is to engage in daily practices, an important part of which is to be a virgin. A heterosexuality that is honour/shame-based such as the Arab one, demands, under the sanction of social penalty, that the performance of femaleness stylizes the body that is called female as virginal. The hymen, in this context, acquires the double function of being both a mark of virginity and of delineating the boundaries of the body that is called female. This indeed, is what distinguishes it from the male body, since the latter can bear no such mark of virginity. (Abu Odeh 2010, p.917)

Moreover, Abu Odeh clarifies the role of the restrictive social measures that are placed on women,

> The function of these prohibitive demands is not the preservation of actual virginity but the production of the public effect of virginity. In other words, the physical attachment of the hymen to the body needs to be evidenced and publicized, i.e., signified, through an elaborate performance for the benefit of the social audience. Thus, the hymen becomes displaced from its biological vessel, the vagina, onto the body as a whole, 'hymenising' it, and producing it as a body called female. But then, it is displaced again onto the social space where the female body is allowed to move and be, encircling it as a social hymen that delimits its borders. Female gender performance covers all three meanings together. Each of the above borders, the vaginal, the bodily, and the social, is enforced through a set of regulations and prohibitions that the woman is not supposed to violate. (Abu Odeh 2010, p.918)

114

Thus, in light of this perception about the significance of maintaining virginity in its three-dimensional form,

> Sanctions upholding this kind of heterosexuality are designed to pre-empt the honour killing and prevent its occurrence. Through an elaborate system of commands and prohibitions, girls learn their gender performance at a very young age. The culture guards itself against possible violations by devising sanctions less violent than death that are meant to preclude it. (Abu Odeh 2010, p.919)

Both novels present negative cultural and social attitudes as a tremendous force that can scarcely be reformed or reshaped, and perhaps this is what leads them to the alternative radical solution of giving up on society altogether. If, for example, one's own grandmother is depicted encouraging the death of a female family member, then it becomes obvious that there is little hope or aspiration for progress to take place. In their presentations of honour killings, Bataineh and Zaghmout are echoing Nawal El Saadawi, who provides a clear analysis of the concept of honour in an Arab society, in which she argues that,

> There is a distorted concept of honour in our Arab society. A man's honour is safe as long as the female members of his family keep their hymens intact. It is more closely related to the behaviour of the women in the family, than to his own behaviours. He can be a womanizer of the worst calibre and yet be considered an honourable man as long as his womenfolk are able to protect their genital organs. There are certain moral standards for females and others for males, and the whole society is permeated by such double moral standards. At the root of this anomalous situation lies the fact that sexual experience in the life of a man is a source of pride and a symbol of virility; whereas sexual experience in the life of women is a source shame and a symbol of degradation. (El Saadawi 2007, p.47)

Speaking on the issue of female virginity, El Saadawi further explains how a woman's hymen, which is less valuable than other parts of the body in terms of function, becomes the most valuable in symbolic terms. Moreover, she states that, 'if the girl lost her life, it would be considered less of a catastrophe than if she lost her hymen' (El Saadawi 2007, p.40). As a physician herself, she criticises the narrow Arab understanding of female anatomy and how people assume that the presence of a hymen is a way of testing virginity. She describes those who think this way and who believe that virginity is a woman's destiny as backward. Furthermore, she affirms that,

The anatomical and biological constitution of human beings, whether men or women, can have no relation to moral values. Moral values are in fact the product of social systems or, more precisely, of the social system imposed by the ruling class with the aim of serving certain economic and political interests, and ensuring that the situation of women from which that class draws benefit and power is maintained. (El Saadawi 2007, p.41)

Bataineh's and Zaghmout's depiction of Arab society's obsession with female virginity stresses the schizophrenic nature of neopatriarchal societies, which have such a perverse way of handling this issue. However, unlike the analysis of these two writers, which is more 'diagnostic', both novelists push the critique further through envisioning possible solutions to this social problem. Their use of 'drastic' measures should be viewed as a tool to push readers to think differently about virginity and honour killings in ways that are more beneficial for women. This absurdity of Arab societies being inwardly preoccupied with sexuality and outwardly behaving as if does not exist is presented as one of the pitfalls that stand in the way of social progress.

Deconstructing normative images of womanhood

One of the main reasons for considering *Outside the Body* and *The Bride of Amman* as feminist novels is their ability to destabilise the typical images of Arab women and to create new ones. They replace depictions of passivity, domination and degradation with those of strong will, determination, strength, resistance, rebellion and defiance. I find their reliance on strong female characters who are able to break free of the fierce grip of patriarchy a fascinating element in the novels. It calls for the retreat from conventional norms of life that suffocate women to a more vibrant role that focuses on their perspective on life, their interests, desires, ambitions and, most importantly, their agency. I realise why these two novels received criticism that claimed they were promoting corruption and rebellion against the traditional values that hold Arab society together. It is understandable that a society which has been fostering a certain narrow depiction of womanhood that serves particular agendas will be outraged if these standards are shaken or questioned. Yet, I maintain the view that such novels have a great deal to offer in social and cultural discussions around gender inequality.

In *Outside the Body*, Bataineh chooses to differentiate Muna from the rest of the female characters by presenting her as rebellious and determined to change her life and escape the misery of a controlling father and a harsh society. Unlike her mother and sisters, she refuses to give up and to assume a typical female role. She does not want to be a replica of her mother and realises that she has a long road to travel before she can find herself in a satisfying life. Thus, the protagonist is depicted as having a conscious understanding of her social positioning, and her refusal to conform to acceptable social roles further reinforces the interactive notion of gender that I explained earlier.[68] I argue that the importance of this agency not only stems from pushing feminist ideas forward, but also highlights the tremendous pressure that women face in resisting being socialised into rigid categories. There are various characteristics that make Muna stand out as different. The first is her boldness and her high sense of adventure, which can be observed in various incidents. She decides to meet Sadeq, her secret lover and neighbour, in a coffee shop on the final day of high school. She knows the risk if she is spotted by a relative, but does not imagine that it will reach such extreme measures. 'How was I to know that my meeting with Sadeq was going to turn my life upside down and to transform it into a series of negotiations with life?' (Bataineh 2004, p.23).[69] She realises in her mind that an innocent teenage behaviour is risky, but she chooses to enjoy the moment. 'I was a teenager and it was normal that I live my age. What is not normal is the price that my father forced me to pay because I met Sadeq. Oh God, how ignorant were you of your children, their growth and their feeling my father!' (Bataineh 2004, p.23).[70] Here, the protagonist is presented as being critical of the gendered teenage experience that prevails in conservative Arab societies, where the social restrictions on female behaviour are far greater than those on the male.

Then we can notice the protagonist's insistence on writing conditions into her marriage contract, a thing that is commonly done by women in the Arab world, especially in Jordan, but which tends to be financial in nature rather than social. Her attitude towards her husband, Mahrous, is also a step away from that of a traditional wife in that she shows him utter disrespect and refuses to obey his orders or to attend

---

[68] I have discussed this on (p.97) of this chapter.

[69] كيف كان لي ان أعرف أن لقائي بصادق سيقلب حياتي رأسا على عقب، وأن يحولها إلى سلسلة من المفاوضات مع الحياة

[70] كنت مراهقة وكان من الطبيعي أن أعيش سني، ما لم يكن طبيعيا هو ذاك الثمن الذي أجبرني والدي على دفعه لأنني التقيت صادق. يا الله كم كنت جاهلا بأبنائك ونموهم ومشاعرهم يا أبي!

to his needs, which later leads to their divorce. But the greatest deviation comes after she engages in a sexual relationship with a Scottish man and gives birth to an illegitimate child before opting for marriage. Reflecting on her past life, Muna says:

> Yesterday I was Muna, the daughter of the village and the naïve field; yesterday I was also Muna, the teenager *who does not own her body*, her will or her decisions. In my childhood, which is almost erased from my memory, I was free, my feet did not know numbness or surrender, and my eyes did not know the ugly effect that crying leaves on oneself. Teenage desires aroused me and so I lost my body, my will, my decisions and my actions and entered into circles of fear and weakness. They took away everything, even the hope for a tomorrow, and left me with a desire to die. I rushed into the lap of death, blessing it and believing in it, but they stood between me and my death. They refused to let me choose the ultimate nonexistence and left me in the absurdity of theirs. *Every time I escaped a prison, they forced me into another*. They cut my wings, plucked my feathers, and wrapped me in white cloth to walk with the life of a body that does not know life. A walking dead amongst them that does not know warmth or security and does not have the ability to fly. (Bataineh 2004, p.5, my emphasis)[71]

The character's ability to challenge patriarchal control can be seen in the gradual power that she gains as she moves from the extended family home (in which her father, uncle, brother and other relatives are all active agents of oppression) to the nuclear family of Mahrous and then later Suleiman. Her sense of autonomy is further increased when she finds a job and becomes economically independent. Expressing her satisfaction, the protagonist asserts:

> *I love the woman I have become.* I love my *dependence on myself* and in reaching out to all fields of life after life was merely responsibilities that need to be accomplished or orders that need to be obeyed or dreams that could not be fulfilled. I love the flow of blood that makes me capable of *leading my life* and my dreams *the way I desire* and *not according to circumstances or according to the desires of others*. I love the feeling of productivity, work and creativity. I love my *liberated capabilities* and *the construction of my being*, personality and future. I love my love for what I am now and what I can achieve and the purity that surround my days. (Bataineh 2004, p. 282)[72]

Thus, despite all the hardships that the protagonist has undergone, she is successful in moulding her gendered identity into one that she desires. Such depictions reinstate

---

[71] بالأمس كنت منى، ابنه الريف والحقول الساذجة، وبالأمس أيضا كنت منى، المراهقة التي لم تملك جسدها ولا إرادتها ولا قرارها. في طفولتي التي محت الذاكرة أغلبها، كنت حرة، لا تعرف قدماي الخدر ولا الحصار، ولا تعرف عيناي قبح الأخاديد التي يتركها البكاء في أعماق الذات. تفتحت فيَّ رغبات المراهقة فخسرت جسدي وإرادتي وقراري وحركتي، ودخلت في دوائر الخوف والهزال. سلبوا مني كل شيء، حتى الأمل في الغد، وما تركوا لي إلا رغبتي في الموت. اندفعت الى حضن الموت أباركه له أيماني بلا شيء إلا هو. لكنهم كانوا بيني وبين الموت. منعوني من اختيار العدم الحقيقي. وأبقوني في عبثية عدمهم. كلما فررت من قفص أدخلوني في آخر. قصوا أجنحتي، نتفوا ريشي، وكفنوني بالبياض لأسير بين الأحياء جسدا لا يعرف الحياة. أسيرة ميتة بينهم، لا أعرف الدفء ولا الأمان ولا أقدر على التحليق.

[72] أحب المرأة التي صرتها. أحب اعتمادي على نفسي وخروجي إلى مدارات الحياة، بعد أن كانت الحياة مجرد واجبات علىّ أن أؤديها، أو أوامر علىَّ أن أطيعها، أو أحلاما لا أستطيع تحقيقها. أحب دفق الدماء الذي يجعلني قادرة على تسيير حياتي وأحلامي كما أشاء، لا كما تشاء ظروفي، أو كما يشاء غيري. أحب احساسي أنى قادرة على الفعل والعمل والخلق. أحب تحرر قدراتي وبناء كياني وشخصيتي ومستقبلي. أحب حبي لما أنا عليه ولما أستطيع إليه وأحب الصفاء الذي يضم أيامي

the notion that one's gender cannot be static and that it changes according to one's lived experience and informed choices.

In *The Bride of Amman,* Salma is depicted as a highly ambitious girl who is overburdened by social pressure to be married. Like Muna in *Outside the Body*, she is not a typical female character who conforms to normative social values. When she hears the news that her younger sister is going to be married, she decides that she too will marry, but in her own style. Without the knowledge of anyone, she starts preparing a wedding dress for herself. In the scene depicting her sister's wedding, Salma disappears and decides to go to Amman Mountain where she wears her wedding dress and cuts the veins on her left arm. She makes sure that her suicide is recorded on her laptop and leaves a message for her family to watch her as she dies. She makes the following comment about marriage just days before her death:

> *'Before both of you lose your chance of marriage'*… This phrase frightens me! The countdown begins after graduating from university, sometimes even before and women start racing with time towards marriage. Each one depending on her wit, in a Darwinian scene where survival is for the fittest, where the lucky ones are those who find a good match. As for the others, the marathon continues and narrows down as one reaches 30 where those who were unlucky are judged as social failures and are hence assigned a secondary status on the margins of society. (Zaghmout 2012, p.13, my emphasis)[73]

Stressing the social obsession with marriage, Zaghmout depicts its psychological effect on women who (either by choice or chance) remain unmarried. This vivid description not only serves to criticise this social attitude towards marriage but also highlights the danger that such pressure will be too much for single women. The jungle metaphor of 'survival is for the fittest' is significant in invoking the predator versus prey binary, in which women who fail to find a match fall prey to this perverse social system and are rendered losers of this game. Interestingly, the responsibility for finding a match in this depiction lies solely on the back of the woman, and it is therefore her duty to 'win' the prize or the husband before time runs out.[74]

---

[73] تبورو انتو الجوز ترعبني تلك الكلمة! يبدأ العد التنازلي بعد التخرج من الجامعة؛ أحيانا قبل، وتتسابق النساء مع الزمن نحو عش الزوجية، كلٌ حسب شطارتها، في مشهد دارويني، البقاء للأصلح. في هذه الحالة لمن يسعفها الحظ في خطف سعيد الحظ. يستمر المارثون، ويضيق باب العبور مع العد التنازلي للوصول العمر الثلاثين، الحكم على المتخلفين بفشل اجتماعي بدور ثانوي على هامش المجتمع

[74] I discuss spinsterhood in Chapter Five, p.139.

Providing an image of another defiant character, Zaghmout presents Rana, who is very critical of the social restrictions on women. While alone, she confesses:

> I am not good at abiding by laws and norms. I am rebellious and stubborn. *I only hear the voice in my head*. I do what I see as right and what makes me feel happy even if it is temporary happiness. Of course, this is not easy in a society that restricts the freedom of women regardless of their religion and imposes on them a life guide that shapes the features of their movements, behaviour and characteristics. Maybe it is personal nature or the fact that my mother is foreign … I receive contradictory messages around me. Everyone tries to build me a moral system in a society that is *schizophrenic in personality and patriarchal in identity. I collect the contradictions around me, melt them in my personal pot, and comply with what my mind and body dictates to me.* (Zaghmout 2012, pp.24–25, my emphasis)[75]

Of all the remarks made by characters in the novel, I find this one the most significant. This is because it enables Zaghmout to make two ideas explicit. The first is about the relationship between women and the patriarchal society that imposes its iron grip on women, depriving them of the possibility of leading satisfying lives. The complex nature of this relationship is acknowledged. A 'rebellious' woman, or one who defies convention, is one who is conscious of the social boundaries and restrictions and is therefore aware of her choices and, more significantly, is a woman with agency (albeit limited). The second point which I thought was intriguing is the connection that the protagonist makes between ideas of rebellion and disregard of social morals and that of having a foreign mother. It is therefore suggested that these 'liberating' actions taken by Rana are the result of having a foreign mother or the direct influence of her mother and not because of an inherent willingness to challenge oppressive circumstances and positions.

Through these characters, both novels stress the significance of being critical of harmful practices against women in order for the authors to evaluate and give constructive criticism. The function of such outspoken characters thus becomes that of raising awareness about the social problems of women on both the personal and the collective level. Their function differs from those in *Anwaar* and *When Wolves Grow Old*, whose approach is individualistic rather than collective.

---

75 لم أكن جيدة في التقييد بالقوانين والأعراف. متمردة وعنيدة، لا أسمع سوى الصوت الذي في رأسي. أعمل ما أراه صوابا وما يجعلني سعيدة. حتى لو أنها سعادة آنية. طبعا لم يكن ذلك سهلا في مجتمع يقيد حرية المرأة بغض النظر عن دينها ويفرض عليها دليل حياة يحدد معالم حركاتها، تصرفاتها وصفاتها. ربما هي طبيعة شخصية، أو حقيقة أن أمي أجنبية، أو ربما هي خصوصية المجتمع المحلي للمدرسة الخاصة التي درست بها. أستقبل رسائل متناقضة من حولي، كل يحاول أن يبني لي نظامي الاخلاقي في مجتمع مفصوم الشخصية. ذكوري الهوية. وأنا كنت أنثى، تستقي من منهل موجة المساواة الجنسية والحريات الشخصية. أجمع التناقضات من حولي وأصهرها في بوتقتي الشخصية وأدمجها مع ما يمليه على عقلي وكياني.

120

A lost battle with patriarchy

Unlike the many Jordanian writers who underestimate the power of patriarchy and present it as a neutral structure,[76] Bataineh and Zaghmout clearly differentiate themselves by presenting patriarchy as a debilitating system for women. In *Outside the Body*, Bataineh depicts a world in which Muna has lost hope in reforming society as she realises that it is a situation beyond reformation and that the only logical and plausible way to evade the strong grip of the system is through escape. This realisation is not clearly presented at the beginning. Bataineh illustrates how Muna objects many times to verbal and physical abuse against women and tries to stand up for herself, only to be disappointed, abused yet further by her father and a society that Bataineh presents as 'merciless towards women'. This is why the concept of 'rot' is used to describe patriarchal attitudes. In a scene where the uncle is looking for Muna in Scotland, she protests: 'if I had been male, I would not have been followed by this *rot* and it would not have stood between me and the thresholds of future. *I hate my sex, which I did not choose, for the restrictions it places on me*' (Bataineh, p.432, my emphasis).[77] Thus, Muna explains:

> My hatred towards my father and his *cruelty* at that time has *generated in me a hatred of all prisons*. Just like the tight shoes, and the school with the high concrete fence and the poverty that has no mercy on dreams, or human prisons. Today the prisons have become larger in number and size. Relationships with kin, the lives of women, traditions, beliefs, the needs of the body, the responsibility of the nation, the memory of the human, the language, human existence on this earth, are all prisons. (Bataineh 2004, p.26, my emphasis) [78]

She describes the various events in which Muna defies her society or social norms and how she fails every time.

In an interview in the Jordanian electronic newspaper *Sahafi* on 20th of March, 2011, Bataineh said,

> I curse all the rot that are embedded in all aspects of our lives in *Kharij al-Jasad*. The novel is an angry one, that is true, and describing it as angry does not embarrass me, but I am embarrassed for any person who is not disturbed by the ugliness that the novel depicts. This is truly a person who has lost his/her human nature, which refuses

---

[76] Like Asya Abdel Hadi in *The Bitter Winter*, Ibrahim Awad Allah in *The Thirst of Wheat* and *Ahlam Yousef*.

[77] لو كنت ذكرا لما تبعني العفن ولما وقف بيني وبين شرفات المستقبل. حتى جنسي الذي لم أختره أكره ما يلقيه على من قيود

[78] كرهي لوالدي وجبروته آنذاك ولد في نفسي كرها لكل السجون. كان الحذاء الضيق، والمدرسة ذات السور الاسمنتي المرتفع، والفقر الذي لا يرحم أو الإنسان سجون. اليوم أصبحت السجون أكبر وأكثر. علاقات القرابة، وحياة النساء، والعادات، والمعتقدات، وحاجات الجسد، والتزامات الوطن، وذاكرة الانسان، واللغة، والوجود البشري فوق هذه الأرض كلها سجون.

degradation, injustice and coercion. Most Arab societies, in reality and not on the level of slogans (*shi'arat*), still believe that it is best for a woman to accept reality and to look for her humanity and rights through social, feminist or religious gaps (*fajawat*) and I, like many others, believe that a right is something that is given and not granted and we refuse to rent our voices and writings. We do not wait for permission to be who we want to be, and if this is considered a breach of the conventional and the permissible and the usual then perhaps we need to revaluate our culture, its origins and its contents and our societies, its values and its contradictions instead of cornering the voices and rights of women writers and issuing defensive judgments to defy their voices.[79]

Outside the Body is clearly not interested in negotiating with the prevalent patriarchal modes of Jordanian society that are deemed as unjust to women. The narrative therefore pushes forward a radical take on the issue of women's subordination without allowing room for a dialogue between the various actors, unlike Asya Abdel Hadi, whose approach in *The Bitter Winter* is completely different.[80] Bataineh has reached a stage of complete disgust at how some conservative Arab men choose to treat women. Through her main character and plot, she openly criticises such men, along with the society that provides them with protective cover under the name of patriarchy. Her critique of Arab patriarchy reiterates that of Sharabi's, wherein they both see no point in mere reform as a solution and believe that what is required is more of a revolution that would have radical beneficial implications for women and other members of society. Mohammed Al-Omari, who is a Jordanian writer and novelist, criticises Bataineh for failing to highlight the protagonist's internal struggle in addition to presenting her option to flee the country as premeditated or pre-planned. He sees *Outside the Body* as being closer to a personal experience than a social one, and he argues that Bataineh has committed a grave mistake by following the West as a model. Al-Omari condemns Bataineh for generalising what she sees as the ills of Jordanian society; arguing that the cases she presents are individual and not collective and stating that the situations of women in both rural and urban areas in Jordan are very promising on various levels and deviate from the picture that Bataineh paints of them (Al-Omari 2010).

---

[79] تلعن العفن الذي يندس بين جوانب حياتنا في خارج الجسد...الرواية غاضبة، هذا صحيح، وليس يخجلني وصف الغاضبة، لكن أخجل من أي إنسان لا يغضب من القبح الذي تصوره الرواية، فذلك بحق، إنسان فقد طبيعته الإنسانية التي ترفض الذل والإكراه والظلم والانكسار. إن أغلب المجتمعات العربية، على الحقيقة لا على مستوى الشعارات، ما تزال تؤمن أن من الأفضل للمرأة أن تقبل بالأمر الواقع، وأن تستجدي إنسانيتها وحقوقها من خلال فجوات اجتماعية أو أنثوية أو دينية، نؤمن بأن الحق يؤخذ ولا يمنح، ونأبى أن نؤجر أصواتنا وكتاباتنا، كما أننا لا ننتظر تصريح أحد كي نكون ما نريد. وإن كان هذا خروجاً آخر على المقبول والمسموح والمعتاد, فلعلنا بحاجة إلى مراجعة ثقافاتنا وأصولها ومكوناتها، ومجتمعاتنا وقيمها وتناقضاتها, بدلاً من محاصرة أصوات وحقوق وكتابات نسائنا, وإطلاق أحكام هجومية لقمع أصواتهن.
[80] I discuss her approach in the following chapter.

However, such accusations are commonly aimed at women writers when they deviate from the norm and resort to radical approaches to critique society.

Outside the Body sheds some light on the role of religion, which is crucial to the narrative's main critique of patriarchy. It presents Islam as incapable of bridging the gap between the actual and desired social reality of women and therefore looks for alternative solutions. This aspect is represented in the protagonist's initial refuge in the Holy Qur'an as a source of comfort and reconciliation. Muna describes the captivating spiritual experience of reading the Holy Qur'an, especially after learning the art of reciting the Holy Book (*fan al-tajwīd*). Yet, despite presenting the spiritual as a potential tool for overcoming misery, the protagonist is shown to abandon religious methods (dua', prayer and the recitation of the Holy Qur'an) for numbing her pain and to seek practical solutions instead. Unlike Asya Abdel Hadi in *The Bitter Winter,* who promotes the use of religion as a weapon to destabilise conceptions of womanhood, for Bataineh this is clearly not the case. She only implicitly presents religion, or specifically Islam, as a potential agent for enforcing patriarchy.

Instead, marriage[81] is presented as a potential escape route. Marriage is used as a tool by which the protagonist can achieve her needs and desires. Realising that education is very important, Muna agrees to a conditional contract with her first husband that requires him to allow her to complete her education. She then uses her second marriage as an escape from her distressing society altogether. She later uses her last marriage, to Stewart from Scotland, as a tool to assimilate with a foreign culture and to adopt western liberal values and norms.

The novel has been criticised for depicting Jordanian society in a negative light and for failing to be precise about which groups of people it is condemning (Al-Omari 2010; Masoud 2008). The criticism is not only centred on her depiction of flaws within Jordanian society, ranging from the oppression of women and sexual harassment to honour killing, they also centred on settling for a western solution to the problem rather than looking for answers from within. These critics (Al-Omari 2010; Masoud 2008) ask: How can a man like Steward be her saviour? Why generalise an individual case? Bataineh defends herself against such accusations by

---

[81] Refer to previous section on marriage as a protective cover.

stating that a novel is a form of art and that many fail to criticise it using artistic tools and instead resort to traditional methods used to criticise human beings. She states that many fail to remember that this is a piece of fiction and, although it greatly resembles the real world, this does not necessarily mean that it is criticising particular groups of people. The aim is to criticise conceptions, practices and attitudes revolving around women, and if a realistic novel is used that bears a great resemblance to the real world, then this is mere coincidence or one valid approach (Sahafi 2011). She also states that,

> I am an independent woman who only follows herself and her choices and if a man is bothered by this and sees women's independence a threat to his masculinity then he must search for a solution to his illness because I will not keep silent to protect his masculinity. An independent and free man is one who refuses to see women enslaved and oppressed. This is not a particular hatred towards men, as many have claimed but it is a hatred of enslavement, weakness and degradation. (Sahafi 2011)[82]

Outside the Body makes a breakthrough that goes beyond other contemporary novels on many levels. It is a bold novel in terms of the topics covered and the proposed solutions, which some have described as resembling revenge (Al-Rai 2006). It is a novel that exposes various aspects of Arab patriarchy and portrays it as an unjust system that promotes hatred and encourages inhumane practices against women. Bataineh's depiction of the father's severe illness is a very important part of the argument she is trying to make regarding the social control of women. She uses some male figures, of whom Abu Mansour is the most horrible and aggressive, as symbolic of the patriarchal system. She later chooses to end the life of this controlling character through an illness that leaves Abu Mansour physically weak and apologetic towards members of his family, and especially Muna. The once so powerful and God-like figure thus becomes an object of pity and irony, which is precisely the message that Bataineh is trying to transmit with her choice of such metaphors.

Her emphasis on illness is also significant in allowing her protagonist the moment of revenge that she has long awaited. It is not satisfying for the character of Muna to only leave her society altogether, she wants to seek pleasure through the suffering of

---

82 أنا,.. امرأة مستقلة لا تتبع إلا ذاتها واختياراتها, وإن كان في ذلك إزعاج لرجل يرى في استقلال المرأة تهديداً لرجولته, فليبحث لعقدته عن حل, لأني لن أصمت كي أحمي رجولته. الرجل المستقل والحر يأبى أن تكون المرأة مقهورة ومستعبدة، وهذا ليس كرهاً للرجل، كما فسّره البعض، بل كره للعبودية والضعف والانكسار

the one person who has tortured her during her life, and that is her father. She wants an apology for what she had to endure as a token of recognition of her patience. Although one might say that it is too late for an apology, Bataineh insists on depicting the father's willingness to apologise to his daughter and his family for what he has done, even though he never gathers enough courage to do so. Abu Mansour says, 'Oh God how much I have longed to hug my daughter and to be strong to ask for her forgiveness. I feared that she would get closer to me and force me to see my harshness and cruelty' (Bataineh 2004, p.13).[83] He tries to justify his aggressiveness towards his family, 'My daughter's silence and reserve resembles that of her mother. I doubt that any of them is sad or sorry to see me in pain and weakness. I wanted a safe life for them, so why didn't they realise that my cruelty was out of love?' (Bataineh 2004, p.11)[84] Again, and as Bataineh illustrates, regardless of his feelings of regret, the harm he has caused is far beyond any apology.

In the Arab world, patriarchy has been criticised by several prominent Arab writers (El Saadawi 2007; Mernissi 1982). Both Nawal El Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi were vocal in demonstrating their opposition to the patriarchal structure. Despite following different approaches to discussing patriarchy, they both agree on, 'the fundamental preconditions of liberation: radical social change and the overthrow of patriarchal hegemony … They both see socialism as the answer to the problems of both social injustice and the oppression of women' (El Saadawi and Mernissi in Sharabi 1988, p.34).

Both George Tarabishi and Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm have criticised patriarchy as a traditional system that needs to be disposed of altogether. They speak of the need for a new generation of individuals who are taught the basic principles of equality from an early age. Al-Azm rejects the 'neopatriarchal discourse in its religious as well as its secular form.' He argues that, 'Only a radical Marxist critique ... can pave the way for constructing an entirely modern Arab society' (Al-Azm in Sharabi 1988, p.111). Similarly, Mernissi contends that, 'society cannot afford to be merely reformist, where women's liberation and social justice are concerned' (Mernissi 1975, p.107).

---

[83] يا الله كم وددت ضم ابنتي وكم وددت أن أكون قويا كي أطلب منها أن تسامحني. خفت أن تقترب أكثر فتجبرني على رؤية خشونتي وجبروتي

[84] بناتي يشبهن في صمتهن وتكتمهن أمهن، أكاد أشك أن واحدة منهن حزينة لوجعي وأسفه لهزالي. كنت أريد لهن حياة امنه فهل أدركن أن قسوتي ما كانت الا من باب حبهن

Through their novels, Bataineh and Zaghmout appear to present these same arguments when they illustrate that reforming the current social structure is not the optimum solution. However, as opposed to presenting reform as insufficient in the face of rigid patriarchal societies, both novelists rely on the capacity of fiction to envision possible solutions. They present patriarchal control along with social pressure as serious problems that are beyond reformation and this why they focus on escape as a solution because they both realise that eradicating patriarchy is next to impossible in an Arab society. Despite the drastic solutions they offer, they remain significant in shedding light on the tremendous suffering and obstacles that women endure in patriarchal societies. Because of their provocativeness, these solutions could initiate wider discussions about gender inequality and push forward progressive agendas to resolve the issue. In Sharabi's critique, he explains how the political and economic factors in the Arab world play a role in reinforcing and institutionalising a system that serves to suffocate its individual members and hinders them from leading a civil life built on the principles of freedom and equality. Moreover, in the last chapter of his book on neopatriarchy, entitled *What Is To Be Done?*, Sharabi declares that hope for eradicating the perverse neopatriarchal structure can only come through women's movements.

> Of all these groups, potentially the most revolutionary is the women's movement. If this phase of struggle were to open up to radical democratic change, women's liberation would necessarily be its spearhead. Even in the short term, the women's movement is the detonator that will explode neopatriarchal society from within. If allowed to grow and come into its own, it will become the permanent shield against patriarchal regression, the cornerstone of future modernity. (Sharabi 1988, p.154)

Although Sharabi's neopatriarchal Arab society focused mainly on historical and political points of departure with the West, I find it very significant that towards the end of his book he acknowledges women's role as an important transformative agent that could eventually lead to a promising future.

The West as a safe haven for women

In *Outside the Body* and *The Bride of Amman*, the West is depicted in a positive light. It is presented as the optimum place for women if they want to live a comfortable life away from male domination and biased social practices. The West is very often placed in a binary opposition with the East or, more precisely, with the Arab world. In *Outside the Body*, the West is represented by Scotland and in *The Bride of Amman* it is represented by Sweden[85]. Bataineh's main character shows her admiration for Scotland, its beauty, its nature, its laws and its people. She feels relieved at the thought of spending the rest of her life in such a welcoming place where one is not pressured for being a woman. She gives various accounts of how the character of Muna is overjoyed and filled with excitement as she walks in the streets of Scotland and as she prepares and decorates her new home with Stewart. 'Which time is worth remembering for Sara Alexander? A woman without shores? Or a human without barriers?' (Bataineh 2004, p.5)[86] is how Bataineh describes the life of her protagonist before and after her exposure to western thought and after she became liberated from her abusive father.

In a similar vein, the character of Rana in *The Bride of Amman* is fascinated with the great amount of freedom that is granted to Swedish people. After living in Sweden, Rana is depicted as captivated by liberal western attitudes towards sexual relationships before marriage. These ideas are developed in the novel within a discursive frame, particularly through 'conversations' between two women, Rana and her Swedish friend, Charlotte. The perspective of the novel shifts via Rana, as she compares 'liberal' Swedish society to an 'oppressive' Jordan. Nevertheless, this novel is also about feelings, and Rana, as the Jordanian emigrant, muses:

> Things like that used to make me feel amazed and jealous. Is Swedish society so advanced to the extent of transforming social catastrophes into normal things that go unnoticed! I can but compare our situation in Jordan. It makes me very sad that, despite the economic problems from which we suffer, we seize the opportunities to enforce more social obligations and restrictions on ourselves and to complicate our lives. (Zaghmout 2012, p.154) [87]

---

[85] Although it is not stated, Zaghmout's choice of Sweden could have been inspired by his visit to Sweden in 2008 as part of the Young Leaders Visitors Programme (which he was awarded).

[86] أي العمرين يستحق أن تذكر سارا الكزائر؟ امرأة بلا شواطئ، بل انسانة بلا قيود

[87] أمور كهذه كانت تشعرني بالدهشة والغيرة. الهذة الدرجة تطور المجتمع السويدي ليحول مصائب اجتماعية الى أمور عادية لا ترمش لها عين؟

127

In both novels, the West is synonymous with freedom, comfort, equality and a bright future. By comparing the lives of women in Scotland and Sweden to Jordan, both Bataineh and Zaghmout are able to elicit a feeling of sympathy towards women living in Jordan, who are positioned as having harsh lives, full of social pressure and a multitude of cultural restrictions. The character of Muna makes the following observation:

> Some of the older men and women or some teenagers walk in the park with their dogs. The dogs run after sticks or balls. I look at their free legs and observe the love of their owners as they cuddle them. I wonder whether a dog in this civilisation has gained more rights than members of my civilisation! (Bataineh 2004, p.251)[88]

In their depictions of the oppressive aspects of Jordanian society, neither Bataineh nor Zaghmout address any form of social support from within their community; they choose to search elsewhere for solutions. However, this decision to reach out for an unconventional solution is depicted as complex and (emotionally) challenging.

> I watched my uncle and Stewart discuss what is allowed and not allowed, what is my right and what is not my right. My choices and all the surrounding limitations: the permissible and the forbidden. Each talks about me from his perspective: an eastern one and a western one are confronted. I didn't feel like a woman as much as a mere topic of discussion. Standing at the edge of east and west, or on the boundaries and fitting neither east nor west, my identity is lost and I can't find myself either here or there. (Bataineh, p.425)[89]

Yet, despite this moment of doubt, the protagonist is depicted as settling for the western solution. In *Outside the Body*, western values and western feminism are fully embraced and seen as the only way forward. There is no mention in the novel of the protagonist seeking help from a local or regional source of support. This in itself is representative of Bataineh's predetermined method of dealing with women's issues in her novel. She presents Jordanian modes of tackling women's subordination as useless against the immense force of patriarchy and she therefore adopts foreign tools. In fact, Bataineh's narrative clearly upholds not only western culture, but also

---

[88] بعض الرجال والنساء من كبار السن أو الشباب يسيرون في الحديقة مع كلابهم. تنطلق الكلاب وراء العصي أو الطابات. أنظر الى أرجلها الحرة، وأرقب محبة أصحابها لها حين يضمونها إليهم. أتساءل عما إذا كان الكلب في هذه الحضارة قد أخذ من حقوقهم ما لم يصل اليه أبناء حضارتي.

[89] جلست أراقب عمي وستيورت يناقشان ما يجوز وما لا يجوز، حقي ولا حقي، اختياراتي وما يحيط بها من قيود، الحلال والحرام. كلاهما يتحدث عني من منظوره الخاص. منظور شرقي واخر غربي يتواجهان. شعرت أني لا امرأة وأني مجرد موضوع نقاش. أقف على الحدود الفاصلة بين الشرق والغرب، أو الحدود التي لا تنتمي الى الشرق ولا الى الغرب. تضيع هويتي فلا أجد نفسي هنا وهناك، ولا أعرف إن كنت منى أخي هذا أو مسز مكفرسون شريكة حياة ذاك

western feminism, as the protagonist joins a women's organisation, which is depicted as offering her 'enlightened' western notions of gender equality.

Similarly, in *The Bride of Amman*, Zaghmout implies that the West is a better social model that conservative Arab countries should emulate when tackling the gender discrimination. The following comment by the character of Rana sums up this view in the novel: 'I wonder whether we have the capability as Arab women to change our reality and enforce new facts on our societies. Or is it that the only way lies with those lucky ones who broke their Arab social ties and embraced those of other societies?' (Zaghmout 2012, p.156).[90] It is difficult to work out from the novels why Bataineh and Zaghmout rely on the West as a model; it is hard to believe they are not aware of Arab feminism, so one assumes they are dissatisfied with such movements as a positive force in Arab women's lives.

I argue that Bataineh and Zaghmout's approach is troubling in the sense that it accepts essentialist views about western culture. It invites the problematic debate about East/West and implicitly refers to notions of colonised and coloniser. The portrayal of an 'oppressive' Jordan compared to liberating and fulfilling Scotland and Sweden is very alarming. Their insistence on binary opposition and the juxtaposing of one culture against another does no service to the plight of Jordanian women in the quest to resolve gender inequality. Fully acknowledging the function of literature and the opportunity it gives to writers to explore ideas and practices; I nevertheless find such a portrayal of cultures and societies dangerous. The danger lies in providing a simplistic analysis and making sweeping generalisations based on individual cases. I find both Bataineh and Zaghmout guilty of cultural essentialism and of reinforcing ideas of orientalism. In their images, representations and critique of Jordan and the West, they fail to give the reader a comprehensive or realistic picture of the dynamics of gender inequality in Jordanian society.

Arab readers have been accustomed to reading denigrating depictions of the Arab world from a western perspective and of redundant arguments about Muslim women as oppressed (Abu Lughod 2001; King 2009; Graham-Brown 2003; Sabbagh 2003; Majaj, Sunderman and Saliba 2002; Mahmood 2009; Saliba 2000; Gocek and

---

[90] أتساءل، هل نملك القدرة نحن النساء العرب لتغيير الواقع وفرض معطيات جديدة على مجتمعاتنا؟ أم أن المنفذ الوحيد يكمن في جيب تلك المحظوظات منا ممن كسرن خيوط مجتمعاهن العربية وارتمن في أحضان مجتمعات أخرى؟

Balaghi 1994; Nashat and Tucker 1999; Mehdid 1993; Darvishpour 2003; Hamada 2001). As Abu Lughod states:

> Pundits tell us that there is a clash of civilizations or cultures in our world. They tell us there is an unbridgeable chasm between the West and the 'Rest'. Muslims are presented as a special and threatening culture – the most homogenized and the most troubling of the Rest. Muslim women, in this new common sense, symbolize just how alien this culture is. (Abu Lughod 2013, p.6)

Moreover, she explains that:

> Even if many are willing to set aside the sensationalized stories of oppression that capture media attention and contribute to the widespread sense of certainty about the direness of the situation of the 'Muslim woman,' most people still harbour a stubborn conviction that women's rights should be defined by the values of choice and freedom, and that these are deeply compromised in Muslim communities. (Abu Lughod 2013, p.17)

Arguing against reductionist views of other cultures and their implications for women, Radhika Coomaraswamy explains,

> The fight to eradicate certain cultural practices that are violent to women is often made difficult by what may be termed 'the arrogant gaze' of the outsider. Many societies feel that the campaign to fight cultural practices is often undertaken in a way to make the Third World appear as the primitive 'other', denying dignity and respect towards its people…this 'arrogant gaze,' many feel , has increased since 11 September. (Coomaraswamy 2003)

Interestingly enough, in *Outside the Body* and *The Bride of Amman*, it is the novelists themselves who initiate such negative portrayals. Such novels echo the common rhetoric about Muslim women being in need of saving from their horrible societies by the 'amicable' and 'caring' West.[91]

Such novels reinforce the notion that the West is a 'safe haven' for women, when in reality this is not the case due to the presence of problems pertaining to women that remain unresolved. In their critique, Bataineh and Zaghmout insist on differences and endorse the common notion of the West and the 'uncivilised other'. The fact that this process of 'othering' is done by 'the other' adds another layer of complexity to the nature of the relationship between the Arab world and an 'imagined' modern and 'peaceful' West. By taking such a flawed approach, these novelists lose sight of the complex nature of women's struggles and of the dynamics

---

[91] In similar vein and based on her repeated representations of women as victims, Amal Amireh, accuses Nawal El Saadawi of being 'inevitably caught in the net of power relations that govern interactions between the first and the third worlds' (Amireh, 2000, p.219).

of social and cultural restrictions to which Arab women are subjected. Taking a step further and acknowledging the difficulty of separating art from ideology, I argue that such depictions could represent an implicit call for western intervention in attempts to eradicate gender inequality.

Speaking of her concern about how some Arab women portray themselves in songs using the metaphors of *The Wounded Bird* and *The Caged Bird* Abu Lughod argues that such songs are:

> A sober reminder that we must situate such images and ground our thinking about the meaning of freedom in the everyday lives of individuals, on the one hand, and the imperial politics of intervention, on the other. We will find that it is rarely a case of being free or oppressed, choosing or being forced. Representations of the unfreedom of others that blame the chains of culture incite rescue missions by outsiders. Such representations mask the histories of internal debate and institutional struggles over justice that have occurred in every nation. They also deflect attention from the social and political forces that are responsible for the ways people live. (Abu Lughod 2013, p.20)

Similarly, I worry about the implications of such representations by Jordanian novelists. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously put it, 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak in Abu Lughod 2013, p.33). Abu Lughod explains that, 'the historical record is full of similar cases, including the Middle East. In turn-of-the-century Egypt, what Leila Ahmed has called "colonial feminism" governed policy on women' (Abu Lughod 2013, p.33). I would like to clarify that, while I see no harm in benefiting from the experiences of other societies in advancing women, I oppose the juxtaposition of societies as a technique. I find it a necessity for Jordanian novelists to think thoroughly about the stance they desire to take and of carefully positioning their work in ways that reflect a deep understanding of underlying political narratives.[92] Thus, I propose that novelists ponder the following questions: Do they want their work to implicitly endorse ideas of cultural colonialism (which are embedded in western interests in the Arab region)? Or, do they want their novels to propose feasible solutions for the everyday struggles of women?

---

[92] Saba Mahmood (2009) makes similar arguments about representations of women in Arab and Islamic societies and western intervention. Refer to her chapter 'Feminism, Democracy, and Empire: Islam and the War of Terror' in Herzog H., and Braude A. *Gendering Religion and Politics*.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how Jamal Naji, Taher Al-Odwan, Afaf Bataineh and Fadi Zaghmout chose to denounce various oppressive social issues, from social practices and attitudes to the patriarchal structure as a whole. As these novelists' approaches are different, I have attempted to place them in two camps. The first emphasises the ability to manipulate the patriarchal structure for the benefit of women by relying on female sexuality. The second depicts dramatic escape by leaving one's country behind or death as the only solutions to such an oppressive system. These novels are controversial, as they depict a defiance of social norms that is unusual for Jordanian fiction. It is understandable that many Jordanian critics might find the work of these novelists controversial and problematic; defying social norms is by no means an easy task, especially in a conservative Arab culture.

The breaking of taboo by engaging in unorthodox sexual activity is perhaps suggestive of the possible future of Arab society to which Sharabi was alluding. He explains that if a social revolution is to take place in the future, then it should first start in the individual and in his/her refusal to fall victim to this perverse/schizophrenic neopatriarchal system. Thus, in light of his critique, the sexual activities of the female characters presented in the two novels serve as individualistic attempts to defy the social system. Such individualistic acts of defiance could be seen as 'baby steps' towards social change. Hence, as taboos[93] serve to further strengthen the patriarchal system[94], Naji challenges these sets of rules that characterise conservative societies. His radical move of undermining the social values that shape Arab society reflects Sharabi's main argument that social change needs to be 'bold' and 'defiant' in addressing issues, as opposed to 'safe' and 'conventional'. Moreover, Sharabi places a heavy weight on the shoulders of intellectuals and writers and the role they should play in promoting and preparing future generations for a social revolution that could result in far-reaching change, an imperative partly fulfilled by writers such as Jamal Naji and Taher Al-Odwan, who challenge the existing patriarchal structure three decades after the discussion of neopatriarchy. In their resistance to the conservative norms that exist in traditional

---

[93] In this context, I use taboo to refer to that which is forbidden on a religious, political and sexual level, as understood in Arab culture.

[94] Here, I am referring to how taboos function in traditional societies, where they become tools to further intimidate and dominate individuals.

Arab societies (represented by the breaking of taboos), both novelists offer innovative (radical) feminist perspectives that hold potential for changing women's lives.

Criticising the way in which sexuality is discussed in Arab societies, Sharabi explains how El Saadawi's book *Al-Mar'a Wa al-Jins* (*Women and Sex*), published in 1972, and Mernissi's remarks about female sexuality were perceived as radical in the 1970s.

> The Muslim system is not so much opposed to women as to the heterosexual unit. What is feared is the growth of the involvement between a man and a woman into an all-encompassing love, satisfying the sexual, emotional, and intellectual needs of both partners. Such involvement constitutes a direct threat to the man's allegiance to Allah, which should be the unconditional investment of all man's energies, thought, and feeling in his God. (Mernissi 1975, p.viii)

Moreover, he argues that, 'the formulations of El Saadawi and Mernissi appear so radical because they deal head-on with the specific implications of these constraints. Neopatriarchy, inwardly preoccupied with sex and outwardly behaving as though sex did not exist, here suffers merciless exposure and ridicule' (Sharabi 1988, p.33). It is this precise argument about the absurd way in which sexuality is perceived in a neopatriarchal society that both novels challenge. They both condemn a society in which sex is part of a forbidden discourse.

Through the narrative that is being created in both novels, sexuality features as a significant element that is intricately linked to women's subordination. The emphasis that these novelists place on active female sexuality appears to promote the view that sexuality is one of the root causes of women's sufferings. Sexuality, in this sense, takes on new meanings that deviate from the more common use in Arab fiction of female sexuality as a trope. In this context, not only is it presented as a tool for demanding more of what is desired, it is also (and most importantly) depicted as a site of struggle where women are having to compete for some form of social and cultural power and autonomy. Moreover, in their focus on sexuality, both novels appear to advocate a form of feminism that is 'daring' and 'radical' by exploring fundamental issues that are constructed as 'taboos' and thus not usually open to negotiation.

In their critique of patriarchy, these novelists appear to be in agreement about the powerful relationship between sexuality, or more precisely sexual oppression (whether it is in the form of sexual frustration, the over-emphasis on virginity or honour killings), and the function it plays in maintaining the patriarchal structure. Zaghmout has spoken about how the division of social roles based on sex has created a social hierarchy that gives men superiority over women. Because sexuality is intricately related to gender, he argues that, 'the sexuality of men as a result of this hierarchy has been glorified at a time when women's sexuality has been marginalised' (n.p. 2015). Moreover, he reinstates the significance of sexual and physical rights for a healthier society and states that he is raising these issues, including the sexuality of women, because they face social and legal injustice.

Despite my admiration of the boldness of these novelists in challenging conventional norms in their depictions of patriarchy, I suggest that they could have been addressed differently. My greatest contention, particularly in relation to Zaghmout's and Bataineh's work, is their 'idealising' of a western solution to women's social subordination instead of pushing forward 'indigenous' solutions from one's own society. However, I maintain the view that these novels are significant because they succeed in bringing critical questions about Arab women to the forefront of social and cultural debate. Moreover, because of their controversial nature, these novels have the potential to invite readers to think differently about the topics of patriarchy and sexuality in ways that are beneficial to women.

Chapter Five: Renegotiating Gender and Islam: The Ambivalence of Religious Rhetoric

***The Bitter Winter* by Asya Abdel Hadi (2010)**

This novel features Raja', who is the wife of a doctor and the daughter of a well-known teacher. Raja' goes through a very difficult life and has many tragic experiences although her only fault is that she is a woman in a society that values men. Raja' faces horrible treatment from her husband, who abuses her not only verbally but also physically. Raja' maintains her patience towards her husband for the sake of her children. She returns to her passion of writing and starts publishing in newspapers. She publishes many articles under an alias and gradually gains readership and prominence. She gives particular emphasis to issues concerning women and Islam. She joins a feminist organisation and becomes a highly active and appreciated member. A famous poet, Rafiq, falls in love with her and she is worried that her husband will discover this and make her life even more miserable. She visits Rafiq's wife, who was complaining about his negligence and tries to help them in their relationship by being careful not to reveal her identity. Raja's husband accepts a very good offer from a leading hospital in London. The family travels to London and this is where Raja' notices that her husband Ahmad has changed for the better. Before completing one year in London, Ahmad dies of brain cancer. Raja' returns to Jordan with her children. She later visits Rafiq, who has been thrown in prison for criticising the government and with his son she helps to have him freed. Rafiq appreciates Raja' and admires her personality and patience.

Chapter Five: Renegotiating Gender and Islam: The Ambivalence of Religious Rhetoric

Introduction

'Be kind to your women.' (Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) in Abdel Hadi 2012, p.190) [95]

'May God damn your face,' a husband's response to his wife. (Abdel Hadi 2012, p.10) [96]

In this chapter, I explore Asya Abdel Hadi's *The Bitter Winter* (*Al-Shita' al-Marīr*). I investigate the ways in which the novelist employs religious texts to discuss perceptions of womanhood, and women's place and value in society. I give particular emphasis to the ways in which religion operates as a vehicle for social and cultural change. In presenting her critique on the dilemma of Arab Muslim women, Asya Abdel Hadi offers two conflicting views on women, highlighting the gap between an imagined Islamic society, centuries ago, and a version of an envisaged reality. Through her approach, 'tradition' is complicated as an 'imaginary' concept, as an idea which evokes certain ideas about magnanimity, honourable behaviour and ideal conduct towards women. By providing these paradoxical views, she raises important questions about women that are grounded in a firm understanding of Islam and what constitutes an 'ideal' method in addressing problematic notions of gender inequality in the Arab world and the Islamic one more broadly.

---

[95] اوصيكم بالنساء خيرا

[96] يلعن لك هالوجه

Progressive Islamic rhetoric in Asya Abdel Hadi's *The Bitter Winter*

The Bitter Winter, a recent novel by Asya Abdel Hadi, published in 2010, addresses the fictional life of Raja' and her husband Ahmad. He is depicted as a man who manages to seize every opportunity to insult, humiliate and disrespect his wife, a situation which provokes Raja' out of passivity, and back to her previously favourite 'hobby' of writing. This activity develops into something more as she starts to publish articles in a mainstream newspaper, and then joins a woman's organisation, where she works as a volunteer and media coordinator. By rediscovering her desires and passions, she recognises a sense of liberation and begins to view her life in a new light. She begins questioning the way in which her husband treats her and how society in general can be demeaning to women, and this prompts her to focus her writing on women in Jordanian culture.

At first glance, this novel appears to be a traditional story that discusses husband-wife relationships, but what makes it interesting from my perspective is how the writer uses the protagonist's reaction to her abusive experience with Ahmad as a starting point to shed light on oppressive attitudes towards women in general. And she does not just depict this process but, through her narrative, suggests ways of empowering women within an Islamic framework. The protagonist invokes western feminism as a foil for the type of Islamic feminism she is advocating, and the narrative thus steers a path between traditional, patriarchal Islamic society and a version of 'western' feminism, which the protagonist condemns.[97]

There are times when the line between fiction and reality becomes blurred. This is due to the preface, in which Abdel Hadi explains to the reader that her novel is more of a study than a literary work. She uses the two terms – 'novel' and 'study' – interchangeably. In her choice of the word study, she is emphasising the presence of a strong relationship between literature and social science whereby she uses literature to investigate the lives of members of Jordanian society. She also explains that, instead of embarking on an artistic journey only for the sake of art and enjoyment, she sees herself rather as on a mission in which she tries to deploy the artistic styles of writing characterised in the form of the novel to achieve her primary goals.

---

[97] I discuss this in more detail on the section on western feminism, pages 155-161.

Abdel Hadi explicitly states her two major objectives and, in doing so, she is differentiating herself from previous (writers and) novelists who were not interested in exploring positive images of women and instead focused on negative attributes (that are far from reality). Such aims are stated in the preface when the author indicates that her primary objective in writing the novel is to refute misconceptions about women that reduce them to sexual objects. Abdel Hadi appears to be condemning the sexual portrayal of women through a moral and ethical standard that she sees as grounded in religion. She states, 'May God forbid that Arab women are depicted in such a manner' (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.7)[98] and she presents her protagonist as a respectable figure, who fears God and relies on religion for moral guidance throughout the novel

Throughout the preface, she tries to establish a sense of community with the reader by using the words 'our' and 'we':

> I place before the reader a novel or perhaps a study of the various concepts, traditions and customs that stand in *our* way from progressing with *our* social relationships to a level that has a positive reflection on *our* homes, the upbringing of *our* children and *our* society to the level that *we* desire. (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.7, my emphasis)[99]

She appears to be laying the burden of these problems that she identifies in her society not only on herself, but also on her reader. She presents issues of social pressure and negative images of women as general and public rather than individual and private, ones that urgently need to be resolved if an Arab Muslim woman is to live up to her aspired standard of life.

The narrative paints a picture of a patriarchal Arab society in which many misconceptions about women prevail. Distorted ideas about the roles of wives and husbands are presented as one of the major obstacles that Arab Muslim women face. Thus, the image of the subservient and obedient wife and that of the dominant and ungrateful husband are given central focus. These images are explored through the character of Raja' and her relationship with Ahmad. 'She is the loyal guard dog that does not disobey orders and that jumps and bounces with every word or movement from its owner. Ohhhhh how (life) is similar to the clowns and monkeys in a circus'

---

[98] فحاشا لله أن تكون المرأة العربية على هذه الصورة
[99] أضع بين يدي القارئ رواية أو بالأحرى دراسة للعديد من المفاهيم والعادات والموروثات التي تقف حائلا بيننا وبين الارتقاء بعلاقاتنا الاجتماعية الى المستوى الذي ينعكس إيجابا على بيوتنا ورؤيتنا لأبنائنا والنهوض بمجتمعنا الى المكانة التي نريد.

(Abdel Hadi 2010, p.27).[100] I find this depiction of wives as resembling animals significant. The evocation of the animal versus human metaphor emphasises the vulnerability of animals, and the abuse that humans can inflict upon them. While the dog metaphor invokes blind obedience, the 'monkey in a circus' image leads one to think of animals locked in cages against their will and forced to perform in front of an audience at the behest of their owner. The animals are helpless, with no sense of autonomy and exist at the mercy (or not) of their owners. These powerful images associate women with weakness, passivity and vulnerability.

Wifeliness is a defining feature of womanhood in Jordanian Muslim life. Amira Sonbol asserts that, 'social conditioning that makes marriage and family the ultimate goal for a woman begins very early as she plays the role of her mother's helper; it is strengthened at every step of a woman's life' (Sonbol 2003, p.16). She states that, 'if there is one constant fear in the life of a Jordanian girl it is that she will never be married. Spinsterhood seems to represent the worst fate that a young woman can imagine for herself' (Sonbol 2003, p.125). Therefore, becoming a wife is regarded as a privilege, and Abdel Hadi makes this aspect central to the novel.

It is important to note that, while becoming a wife has been normalised, ironically it remains viewed as a privilege. In a common conversational exchange between the two main protagonists, the husband's words are 'You should thank God a thousand times for His blessings. You have a huge house to live in. You are enjoying a life that many women would be very envious of. Everything is available to you. You even have more than you need.'[101] His wife's reply is:

> yes, thank Goodness, thank Goodness for He has given me everything, a husband, children, money, health and everything, not to mention people's love and respect. I am very thankful and consider myself very lucky. I always thank God and I am completely enjoying my life and I hope that you are doing the same. (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.40)[102]

---

[100] هي كلب الحراسة الأمين الذي لا يخالف الأوامر والذي يقفز ويتنطط مع كل كلمة أو حركة من صاحبه... ١٥٥٥ ما أشبهها بالهلوانات وبقرود السيرك...

[101] أنت. أنت يجب أن تشكري ربك ألف مرة على نعمه عليك. انت هايصة في هذا البيت هو في حد عايش عيشتك، انت العيشة اللي عايشاها تحسدك عليها كل النساء كل أشي متوفر لك وبأكثر مما تستحقين أيضا.

[102] نعم. الحمد لله، الحمد لله لقد أعطاني كل شيء...الزوج والأولاد والمال والصحة وكل شيء ناهيك عن حب الناس واحترامهم... وأنا ممنونه له تعالى واعتبر نفسي محظوظة جدا... الحمد لله أنا اشكر الله دائما ...أنا استمتع بحياتي تماما وأتمنى أن تكون مثلي

The protagonist's sense of happiness and satisfaction with her life is depicted as dependent on her husband, who is presented as a gatekeeper, allowing a woman to become a wife and mother and thus becoming more valued by her society.

The novel constructs gender mainly through exploring the idea of wifeliness. This is made absolutely clear in the following ironic words of the narrator:

> *She is no more than a maid*, who is pressured into forced labour and provides him and his children with free services at the very best level and without gratitude or appreciation. Instead she should thank God a hundred times for being in his house and living in such blessings and a surplus of things … After he has neglected her for so long, she does not need to beg for love and she has convinced herself that most women like her must have similar lives in which they live for the sake of their children. *For her, this is a sacred mission as sacrifice is a duty, not an option, and she has to pull herself together in order to provide them with the best she can. May God be her Supporter.* (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.53, my emphasis)[103]

These tasks are illustrated as deeply entrenched in the protagonist's society, where any sign of resistance is regarded as a form of rebellion, which cannot be tolerated. Raja' is depicted as overburdened by duties, in order to focus on the stressful lives that many women lead as wives in a patriarchal society. What is significant about this passage is how the author is trying to create a sense of community for her protagonist. She first starts by listing the tasks of women and how they are reduced to domestic workers and how, instead of complaining, they should be thankful, which is precisely what Islamic feminists oppose. These feminists want women to break away from such typically narrow conceptions of womanhood. The tone used here is not one that attempts to dramatize the issue, but consoles women who suffer in this way.

The protagonist's main complaints about her life centre upon her husband's negative attitudes rather than being about the demanding responsibilities of being a wife. Expressing her disappointment at how her society views marriage, Raja' protests: 'it is inevitable that some form of adjustment will take place after marriage in order to move on, but what is illogical is for an educated woman to be married in

---

[103] جارية لا أكثر تعمل بالسخرة وتقوم على خدمته وعياله مجانا وعلى أحسن وجه ودون شكر ويتوجب عليها أن تشكر ربها مائة مرة أنها موجودة في بيته وتعيش في هذه النعمة والخير الوفير. وبعد أن طال تجاهله لها لم تعد بحاجة لتسول الحب واقتنعت أنه لا بد أن نساء كثيرات مثلها يعشن من أجل أبنائهن وهذه بالنسبة لها أقدس مهمة فالتضحية واجبة وليس لديها خيار آخر...وإن عليها أن تتماسك من أجل إعطاءهم أكثر ما تستطيع. وعلى الله الاتكال...

140

order to find someone to discipline her! What nonsense this is and what backward ideas those are!' (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.83).[104]

Moreover, a wife is also presented as a woman who is completely occupied by her duties to her husband and children, and these duties are depicted as giving her hardly any sense of pleasure. Although she may be allowed some time away from her duties in the morning when children are at school and the husband is at work, this is depicted as a very restrictive escape from the burdens and responsibilities of marriage. This is clear when Raja' complains that 'even reading a newspaper is usually done in secrecy as it is considered a scandalous act that cannot be committed in the presence of my husband' (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.16).[105] Another comment depicts the wife's lack of autonomy and freedom to shop, to visit neighbours or friends or to think about any matter, however trivial, without discussing it first with her husband, who would reply, 'a disrespectful and shameful woman is one who wanders around on her own without taking her husband's position and social status into consideration' (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.49).[106]

As for the husband, Ahmad is portrayed as a typical patriarch who controls, dominates and disrespects his wife. Ahmad has a very problematic view of marriage, seeing it as a relationship that is built on power, where his task is to constantly reinforce his domination over all the members of his family, and especially his wife. He is to be treated with respect and his daily demands are to be met, down to the smallest details.

Moreover, Abdel Hadi presents Ahmad as someone who does not seem shy about expressing his feelings towards women in public, and especially his negative views and thoughts about wives. He places all women in the same category, claiming that they are all similar, and on more than one occasion he exclaims 'May God damn women' (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.45).[107] He takes pride in disciplining his wife through physical and verbal abuse and uses terms such as 'this is how I want you to be' whenever he is punishing her (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.27).[108] Such a vision of manhood

---

104 لا شك أن بعض التكيف يأخذ مجراه بعد الزواج لكي تسير القافلة ولكن من غير المنطقي أن المرأة المتعلمة الناضجة تتزوج لكي تجد من يربيها.... أي سخافة هذه وأي أفكار رجعية...
105 وحتى قراءة الجريدة تتم خلسه فهذا عمل فاضح لا يجوز ارتكابه في حضور الزوج
106 السايبة التي تسير على حل شعرها التي لا تقدر زوجها ولا مركزه ولا مكانته
107 فلعنه الله على النساء
108 ايوه هيك بدي اياك تكوني

serves as a reminder of the destructive role that some men undertake in the process of gender socialisation; Ahmad becomes akin to a social engineer, moulding Raja' into her social role as a subservient wife. He sees her more as a servant for him and his children. He enjoys insulting and disrespecting her in every possible way and in reminding her that she should be grateful to have him as a husband. In a dialogue with his friend Saeed, while the protagonist is depicted as giving birth to their son, Ahmad makes the following comment about marriage, 'Do you think that if the doctor made me choose between Raja' and my son Wa'el, that I would sacrifice my son? Can a man sacrifice his child for the sake of a stranger's child?' (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.23).[109] Ahmad further explains his views on marriage in the following:

> Listen Saeed, there are degrees to kinship; for example, you cannot divorce your mother, sister, brother, son, daughter, uncle or any relative no matter how hard you try, and you cannot say that I do not want to be the brother of this person or the relative of that or even the grandchild of a different family, but for the wife you have the option of divorcing her, which will make her a complete stranger to you and which will end all your ties with her forever. (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.23)[110]

In this depiction, the use of the term 'stranger' sheds light on the problematic definition of family in the Arab context and its consequences for women. In the case of the protagonist, upon marriage, she moves from her family (father, mother) to her husband's. In that transition, she is expected to embrace the new family as her own and to maximise her dependence on herself (as opposed to her mother and father) for support. While she will always be considered a part of her original family, the same is not true for her new adopted one. Thus, a woman in this situation is caught between a family that wants her to be more (emotionally) independent and one that in most cases will perceive her as a 'stranger'. This complex situation involving the inclusion/exclusion of a woman in relation to both families, not only causes confusion, but also augments a woman's sense of alienation/isolation and suffering.

The novel's illustration of Ahmad's repetitive negative attitudes towards women is important in condemning this category of men and in criticising these qualities, which should be absent in any man who claims to be a believer or follower of Islam.

---

[109] يعني تعتقد لو أن الطبيب خيرني ما بين وائل ورجاء فهل يمكن لي أن أضحي بابني هل يضحي الرجل بولده من أجل أولاد الناس!

[110] شوف يا سعيد هناك درجات للقربى...مثلا أنت لا تستطيع أن تطلق والدتك أو اختك أو أخاك أو ابنك او ابنتك أو حتى خالك أو عمك أو غيرهم من الأقارب مهما حاولت...ولن تستطيع أن تقول أنا لا اريد أن أكون شقيق فلان أو ابن عم فلانه. أو حتى حفيد فلان من الناس... أما الزوجة فان طلاقك منها يجعلها غريبة عنك تماما... ينهي علاقتك بها الى اخر العمر...

142

But the novel does not just condemn men, it also stresses the problematic role of mothers as active agents in reproducing the status quo and reaffirming men's domination over women. It is sad that, despite her love and care, the protagonist does not resort to her mother to help her solve her problems, since she knows that it would simply be useless. The narrator describes how the protagonist keeps recalling her mother's advice:

> Her mother has taught her that the success of the house and her husband are the first priorities of a wife and that problems destroy married life and destroy the psychological status of children; therefore, it is best to remain silent in order to resolve disputes and to withdraw from the sight of the husband when he is angry. This is the best way to control and avoid his anger. Obeying the husband and listening to his word is a matter that should never be forgotten. (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.17)[111]

She also recalls her mother's words, 'my dear daughter, be careful not to enter into a conversation with your husband in front of other people, as he may slip in a word that could hurt you or embarrass you and allow people to meddle in your affairs' (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.24).[112]

> Be careful not to share your secrets with anyone, for you might receive bad advice and become the topic of people's gossip and mockery… you have to learn how to resolve your problems on your own for no one can solve them but yourself. You are an educated woman who knows how to assess your situation. (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.28)[113]

Another typical response from Raja's mother is, 'Be quiet, we don't need any scandals. What will people say about us? That their only spoiled daughter could not handle married life? Ahmad is one of a kind so let us thank God for such a blessing instead of throwing it all away' (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.23).[114] The protagonist condemns her mother for giving her advice that only serves to complicate her life even further. She indirectly holds her mother responsible for making her disillusioned about the foundations of a healthy and normal marriage. Thus, these

---

[111] والدتها علمتها أن نجاح البيت والزوج من أولى مهام الزوجة وأن المشاكل تدمر الحياة الزوجية وتدمر نفسيات الأبناء ولهذا فالسكوت أحسن حل لفض المنازعات والانسحاب من أمام الزوج في حال غضبه أفضل طريقة لكبح ذلك الغضب... وإطاعة الزوج وسماع كلمته أمر لا يجوز نسيانه و...و......الخ

[112] اوعك يا ماما يا رجاء تدخلي في نقاش أمام الناس مع زوجك فقد تخرج منه كلمة تؤذيك وتحرجك وتدخل عين الناس فيكم...

[113] اوعك يا رجاء تخرجي أسرار بيتك لأي انسان. فقد تجدين النصيحة السيئة وقد يشمت بك البعض... وستدخل العيون في حياتك وستصبحين قصة الناس...حلي مشاكلك بنفسك. أنت أدرى بها ولا يمكن لمن لا يعيش معك أن يعرف كيف يحلها لك. أنت فتاة متعلمة، وأقدر من غيرك على تقدير الظروف...

[114] بس هسي بلاش فضائح. شو يقولوا عنا الناس...ابنتهم الوحيدة المدللة لم تستطع احتمال الحياة الزوجية...أحمد رجل ما في منه خلينا نحمد الله وبلاش نكفر بالنعمة...

143

pieces of advice function as key elements of women's subjugation, as they reinforce notions of submission, silence and the suppression of women's needs and desires.

Thus, because of the actions of her husband, and the lack of a supportive mother, the protagonist is presented as a woman in an unhappy and unsatisfactory marriage. This plot allows the novel to make a direct entrance into the debate on women and their position in society. Here, it is important to note that Abdel Hadi's choice of a traditional female character functions as a strategy for questioning social perceptions of womanhood. The author overwhelms the reader with extensive details about Raja' and her life and shows how she fails, as an individual, as recommended by her mother, to find a solution to her oppressive relationship with Ahmad.

The author's reliance on monologues[115] to highlight the internal conflict of the protagonist is another significant technique. Monologues make up a large proportion of the conversations in the novel, adding magnitude to the dilemma of the character of Raja' and dramatising her situation to create a strong impact on the reader. Monologues function as important mechanisms of confession. They also function as important tools for meditation and for depicting Raja' as someone who is capable of thinking thoroughly about her problems and connecting with herself to discover what she truly desires. When she fails to find anyone to listen to her, she finds refuge in herself, as her mother suggested. This channels Raja's interests to think about the spiritual aspects of her life and about deploying texts from Islamic tradition as a potential solution to challenge pre-existing reductionist and biased attitudes towards women.

Moreover, the plot plays an important role in pressing forward ideas about women in Islam. The author's emphasis on women's value and position in Arab society is shown in stages. The first phase begins in the private sphere, in the home, where the protagonist experiences abuse from Ahmad. His verbal abuse escalates so much that he curses his wife *Allah yel'anlik hal wijih* (May God damn your face) for simply misplacing his shoes (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.10). This repulsive curse is representative of the husband's moral and ethical downfall, the spark that leads Raja' to reassess and re-evaluate her life with an ungrateful man. The second phase is where the

---

[115] My use of the term monologues, as opposed to using narration, is intended to draw a distinction between the character's external action of telling a story (narration) and her internal struggles.

protagonist decides to join a women's organisation as a volunteer, acting mainly as a media and public coordinator between the organisation and the local community. In this phase, she steps into the public domain and decides to help women who are in need, despite her husband's criticism about engaging in unpaid work and his negative views about working women. Then comes the final stage when Raja' starts writing and publishing articles as a daily column in a newspaper, in which she tackles various social issues and problems for a variety of Arab audiences. It is this final stage that I regard as the most significant phase of the novel as it stresses the potential of shifting public opinion about women by relying on writing as a narrative device for liberating women on a personal and collective level. Thus, through the act of writing, Raja' is presented as taking the time and effort to think about what she regards as important in her life. By publishing, she is trying to speak on behalf of other women who are suffering in similar situations.

I find it intriguing that, despite Abdel Hadi's determination to invoke the religious in matters relating to women, reliance on Islamic texts in the novel comes as a last resort. This could perhaps be explained in terms of how the spiritual functions in the lives of individuals. In a patriarchal Arab society, the Divine Power is projected as one's ultimate source of comfort, confidence and reassurance of a better life in the future in the absence of effective social and political systems of support. Abdel Hadi illustrates how the protagonist seeks help from God to provide her with enough patience to move on and to find a palpable solution to her problem, with her husband knowing that she cannot resort to anyone for help. This comes in addition to challenging the negative stereotypes that people associate with women, which are solely built on a distorted perception of religion. 'Thank Goodness, I am not weak. I have placed God before me and I know that He will not let me down,' is how Abdel Hadi depicts her character's dependence on God (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.245).[116] In this context, it is important to stress that the reliance on God is not represented as a sign of weakness; it is a spiritual connection that leads to comfort, hope and strength.

The novel relies heavily on Islamic texts that reaffirm gender roles and view gender as natural and biologically determined. From a western feminist perspective, it is very difficult to understand how this type of hierarchical discourse, which

---

[116] لست ضعيفة والحمد لله.. لقد وضعت الله امام ناظري ولن يخيبني ابدا...

conflicts with the basic principles of western feminism, could be a useful strategy for other women. Therefore, a western reader has to comprehend the historical, political and cultural background of the Arab region in order to recognise the potential of Islamic progressive discourse as a tool for social reform. This discourse focuses on accepting and embracing differences between women and men from a moral and ethical standpoint, and challenging existing social structures is not presented as a primary concern. The Holy Qur'an and the Hadiths of the Prophet (PBUH) construct women and men as different, and hence complementary, beings. Although the difference in hierarchy between women and men is clearly visible in Islamic Holy Scriptures, this difference does not necessarily mean opposition, as some would argue (Barlas 2002; Lamrabet 2015; Bakr 2015).

As Islam emphasises the differences between women and men and focuses on the significant role of motherhood, it constructs an image of a woman as someone who is heavily dependent on a man to fulfil her role as a mother. Hence, she is reduced to a heterosexual wife and it is her duty and responsibility to maintain that relationship in order to be a productive and reproductive member of society. Although this productivity is mainly bound up with her duties as a wife and mother, it does not contradict her ambitions to work in the public sphere, so long as she is able to maintain a reasonable balance between her various roles.[117]However, while the 'different' or 'complimentary' roles of women and men are not challenged in the novel, Abdel Hadi focuses on particular interpretations of religious texts that relegate women to a position inferior to men. Through the novel, she offers 'reinterpretation' of polemical texts as I discus in the following section.

Qiwamah: **The roots of a contested debate on male superiority**
Through the juxtaposition of an Islamic ethos with the present treatment of women, the narrative gradually introduces the notion of *qiwamah* as a root cause of misconceptions about women. The protagonist highlights the main controversy about women in Islam and then proceeds to present her views of women and how they are

---

[117] Where many Islamists have argued against women working in the public sphere, as it places their families at risk of negligence, the harsh economic living standards and changing socioeconomic patterns have compelled them to accept the increased phenomenon of women's public presence and contribution to family incomes (Taraki 1995, p.647).

treated and perceived in contemporary society. The protagonist introduces examples of verses from the Holy Qur'an and Hadith of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) to advocate positive relationships that, according to Islam, should be built on respect, sensitivity, and mutual understanding. She recites a verse and explains the high and elevated value of women in Islam. She then notices the irony in her husband's claim to be a Muslim and his lack of adherence to the proper practice of Islam.[118] In this context, it is important to note that the emphasis on Ahmad and his abusive behaviour is merely intended to serve as a catalyst to initiate a debate on women in Islam; the author is not interested in his religious or ethical reform.

Initiating a religious debate, the protagonist starts with the common allegations about women and tries her best to refute them one by one by referring to the prominent Islamic figure of the Egyptian Sheikh Mohammed Mutwali Al-Sha'rawi[119] and his analysis and explanation of the controversial verse in the Qur'an, 4:34. It is inevitable that, when discussing perceptions of womanhood and manhood in Islamic tradition, one will come across the controversial notion of *qiwamah*. As Ziba Mir-Hosseini affirms,

> At the heart of the unequal construction of gender rights in Muslim legal tradition is the idea that God has given men authority over women. Defenders of male authority frequently invoke, as their main textual justification, Qur'anic verse 4:34, from which classical jurists derived the concept of *qiwamah*, developing it into a guiding principle to define and regulate gender relations. (Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.15)

Similarly, Omaima Bakr poses an important question:

> How exactly did the Qur'anic sentence *'al-rijal qawwamun 'ala al-nisa' bima faddala Allah ba'dahum 'ala ba'd wa bima anfaqu min amwalihim'* – which is part of the larger verse 4:34, in its turn part of a larger passage, and part of a larger structure of governing principles – become an independent and separate (trans-contextual) patriarchal construct? Perhaps if we understand this historical and cultural process, we will be able to refute certain meanings and reconstruct others. (Bakr 2015, p.44)

This is precisely why this verse makes a useful starting point for Abdel Hadi's critique, thereby initiating attempts at tackling misconceptions about women.

---

[118] In her notion of what is proper, Abdel Hadi is mainly referring to the life of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) and his positive view of women, and to an interpretation of the Holy Qur'an that is more liberating to women.

[119] Azza Karam states that, 'Al-Sha'rawi is best known by almost all Egyptians for his elaborate and simplified interpretation of the Qur'an, which have been broadcast on prime-time national television and radio channels, for the past ten years or so' (1998, p.179).

Based on the translation of Kecia Ali, the verse reads,

> Men are *qawwamun* [protectors/maintainers] in relation to women, according to what God has favoured some over others and according to what they spend from their wealth. Righteous women are *qanitat* [obedient], guarding the unseen according to what God has guarded. Those [women] whose *nushuz* [rebellion] you fear, admonish them, and abandon them in bed, and *adrabuhunna* [strike them]. If they obey you, do not pursue a strategy against them. Indeed God is Exalted, Great. (Ali in Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.15)[120]

It is important to explain that Ali has left the italicised words untranslated in order to emphasise that any translation of each of these terms amounts to an interpretation (Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.15). Clarifying this verse further, Mir-Hosseini has inserted translations which, she explains, 'approximate the consensus of classical Muslim jurists and are reflected in a set of rulings (*ahkam*) that they devised to define marriage and marital relations. These rulings rest on a single postulate: that God made men *qawwamun* over women and placed them under male authority' (Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.15). Mir-Hosseini explains that,

> For these jurists, men's superiority and authority over women was a given, legally inviolable; it was in accordance with a conception of justice that accepted slavery and patriarchy, as long as slaves and women were treated fairly. They naturally understood the verse in this light; they used the four key terms in the verse to define relations between spouses, and notions of justice and equity. (Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.15)

Moreover, Bakr clarifies that the evolution from *qawwamun* to the patriarchal construct of *qiwamah* went through four distinctive stages:

> The initial stage was turning the descriptive *qawwamun* into a normative or a prescriptive conception, signaled by the transformation to a grammatical *masdar* (a verbal noun or infinitive), namely *qiyam*, which later developed into *qiwamah*. The second stage was consolidation through amassing reasons for the hierarchical concept of *qiwamah*. Third, jurists expanded the concept through aligning it with *darajah* (degree) in Qur'anic verse 2:228 and selected *ahadith*. Finally, there was a modernist turn of linking it to the ideology of domesticity and women's *fitrah* (created nature). (Bakr 2015, p.46)

Clarifying the growing interest in women's position in Muslim majority countries, Mir-Hosseini argues that 'With the advent of modernity, the idea of male authority over women started to lose its hold. From the turn of the twentieth century, Muslim reformist thinkers have tried to reconcile what they understood to be fundamental principles in Muslim law and ethics with modernist's conceptions of justice and

---

[120] Definitions in brackets are those of Mir-Hosseini (2015, pp.14–15).

gender relations' (Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.18). Such thinkers include Tahir Al-Haddad, Fazlur Rahman and Nasr Abu Zayd.

Al-Haddad concurs that 'this verse is not speaking of the rights and duties of spouses, but is about the course of action to be taken when there is marital discord, and it offers ways to resolve such discord' (Al-Haddad in Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.21). This becomes clear in the verse that follows, which reads, 'if you have reason to fear that a breach might occur between a couple, appoint an arbiter from among his people and an arbiter from among her people; if they both want to set things right, God may bring their reconciliation' (4:35). Men are addressed, he argues, 'because they are the ones who, then as now, have the power to terminate marriage, and the objective was to restrain this power and give the marriage a chance' (Al- Haddad in Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.21).

Furthermore, and with respect to marriage and gender roles, Al-Haddad rejects the argument that women are unfit for certain activities and that their primary role is motherhood. 'Islam did not assign fixed roles to men and women…Nowhere in the Qur'an can one find any reference to any activity – no matter how elevated it may be, and whether in government or society – that is forbidden to women' (Husni and Newman 2007, p.39). 'Yes, men and women are different; women give birth and are physically and emotionally suited to care for children, but this in no way means that Islam wanted them to be confined to the home and to domestic roles' (Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.22). Al-Haddad affirms that, 'The problem is not with Islam but with patriarchy, with reducing women to sex objects; it is "primarily due to the fact that we [men] regard them [women] as vessels for our penises"' (Al- Haddad in Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.22). Moreover, Mir-Hosseini argues that, 'By establishing gender hierarchy and discrimination, the juristic concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah*[121] are in effect the "DNA of patriarchy" (Gillian 2011, p.18) in Muslim legal tradition' (Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.35). Thus, she contends that, 'Those who seek to establish an egalitarian construction of gender rights in Muslim contexts must address and redefine the understanding of these legal concepts in line with contemporary notions of justice, in which gender equality is inherent' (Mir- Hosseini 2015, p.35).

---

[121] *Wilayah* refers to guardianship.

Abdel Hadi's reliance on Mohammed Metwali Al-Sha'rawi's interpretation in *The Bitter Winter* is important in illustrating to the reader the type of Islamic discourse that is being constructed. There appears to be a promotion of a moderate religious approach to pressing social issues in an era where many people are sceptical of the religious, or more precisely, conservative Islamic discourse. Therefore, in order to appeal to her audience, her choice of Al-Sha'rawi is wise at a time when many women feel hesitant about finding a solution to their problems through Islamic texts, owing to the rise of fundamentalist discourse that advocates male dominance and control. Al-Sha'rawi explains that this verse does not grant men superiority over women, as many would think. Superiority in this verse refers to a man's responsibility to provide for his family and a woman's responsibility to take care of domestic duties. There is not an overlap in the roles or a contradiction; on the contrary, each one has his/her rights and responsibilities, and each could be more important than the other. This means that one will excel in certain tasks more than the other and therefore women and men complement each other. A woman might excel in her assigned roles, a man might excel in his assigned roles, and therefore one does not have more merit over the other (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.189).[122]

Expressing her frustration at how religion is used by some as a means of containment, the protagonist protests:

> They speak on behalf of women about her obedience towards her husband by using God said this and the Prophet said that, but they do not remember how the dear Prophet was great in treating his wives and they do not remember how kind, sensitive and respectful he was towards them. Neither do they remember how fair he was with them. They do not remember that at all! For you are a woman and *you have to remain silent and obedient* and it is *your destiny to be a woman so just accept it*. (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.226, my emphasis).[123]

Thus, throughout the novel, most of the problems that women face are attributed to some men's (and some women's) lack of awareness about the status of women in Islam. The protagonist addresses men by saying, 'how could you forget Prophet

---

[122] قال إن الآية لا تعطي الرجال الأفضلية على النساء ولا تفضلهم عليهن بل يقضي المولى عز وجل أن يقوم الرجل بالقوامة أي بالإنفاق على الاسرة وتقوم المرأة على شؤون البيت ولا تتناقض بين الحالتين بل لكل منهم واجباته وحقوقه الذي يتفوق بها على الاخر وبيّن ان لا يحق لاحد أن يدعي أفضليته عند الخالق حيث لكل واحد الفضل فيما خصص له من واجبات...فالمرأة هي الأفضل فيما يخصها من واجبات والرجل هو الأفضل فيما يخصه من واجبات... كلام رائع وجميل ليت باقي الشيوخ والذين ينعتون المرأة بنقص بالعقل والدين يسمعونه

[123] يقولون ويتقولون على المرأة وطاعتها لزوجها وقال الله وقال الرسول ولكنهم لا يتذكرون كم كان الرسول الكريم عظيما بتعامله مع زوجاته ولا يتذكرون كم كان لطيفا وذواقة وحساسا معهن ولا كم كان منصفا لهن...لا يتذكرون ذلك مطلقا. فأنت المرأة وعليك السكوت وعليك الطاعة ونصيبك أن تكوني امرأة فاقبلي بهذا النصيب. نامي سيدتي واستريحي. نامي نوما هنيئا...

Mohammed (PBUH) saying, "I advise you to take good care of women,"[124] and "Be caring towards your women,"[125] and "your mother, your mother and then your mother"[126].' She then gives examples of the way in which Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) used to be very helpful around the house and how he used to attend to his own needs (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.190).

Fazlur Rahman explains how 'Those sayings attributed to the Prophet that speak of women's inferiority and require them to obey and worship their husbands, are clearly "a twisting of whatever the Qur'an has to say in matters of piety and religious merit and marriage"' (1982b, p.292). Moreover, he argues that such sayings also contradict what we know of the Prophet's own conduct, and thus must be rejected. 'The Qur'an does speak of inequality between the sexes. But when it does, it gives the rationale, which has to do with socioeconomic factors' (1982b, p.294).

After displaying evidence from the Holy Qur'an and from the life of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), the protagonist is then shown to blame fundamentalists[127] and ignorant people, whether men or women, for reproducing negative images and misconceptions about women. These images reduce them to weak, passive and vulnerable beings who need to be controlled and monitored. Raja' recalls her experience of listening to a religious lesson on tape and how a sheikh was warning fathers and brothers about women and sisters and how she felt his nerves were about to explode as he shouted and warned about the horrible and shameful things that women are capable of doing. The sheikh was calling on his listeners to inspect the pockets of women, their closets, their bags, their books, and to keep a close eye on them day and night and to frighten and threaten them with murder. The character is depicted visualising the outcomes of such claims to a point where she thought that anyone listening to this tape would not hesitate to kill his own daughters and sisters and the rest of the women in his family. Hence, such fundamentalist views about women are robustly condemned in *The Bitter Winter* and their dangers are highlighted. 'She wrote and greatly condemned that man who is as far as he can be

---

[124] أوصيكم بالنساء خيرا

[125] رفقا بالقوارير

[126] وأمك ثم أمك يم أمك

[127] I use fundamentalism as defined by S.M. Shamsul Alam, 'a political movement whose intellectual and moral stand derives from unchanging divine Islamic text – the Qur'an and hadith. It calls for a reaffirmation of the fundamental elements of the Islamic faith and political mission. It therefore implies the reaffirmation of fundamental principles of Islam and the effort to reshape society in terms of those reaffirmed principles' (2002 p.430).

from Islam and its leniency and commandments towards women and their best treatment' (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.191). On a similar occasion, the novelist describes a scene in which the protagonist is depicted as infuriated by a woman who preaches to others about the devilish nature of women.

> Why does this woman degrade the value of women and why does she reduce us to the level of devils? What kind of awkward lesson is this that makes those who are present forget their world and life and hope for no good, neither in this life nor the afterlife? (p.31)[128]

Despite the significance of Abdel Hadi's use of moderate Islamic discourse to question dominant misconceptions about women, I also suggest that it is important to observe the substantial presence of religion in a Jordanian's life in the process of negotiating gender. In other words, tackling the common negative beliefs about women alone is not the only positive or progressive way forward; one also has to look at the underlying religious structure that shapes society as a whole in order to understand how certain misconceptions about women were produced in the first place. I clarify this argument in more detail as the chapter progresses.

Abdel Hadi provides the reader with various examples that reaffirm religion's presence in everyday life. These include, 'May God be the Supporter', 'Thank Goodness', 'God is with those who are patient', 'May God forbid that Arab women are like that', and 'May God protect my son', which are constantly used throughout the narrative. When the protagonist consoles herself about her current unsatisfactory situation and believes that she will be rewarded by God for being patient with a horrible husband, she uses the verse, 'Indeed, those who believe and do pious deeds, We certainly do not waste the reward of the one who does pious deeds' (Qur'an 18.30) (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.79).[129] She then reassures herself with, 'Be optimistic of good in order to find it,' which is a Hadith that she regards as a remarkable lesson of wisdom that she believes in and that she frequently recites to her children (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.79).[130]

It is evident that verse 4:34 in particular has been and continues to be a subject of debate whenever the issue of women in Islam is raised. Many fundamentalists use it

---

[128] لا حول ولا قوة بالله العلي العظيم لماذا تحط هذه المرأة من قيمة النساء ولماذا تنزلهن الى مرتبة الشياطين ما هذا الدرس الغريب الذي يجعل الحاضرات ينسين دنياهن وحياتهن ولا يأملن خيرا لا في الدنيا ولا في الاخرة.

[129] إن الله لا يضيع أجر من أحسن عملا

[130] تفاءلوا بالخير تجدوه

as an excuse to further control and subjugate women, claiming that they are conforming to the laws or the Shari'a of Islam. What is very unfortunate about those who use it is that they do not make the effort to continue the recitation of the complete verse to obtain the full meaning. By doing so, they are taking words out of context and developing them into an argument, which is a risky undertaking. The risk lies mainly in the loss of the original meaning of the words of God that consequently leads to misinterpretations and a distortion of religion. Such illogical approaches to Holy texts validate the argument that, 'the problem is not with the text but with context and the ways in which the text is used to sustain patriarchal and authoritarian structures' (Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.38). Similarly, Haideh Moghissi explains that, 'both secularists and Muslim modernists stressed that women's degraded conditions were the result of a gender-biased misreading of the Qur'an, not the text itself' (Moghissi 1999, p.130). Moreover, Mai Ghoussoub states, 'Islam does not advance the thesis of women's inherent inferiority. Quite the contrary, it affirms the potential equality between the sexes. The existing inequality does not rest on an ideological or biological theory of women's inferiority, but is the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain her power' (1987, p.5). In this regard,

> Not only have Muslim men arrogated to themselves the task of defining the ontological, theological, sociological and eschatological status of Muslim women, but they have prohibited the growth of scholarship on Islamic thought among women. Consequently, Muslim women are not aware that their Islamic rights have been violated by the male-centred societies in which they live. (Moghissi 1999, pp.39–40)

Along the same lines, Assia Djebar also argues that, 'by silencing women's words, it became possible for a misogynist interpretation of women's position and rights within Islam to be established' (Djebar in Ouedghiri 2002, p.5). The dilemma that Muslim women face with reference to misogynist understandings of Holy scripts and the promotion of reductionist views of women that are contextualised (by men) in religious discourse highlights the intersectionality of the gender struggle that women in Islamic countries are having to endure. Not only are they battling against a patriarchal society in which ideas of the inequality between women and men are deeply entrenched (and at times even advocated), they are also taking it upon themselves to confront male interpretations of Islamic texts that have been unchallenged for centuries. Omaima Bakr concludes,

Producing research on verse 4:34 has turned into an obsession and an industry. It is indeed the verse that most often touches our lives as Muslim women and so deserves our attention and scholarly contestation. This increasing research also embodies the very idea of Muslim women's right to participate in *ijtihad* and the production of Islamic knowledge. (Bakr 2015, p.45)

Significantly, the necessity of gender-progressive readings of Islamic texts is invoked in the novel. I read this as a form of feminist activism that aims to restore women's value in society. Despite starting as a individualistic experience of unravelling sources of women's subordination, the narrative then shifts to the collective whereby the novelists moves into a new phase of 'activism' represented in interrogating and re-interpreting controversial religious texts that have been used to the disadvantage of women and publishing her 'feminist' readings of those texts in local newspapers. The personal thus becomes political and the protagonist engages in wider debates about women from a religious perspective. The subservience and inequality of women are presented as outcomes of distorted understandings of religious texts and are thus criticised. 'And here she is. She has dedicated her life to her home and husband and what has she gained…' (p.17).[131] 'They told us to listen to our husbands and to obey them and to have good relationships with their family and to preserve their food, their clothes at our own expense with lies and deception' (p.120).[132] Moreover, Abdel Hadi introduces attempts at *ijtihad* by offering a counter narrative to male 'presumed' superiority. This initiative is highlighted in a scene in which the protagonist is writing an article on women and Islam and then exclaims:

How do we interpret what came in the verses 'male believers and female believers', 'Muslim men and Muslim women'? Even in punishment both are equal, an adulteress and adulterer and the Prophet (PBUH) when he says 'you are all shepherds and each is responsible for his flock. A man is responsible for his flock and a woman is a shepherd in the husband's house and is responsible for her flock'. (p.189)[133]

By drawing on these Islamic scripts, the narrative shifts from criticising male-centric interpretations of Islam that promote 'unquestioned' and 'unjustified' notions of male superiority and instead advocates an egalitarian approach to Islamic jurisprudence. The author's choice of embedding these texts in particular highlights

---

[131] فها هي وقد كرست حياتها لبيتها وزوجها فماذا نالها وماذا جنت من وراء ذلك...

[132] قالوا لنا أن نسمع كلام أزواجنا وأن نطيعهم وأن نحافظ على علاقاتنا بأهلهم وأن نحافظ على مأكلهم وملبسهم وعلى أنفسنا، يا لها من أكاذيب وأضاليل...

[133] ثم كيف نفسر ما ورد في كثير من الآيات الكريمة المؤمنون والمؤمنات المسلمون والمسلمات وحتى في العقاب تساوى الطرفان الزاني والزانية يجلد كل منهما وحديث الرسول صلى الله عليه وسلم حين يقول كلكم راع وكلكم مسؤول عن رعيته فالرجل مسؤول عن رعيته والمرأة راعية في بيت زوجها ومسؤولة عن رعيتها...

the type of Islamic discourse that is being advocated and the way that traditional practices need not be passed down in static, non-changing ways, but can be reinterpreted and gently shifted.

The polemic against western feminism

Throughout the narrative, Abdel Hadi presents the reader with a strong polemical stance against western feminism. It is unfortunate that she reduces all types of western feminism to one concept and apparently fails to acknowledge that there are many versions which vary in terms of concepts and principles. Some forms, as I argue in Chapter Six, could be very beneficial in providing Arab women with useful theoretical knowledge and ways to move forward within Arab social and cultural boundaries.

The critique that the novel offers of western feminism is highlighted through the introduction of three incidents into the narrative. The first occurs while the protagonist is publishing an article on women in Islam. The second is a social gathering at which the protagonist is critical of women's western clothing and attitudes. The third is when the protagonist is in London with her husband, where she criticises the lives of Arab men who marry western women and the various struggles and social burdens of such marriages that involve a man of patriarchal mentality and a woman inspired by western ideas of equality. The protagonist urges Arabs, and particularly Muslims, to avoid the blind imitation of western values, which she sees as not being adaptable to Arab societies, and to resort instead to indigenous modes of thought.

> Raja' rejects the idea that an Arab woman should imitate a western one by eliminating all the differences between men and women. This is a very dangerous step that does not benefit women in anything at all… Western imitation is one of the most dangerous things that Arab societies do, in which they try to erase the personality of a man and present him as marginal or as someone who is no different than any other member of the family, whether it be a woman or a child. She finds this a sick idea that should be resisted since women will be the primary losers from such a proposal. (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.190)[134]

---

[134] رفضت رجاء أن تتمثل المرأة العربية بالغربية وتلغي الفوارق بينها وبين الرجل هذه نظرة خطيرة جدا ليست في مصلحة المرأة في شيء مطلقا بل هي موجهة ضدها أساسا وذكرت في مقال لها أن من أخطر ما تقوم به المجتمعات العربية من تقليد للغرب، مسح شخصية الرجل وجعلها شخصية هامشية لا تختلف عن أي من افراد الاسرة طفلا كان أو امرأة. ووجدت أنها فكرة مريضة يجب مقاومتها لأن المرأة ستكون الخاسر الأول من مثل هذه الدعوة خصوصا وأن هذا المفهوم أدى الى مشاكل بل مصائب لحقت بالمرأة الغربية عندما يفقد الرجل قيمته واحترامه وبات شيئا لا أكثر لا يملك الشخصية التي تجعله حاميا للمرأة مدافعا عنها وقائما على شؤونها وبالتالي هرب من مسؤولياته وتخلى عنها وباتت المرأة لا تدري ما تفعل وما نراه من معاناتها تجري خلف لقمة العيش

Western feminism is presented as a threat to the moral values and traditions of Arab society. This is primarily because of the excessive emphasis that it places on gender equality (sameness), and for providing what is deemed 'radical' social freedoms to women. It is depicted as not only inappropriate, but also a bad example to follow and, through the protagonist, the author instead provides a version of feminism that is deeply rooted in Islam. In more than one incident, we see the protagonist compare western feminism, which in her own terms has stripped both men and women of their dignity, with Islamic feminism which, she suggests, asserts men's and women's value in society. Raja' provides the reader with an explanation of her choice to use a form of feminism that takes religion into consideration. She asserts the importance of maintaining a strong relationship with Islam and of teaching young children to conform to religious practices. She rejects any form of western intrusion and calls for an original contribution of intellectual thought around women that should emerge out of necessity and from one's own region and background. On one occasion, during a social gathering, the protagonist makes the following argument about western women:

> My dear friend, women in the West live a life of suffering and misery… we think that she enjoys freedom and happiness when in my view she is a source of pity and sadness… We have the wrong conception about life and we have to return to our own values. If only we can have a strong sense of dignity and belonging … blind imitation is spreading in all of our issues; when will we ever wake up? (Abdel Hadi 2010, p.210)[135]

In the criticism of western feminism, two main issues are central: the concept of gender equality and western perceptions of manhood. The idea of striving for equality between women and men, which is depicted as celebrated in the West, is presented as a terrible idea in Arab societies. Raja' continues:

> To be equal in duties! Why? Don't we have enough duties and miseries and responsibilities? Aren't our numerous duties that were imposed on us because of our nature as mothers and wives enough? Duties that do not even grant us rights, so why don't we ask for these rights and these duties first and if we succeed then move on to

---

والقبول باي عمل مهما كان وضيعا أو خطيرا لكسب قوتها لتتمكن من البقاء على قيد الحياة...من مصلحة المرأة العربية أن تنأى بنفسها عن الحلول المطروحة غربيا وأن تعمل على تقوية شخصية الرجل ومساندتها وتثقيفهما بما لها وبما عليها حتى تستقيم الأمور...

[135] المرأة في الغرب يا عزيزتي تعيش حياة الضنك والشقاء ...المرأة في الغرب تعمل في أحط المهن من أجل لقمة العيش...المرأة في الغرب والتي نعتقد أنها تتمتع بالحرية والسعادة، هي في نظري أكثر النساء مدعاة للرثاء والحزن...والرجل الغربي لم يعد يكترث لموضوع الأسرة ومستلزمات الزواج بعد أن حرمته القوانين مكانته وأهدرت دمه ومسحت قيمته وجعلته ضيفا ثقيلا في بيته.. . نحن نفهم الحياة بشكل خاطئ وعلينا أن نعود عن مفاهيمنا هذه ..التقليد الأعمى يتفشى في كل أمورنا متى نستفيق..

156

others. Yes to equality, but in its domain and in accordance with its capacities. A woman whose husband goes to work does not sit at home without doing a stroke of work, waiting for her children to come back. On the contrary, she does hard work that carries no less responsibility and exhaustion than that which a man does outside of his house. Does she have rights in return for these [services] …? (pp.94–95)[136]

This scene allows the author to make two arguments explicit. The first relates to Arabs' 'distorted' perception of equality and the second is about equality's 'harmful' consequences for women. Gender equality is presented as a difficult goal to achieve in the Arab world, in the absence of preliminary rights and of an encouraging environment that does not limit women to their prescribed social roles of wives and mothers. Thus, within a patriarchal society in which women are pressured to fit the image of a 'living martyr', providing for everyone (emotionally, physically and in some cases economically), while being themselves denied basic rights, conceiving equality as illogical is not a surprising view. While, at first glance, this comment might seem to be going against gender equality, it is rather a stance that strives towards a kind of equality which recognizes different spheres of women's and men's work and thus demands more rights for women. The 'equal but different' argument that is being constructed in this scene is one that fits well with traditional discourse on gender that sees no gain in competing with men on an equal footing in the public sphere. The emphasis is thus shifted to valorising women's unpaid work (represented in rearing children, cooking and cleaning) in order to demand more rights in return for these 'free' services that women are having to provide. Hence, we have, 'Yes to equality, but in its domain and in accordance with its capacities', which implicitly recognises the necessity of improving women's lives as a prelude to calling for gender equality.

In light of this critique, calling for gender equality while the situation of women in the Arab world remains unchanged is presented as a project that is doomed to fail. So, for example, calling for equality between the sexes when women are the ones who are culturally/socially required to do the housework is not depicted as triumphant for women, especially when services such as cleaning, cooking and looking after the children are done by women free of charge. In this regard,

---

[136] نتساوى في الواجبات لماذا..أليس لدينا ما يكفي من واجبات وهموم ومسؤوليات ألا تكفينا واجباتنا الكثيرة التي فرضتها طبيعتنا كأمهات وزوجات لا ننال عنها إلا حقوق فلماذا لا نطالب بحقوقنا عن هذه الواجبات أولا وإن نجحنا نشرع في غيرها. نعم للمساواة بالحقوق ولكن لكل في مجاله وحسب إمكاناته فالمرأة التي يخرج زوجها الى العمل وتجلس في بيتها ...لا تضع ساقا على ساق بانتظار عودته وأولادها ، بل تقوم بأعمال شاقة لا تقل مسؤولية وتعبا عما يقوم به الرجل خارج بيته فهل تتقاضى أي حقوق عن ذلك...

achieving equality would mean a double oppression, as it would further aggravate women's situation. The severity of the situation increases for working women, who would have to fight two battles; one at work and another at home. Echoing a Marxist feminist approach, the critique of gender equality that is presented in this context is one that focuses on the social division of labour as one of the primary sources of struggle for women (alongside the religious misconceptions about women that form the central focus of the novel).

> An unemployed woman works at home the equivalent of 20 hours a day… but in the case of an employed woman, her hours of work are added to these hours, which are no less than eight hours a day. So how does a woman ask for equality with men in terms of duties? Raja' thinks that achieving equality is the duty for those who work in the field of laws it has not been proved that a man is more giving and more intelligent or efficient than a woman. On the contrary, a woman in most cases surpasses a man in precision and efficacy... Why does a woman not earn a pension from the family expenses for all her hard work so she can live her old age a respectable woman away from poverty? It is a thing that cannot be understood. A woman has always been a contributor to labour. But she works and others get paid. When will feminist movements become aware of these type of miseries…? Our women have committed grave mistakes in identifying the reasons for their hardship and that is why their duties have increased and their rights have remained the same or even decreased in number. (p.95)[137]

Moreover, gender equality would withhold from women their unique experience and certain social privileges. In a society holding the notion that man is the breadwinner, while it regards women's work as secondary compared to a man's, the pressure on women to work in order to maintain their families is alleviated. Work in that sense becomes voluntary and a woman is not obligated socially (or in religious terms) to provide money for the household, except out of good will and usually a smaller amount than the man. Therefore, work is perceived as a source of leisure; women can have the option to take time off during pregnancy and childbirth or out of personal choice without having the pressure to support her family. Thus, the argument that the narrative makes about the irrelevance of 'western' notions of gender equality rests on the assumption that women in the West, in fighting for their

---

[137] المرأة الغير موظفة تعمل في بيتها ما يقرب من عشرين ساعة في اليوم... أما المرأة العاملة فيضاف الى هذه الساعات ساعات الدوام والتي لا تقل عن ثماني ساعات في اليوم... فكيف تطالب المرأة بالمساواة الرجل في الواجبات... تعتقد رجاء أن المساواة في الواجبات للعاملين في حقل من حقل القانون حقا مشروعا فلم يثبت أن الرجل أكثر عطاء او ذكاء أو انتاجا بل إن المرأة في كثير من الأحيان تتفوق عليه بالدقة والاتقان... لماذا لا تتقاضى المرأة راتبا تقاعدا من دخل الأسرة عن عملها المضنى لتعيش شيخوخة محترمة بعيدة عن العوز والفقر أمر غير مفهوم حتى الآن. المرأة كانت دائما مشاركة في العمل ولكنها تعمل وغيرها يقبض. .. فمتى تتنبه الحركات النسوية لمثل هذه الهموم...اخطأت نساءنا كثيرا في تلمس أسباب شقاءهن فازدادت الواجبات وبقيت الحقوق تراوح مكانها إن لم تنقص...

158

rights, are having to compete on an unequal footing with men, placing themselves at a disadvantage.

The second problematic issue with 'western equality' is its assumed perception of manhood. This idea is raised in two scenes; the first is when Raja' criticises a woman she overheard at a party saying that she is not willing to polish her husband's shoes.

> Does a woman think that she has bought her husband from a slave market so she can control him to this extent? Why don't we admit the great load that men have to endure outside of their homes? We, housewives, have our mouths fed with food dipped in honey. But behind this are hard work, effort and misery that we cannot sense or realise. (p.209)[138]

The second scene depicts Raja' being critical of Arab Muslim men who marry western women.

> How poor is an Arab man. I swear that women are better than him and their lives are better than his life. An Arab woman does not have to chase after her food. In most cases she lives relaxed and in comfort. She has someone to look after her, her father, brother or husband, even those who are distant relatives. She is not haunted by the ghost of poverty. Unlike her male colleague, who is consumed with running after sustenance for his children and their mother and he dare not complain. (p.306)[139]

Feeling sympathetic towards a male friend, a doctor who is married to a British woman, Raja' makes the following remarks: 'It's a shame that a respected doctor who longs to eat *mjadara*[140] or even something less than that, could not find anyone to make him a cup of tea or coffee. Why would he, the wives of equality don't do such things!' (p.308)[141]

Turning away from providing critical views of the West, the narrative then presents another insight into the sources of women's struggles in the Arab world. This is explored in a scene in which Raja' reflects on her life with Ahmad and ponders about her situation, and the manifestations of patriarchal control in society.

---

[138] هل تعتقد الواحدة منا أنها اشترت زوجها من سوق العبيد لتحكمه وتتحكم به الى هذا الحد... لماذا لا نقر بالهموم التي يتعرض لها الأزواج خارج منازلهم، نحن ربات البيوت تأتينا اللقمة مغموسة بالعسل ولكن خلف ذلك تعب وجهد وشقاء ومعاناة لا نحسها ولا ندركها.

[139] مسكين الرجل العربي.. والله النساء أفضل منه وحياتهن أفضل من حياته فالمرأة العربية لا تطاردها الحاجة الى لقمة العيش في معظم الأحيان تعيش مرتاحة قريرة العين لديها من يكفل لقمتها ألاب أو الأخ أو الزوج أو حتى من هو أبعد نسبا من هؤلاء .. لا يطارده شبح المجاعة أما أخوها الرجل فمنهك ملاحق بلقمة عياله وأمهم وولاياه بل حياته كلها " ويا ويله لو تخنفس أو تنفس.."

[140] *Mjadara* is a common Arabic dish of rice with lentils.

[141] مؤسف حقا والله .. طبيب محترم ويتوق لمن يطعمه المجدرة وربما لما هو أقل من ذلك.. قد لا يجد من يعد له فنجان الشاي أو القهوة ان احتاج .. ولم لا فزوجات المساواة لا يقمن بذلك.

Who said that a man alone is capable of repressing a woman? We have examples around us that prove that women also contribute to oppressing other women. …this mutual repression is a phenomenon that women suffer from everywhere in our Arab world. And who said that the oppression of a woman only occurs at the hand of her husband? Does she not face outright familial oppression from her brother, father or son? The problem does not stop with the husband. It is true that a man thinks that his wife is (his own property) and that she has to accept all his flaws, but does not a father also suppress his daughter before she is married and does not a brother suppress his sister so he can have her share of the inheritance. (p.94)[142]

The following conclusion is then drawn:

But the woman is the reason, is it not she who raises, nurtures and develops? She is indeed responsible for the flaws of the husband. She is the first school. She is the stream and the resources of inspiration and the most successful in this world owe it to the presence of their mothers... Big artists, creative people, leaders all had their mothers and they were extraordinary, but unfortunately they are few in number. But Arab women thought that liberation is represented by stripping down and in the use of cosmetics and imitating others. That is why her liberation was external and very far from tangible. That is why she did not gain much in relation to her long struggles because she had imitated others and adopted their perceptions and did not realise the numerous differences between us and others, like religion, *urf*[143], traditions and environment, even geography. Is it important just to be liberated from men and to be equal in rights and duties? What nonsense is this! (p.94)[144]

So, in order to lead a respectable life that guarantees women's satisfaction and happiness, the narrative presents the idea that following the basic principles of Islam, which call for high moral values between men and women, is the right way to move forward. Through Raja', Abdel Hadi provides a critique of how women and men are constructed in Jordanian society. She provides various examples of negative attitudes and characteristics that are far from the essence and teachings of Islam.

Abdel Hadi's take on the issue is confrontational in that she not only discusses the dilemma of Arab women in a Muslim majority country, but also takes it a step further by de-valorising western modes of tackling gender inequality. By denigrating western feminism, she is validating what she regards as the optimum method. Thus,

---

[142] ومن قال إن قمع المرأة يتم على يدي الزوج وحده الا يقع عليها قمع أسري فاضح من قبل الأخ أو الاب أو الابن... المشكلة لا تتوقف عند حد الزوج... صحيح أن الرجل يعتقد أن الزوجة ملكا له (أي بتعته) وأن عليها أن تتقبل بلاويه وعيوبه ولكن الا يقمع الاب ابنته قبل زواجها والا يقمع الأخ أخته حين يستولي على ميراثها.

[143] *Urf* refers to the custom of a given society

[144] ولكن المرأة هي السبب.. أليست من يبرئ ويرعى وينشئ ... هي مسؤولة فعلا عن كبوات الرجل هي المدرسة الأولى هي النبع وهي مصدر الإلهام ومعظم الناجحين في العالم كانت الأم حضورا ووجودا بين ثنايا أيامهم... كبار الفنانين والمبدعين والقادة كانت وراءهم أمهات وكنَّ متميزات ولكنهم قلة للأسف... اعتقدت النساء العربيات أن التحرر يكمن في التعري واستخدام المساحيق وتقليد الآخرين فكان تحررها مظهريا بعيدا عن الجدية ولهذا لم تنل شيئا يذكر لنضالاتها الطويلة لأنها قلدت الاخريات وحملت مفاهيمهن ولم تدرك الاختلافات الكثيرة بيننا وبين غيرنا كالدين والعرف والتقاليد والبيئة وحتى الجغرافيا فهل المهم فقط أن نتحرر من الرجال وأن نتساوى بالحقوق والواجبات أي هراء هذا...

160

she is justifying the significance of finding a solution from within one's own culture and traditions. Moreover, she warns against falling victim to what she sees as the 'ill-conceived' notions of the West as a beacon of hope for women. This stance is not surprising as some have argued that feminism in the West, 'basically stands for enmity between men and women as well as a call for immorality in the form of sexual promiscuity for women' (Badran 1995, p.6).

However, despite presenting a valid approach, which has been advocated by many Arab Muslim feminists and in particular Islamic feminists, I argue that Abdel Hadi's anti-western critique is not particularly useful. This is mainly because she bases her critique of the West on flawed understandings and sweeping generalisations of a society and a culture, setting up an 'imagined' social, political and cultural construct of the West. Thus, while Abdel Hadi's critique is one of a number that are being proposed and negotiated, I argue that such a cultural and perhaps politically motivated approach, which is rooted in tradition, need not be based on devaluing other ideas or concepts that contradict such proposals. Such a confrontational approach is also guilty of Occidentalism. As an Arab Muslim researcher, I find the overwhelming tendency in western literature on Arab Muslim women to victimise them and to present a homogeneous image of them to be frustrating. While I do not know whether Abdel Hadi has been exposed to such reductionist views about Arab and Muslim women, I regard it as equally troubling that writers like herself resort to the same approach in reverse as a counter strategy. Nevertheless, such an approach is not a new one, as Kecia Ali explains, 'Muslim authorities may attempt to reverse the values assigned to Muslim and western treatment of women by criticising lax moral standards or other elements of western life' (Ali 2013, p.xiv). I suggest that such techniques will further contribute to the growing gap between women of different cultural, social, and traditional backgrounds. Although cross-cultural understanding is not my primary concern, I find that if one feels obligated to draw comparisons with other cultures, then these should be done in a reasonable manner, backed by sufficient scientific research, rather than ill-informed personal views.

The role of Islam in Jordanian society

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the use of progressive Islamic discourse in Abdel Hadi's novel, I offer an overview of the role that Islam plays in contemporary Jordanian society. Locating itself between the two opposite extremes of fundamentalism and liberalism, Jordan could be characterised as moderate in terms of religious outlook. There are three major religious parties in Jordan: the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the Islamic Action Front (IAF) and the Islamic Centrist Party (ICP).The Jordanian government tries to maintain a friendly yet cautious approach towards these parties using productive dialogue that attempts to grant them some powers in the name of democracy. Despite this lenient approach compared to neighbouring countries, the Jordanian government also tries to minimise their power and their presence within parliament and in political positions or ranks. This could partly be interpreted in the light of safeguarding Jordan's political interests abroad and in maintaining its pro-western political outlook, which clashes with the agendas of these Islamic groups.

The emphasis on religion in Jordan is influenced by many factors, perhaps the most significant being related to the royal family and its focus on its important genealogy that is closely connected to Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). The kingdom has always stressed its Hashemite roots as a protective measure for this small and vulnerable nation, which has faced and continues to encounter ideological challenges that threaten its very existence (Wiktorowicz 1999). Realising their critical position, the Hashemites choose to stress their legitimacy based on religious significance. This is often stated explicitly in the speeches of the King and other members of the royal family, and is clearly present in the official name of Jordan, which is The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The Jordanian monarchy also stresses its important role in protecting sacred religious sites such as Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. In relation to this, they speak, with a great sense of pride, about rebuilding Al- Aqsa Mosque twice after it was burned down by the Israelis using their personal funds (Wiktorowicz 1999, p.680). Michael Robbins and Lawrence Rubin explain that, 'in Jordan's case, the regime has sought to develop these institutions as a survival strategy in an attempt to limit the ability of the opposition to mobilize' (Robbins and

Rubin 2013, p.60). They give a further description of Jordan's involvement in official Islam[145] from the beginning of its independence when they argue that:

> Jordan's development went through three phases. From its independence in 1947 until the Iranian revolution, the state undertook minimal efforts to develop this institution, after the revolution, however the state changed course by developing two institutions – the Advisory Council of Dar al-Ifta (department for issuing fatwas) and the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought. These institutional changes set the stage for the regime's new policy of seeking to manage the public religious space and debate in Jordan. With the rise of global jihadism in the late 1990s however, the state has increasingly empowered both institutions seeking to actively shape the religious space and debate in Jordan. (Robbins and Rubin 2013, p.60)

The increased emphasis on official Islam was then bolstered by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1989, when they 'won 40 percent of the parliamentary seats and became the most powerful bloc in parliament' (Robbins and Rubin 2013, p.66). Curtis Ryan explains that, 'regime officials were certain that the Islamist ministers – if given room to manoeuvre – would in fact rile public opinion against various measures. The idea, in short, was to ease tensions by including the opposition in government, but also to allow them to fall in the face of a backlash in public opinion' (Ryan 2008, p.4). After the rise of global jihadism in the 1990s, and the increased threats and plots by radical Islamists, the Jordanian regime 'continued to cultivate official Islam and shape the religious space that was susceptible to influence and manipulation by moderate and radical Islamists' (Robbins and Rubin 2013, p.69).

Jordan has a high population of Sunnis, who make up 92% of the population, with Christians making up 6%, and Shias and other minorities forming the remaining 2% (Embassy of Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan 2015). Jordan is not very liberal in terms of certain religious issues, and especially those pertaining to women and their role. As in many other Arab and Islamic nations, Friday prayer is an important Islamic practice for many Jordanian individuals, especially in rural areas. People also pray five times a day and fast during the month of Ramadan, and as these rituals are performed in the private sphere those who do not practise them will generally give the impression that they are performing their religious duties when they are in public space (Droeber 2003). Pilgrimage or *Haj* is a ritual that many individuals look

---

[145] Official Islam refers to the elements of religious authority that are under the direct or indirect control of the regime. These elements are a part of the bureaucracy, meaning that they have some autonomy from the regime itself but that this autonomy can be checked by the regime as with any other bureaucratic department. More concretely, 'official Islam' is also referred to as 'establishment Islam' (Robbins and Rubin 2013, p.61).

forward to each year, and announcements are broadcast with the guidelines for registration on national television. Jordanians adopt many religious principles in their daily and habitual lives, an example would be their frequent use of the phrases *inshallah* (If God wills), *al-hamdu lilallah* (Thank God), *masha'a Allah* and, most notably, in greeting others using '*Asalamu alykum wa rahmatu 'Allahi wa barakatuh* (May God's peace and mercy be upon you). In terms of female general attire, Lisa Taraki gives the following description:

> A casual observer in Amman, Zarqa and Irbid, and the other major towns in Jordan will find women in different states of dress and 'undress' (if we are to borrow the Islamists' terms). Women choosing to wear some form of Islamic dress (*al-ziyy al-shar'i or al-ziyy al-Islami*) have a number of options available to them. They may choose the most severe version, a uniform consisting of the *niqab* (face covering), gloves, a head covering, and *jilbab* (a cloak-like garment), or they may opt for the most minimal, which is comprised of the head covering and some form of western dress, even jeans. It is of course obvious that not all – perhaps not even a majority – of women wearing some version of Islamic dress are members or sympathizers of the Islamist movement. It is a mark of its influence, however, that it has managed within the space of a decade to make the modern Islamist uniform or variations on it an attractive and viable option for women, particularly those in cities and big towns. (Taraki 1996, p.152)

Compared to other Arab and Islamic countries, an individual in Jordan has far greater freedom to lead his/her life as long as major religious taboos are avoided and as long as this freedom does not pose problems for others. In Jordan, religion joins hands with social norms and traditions in shaping the lives of many individuals. They work in moderation and in a form of collaboration rather than opposition where each domain complements the other. Wiktorowicz explains that,

> Religious knowledge and understanding is acquired through a mediated process of interpretation…Today, religious interpretations are disseminated through books, cassettes, videos, television, radio, religious lessons, sermons, and personal interactions, etc. these instruments represent the means for obtaining religious understanding. While some groups and individuals turn directly to the sources of the religion, the Quran and Sunna (the path of Prophet Mohammed), even they will also rely on other scholars and past religious knowledge to help interpret these texts. (Wiktorowicz 1999, p. 685)

Perhaps one the most prominent religious figures to influence Jordanians is Mohammed Metwali Al-Sha'rawi. Al-Sha'rawi is a respected Egyptian figure whose religious lessons used to be broadcast on Jordanian national television every week before Friday prayer. Many programmes would also be dedicated to his teachings and his explanation and interpretation of the Holy Qur'an and of Prophet Mohammed's Hadith, and would also be aired on the national channel of Jordan,

Amman First Channel. The popularity of Al-Sha'rawi is accredited by many Jordanians for his simple, moderate and interactive style. The religious weight of such sheikhs does not affect the importance of Jordanian sheikhs and imams of mosques, especially those whom individuals encounter during Friday prayer, who will usually answer and help members of society regarding any religious issues.

The Bitter Winter was published in 2010, two decades after the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan. Their active role was visible not only in the political field but also the social (Taraki 1995. P.644). They were able to mobilise a fairly wide segment of society and to involve them in their plans to embrace their new ideology. In the Universities of Jordan and Yarmouk, students who are members of the Muslim Brotherhood usually receive the highest votes in Student Union elections. 'The Islamic movement is proud that most of its strength in universities and during elections derives from women' (Taraki 1996, p.144). They also have considerable influence in the syndicate of engineering, medicine and pharmacy. They also established the Islamic Hospital in Amman, in which employees are obliged to adhere to the Islamic dress code. In addition to the numerous charitable organisations that they sponsor, there exist tens of private Islamic schools, such as *Dur Al-Manthur*[146] (the scattered pearls) and *Al-Radwan* (pleasure) and many others in which Islamic teaching and memorisation of the Holy Qur'an are highly encouraged.

All of this illustrates that the main goals of the Muslim Brotherhood exceed the ambition of gaining more political representation and extend to the transformation of Jordanian society into a more religious one that follows Shariʿa law. Although their most active years in Jordan were during the 1990s, when they enjoyed a high level of freedom and political representation, their influence and presence remains visible. Because of their reliance on Islam as a mechanism for enforcing their ideologies and agendas, their political freedom was gradually reduced by the Jordanian regime, who wished to maintain a liberal outlook and image in the regional and international arena, as a loyal ally to the West and a strong supporter of neighbouring Arab countries and issues, especially the Palestinian cause.

---

[146] Dur Al-Manthur is the name of an authoritative Sunni exegesis of the Holy Qur'an written by prominent Imam Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d.1505 AD).

The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic parties chose to direct their energy towards social platforms, realising that they were being politely undermined by the government. Their marginalisation explains the effort they expended in finding an alternative field to exercise their agendas. Yet, despite the regime placing stringent limitations on religious parties, the presence of additional external factors, such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq led by the United States and its allies, the Amman bombings in 2005 and the Arab Spring in 2011, did not fail to engage the religious with the political in explaining the deteriorating situation of Arab and Islamic nations.

Clark and Schwedler note that '"a significant shift in Islamists" views occurred in recent years, in terms of women's issues. This shift has primarily manifested in leaving behind strict views and practices that completely overlooked women's visible political role, to nominating female candidates to parliamentary elections' (2003, p.293). This was done in addition to appointing women to decision-making governing bodies, as in the case of IAF nominee Nawal Faouri, who became the first female member of the Shura Council in 1994 and who is currently a member of the Upper House of the Jordanian Parliament. Since 2003, the role of women and their rights have been important topics that were present in the statements of the ICP and IAF (Alatiyat and Barari 2010). Many women joined Islamist parties, where they saw an opportunity to become involved in social activism and in reaching out to other women, albeit through physically and programmatically separate spaces from men (Alatiyat and Barari 2010). Although many women viewed this separation as secluding them, the Islamist feminists stressed that, 'it is through such activities and involvement that they have almost taken over one of Jordan's major organizations, namely the General Federation of Jordanian Women (GFJW)' (Alatiyat and Barari 2010, p.370).

A call for Islamic feminism
In her style, and in how she presents women's issues in contemporary Jordanian society in her work, Abdel Hadi is echoing many Islamic feminists, who call for a re-evaluation of the way in which Muslim women have been disadvantaged by fundamentalists and for a re-reading of Islamic texts without the reliance on

misogynistic interpretations. Despite Abdel Hadi's emphasis on the individual life of the character of Raja' and her suffering, and how she manages to transform her life for the better, she also addresses other women in society. The protagonist first goes through an isolated individual experience of pain and misery and then decides to actively take part in challenging and transforming people's views about how all women should be treated, through her articles about women in Islam.

Abdel Hadi follows the path of feminists who choose to operate through an Islamic framework in reshaping previously fixed negative ideas about women in an Islamic nation. This process of reshaping takes into account the changing social, political, and economic situation of many Arab countries, and particularly Jordan. The modern Islamic discourse on women, which started in the late 1980s and early 1990s, explains how those changes influenced the religious attitudes of that time, which were moving in the direction of conservatism in many Arab and Islamic countries. Such changes also coincided with the overthrow of the Shah in 1979 as an outcome of the Iranian Islamic revolution (Ahmed 1992; Mernissi 1991). Many have come to interpret this conservative ousting of the pro-western Shah as a consequence of the negative image that many Arab nations hold towards the West due to colonialism and a general feeling of frustration at the failure to reach an acceptable level of prosperity, economic and political stability (Mir-Hosseini 2015; Ali 2013; Abu Lughod 2013). In a similar manner to her predecessors, Abdel Hadi utilises moderate Islamic discourse as a tool to generate debates about women and gender in Islam, but in her case within a literary framework. Thus, the verses of the Holy Qur'an and the Hadiths that she uses are ones that particularly address women and serve as evidence of their elevated status in Islam. She raises controversial issues, in particular in relation to gender inequality, honour killings and the rights and responsibilities of wives and husbands, and addresses the gendered aspects of Islamic fundamentalism. Moreover, she criticises Arab writers for distorting the image of women in literature. Through her narrative, she calls for a return to the Holy Islamic scriptures as an attempt to restore and emphasise women's value in a society that has strayed away from the teachings of Islam. Blindly imitating a foreign culture, she suggests, can only lead to corruption and moral decay.

Speaking about western imitation, a supervisor of the Dar Al-Arqam School in Amman says,

> But what is the result of all of this? The woman was the one to lose. She lost the protective shadow of her home; she gained materially but lost her dignity… But then there came this sweeping tide, a call for a return to the pure spring, to Islam. A call for the return of the Muslim woman to her kingdom at home… the Muslim woman returned with new determination, saying: I want to return to regain my honour! I want to return to Islam to find my humanity! I want to return to my home to answer the call of my nature! (Taraki 1996, p.144)

Abdel Hadi's decision to take an Islamic feminist approach in *The Bitter Winter* is not surprising. As Ziba Mir-Hosseini argues, 'attempts to translate anachronistic patriarchal interpretations of the Shari'ah into policy provoked many women to increasing criticism and drove them to greater activism' (Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.29). The socioeconomic developments brought by education and employment opened up new spaces for activism and debate. 'Women were now finding ways to sustain a critique, from within, of patriarchal readings of the *Shari'ah* and of the gender biases of *fiqh* texts.' Thus, with the rise of such activists, a new discourse, a new way of thinking about gender, emerged among Muslims, a way that was branded 'Islamic feminism', an intellectual domain interested in 'uncovering a hidden history and rereading Islamic textual resources', and in reclaiming Islam's egalitarian message (Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.29).

Moreover, I argue that Abdel Hadi's religious approach to dismantling common misconceptions about women in Jordanian society is a literary and strategically safe one, especially during the critical time that Jordan (and the region) is currently experiencing politically, socially and economically. In this new millennium, Jordan has undergone various transformations on many levels. The Amman bombings that targeted three western hotels in November of 2005 as a result of the rise of global jihadism were the main setback (Robbins and Rubin 2013, p.68). The harsh economic situation in Jordan, represented by increasing prices and the new wave of privatisation, were responsible for the growing gap between the social classes. These changes are mainly attributed to the lack of capital and proper management of resources, coupled with corruption, which has left the public in a state of despair and frustration. Moreover, the growing resentment from the West as a result of 9/11, which triggered a massive wave of antagonism towards the Middle East and Islam, had a tremendous influence on the psyche of Arabs, especially Muslims. These factors surely affected the way in which intellectuals and writers were reacting to such transformations. In the midst of all this instability and uncertainty, many found

refuge in the spiritual and the sacred. Abdel Hadi chooses to resort to Islam in search of solutions for a society that is overburdened by the current situation, which is far from the ambitions and aspirations of Arabs in an age of confusion, desperation, double standards, and social upheaval. In a country like Jordan that is oscillating between the conservatives and the liberals in terms of social issues and problems without having a clear take on matters, it is not surprising to find a certain group of people who are adamant in their wish to find practical and clear-cut solutions to staggering and prolonged social problems. This is of particular relevance to issues pertaining to women and their struggle for liberation from gender inequality.

It remains one valid approach. Nevertheless, my concern lies in the exclusion of Christian Jordanian women from this type of discourse. Although they form a minority of the Jordanian population, they should be included in any social reformist discourse targeting Arab women, especially in Jordan where many Christian women have contributed to raising women's issues and to empowering them politically, economically and socially. These figures include Asma Khadr, the former Head of the National Commission for Jordanian Women and a former minister and spokeswoman for the government, Abeer Dababneh, the Head of the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of Jordan and Rula Quawas, who is an academic and a former Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Jordan and who was among the first to introduce feminism as an academic discipline. The contributions of these women should be acknowledged and they should not be excluded from the debates around women based on their religious beliefs.

Nonetheless, speaking from within a conservative Arab country like Jordan, Abdel Hadi is very well aware of the role of religion in society and its strong presence. She realises that it would be a very difficult task to exclude religion when discussing a social issue in an Islamic country, and this is why her choice of examples to condemn the actions of the protagonist's husband were deliberately taken from Islamic texts and heritage. She seems determined to take this route in order to support her argument about certain perceptions of gender and about the primary pillars that should be the basis of the relationship involving a husband and wife.

Conclusion

The fictional world that is created in *The Bitter Winter* does not deviate from the conventional image of society in the real world. On the contrary, its social structures remain the same. The only major difference is in its challenging of dominant fundamentalist Islamic discourses on women. Having a novel that rebels against and defies social meanings would contradict the primary function of delivering a lesson, especially in a conservative Arab and Islamic society. Through various fictional devices, Abdel Hadi is trying to convey a direct message to the reader about the value and position of women in an Arab society. She carefully makes her novel function as a didactic one, in which she assumes the role of an eye opener and an educator about the various problems of her society. What separates this work from many feminist novels or ones that discuss the issue of women is the author's will and determination to find a solution, as opposed to simply exposing a problem and inviting the reader to come up with proposals.

Finally, following the conservative approach is an appealing method for tackling women's issues for Abdel Hadi, one that is likely to find a wide audience, especially in villages that are home to slightly more conservative and traditional Jordanians, in which any unconventional approach is simply implausible. In cities, this approach would appeal to conservatives and particularly members of religious parties and groups. While a religious approach may prove effective for some, there will always be those groups of people, like Haideh Moghissi, who would condemn Abdel Hadi for involving Islam in her debate on women as she, along with many others, believes that religion and feminism are mutually exclusive since one is built on hierarchy and the other calls for the elimination of such structures. However, the feminist approach in *The Bitter Winter* remains useful in highlighting the various resources that are available to women, and how they attempt to use such resources to support their stance or their main objectives for women in Jordanian society. I find Abdel Hadi rebellious in how she questions religion in a society that restricts this domain to men. Moreover, I find it ironic that, despite advocating a return to tradition, the Islamic feminist approach that is being promoted in the novel is characterised as a 'modern'

one.[147] Despite realising the complex nature of such an approach, she remains hopeful that it will yield positive outcomes.

While Islamic feminists seem to be making progress in challenging some misogynistic readings and interpretations of Holy Scriptures, such a fresh approach faces a number of obstacles. Al-Haddad, Rahman and Abu Zayd attribute the greatest barrier to the presence of 'entrenched patriarchal and authoritarian structures and the way they conspire to silence voices of reform and change. The proponents of traditionalist ideas and practices will not easily relinquish established interpretations of the *Shari'ah*, as reflected in classical *fiqh* rulings that allowed discrimination on the basis of gender and faith' (quoted in Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.38). However, one has to remember that, 'The struggle for gender equality in Muslim contexts is part of the wider struggle for political democracy, pluralism and freedom of expression; the democratization of the production of religious knowledge has an essential role in this struggle' (Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.38).

Nonetheless, bringing current Islamic legal thought into conversation with feminism, as Mir-Hosseini argues, 'can pave the way for transcending ideological dichotomies such as "secular" versus "religious" feminism, or "Islam" versus "human rights", to which Muslim women's quest for equality and dignity has remained hostage since the early twentieth century' (Mir-Hosseini 2015, pp.39-40). These dichotomies, she explains, 'have masked the real site of the battle, which is between patriarchal and authoritarian structures, on the one side, and egalitarian and democratic ideologies and forces, on the other' (Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.40). Finding her critique particularly useful, I conclude this chapter with her proposal,

> Unmasking this reality entails two linked processes: recovering and reclaiming the ethical and egalitarian ethos in Islam's sacred texts, and decoding and exposing the relation between the production of knowledge and the practices of power. It is only then that we can aspire to real and meaningful change that can transform the deep structures that have shaped our religious, cultural and political realities. (Mir-Hosseini 2015, p.40)

---

[147] Islamic feminism is a 'modern' phenomenon that emerged into the scene two decades ago (Badran 2009).

Chapter Six: The Emergence of a New Feminist Consciousness

The Empire of Nara's Papers by Samiha Khreis (2010)

This is the story of Nara Adnan, a journalist from Al-Ashrafia neighbourhood, who lives with her uncle and his wife and a grandfather who is ill and has lost his memory. She is unsatisfied with her life as she did not receive her fair share of the family house after the death of her father. She is also disgusted with the way her grandfather is kept in the basement like a piece of rotten cloth without the least sense of compassion. Nara becomes a journalist, and although she publishes a few times a week she is not proficient in the classical Arabic language. She is regularly criticised for writing in a colloquial language and a provocative style, without taking social norms into consideration. Despite this, she is an ambitious and bright young woman who continues to criticise 'everything' around her in a sarcastic way. She makes use of her profession to travel widely, and leaves her rebellious trademark on the stories that she writes.

Nara tells us about her beloved, Tariq (a fantasy lover), whom she invented as a companion in her life. She talks about their loving and cheerful relationship. She also talks about her uncle's wife, Fathiya, who experiments with various methods to have a child without any luck. The daughter of Fathiya's friend and neighbour, Um Subhi, is raped by a man in the same neighbourhood and as a result the girl becomes pregnant. In order to avoid the fate that her daughter would have suffered had her story been revealed to the public, Fathiya's neighbour makes a deal whereby she gives Fathiya her granddaughter to bring up as her own child in return for Fathiya's silence regarding the rape of her daughter. Nara discovers the whole story one night when she realises that her friend, Widad, is nursing the infant instead of Fathiya, the alleged mother, but decides to remain silent. Nara's uncle and his wife realise that she knows the whole story about the child and the rape of her friend and one day her uncle approaches her with a marriage proposal from the same man who raped her friend. She fiercely rejects the man, refusing to take part in a dirty game and a life

built on lies. Towards the end, the neglected grandfather burns down the house and puts an end to his miserable life. From the midst of the fire in the basement, he calls on Nara to join him.

Match Sticks by Rifqa Dodin (2000)

This is a novel about the relationship between Saleh, a male Palestinian freedom fighter and Sawsana, a young female lecturer. The narrative begins with a description of a very traditional setting of older men and women discussing their views of life. Saleh then describes his encounter with Sawsana, who was preaching to women in the neighbourhood about women's value in society. Astonished by her strong presence and personality, Saleh decides to join the audience and listen to Sawsana. He then describes the transformation that he experiences as a result of Sawsana's influence on him.

The Hornet's Nest by Faisal Tellawi (2007)

This novel revolves around a group of seven women: a landlady Sawsan and her six tenants, and the stories they tell of their lives as women. Sawsan explains to her tenants about her strict rules and regulations in order to maintain a reputable business. Having come from distant villages and cities, the seven women establish a friendship in which each one talks about the major problems that she has encountered as a woman. Nisreen, a lawyer, expresses her frustration at not having a prosperous career. She has secret encounters with her employer Marwan, and they discuss various social topics, mainly the philosophy of marriage.

Diana is a divorced woman who had to sacrifice her marriage for the sake of her career as a nurse, and she has a strong belief in the significance of employment for women. She describes the many problems she faces in her life as a result of being labelled divorced. Hala is a sales representative who, due to travelling to countries like France and Austria, shares western perceptions of marriage and relationships with her flatmates, who are left amused.

Reema is a secretary at a dental surgery who talks about the agony her family had to go through after her father married a second wife. She has various encounters with dentist Wa'el, and they have discussions about sexuality in the Arab psyche. Fadwa is a computer programmer who expresses her frustration about marriage and discusses the various problems that her uncle has caused for her because she refused to marry one of his sons.

As all the female characters live in the same flat, they share their stories in informal gatherings at night when they return from work. They all complain about living in a patriarchal society that endows men with greater value, and each of them provides her perspective upon gender inequality through her experiences of life.

Chapter Six: The Emergence of a New Feminist Consciousness

Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I examined various ways in which Jordanian novelists 'diagnosed' the situation of women and offered suggestions for improvement. Yet, I argued that they had overlooked important aspects of women's struggle in a patriarchal society. These relate to stressing the destructive effects of the social conditioning of males and females, in ways that support the former and suppress the latter, and examining what it means to be a woman in a conservative Arab society. Whereas those novels focused on presenting problems and solutions via a complex web of events or stories, the novels under investigation in this chapter focus on philosophical concepts revolving around women and men as social categories and explore ways to address gender inequality starting from a theoretical perspective.

In this chapter, then, I investigate contemporary Jordanian novels that highlight the emergence of a new feminist consciousness, one that not only explores notions of feminist activism, but also engages with aspects of 'academic' feminism. Once again, I have divided the relevant novels into two categories: In the first, I explore new perceptions of gender (Samiha Khreis in *The Empire of Nara's Papers* ('*Imbraturiyat Warak Nara)* and Rifqa Dodin in *Match Sticks ('A'wad Thiqāb)*) while, in the second, I examine the emphasis on themes of gender inequality and gendered perceptions around marriage, divorce and sexuality (*The Hornet's Nest* (*Wikr al-Zanabīr)* by Faisal Tellawi). I identify the different approaches that these novelists use to engage with aspects of feminist ideas and explore how they draw on gender theory with the intention of providing alternative ways of conceptualising women's and men's status in society in ways that can serve the interests of women.

The Empire of Nara's Papers and *Match Sticks* are novels that offer a window into the daily lives of women in Jordan. They both pay particular attention to various forms of inequality that women have to endure. For instance, the differential

upbringing of boys and girls, the law of citizenship and the law of *khula*ʿ[148] are issues that surface in the work of Khreis. Interestingly, and after providing their description of 'oppressive Jordanian society', both novels introduce an academic (in the sense that it involves educational and theoretical knowledge that is backed by rigorous research) understanding of gender as a possible solution to overcome such inequalities. *The Empire of Nara's Papers* and *Match Sticks* thus present their narratives as oscillating between the harsh reality and possible gateways through academic discourse. In doing so, both Khreis and Dodin question the effect of academic understanding of women's disadvantaged position in society and imagine whether such an insight could have positive consequences for women's everyday lives.

   The nature of these novels and their presentations of gender and gender studies have made it a very difficult task for me to perceive them as fiction, and hence, not being narratives of real lives. This partly stems from my deep interest in the critique they offer of gender in everyday lives and its close connection with the overall arguments of this research. I argue that Dodin's and Khreis' novels are polemical. Underlying their depictions, some very important questions are explicitly raised: Does insight into gender matter? Can gender studies bring about social change in conservative societies? Such questions remain an important part of my academic interest and future career in the Centre for Women's Studies in Jordan. They will in fact be issues that I always keep at the back of my mind. Situating myself as a mediator who will impart 'gender knowledge' to future students makes the questions that Khreis and Dodin raise seem highly relevant. The solutions that are implied in their representations of the gender struggle, along with a number of references to real-life matters (such as the law of citizenship and *khula*ʿ), in the work of Khreis has somewhat blurred the line between fiction and reality. Moreover, knowing of Dodin's great interest in feminist literary studies has also been a contributing factor. In her book *The Discourse of Contemporary Arab Feminist Novels (Khitab al-Riwaya al-Niswiyya al-ʿArabiyya al-Muʿasira*, Dodin explicitly declares her interest in feminism. Khreis is also explicit: in *The Empire of Nara's Papers*, she breaks with tradition by creating two introductions. In the first, her protagonist introduces herself

---

[148] This is a conditional law that allows women to divorce their husbands in return for giving up their rights to alimony and dowry.

and, in the second, Khreis introduces herself and describes some of the issues she has encountered in real life with people who want her to write fictional work about their lives. Among these people is a woman by the name of Nara (the name of the protagonist in the novel). Thus, the way in which Khreis starts with her protagonist Nara and then talks about her 'real' life issues and an encounter with a 'Nara' adds a layer of confusion between the real Nara and the fictional one.

Gender as a shift from the passive to the active: A valid approach

Both Khreis and Dodin introduce the term and idea of 'gender' as a strategy for thinking differently about the social roles of women and men. They raise critical questions about gender in an attempt to understand how it is conceptualised. Implicit in their presentations, these questions include the relationship between sex and gender; the relationship between gender and social discrimination; and, most importantly, ideas of how notions of gender can bring an end to gender inequality. Both novelists start by presenting a traditionalist view of women and men in Jordanian society. They then progress by providing ways to destabilise such perceptions for the benefit of women.

Such socially established norms then become internalized through discriminatory practices such as the differential upbringing of girls and boys, in which males are granted more privileges than females. Khreis raises this issue when describing how a male infant, the protagonist's new-born cousin, has more rights to inherit her uncle's property simply because of his gender. The mere thought of being pressured to give up her rights on the basis of gender highlights the problematic notion around male privilege. In *The Empire of Nara's Papers*, gendered perceptions of intellectual ability are also raised, in which a woman is seen as less capable than a man. Khreis fleshes out this idea through the way in which the protagonist's male colleagues perceive her.

> How do we know whether this *idiot* has covered Al-Jabiri's symposium accurately, if you guys can barely understand his logic [referring to male reports] or if she has recorded the poems of poet Al-Madi without any mistakes! … This is not a local event, nor a charity event, nor a traditional fashion show, nor a poetry evening event of a beautiful poet [referring to a female poet], nor an exhibition of a Salti[149] artist; people, have you no fear

---

[149] Referring to the city of Salt.

of God, this is the conference summit and you send Nara Adnan! (Khreis p.91, my emphasis)[150]

Such a negative perception of women and the activities that are traditionally associated with them highlights the consequences of essentialist views of gender in promoting gender discrimination. Not only are women presented as less capable than men in reporting on influential male critics, poets or events, but also activities in which they are involved are labelled as trivial. Covering an event by a 'beautiful' female poet or artist does not compare to reporting on that of renowned Arab poet Al-Mutanabi or Arab intellectual Mohammed Abed Al-Jabiri. Moreover, events involving male critics and poets are magnified and given wider attention than those featuring women. In these depictions, man is the centre of attention and woman is peripheral, having to compete for social significance and value.

In *Match Sticks*, Dodin provides a more traditional view of womanhood and manhood through choosing the rural areas of Jordan as her setting. She describes how women are almost entirely confined to their homes, performing domestic duties, while men are mostly absent either at work or some social gathering. Dodin depicts an older generation of women and men and presents their narrow understanding of gender. These include the linking of womanhood to domesticity and confinement, and manhood to power and virility. 'And my children dragged by that woman who is called my wife and, as you can see, she is reaping, kneading, baking and cooking' (Dodin 2000, p.72)[151], is how Abu Al-Tuyur is depicted describing his wife. Providing a 'proper' image of women, the male protagonist describes Sawsana as follows, 'I really like Sawsana. She is *reserved, decently dressed* and is not the type who would laugh loudly. She doesn't smoke like some women who are *out of the ordinary…*' (Dodin 2000, p.80, my emphasis).[152] Such a description situates womanhood as moderate (reserved, decently attired) as well as fitting in and

---

[150] وإن تكن هذه الهبله غطت ندوة الجابري بدقه. أساسا أنتم أنفسكم بالكاد تفهمون الجابري، وإن تكن سجلات قصائد الشاعر الماضي بلا اخطاء. أصلا ما فيها هذه القصائد من إعجاز. أي طالب ابتدائي يستطيع أن يكتبها، وإن تكن فعلت كل هذه المعجزات، الا ترون هبلها وارتباكها واضطراب بوصلة الفهم والتحليل لديها؟ ينقلب رئيس التحرير (الذي وظفني) علي بسهوله، صائحا: هذا ليس خبرا محليا، ليس حفله خيريه تقيمها جمعية وادي العتمات، ليس عرضا للأزياء الشعبية، ولا أمسية شعريه لحسناء، ولا افتتاح معرض لفنانة سلطيه، يا ناس يا عالم خافوا ربكم، هذا مؤتمر القمة وترسلون ناره عدنان لتغطيته. خلص. أمحلت.

[151] وأولادي تجرهم تلك المرأة التي تسمى زوجتي والتي كما ترى تحصد وتعجن وتخبز

[152] وكانت تعجبني كثيرا، ملتزمة ومحتشمة وليست بذات ضحكات رقيعة، ولا يخشش الدخان ويعشش في جوفها كما بعض النساء والخارجات عن المألوف

178

ordinary, demonstrating the way in which perceptions of womanhood are framed within restrictive social and cultural norms. After becoming enlightened by ideas of gender through vigorous reading of academic books and resources, the following insightful views on manhood are presented by Sawsana:

> Any man wishes to be a rooster in the midst of a group of chickens. If it finds a grain of wheat or barley, it would crow for the chickens and they would respond to its call in a hurry. It then gives them a false alarm. It would next wave its feathers a bit and the chickens would come forward, fighting each other until the rooster won one of them. (Dodin 2000, p.134)[153]

In a satirical manner, Dodin offers such perceptions as primarily espoused by older generations. Through her protagonist, she focuses on the destructive effects of gender socialisation in perpetuating the status quo rather than bringing about social reform. Therefore, it is no surprise that she creates the character of Sawsana, who is young and lectures members of the public on gender theory and gender equality as symbolic of the positive side of modernity, contrasted against the older generations in rural areas who are symbolic of the negative counter-force of tradition. In the novel, age is presented as a significant factor in pushing forward modern ideas of gender. Younger generations are thus presented as progressive compared to regressive older generations.

Thus, in all these representations of forms of social malaise that exists in Jordanian culture, Khreis and Dodin present gender as the set of beliefs, attitudes, practices and perceptions that a certain society or culture has about its members and that correlate to their biological sex. Hence, they present sex and gender as inter-connected. The novels offer a critique of biologically determinist notions of womanhood and of the active gender socialisation of women and men into predetermined social roles, and push for an alternative view of womanhood.

There is an apparent pattern in these two novels in the way in which they present gender. This pattern can be framed in the form of a proposal that involves four main steps. The first acknowledges that women's subordination is social and cultural and not biological. The second criticises the way in which older generations of women and men have been socialised. The third offers a new understanding of gender as a

---

[153] أي رجل يرغب في أن يكون ديكا وسط قافلة دجاجات، إذا ما وجد قمحه او شعيره، قرق لهن مناديا فيأتين مسرعات، هو يقدم لهن الطعم اذن، ينفش ريشه قليلا، هن يتقدمن، متقاتلات قارقات هنَّ الأخريات، ليفوز بإحداهن أو لتفوز به

doing as opposed to a given. The final step emphasises the significance of insights into gender in promoting more liberating views of womanhood and manhood. I now turn to these steps in more detail and investigate how they are presented in each novel.

The first and most important is the acknowledgment that women's subordination in society is a result of social and cultural factors and not biological ones. This claim contradicts traditional views following biological determinism in which women's bodies are seen as responsible for the role they should perform in society. Conceptualising gender in this way has certainly been a central part of women's efforts to challenge their subordination and low status in society. It has also become used by traditionalists as a mechanism of restraint, whereby efforts to bring about change in women's lives are seen as contradicting nature and hence are deemed irrational and intolerable.[154] Therefore, making a counter argument to this long-held view about gender and viewing it as social allows room for flexibility of thought that could lead to change. This is where the sex/gender binary becomes crucial in understanding the sources of gender inequality.

One of the greatest accomplishments of western feminist scholarship is creating the sex/gender distinction, which was hailed as a breakthrough in the field of women's studies. Although some feminists (Gatens 1996; Moi 1999; Mikkola 2011) are critical of this binary and find it more restrictive than liberating, I find it a crucial step in identifying the main causes of the domination and subordination of women in Jordan. In this theorisation, sex is defined as 'a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. "Gender", however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into "masculine" and "feminine"' (Oakley 1985, p.16).

I argue that the distinction between sex and gender allows novelists to focus on the social aspects of women's struggle for liberation rather than combining the biological with the social. Oakley explains that there is a difference between

> the tendency to differentiate by sex and the tendency to differentiate in a particular way by sex. The first is genuinely a constant feature of human society but the second is not, and its inconstancy marks the division between 'sex' and 'gender': sex differences may

---

[154] Refer to Chapter Five, the section on *qiwamah*.

180

be 'natural', but gender differences have their source in culture, not nature. (Oakley 1972, p.189)

By stressing the significance of the distinction between sex and gender and thus separating the biological from the social and the cultural, it becomes an easier task to look for the source of gender discrimination.

To illustrate how this is done, Dodin in *Match Sticks* introduces the reader to complex ideas about femininity and masculinity by destabilising the conception of biological determinism. She describes a scene in which the mother of the protagonist, Saleh, used to dress him up as a girl and grow his hair long since she always longed for a girl. Saleh complains to his grandmother about the actions of his mother, 'Why did she dress me in skirts and dresses until I myself refused to do so as I was almost confused about my sex?' (Dodin 2000, p.40).[155] The grandmother answers by referring to her daughter's purpose of evading people's envy towards her family, which is blessed with a great number of boys in an age when girls were buried alive. However, there is a more significant reason that transcends this narrow belief. The mother's oblivious attitude towards the social expectations placed upon women and men based on their biological sex is suggestive of the ideas that Dodin is trying to raise about gender. Her decision to carry out a social experiment of mixing sex with gender serves to support the claim that gender is a set of social and cultural attributes that does not have to correlate to one's sex and is not biologically determined.

The second step of the authors' proposal is to criticise how older generations of women have been socialised in ways that are incompatible with the aspirations of young progressive generations and their views on gender. Thus, Dodin and Khreis present this as a clash between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. They both depict older generations of women as having been socialised into their submissive social roles, whereas such mechanisms of social engineering are less powerful in younger generations of women. This is clearly illustrated in the gap between the socially secluded, narrow-minded, uneducated older women (the wife of the protagonist's uncle in *The Empire of Nara's Papers* and the old women of the village in *Match Sticks*) and the open-minded, highly self-conscious, educated and employed younger women represented by Sawsana in *Match Sticks* and Nara in *The*

طيب لماذا أنا تلبسني التنورة والفستان، حتى رفضت لبسهما بنفسي، بعد إذ كاد أن يختلط على جنسي؟[155]

181

Empire of Nara's Papers. Women of these two generations are therefore presented as having different understandings of their social identity as women, which becomes a site of struggle and constant negotiation. Dodin and Khreis show how this socialisation process is responsible for the ways in which boys and girls develop a sense of who they are in their society. Hence, the emphasis here is on gender as a learning process. In other words, individuals are not born gendered; they are taught how to be gendered, recalling the iconic remark of Simone De Beauvoir: 'One is not born but rather becomes a woman' (1973, p.301). This 'becoming a woman' in light of Dodin's and Khreis's work is primarily done through the family. Here, the role of mothers as agents of socialisation who police their daughters' behaviour becomes instrumental in the way in which girls are socialised into women in accordance with social expectations. Hence, girls grow up knowing that they have to fit the role that has been assigned to them, which is to structure their lives around marriage and motherhood. The mothers' most pervasive method of socialising their young daughters (as presented in *Match Sticks*) is through the notion of shame. This shame becomes an overarching theme shadowing the manipulation[156] and canalisation[157] of young girls, forcing them to adhere to their ascribed social role. The following comment of a mother to her daughter in Dodin's work is illustrative of this idea of deeply entrenched shame: 'it is shameful for a girl to raise her voice. It is shameful for a girl to laugh loudly. If a girl laughs until her molars appear, then she should be disciplined and not feared' (Dodin 2000, p.38).[158]

In the work of Khreis, this process is highlighted when she introduces the reader to the world of a pessimistic journalist, Nara, who complains about being labelled incompetent for focusing on the smallest of details when covering her stories. She is accused of following the style of yellow journalism[159], which she denies doing. From the beginning of the novel, Khreis invites the reader to explore the gendered life of Jordanian society through Nara and her world of journalism. As readers, we are taken from the coverage of one story to the next, and during this journey Khreis does not

---

[156] In manipulation, the first stage, Oakley describes how parents encourage behaviour that is seen as the norm for the child's gender, and discourage behaviour that is not the norm (Oakley 1972, p.175).

[157] Canalisation 'involves directing the attention of male and female children onto particular objects or aspects of objects' (Oakley 1972, p.175).

[158] البنت عيب يرتفع صوتها، البنت عيب تضحك ويطلع حسها، إذا ضحكت البنت وبين نابها، الحقها ولا تهابها

[159] Yellow journalism refers to a style of newspaper reporting that emphasises sensationalism over facts.

spare us the smallest details as she paints a vivid picture of an imagined reality through the eyes of Nara. From the upper class of Abdun to the working class of Ras El'ein, Khreis provides detailed descriptions of the scenes, making one feel as if one is reading a report.

Khreis first creates a character who is depicted as very conscious of her surroundings despite being oblivious to people's reactions towards her. She then begins her task of critiquing society's gendered attitudes towards its members. She mocks society's insistence on confining women and men into rigid social categories. In speaking about her dreams, Nara describes how she wanted to become a superhero, and then expresses her frustration:

> I have always dreamed of being Superman, or Batman. I guess this was before I realised that I am a female and that I have to find my image of a superhero from the beauties that fill the television screen with their harshness and charm like the stars of *Wonder Woman* or *The Bionic Woman* or *Charlie's Angels.* All of those have helped me in living a balanced adolescence. They used to avenge on my behalf and on behalf of millions of other women for our implicit and explicit weakness… They have avenged for my horrific discipline and peacefulness. (Khreis 2006, p.71)[160]

This remark reflects a deep understanding of the self as gendered and as a socially conditioned entity, where an individual is presented as an 'active' victim by highlighting the power of imagination in developing a strategy against socialisation. This strong self-awareness is the spark that generates a series of complaints about the Arab perception of gender as biologically determined. It is from here that the protagonist gradually attempts to dismantle her society's view of gender as biologically determined to focus on one that she sees as rooted in culture.

The third step is to provide an alternative view of how women and men are conceptualised in Arab society. Here, I make a shift from the sex/gender distinction to an emphasis on the notion that gender is in itself an active process of one's identity. Dodin and Khreis destabilise the traditional conception of gender by explaining how it involves a 'doing'; it involves action. This 'doing' of gender involves the conscious understanding of one's gendered identity in the social world, how an individual engages and interacts with his/her perceived knowledge about the

---

160 صحيح أنى حلمت طويلا بأني سوبرمان، أو الرجل الوطواط، لعل هذا حدث قبل أن أدرك بأنني أنثى، وأن عليَّ أن أجد نموذجي من الحسناوات اللواتي يملأن الشاشة بشراستهن وحسنهن المدمر مثل " المرأة الجبارة " أو "ذا بيونك وومان " أو " ملائكة تشارلي "، كل هؤلاء أعنني على قضاء مراهقة متوازنة، كنَّ ينتقمن باسمي واسم ملايين النساء لضعفنا المستتر والعلني

183

self as gendered and how he/she wishes to act accordingly. So where the vast majority might try to 'do gender' conventionally, that is, by acting and behaving according to social expectations of one's gender, there are those who actively choose to defy such norms. Hence, this understanding of gender allows space for flexibility and gives individuals more freedom to formulate their own perception of gender. This theorising follows West's and Zimmerman's argument that 'to *do* gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behaviour *at the risk of gender assessment*' (1987, p.136, emphasis in original). The novelists' complex presentations of gender as active could be interpreted as an attempt to stress the agency of individuals, and in particular women, to take control of their lives. In *Match Sticks*, Dodin best depicts this process in her protagonist's response to a male colleague, 'stubborn fighter with wise thoughts: Did you see first how lighting a candle is much better than cursing the darkness? Second, that we are capable of doing anything without the direct control of men…echoing the cry of Martin Luther King: I have a dream. Let the glow remain' (Dodin 2000, p.122).[161]

The fourth and most significant step, which I discuss at length, is the novels' presentation of the importance of possessing sufficient knowledge about gender as a philosophical concept. This knowledge holds the potential to combat the sharp division between women and men and to prioritise women's social and political struggles. The relevance of this step to the gender struggle can clearly be seen in *The Empire of Nara's Papers* when the protagonist expresses her frustration at how women's issues are dealt with in Jordanian society in a manner that lacks theoretical grounding.

Due to her repeated failure to be 'professional', according to her chief editor, Nara is assigned smaller and less important stories to cover.[162] The first is an annual conference on women, the second is a story on female candidates prior to the parliamentary elections and the third is a parliamentary session around the law of

---

[161] رأيت أيها المناضل العنيد ذو الرأي السديد أن اشعال شمعه أفضل من لعن الظلام، هذا أولا وثانيا أننا نثبت أننا قادرات على فعل شيء ما دون رعاية مباشره عنا رجالنا، فقط فليذهب عنا رجالنا، وكان للزميلات المحاميات الدور الأكبر في ابراز أجمل وأنقى صوره في الحديث المرتب عن حقوق الانسان، وفي التماهي مع صرخة مارتن لوثر كنج:

I Just have a dream فليضل الوهاج.

[162] That is, less worthy from the perspective of the male chief editor.

khula' that did not get passed by the government, which enables women to divorce their husbands. Khreis illustrates her character's disappointment at not being able to cover the biggest event at that time, which was the World Economic Forum that was taking place at the Dead Sea where world leaders were gathering to discuss global and political affairs. Ironically, the decision to exclude Nara from covering important events and to require her instead to cover 'trivial' ones related to women is the point at which the novel takes a turn.

> My inner bitterness comes from our house, which continues to celebrate the birth of a boy, it comes from restraints that are enforced on my method and style of covering the elections, it comes from my anger at being forced to do the easier tasks while others are sent to cover the trial of the century. (Khreis p.124)[163]

From here, the novel engages in an open discussion of Jordanian society. The critique begins by addressing national and global initiatives that target women's development in Jordan for their failure to embrace the essence of the gender struggle. This failure is illustrated in the way in which Nara chooses to cover these three major events, which one would imagine should have mattered a great deal to her considering she is a female character. When covering the International Forum on Women hosted by Queen Rania, and attended by the first ladies of Arab countries, Nara focuses on the general attire of the speakers and compares them to each other. She does this instead of focusing on their speeches and their implications for women's developments in Jordan and neighbouring Arab countries. She describes the hall where the conference is taking place and gives the reader all the little details, depriving them of the 'main story'. Later, she explains that, because she was constantly straying, she ended up relying on a fellow, male, reporter to provide her with a copy of his report on the event. Where many might read Nara's emphasis on irrelevant details as a gendered practice, I read her deviation from the traditional style of reporting as a marker of difference whereby she is following her own (unconventional) path by focusing on the unheard and unexplored aspects of a story. Viewing it as such echoes feminist scholarship that focuses on the unheard stories in society, usually women's.

---

[163] تأتي مرارتي الداخلية من بيتنا الذي واصل الاحتفال مطولا بالمولود الصغير، تأتي من القيود على طريقتي واسلوبي في تغطية الانتخابات، تأتي من الغيظ كوني أدفع للمهام البسيطة، ويرسل سواي لتغطية محكمة العصر

Khreis repeats the same technique when describing the encounter between Nara and Dima, the female candidate running in the parliamentary elections, in which she talks about her views on women and why she chose to run for the position of Member of Parliament. One would imagine that such a meeting between a journalist and a candidate would involve a fruitful conversation about the candidate's parliamentary programme and her opinions on laws that have a direct effect on women, but what happens is that Nara has to chase Dima from one beauty salon to another. By choosing to depict Dima in such a way, the narrative is critical of a model of women who dedicate excessive amounts of time to their exterior appearance, while retaining a very superficial understanding of women's needs in society. For instance, in Dima's dialogue, she says, 'Why do men think that they're better than us, what more do we need to prove them wrong? Look at us. We're so beautiful. Women will even add a lovely *soft touch* to the parliament of toughness' (Khreis 2006, p.131, my emphasis).[164] Such views are illustrative of the enormous gap between the social classes which means that, despite living in the same country, women of different classes can be completely disconnected from each other's realities and struggles. More importantly, this superficial representation of a character who stands a good chance of becoming a reforming agent in a highly privileged position is symbolic of the narrow perception of womanhood that exists in Jordanian society.

Khreis's choice to cover the controversial topics of women's quotas and citizenship as well as the *khula'* law lies at the heart of the gender struggle in Jordanian society. By choosing to cover such issues in her novel, Khreis stresses the complicated relationship that exists between the external and internal implications of addressing gender inequality in Jordan; externally, it appears to be a promising picture in which conferences are held and quotas are set, all for the purpose of empowering women, whereas internally women are still discriminated against and denied certain rights. Hence, such initiatives represent public displays that can seem to lack a more subtle understanding of the complex nature of the gender struggle. This is to say that efforts are being made without tackling the core concepts about women's longing for liberation. The response that Dima gives to Nara regarding her

---

[164] ما بصير الوحدة تحكي عن الأنون حيا الله مثل الرجال اللي بفكروا حالهم أشطر منا، ليش نحنا شو نائصنا. زي الفل، حتى الستات بتحط لمسه حنونه وناعمه على برلمان الخناشير،

opinion on the new law that was being debated in parliament concerning women's right to pass their nationality to their children when married to a non-Jordanian is a good example of this ignorance regarding the essence of gender inequality. This becomes an even bigger problem when practised by people who are privileged by class or social prestige where the primary intentions are global rather than national. Here, I am referring to Dima's main objective in becoming an MP, which is to show the West that Jordan has good-looking women who are not a public embarrassment and who can hold political positions (Khreis 2006, p.131). Meanwhile, the International Conference on Women, attended by the first ladies of many Arab countries, is presented as serving to improve Jordan's image internationally rather than helping local women fight their daily battles with gender inequality. This is thus presented as a form of 'activism without feminism' in which efforts to mobilise women and enhance their economic situation and political representation are devoid of fundamental 'feminist' considerations. These include what it means to be a woman in a position of power and what it means to be economically independent. In other words it is a form of limited activism that does not interrogate the implications of women's success in the realms of economy and politics on the lives of women and the way they are perceived in society and culture. This activism is contrasted against 'feminist activism' that the novelists advocate as I discuss later in this chapter.

Therefore, Khreis' strategy of showing Nara as focusing on irrelevant details in her reports about women, and her presentation of such topics as trivial in the eyes of male editors and colleagues, is suggestive of the obstacles that she is attempting to highlight. The novel suggests that, as long as women's issues are tackled from the narrow perspective of upper-class and highly privileged women, without a profound revolutionary change in how gender is perceived, then the women's cause[165] will continue to hold a secondary status, compared to other social issues. 'The chief editor will not ask at all about who went to cover the conference. Whether it is Nara or renowned Arab reporter Mohammed Hasanin Haikal, in sum, it is a conference on women and who really cares about what goes on inside such conferences?' (Khreis

---

[165] In the Arab world, issues pertaining to women are commonly referred to as the women's cause.

p.92)[166] is how Khreis illustrates the fact that women's issues are regarded as less important.

The Empire of Nara's Papers identifies women's problems in Jordanian society as the following: the prevailing negative stereotypes and the social roles expected of women, the excessive pressure on women to get married, to preserve their virginity before marriage and to bear children, and the misconception that women are unequal to men. Nevertheless, the most significant obstacle is the lack of in-depth understanding of just how huge these problems are so that, even when attempts are made to solve them, they fail to scratch the surface. Khreis' narrative is critical of a society that still views women's issues as unimportant, and warns against this damaging habit of not placing such problems at the top of the priority list. The failure to prioritise women is presented as being responsible for the lack of satisfactory outcomes. This is where solutions are reduced to small-scale, practical ones by establishing quotas for women to reach office, by questioning certain laws that affect women such as *khula'* and citizenship and enabling women economically, without penetrating deep to the root of the problem, which is related to a long tradition of ill-conceived notions around gender.

The necessity of having access to theoretical knowledge about gender inequality and gender theory can best be explored in Nara's reflections on reading a book about gender. When going through tough times of having to give up her share of the house to her uncle, Nara muses: 'Would I have done this if I had read and understood this book?' (Khreis 2006, p.125).[167] The narrative focuses on Nara's development after being exposed to ideas about gender and the internal conflict that she faces as she becomes more attentive to gender inequality in conservative societies. After being presented as transformed through reading and being more sensitive towards gender when analysing any given incident, Nara makes the following sarcastic remark: 'it appears as though I am still under the influence of that book on gender' (Khreis 2006, p.125).[168] In another incident, Nara protests against the use of the masculine

---

166 رئيس التحرير لن يسأل مطلقا عمن ذهب لتغطية المؤتمر، وإن الأمر لديه سيان أكانت ناره البسيطة (ال....)، أم الصحفي الاشهر في تاريخ الصحافة العربية " محمد حسنين هيكل "، باختصار إنه مؤتمر للمرأة، ومن يهتم بما يدور في هذه المؤتمرات ؟؟

167 حاولت أن أفهم بموضوع المرأة، قرأت كتابا حول الجندر، وأذهلني الحديث عن مجتمع ذكوري، هو أمر لم أناقش تأثيره في حياتي، لو لم أكن ناره، لو أنى أحمد أو محمود، هل يجرؤ عمي على احضار أوراق التنازل عن البيت الى عقر البيت؟ ولو لم أكن ناره، هل كنت أوقع اسمي البهي فوقها طوعا بلا إكراه. بطيب خاطر ؟؟

168 يبدو أنى ما زلت متأثرة بكتاب الجندر

188

term 'member of parliament' in Arabic, *na'ib* (نائب), as opposed to the feminine reference *na'iba* (نائبة) to refer to female candidates, 'May this language be damned as it's capable of revealing the ill intentions of patriarchal culture' (Khreis 2006, p.125).[169] In a later scene, when Nara's friend, who was raped by her neighbour, comes asking for help, the protagonist says,

> It has become my duty to show my *feminist* solidarity similar to the thinkers of 'gender' and women's liberation issues and gaining their rights… I could have denied knowing her and withdrawn, letting her deal with her humiliating wounds alone, but now and for the sake of women's historic and glorious fight, I have to calm her fear. (Khreis 2000, p.158, my emphasis)[170]

The emphasis that Khreis places on her protagonist reading and reflecting on her understanding of core concepts around gender is pivotal, and the novel clearly addresses the importance of an academic understanding of gender theory, as extending everyday understandings of gender discrimination. By becoming equipped with the proper knowledge, through reading, women stand a better chance of breaking free from social and patriarchal control. Thus, knowledge in this sense becomes an empowering agent that has the potential to change, shift or destabilise normative depictions of womanhood and manhood, for the benefit of both women and men.

By choosing to represent women's stories as less worthy of coverage and to focus on reporting trivial aspects of important stories about women that could greatly impact women's lives in Jordan, Khreis signifies the importance of shifting the conventional discourse on women that tends to restrict them to the private sphere, that regulates their interests and constructs them as subordinate. This shift would involve moving from the type of discourse that tends to be practical and temporary to a modern and theoretical one grounded in the field of sociology and academic research that would accordingly have more positive and permanent consequences for women.

Moreover, the novel's criticism of such narrow approaches to resolving gender inequality highlights what I would refer to as the confusion around the female/feminist divide. I use female to refer to the category of women as defined by

---

[169] ملعونة هذه اللغة القادرة على الافصاح عن النوايا السيئة للثقافة الذكورية

[170] وصار لزاما عليَّ أن أبدى مؤازرة نسائية أسوة بمفكرات " الجندر " وقضايا تحرير المرأة وانتزاع حقوقها

their biological sex, whereas feminist is used to refer to both women and men who acknowledge that women are socially disadvantaged and who support their calls for liberation through either thought or action or both combined.[171] The primary reason behind the depiction of Nara's frustration and disappointment with the current situation of women in Jordan is the confusion over what counts as a female contribution and what counts as a feminist one. Having women reach public office, for example, is presented as an accomplishment for Jordanian women but it is not necessarily a feminist gain. In other words, the government's preoccupation with increasing the number of women in parliament, through quotas, is illustrated as a mechanism to tackle gender inequality. However, it remains inwardly suppressive to women by refusing to pass laws whose implications for many women's lives are enormous, as explained earlier. Here, one cannot help but ask the following: Does a higher proportion of women in public office guarantee a better future for the majority of women in Jordan? Does it serve the interests of female MPs to push forward a feminist agenda at the expense of a national one? These are all questions that require deep thought and evaluation.

Stressing informed knowledge about gender, in *Match Sticks* Dodin highlights her male protagonist's development after being in constant contact with Sawsana, who is a volunteer at one of the non-governmental programmes aiming to empower women. She illustrates Saleh's journey as a bewildered man who feels lost between the reality and the future of Palestine until he meets Sawsana, who charms him with her glamour and knowledge. Dodin provides the reader with the gradual development of her protagonist,

> At first, I did not want to be taught by a woman. How can that be? How will I accept it? Historically, I am a farmer and the son of a farmer! How can I be taught by their women? Even if it was Sawsana, therefore my dear friends, I have to confess that a pivotal thing in the issue has started, changing beginnings into outcomes that surface on the horizon. I was facing battles of transformations. (Dodin 2000, p.86)[172]

Due to his constant exposure to discussions on gender with Sawsana, and through formal lectures and meetings, Saleh gains a new understanding of women's struggle.

---

[171] I discuss this in the last section on the feminist Jordanian novel in Chapter Three.

[172] في البدء لم أكن راغبا في أن تعلمني امرأة، كيف يكون ذلك، وكيف أتقبله، وأنا الفلاح بن الفلاح تاريخيا، وكيف تعلمني نسوانه، حتى لو كانت السوسنة، ألا أن يا ساده يا كرام تأثيرا فيصلا في الأمر قد بدأ، يحول المقدمات الى نتائج تلوح في الأفق كنت أخوض معركة تحولات

He becomes more critical of oppressive social practices towards women and calls for their elimination and for the adoption of new approaches that would serve their interests.

> We have to think of a successful way that would bridge the gap between the public and the private so that neither side would triumph over the other. I had a feeling that convinced me, with a great degree of love, about all the theoretical aspects of the woman in charge of me about the double oppression of women. I would like to add that women suffer more than that; there is institutional, social and sexual oppression in addition to a nationalist one as well, although I place comprehensive nationalist thought at the top of my priority list. Her thoughts and awareness about this issue were a little above mine. My enthusiasm springs from authentic and generational magnanimity and I believe that we must stop discrimination against women. I was determined to mail my dad through the Red Cross to stop oppressing women in the country and I will make my sisters' right to inheritance a condition to resume a normal relationship with my family. But Sawsana was always logical when discussing the issue. She looks at legislation and laws. She sees that women's movements should be directed through public associations aiming to change the laws that discriminate against women at work, in divorce, and in rental systems (housing rents and property rents). (Dodin 2000, p.87)[173]

The depiction of Saleh's transformation is very significant in fleshing out the novel's ideas about the positive impact of possessing gender knowledge. Both characters present such an insight as capable of destabilising the effect of years of gender socialisation.

In the novel, Dodin highlights the intersection between conventional and modern modes of thinking about gender and then provides an optimistic vision of the future of this complex issue. The novel engages in constructive criticism of social misconceptions about gender roles, gendered practices such as honour killings and FGM and an over-emphasis on the importance of women behaving in accordance with social norms and expectations. All of this is done from the perspective of the male narrator. In this way the narrative highlights the necessity of both women and men taking part in social reform in which gender inequality should not be seen as only connected to women; such reform involves the mobilisation of society as a

---

[173] وعلينا أن نفكر بطريقه توفيقيه، ترصف الطريق ما بين العام والخاص، فلا ترجح كفه على أخرى، وكنت بي شعور يلم بي اللحظة، ويدفعني لأن اقتنع وبقدر كبير من الحب بكل تنظيرات مسؤوليتي في التنظيم حول ازدواجية اضطهاد المرأة بل انني أزيد على ما تقول بأن المرأة تعاني أكثر من ازدواجيه. فثمة اضطهاد مؤسسي ومجتمعي وجنسوي، وقد يكون قوميا أيضا رغم أنني أضع في سلم اولوياتي تفكيرا أمميا عموميا شاملا. وكان تفكيرها ووعيها بهذا الأمر يفوق وعيي قليلا. أنا اندفع ومن أبواب الحماس والنخوة الأصيلة والإباء والشمم وارى ان نكف عن التميز ضد المرأة. وكنت قررت بالفعل أن اراسل والدي بواسطة الصليب الاحمر الدولي، ليكفوا عن اضطهاد النسوان في البلد، وسأجعل حتى خواتي في الميراث شرطا لمعاودتي علاقات طبيعية مع أهلي، أما السوسنة فقد كان دائمة المتدثر بالعقل في هذا الموضوع، تنظر في الشرائع وفي القوانين، كانت ترى أن تتجه نضالات المرأة من خلال مؤسساتها الجماهيرية نحو تعديل القوانين، التي تميز ضدها، في العمل وفي الطلاق وفي أنظمة الايجارات، ايجارات البيوت والعقارات

191

whole. The character of Saleh expresses his amusement about the character of Sawsana,

> I was astonished to be led by a woman. I used to see her as a symbol of an extraordinary woman by all standards: modesty, beauty, and determination, a fair face and a huge capacity to engage in intellectual dialogues and to come up with thoughts and recommendations and programmes of work. Certainly, she is much stronger than me and I have decided to walk by myself to come closer to her and the light in her eyes, for I have seen a nation complete with her: fire, light and sunshine. (Dodin 2000, p.83)[174]

Dodin then describes the transformations that Saleh goes through and how they affect the way he treats women.

> Being constantly in her company has taught me to be hospitable towards her, the etiquette of our lord. *We cannot let her or allow her to serve us; we are at her service*, although my mother serves all the males in our neighbourhood young and old…. My mom is free to serve whomever she wants but here we have to respect women and ask them how many spoons of sugar they want in their tea! (Dodin 2000, p.90, my emphasis)[175]

Throughout the novel, Dodin emphasises the development of the protagonist Saleh through informed knowledge about gender. After becoming more aware of the gender struggle that prevails in many conservative societies, Saleh becomes a staunch supporter of women's rights. He condemns gender inequality by questioning the attitude of many employers who choose to employ only single women and who pay women less than men, claiming that men's efforts surpass those of a woman. Saleh gives his new views on women and then refers to a declaration made by Sawsana:

> General liberation cannot occur without private liberation. The private in this equation is the woman… The issue of Arab women's liberation is a public issue and her advancement is more important than social, economic or political liberation. Caring about the issue of women on a public scale is more important than taking care of atomic reactors, as it is easy to destroy an atomic or a chemical reactor whereas it is difficult to destroy a woman's reactor. (Dodin 2000, p.88)[176]

---

[174] وكنت مندهشا أن تقودني امرأة، صحيح أنى معجب بأدائها المتميز في برنامج التمريض المنزلي، وكنت أراها رمزا للمرأة الاستثنائية بكل المقاييس، احتشام وجمال ونضال، وجه نقي مشرب بماء الورد، وقدره هائلة على إدارة حوارات الفكر والخروج بأفكار وتوصيات وبرامج عمل. هي أقوى مني بالتأكيد وقررت أن أسير بنفسي لأماشيها لأصير على مقربه من ضياء عينيها، وقد رأيت الوطن بها مكتملا، نارا ونورا ونوارا

[175] إن مجاورتي لها تعني أن اقوم أنا بواجب الضيافة تجاهها، أتكيت مولانا يقول بذلك، لا يجوز ولا يستحسن أن نتركها تخدمنا، نحن في خدمتها، رغم أن أمي في البلد تخدم كل ذكور الحارة، صغارا وكبارا، حتى محمد المغزول تأخذ له حطته المتسخة، وتغسلها وتعيدها له نظيفة، لكل مقام مقال، أمي حره تخدم من تخدم، أما هنا فعلينا أن نحترم النساء وأن نسألهن كم معلقه سكر نضع في فنجان الشاي؟ سأسل السوسنة، ثم أذوب وأذوب فيها وفي الماء

[176] التحرر العام لن يكون بدون تحرر خاص، والخاص ضمن هذه المعادلة هو المرأة: إن مسألة تحرر المرأة العربية عامه، وتقدمها اهم من التحرر الاجتماعي والاقتصادي والسياسي، وان الاعتناء بنهوض النسوان عامه أهم من الاعتناء بالأفران الذرية، ذلك إنه من الممكن تدمير المفاعل النووي في حين أنه لا يمكن تدمير مفاعل المرأة التي ....

Through this process of constructive dialogue between the two main characters, the narrative paints an optimistic vision of a future that needs to be constructed through proper channels of communication involving both women and men. The presentation of the new enlightened individual is significant in underlining the necessity of establishing a well-structured intellectual base through which positive notions and understandings of gender can be generated. 'Sawsana was greatly pleased with what women have gained by engaging in political debates and of the politicisation of their thought, which proves that there are conversations in the course of life that are far from those related to onions, garlic and sweets' (Dodin 2000, p.121).[177] These remarks by the protagonist illustrate the continuous struggle to resist a gender socialisation that tends to confine women to the domestic sphere and discourages them from engaging in public and political affairs. More importantly, they represent the consequences of 'feminist activism', one that interrogates gendered social roles and perceptions of women that tend to confine them to the domestic and the 'trivial' and that restricts them the private sphere. This form of activism is contrasted against the earlier form of 'activism without feminism' and its outcomes are presented as 'revolutionary' involving a shift not only in how women perceive themselves, but also in how they are viewed by society at large (including men).

In their work, Khreis and Dodin provide a complex understanding of gender. They start by presenting sex and gender as separate, yet closely connected. They continue by illustrating how oppressive attitudes towards women have been maintained in past generations through a process of gender socialisation in which the family, and more particularly the mother, has a crucial role to play. Khreis and Dodin then proceed by providing a distinct presentation of gender as an active process of social interaction that involves the conscious understanding of one's gender identity in society.

They both propose that a break from essentialist views on gender is contingent on a broader and more complex understanding of this concept that transcends essentialist or reductionist views. Moreover, this leap becomes readily accessible to both women and men through academic insight, as presented by Khreis, or through

---

177 وكانت السوسنة معجبه ومعتدة بما صار لدى النساء من أحاديث في السياسة ومن تسيس، ومن فكر سياسي، تثبت النساء فيه ان ثمة أحاديث في طلب الحياة هي غير أحاديث البصل والثوم والحلوى، والكعك بعجوة

proper training, as presented by Dodin. Therefore, having insight into gender becomes a transformative agent that is capable of forging a new perception of gender involving more potential for women. Both writers present the leap from being socially gendered to being actively aware of the interactive aspect of gender as a very challenging process. The challenge involves the ways in which debates about women tend to polarise tradition and modernity and construct them as binary opposites.

Tradition verses modernity: The inevitable debate

The existence of *The Empire of Nara's Papers* and *Match Sticks* testifies to the prolonged struggle surrounding Arab feminism in Arab society. Not only are these novels shifting the focus from the practical and temporary to a more thorough understanding of gender discrimination, but they are also able to enrich the debate by highlighting the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity, which is a controversial topic when tackling the progress of women in the Arab world. Whereas this complex debate is briefly mentioned in many contemporary Jordanian novels, it is highlighted in more depth in the work of Samiha Khreis and Rifqa Dodin.

In their work, Khreis and Dodin revive the tradition versus modernity debate by presenting ways in which the explicit and implicit clash of these two paradigms affects any progress that acknowledges women's value in society. Their decisions to focus on the sociological dimension of the woman struggle by using the 'modern'[178] terms 'gender' and 'gender studies' is consistent with the call of liberal feminists and intellectuals, who see this as an important aspect of modernity's implications for Arab societies. Their representation of the challenge of grasping the meaning of the gender struggle by engaging thoroughly with sociological studies and debates about the long history of this issue, illustrates the trap that modernist discourses of gender fall into when confronted by the resisting forces in conservative Arab societies. Even when attempts are made to become 'modern' by embracing either new concepts or new approaches around women, these methods fall short of the proposed objectives. This is depicted due to the failure to overcome more traditional modes of thought which resist the social change represented by empowering women, and regard such a

---

[178] Here, I am referring to the terms gender and gender studies as modern as they were recently introduced to the Arab world, long after they were widely circulating and well established in the West as part of 'modernity'.

194

shift as a threat to the social order. These modes are presented as being espoused by older generations of men and women.

In *Match Sticks*, the confrontation between tradition and modernity is implicit in the novel's portrayal of oppressive social and cultural perceptions of womanhood (espoused mainly by older generations of women and men). It is also apparent in its presentation of a modern outlook towards gender personified by the character of Sawsana and her mission to educate the public about the roots of gender inequality. 'Condoleezza Rice represents the bright side of gender equality. Imagine that the advisor to the American president on national security affairs is a woman!! Does he really consult her?? Our men with thick moustaches and a backward mentality would say: damn such men, they have been defeated' (Khreis 2000, p.102).[179] Khreis represents this as a clash that exists between 'western' examples of womanhood and 'traditional' examples of manhood that reject such liberating notions of empowerment. In her depiction of a 'clash', Khreis is critical of the way discussions about women's experiences are juxtaposed.

Nevertheless, representations of the tension between tradition and modernity and their juxtaposition as opposites is brought clearly to the fore in *The Empire of Nara's Papers* when Khreis makes a reference to Mohammed Abed Al-Jabiri.[180] This happens when her protagonist is asked to cover a symposium by Al-Jabiri in Amman. During the symposium, Al-Jabiri calls for:

> Establishing a new dialogue with the West in which it would not be necessary to explain the basis of our noble civilization. Instead, priority should be given to the contradicting reality of western thought that the West produces where they give more authority to their culture and see it as superior to the rest of humanity. (Khreis 2006, p.88)[181]

The protagonist then remarks:

> Our philosopher thinks that reaching this truth would shock the West in itself, and its noble humanitarian claims. It might also result in the West reshuffling its cards by discovering that their developments and advancements were based on a wrong and false

---

[179] وتمثل بنت " رايز " الجانب المضيء في المساواة الجنسية أيضا، تصوروا مستشارة الرئيس الامريكي لشؤون الأمن القومي امرأة ...هل يستشيرها حقا. سيقول أصحاب الشوارب الغليظة النخينة عندنا: اخس ع هيك رجال، فاتهم الفلاح ...

[180] Mohammed Abed Al-Jabiri was a contemporary Moroccan critic and professor of philosophy and Islamic thought. He was also an expert in Arabic and Arabic literature. He is considered to have been one of the major figures in the contemporary Arab world. He is well-known for his academic project *The Critique of The Arab Mind*.

[181] يدعو " الجابري " الى مناقشة الغرب في حوار جديد، حيث لا أهمية لشرح معطيات حضارتنا العريقة ولكن الأولوية لتبيان واقع الفكر الذي يصدر عن الغرب والذي يسيّد فيه ثقافته ويراها تعلو عن باقي البشر

basis? Why? Who can discuss such a thought? Between you and I there is an important thing that our philosopher has failed to remember. Does he really think that the West does not realise *the immoral character of its culture? Doesn't the West achieve its power and victory through this reality? Would it not defend its advancement even with our blood!* These are just arbitrary questions that have no meaning since I was recording what Al-Jabiri has said with great accuracy. I did not argue with him as others do so as not to be accused of racism and being opposed to advanced nations out of jealousy and envy. (Khreis 2006, p.88, my emphasis)[182]

Khreis' choice of embedding this type of discourse into her fiction is significant. By shedding light on the arguments of Al-Jabiri, who is very critical of the West, she seems to be advocating a new mode of thought that departs from the common view of idealising the West and devaluing the East. Al-Jabiri's criticism of the West rests on two principal points: immorality and superiority. He gives reference to how the West achieved its advanced and 'modern' status at the expense of destroying other nations. Because of the 'immorality' of the western principle in achieving progress, Al-Jabiri finds it ironic that they (the West) yet endorse the perception of them being superior to the rest of humanity (who in a sense was sacrificed for the sake of their modernity). Questions revolving around modernity and its origins have provided fertile ground for research for a number of intellectuals and academics. While some focus on how it came into existence, others look for new approaches that take account of the political factors that helped shape its dimensions. Gurminder Bhambra, for instance explains:

> The sociological understanding of modernity typically rests on ideas of the modern world emerging out of the processes of economic and political revolution located in Europe and underpinned by cultural changes brought about by the renaissance, reformation, and scientific revolution. Such an understanding conflates Europe with modernity and renders the process of becoming modern, at least in the first instance, one of endogenous European development. Coterminous with this argument is the idea that the rest of the world was external to these world-historical processes and that colonial connections and processes were insignificant to their development. (Bhambra 2011b, p.653)

Moreover, she argues that, 'the end of colonialism as an explicit political formation has given rise to understandings of postcoloniality and, perhaps ironically, an increased recognition of the role that colonialism played in the formation of modernity' (Bhambra 2011b, p.654). As a result of the growing interest in

---

[182] ويعتقد فيلسوفنا أن الوصول الى هذه الحقيقة سيصدم الغرب في ذاته وادعاءاته الإنسانية النبيلة، وقد يدفعه لأعاده فرز أوراقه مكتشفا أن تقدمه قام على أسس خاطئة ومغلوطه ...لماذا ؟؟ من يستطيع أن يناقش فكرا كهذا؟ بيني وبينكم هناك أمر هام عن فيلسوفنا. هل تراه يعتقد أن الغرب يجهل هذه الخاصية اللاأخلاقية في ثقافته. الا يحقق الغرب وانتصاراته من هذا الواقع؟ الن يدافع عن تفوقه ولو بدمائنا؟ مجرد أسئلة عابثه لا معنى لها لأني رحت أسجل ما قال " الجابري " بدقه متناهيه، لم أناقشه كما يفعل الاخرون كي لا يتهمني أحد بالعنصرية ومعاداة الدول المتقدمة حسدا وغيره

modernity, new approaches began to emerge in a quest to redefine it and to critique the grand narratives and Eurocentric assumptions that are inherent within it. These include third-wave cultural historical sociology, multiple modernities, micro-histories and global history (Bhambra 2007a).

Bhambra 'disputes three narrative "myths" that prop up a Eurocentric formulation of modernity – the renaissance, the French revolution and the industrial revolution' (Mussel 2009, p.800). Her undermining of these three myths 'precedes her call for "connected histories"; that is, an approach that "re-thinks our current circumstances and the trajectories of change associated with them from multiple perspectives, rather than a dominant European one"' (Bhambra 2007b, p.153) and one in which she acknowledges that the 'mere recognition of difference is not sufficient' (Bhambra 2007b, p.70). She draws on the work of Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1997, p.737) who argues that, 'it is important to delink the notion of "modernity" from a particular European trajectory and to understand it, instead, as "a more-or-less global shift with many different sources and roots"'.

The ideas raised in *The Empire of Nara's Papers* bear a close resemblance to Al-Jabiri's criticism of western modernity, and the protagonist's engagement with his thoughts echo the arguments of Bhambra. She contends that,

> Where the problem with the concept of modernity has been defined in terms of its failure to address the experiences of peoples and societies outside Europe and the West, this failure can only be remedied by taking them into account and rethinking the previous structures of knowledge from which they had been omitted. (Bhambra 2007a, p.61)

Bhambra explains how the new approach of multiple modernities 'persists in the error of identifying particular values (for example, autonomy and control) as European and then linking these "European values" with the development of a particular institutional framework, the conjunction of which is believed to lead to modernity' (Bhambra 2007a, p.71). To rectify this, she argues that,

> It is possible to understand modernity as a shift of global dimensions and, at the same time, to recognize that its consequences in different places varied in their local manifestations. These different manifestations are not the multiple, cultural variants of an original European modernity but rather they constitute multiple co-presences of modernity. (Bhambra 2007a, p.71)

Hence, I argue that the invocation of Al-Jabiri not only initiates debate about modernity as a purely western project, but also questions the notion of western supremacy/superiority. Explicit in Nara's monologues about covering Al-Jabiri's symposium are ideas of cultural imperialism and its destructive consequences.

At this point, it may be legitimately asked, but how do such debates about the West and modernity serve the interests of women in Jordan? The answer involves a number of stages. When the western-ness of modernity is challenged this paves the way for a new understanding of what constitutes 'the modern', a new vision that dissociates modernity from the West. Modernity in this sense becomes collective and no longer monopolised by a western trajectory. Understanding modernity in this way holds great potential for eliminating the polemical stance around it that has been present for years, and in particular in relation to women. The opportunities that such a shift in view offers to Arab women are promising. Adopting such a view from an Arab perspective holds the potential to alleviate the pressure of the complex (and often hostile) opinion that some Arab countries hold about western modernist projects; in particular those pertaining to women, such as gender development plans. This shift away from equating everything modern to the West would allow both women and men from across the spectrum (liberals, conservatives, secularists and traditionalists) to be more receptive to 'modern' ideas without becoming preoccupied with common arguments about cultural hegemony and colonialism. Thus, I suggest that decoupling modernity from its political and cultural agenda holds more potential for women. In light of such a new perception, women in the Arab world could borrow from western experience in their use of gender theory and gender studies without having to worry about the burden of being labelled as traitors or falling into the trap of cultural colonialism.

Moreover, as Uma Narayan explains,

> The self-proclaimed 'superiority' of 'western culture' functioned as the rationale and mandate for colonialism. The colonial self-portrait of 'western culture' had, however, only a faint resemblance to the moral, political, and cultural values that actually pervaded life in western societies. Thus liberty and equality could be represented as paradigmatic 'western values,' hallmarks of its civilizational superiority, at the very moment when western nations were engaged in slavery, colonialism, expropriation, and the denial of liberty and equality not only to the colonized but to large segments of western subjects, including women. Profound *similarities* between western culture and many of its Others, such as hierarchical social systems, huge economic disparities between members, and the

mistreatment and inequality of women, were systematically ignored in this construction of 'western culture'. (Narayan 1998, p.90)

In light of this perception, Narayan suggests that it could be argued that, 'doctrines of equality and rights, rather than being pure 'products of western imperialism were often important products of such struggles against western imperialism' (Narayan 1998, p.97). Thus, in their use of the terms 'gender' and 'gender studies', Khreis and Dodin seem to follow a similar path as Narayan when she argues that, 'feminists are often better served by analyses that concretely show the particular ways that specific interpretations of rights or equality might be inadequate than by interpretations that criticise these notions of being as "western"' (Narayan 1998, p.98). Furthermore, she explains that,

> Feminists must keep in mind that a value or practice's being 'non-western' (either in terms of its origin or its context of prevalence) does not mean that it is anti-imperialist or anti-colonial, let alone compatible with feminist agendas. Feminists must also remember that a value or practice's being 'western' in its origins does not mean that it can play no part in the service of anticolonial or postcolonial feminist agendas. (Narayan 1998, p.99)

This striking resemblance between the critique that is offered of the use of certain perceived 'western' terminology in the novels and the arguments that Uma Narayan puts forward regarding the hermeneutics of gender discourse in developing countries is very significant. It could also be read as the need to put forward women's feminist agendas without paying too much attention to other political issues that could weaken genuine efforts to tackle gender inequality.

Representations of the dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity in the novels that I have investigated in this research have been explored in different ways. In *Outside the Body* and *The Bride of Amman*, tradition and modernity are represented as contrasting in a strong way and western modernity is presented as the solution to women's staggering social problems. In contrast to such a proposal, *The Bitter Winter* maintains a defensive stance in favour of tradition and conservative values, and against western modernity. Implicit in the novelists' presentations of the dialectical relationship between these two ideological positions is the notion that modernity is a western invention. *The Empire of Nara's Papers* and *Match Sticks*, however, tone down this controversial debate between tradition and modernity to a point where there is advocacy for the reliance on 'modern' tools (represented in the

199

introduction of the concepts of gender and gender studies) to Jordanian society. Nevertheless, this 'modernist' outlook is promoted while seeking to maintain the traditional structure of Jordanian society, although the focus is given to modernity (which does not necessarily have to be western) in effecting social and cultural change in the best interest of Jordanian women. Yet, while the main emphasis is on interrogating modernity, tradition is implicitly constructed as 'necessary' and a useful framework from which to negotiate new methods of dealing with gender discrimination.

By criticising Jordanian society and its superficial understanding of womanhood and manhood, Khreis and Dodin complement each other's ideas. Khreis presents the way in which the women's issue is handled in Jordan as one that focuses on the global and lacks a basic understanding of the social, historical and political dimensions of gender inequality and their implications for women. They are initiatives that concentrate on empowering women politically and economically as part of social development plans and projects without engaging in a deep critique of the origins or roots of the problem. Identifying the cause of women's subordination would allow long-term solutions to be implemented instead of superficial and practical ones that lack any scientific, professional or academic background. Providing a useful link, Dodin offers similar views by emphasising the need to be more critical of the social injustices meted out to women by not only being vocal about problems such as gender inequality and gender stereotyping, but by tackling such issues alongside gender as an academic or professional discipline. Through their novels, both authors were able to provide representations of women and men as social categories and explain why it should matter to Jordanian society. They were able to highlight the embedded controversy around gender represented by the tradition versus modernity debate on women in conservative societies. Despite the pervasiveness of the conventional discourse, they were able to push for a modernist agenda in the hope of reforming Jordanian society in a gradual manner and in ways that hold more potential for women.

Gender inequality: An overarching theme

While the first half of this chapter has investigated novelists' explorations of the theoretical aspects of gender as a useful starting point for tackling gender inequality, the novels in this section focuses on the significance of feminism. Faisal Tellawi is explicit in presenting his novel as works which aims to tackle gender discrimination. In *The Hornet's Nest*, the novelist focuses on how women are subordinated in Arab societies and craft narratives about the roots of such injustices. In his critique of gender inequality, the novel is able to push forward ideas of feminism. The novel can be read as presenting three main stages in this process. The first is to present feminist awareness as a turning point that sparks debate about the injustices perpetrated against women. The second is to condemn essentialist views on gender and their role in women's social struggles. This is taken a step further by providing (unconventional) insights into gender theory. The third stage is represented in the explicit advocacy of a new feminist understanding of gender as a potentially liberating factor for women. I now turn to the novel to illustrate how these stages are manifested.

In the *Hornet's Nest*, Tellawi weaves what I regard as a feminist novel in which he attempts to dismantle perceptions about gender in order to allow space for new ones to rise to the surface. Through intellectual dialogues between the various characters, the novel focuses on critical social matters that have a direct effect on women, namely the 'ill-conceived' notion of marriage as a social security system in which only the fittest survive. Divorce, female honour and the social perception of empowered women are all issues that are brought to light. The narrative in *The Hornet's Nest* is initiated through a group of seven female characters who deviate somewhat from traditional Jordanian women in that they refuse to be victims of social pressures. The majority of these characters are represented as oblivious to the cultural norms pertaining to women in Jordanian society. They navigate their way through life by choosing to be active agents who refuse social/familial interventions. Hence, they are portrayed as powerful women who are trying to create their own path in life and to break away from the strong grip of traditions and customs.

In a rented apartment in the heart of Amman, Tellawi provides a setting in which a group of six women (the tenants) and their landlady (Sawsan) interact together and critique the various social aspects of Jordanian society from a feminist perspective.

Their feminist awakening is explored in more than one scene. In the first of these, the narrator describes Nisreen's disappointment at not finding a prosperous career as a lawyer and condemns social perceptions around female labour. 'And above all, you are *a female* lawyer and not a man. What *idiot* is going to hand his case to a woman to plead in front of judges and general attorneys?' (Tellawi 2007, p.11, my emphasis). 'Are you crazy? You handed your case to a woman and you dream of winning it! Have male lawyers disappeared?' (p.11).[183]

The friendly atmosphere of the apartment, away from the external pressure exerted by family members, allows each character to fully engage in debating gender discrimination by recounting their personal stories. The process of storytelling thus becomes a tool that generates an open discussion of women's status in Jordanian society through which the characters share their experiences. Notions of gender inequality are explored in the novel through three central issues: divorce, sexuality and marriage.

Social conceptions of divorce are explored through the character of Diana in more than one scene. In the first of these, she recounts her divorce story to her friends. She describes her husband's constant jealousy and suspicion of her profession as a nurse and the common social perceptions about this profession, 'once she was a nurse, which means she has become a whore' (Tellawi, 2007, p.21).[184] Refusing to obey her husband's orders to sit at home and quit work, she demands a divorce. She also describes the agony of being stigmatised as divorced.

> The shame that she has brought upon her family is in asking for divorce from her husband, who is a doctor. He is someone that every girl dreams of having. It is indeed a shame that will not be cleansed even with her death (in the eyes of her father and brother), as they will always be haunted by her social title of divorced even after she dies. (Tellawi 2007, p.20)[185]

Diana then provides her explanation, 'I refused, because work is life. It is dignity and independence. It is security and reassurance throughout life. But for someone who is capable and who has the qualifications to work to quit and sit at home is *humiliation, submission and subordination* that she chooses of her own free will'

---

[183] والأدهى من ذلك كله أنك محاميه وليس محام، فمن هو المغفل في هذا المجتمع الذكوري الذي سيسلم قضيته لأمرأه لتترافع له أمام القضاة والمدعين العامين؟ مجنون. سلمت القضية (لحرمة) لمحاميه وتحلم بكسبها. هل انقطع المحامون؟

[184] إذا نرست عرصت

[185] أما العار الذي الحقته بالعائلة بطلبها الطلاق من زوجها الطبيب الذي تحلم كل الفتيات بالظفر ببسمة رضا منه، فهو عار لا يغسله حتى دمها وموتها في نظر والدها واخوتها، فسيظل يلاحقهم نعتها بابنتهم المطلقة حتى بعد موتها

(p.22, my emphasis).[186] Diana's determination to work initiates a discussion between those who are with her and those who are against her decision and the scene thus shifts from a description of Diana's situation to a heated debate about the necessity of female labour.

> There is no harm in sitting at home for someone whose parents did not prepare her for work and did not arm her with a degree or profession. But to sit at home when you are capable out of comfort and laziness and on your husband's orders, that is the sheer definition of humiliation. Did our mothers and grandmothers sit at home? Or were they ones who were working in the fields from dawn until sunset during harvest season? Why didn't our grandfathers make them sit at home and they are owners of virtue, chivalry, and magnanimity? What has happened with the generations of today from the educated and cultured? And why do they make them sit at home gossiping, and chattering, instead of working side by side? And how will a woman be half of society as they claim if they leave her inactive and lazy? (Tellawi 2007, p.22)[187]

When Ahlam asks: 'why did you not leave work temporarily and keep your education as a weapon for the future?' (Tellawi 2007, p.22). Diana responds,

> A weapon?! Won't this weapon become rusty if it's not used? …What is the purpose of a degree if it's left unused for 15 years? She will become a *factory for producing children and milk*. Do I just want to hang it on the wall to flaunt it and then become transformed into a *maid and a mere service provider*? (Tellawi 2007, p.23, my emphasis)[188]

The narrative continues with Sawsan making comparisons between the lives of unemployed women and those who are employed. She shows how employment, in addition to providing women with a continuous flow of money, and financial independence through a pension, also offers them a sense of dignity and pride that is capable of making them become more reliant on themselves. While criticising those who do not favour women's employment, she makes the following sarcastic comment: 'How poor is Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, how oppressed is

---

[186] أنا اقول لك لماذا رفضت. رفضت لأن العمل حياه، والعمل كرامه، والعمل استقلال، والعمل أمان وضمان مدى العمر. أما ترك العمل والقعود في المنزل لمن تستطيع العمل، وتحمل شهادة تؤهلها للعمل فهو مذله وخنوع وتبعيه تختارها بمحض ارادتها

[187] لا ضير في القعود في المنزل لمن لم يهيئها ذووها للعمل، ولم يسلحوها بشهادة أو مهنه. أما قعود القادرة على العمل راحة وكسلا، أو خضوعا لأوامر الزوج واشتراطاته فهو الذل الذي ما بعده ذل. وهل كانت أمهاتنا وجداتنا الأميات قعيدات بيوت؟ أم كن يسابقن الرجال الى الحقول وجني الثمار؟ ولماذا لم يقعدهن وراءهم في المنازل وهم أهل الشيم والنخوة والشهامة؟ ما الذي استجد مع جيل اليوم من المتعلمين والمثقفين؟ ولماذا يقعدونهن في المنازل للثرثرة والغيبة والنميمة بدل الانخراط في العمل معهم جنبا الى جنب؟ وكيف تكون المرأة نصف المجتمع كما يدعون، إن تركوها خامده خامله؟

[188] سلاح؟ الا يصدأ السلاح الذي لا يستخدم ويعفو عليه الزمن؟ والشهادة كذلك يصدأ إن لم يستخدمه حامله. ما جدوى الشهادة إن انقطعت عنها خمسة عشر عاما تحولت فيها الى مصنع لإنتاج العيال والحليب فقط؟ إن اكتفت بتعليقها على الجدار لتتباهي بها، وتحولت الى شغاله وملبيه طلبات فحسب؟

203

she! She once declared in a televised talk that she prepares breakfast for her husband before she goes to work!' (Tellawi 2007, p.26).[189]

This scene allows the author to make two arguments explicit: one about the flawed social perceptions of certain professions such as nursing, and the other about the centrality of education and employment to women's bid for autonomy. Common views that render certain professions 'acceptable' and others 'degrading' are presented as a great obstacle facing women in Arab societies. Such barriers stand in the way of women who, on the one hand, want to become economically independent and, on the other hand, want to lead happy married lives without being forced to give up one (profession) for the sake of the other (marriage).

The depiction of Diana's refusal to conform to the role of 'the submissive wife' who obeys her husband's words is indicative of the feminist ideas that the author is attempting to flesh out. In this critique of divorce, two powerful images of women are juxtaposed: the unemployed, economically dependent, subservient wife versus the employed, economically independent, divorced woman. The projection of these two extremes with no middle ground is indicative of the complicated equation with which women in the Arab world have to struggle. I find it ironic that education and employment are referred to as 'weapons'. They are weapons that should shield women against an unfortunate divorce. They become imbued with social significance and, most importantly, become intimately related to women's conscious understanding of themselves as a socially disadvantaged group. Thus, being described as 'the vulnerable', women should equip themselves with the proper armour. Nevertheless, this weapon could also be double edged, providing women with some benefits at the expense of others. In this case, divorce becomes the price that the character pays for refusing the biologically determined notion of gender, and of becoming 'a factory for producing milk and children.'

Equally significant is the explicit reference to western perceptions of womanhood. The presentation of Merkel as a powerful example of western political figures could function as a technique for self-reflection and the evaluation of prevailing misconceptions and practices that are placing women in the Arab world at a

---

[189] مسكينه السيدة أنجيلا ميركل مستشارة المانيا كم هي مضطهده. وقد صرحت في حديث تلفزيوني بأنها تعد وجبة الافطار لزوجها قبل ذهابها للعمل

disadvantage. A similar strategy is used in Dodin's *Match Sticks* when she makes reference to Condoleezza Rice. This narrative technique of juxtaposing binary opposites is recurrent throughout the novel, as I explained.

Moreover, the negative psychological consequences of divorce on women are explored. This is done in two scenes in which Diana expresses her frustration at not being able to enjoy life like her single flatmates.

> She doesn't have great hopes and doesn't compete with the rest of her flatmates in their outings and friendships. This does not suit her as what is permissible for single women is not acceptable for the divorced. People will forgive them for looking for future husbands in any way they can, whereas they will not allow that for a divorced woman. They [single women] can choose as they wish, whereas in society's eyes a divorced woman is easy and permissible prey, available to all. (pp.54–55)[190]

In the second scene, Diana is approached by a single man and reflects on her cautious understanding of her newly acquired social status, '*how can she forget that she is the ostracised and plagued divorced woman and he is the single, honourable and chaste man? These are opposites that can never come together*' (p.66, my emphasis).[191] Through these depictions of 'distressed' Diana, the novel sheds light on the heavy price that women have to pay in the event of divorce. Divorce is presented as being a woman's fault, for no one turns down a 'good catch' (such as Diana's former husband, who is depicted as a successful doctor) and it is therefore 'justifiable' for the woman to experience all the backlash. The depiction of divorced women as 'prey' speaks volumes about the numerous obstacles that stand in the way of women's desire for peaceful lives. Thus, 'victim' is presented as the inevitable role that a woman has to perform throughout her life.

I find it interesting that, while critiquing certain discriminatory practices, the author brings into the narrative western perceptions around divorce that are depicted as 'enlightened'. These are highlighted in a scene in which Hala describes to her friends how relationships are constructed in the West:

> If something happens and things develop into long-term misunderstanding to a point of hatred, they choose amicable separation and take it light-heartedly. Things will not be turned upside down. So a wife will not become a burden on her parents nor will she be a

---

[190] إنها تقتصد في آمالها، ولا تجاري بقية زميلاتها في سهرهن وصحبتهن، فلا يليق بها أن تفعل فعلهن، فما يباح للعازبات لا يباح للمطلقة. يعذرهن الناس في البحث عن عرسان المستقبل بكل وسيله، بينما لا يبيحون ذلك للمطلقة. يصطدان كما يحلو لهن، أما المطلقة فلا تكون في نظر الجميع الا صيدا مباحا وسهلا في متناول الجميع

[191] فأني لها ان تنسى أنها المنبوذة المطلقة، وهو الشريف العفيف الأعزب، إنهما ضدان لا يجتمعان،

205

maid for her sisters-in-law. She is employed and her salary and social security guarantees her dignity. She may remain in her house or move to a new one. But her world will not be wrecked and people will not mock her for being divorced or consider her divorce a scandal. Nor will they harass her now that she has become 'permissible prey'. Life passes by as normal, as if nothing has happened. The home will not be destroyed. The children will not be lost; that is because there will only be one or a maximum of two… the tribes will not become enemies and cut off all their ties. This is the proper thing for people with a conscience people who follow a proper doctrine. This was even done very often by the companions of the Prophet and no one was left puzzled by their actions. Didn't Al-Zubeir Bin Alawam (who is promised paradise) divorce Asama Bint Abi Bakr? He maintained his status quo (of being promised paradise) and she maintained her reputation as a prime model for women. (Tellawi 2007, p.51)[192]

The narrative complicates prevalent notions of divorce by not just presenting the western model as the ideal; examples from the old Islamic heritage are aligned alongside the western in critique of 'present' traditions and customs. Thus, such presentations should not be understood as only an invitation to imitate the western, but instead should be read as a return to the progressive elements of the traditional and authentic. Such a critique represents a call for re-evaluation and emphasises the necessity of reform.

In addition to divorce, sexuality also features as a contributing factor to women's problems in Arab societies. Misconceptions about the function of sexuality in conservative Arab societies are brought to light in a scene in which Wa'el, who is presented as a dentist, provides his views on traditional marriage and his ideas of female sexuality to his secretary Reema. When asked about his traditional marriage to his wife, he complains:

> She doesn't eat much of the food, so I don't have someone to share the joy of food with. She also displays her appeal and body in the bedroom as if we were at a show or an auction. *She is simply a witness to an event, and awaits the last scene of the play and for the curtain to fall, as if she has been taught that she is a doll for a man to play with.* She has no right to share with him. Maybe she has been taught that this is a feature of chastity and high taste and good discipline. This certainly bewilders a man and reinstates in him the certainty that she is innocent and has no previous knowledge of the matter. He would then regard this as a sign of elevated honour. But for her to participate and to enjoy, then she is a whore, someone lacking in dignity, one who is fallen in the eyes of men. And maybe she will remain in a conflict between revealing her desires and pleasures and supressing and hiding them and pretending chastity and honour as she has been taught.

192 إن حدث وتطورت الأمور الى سوء تفاهم مزمن، وتفاقم الى حد الكراهية فأنهما يختاران الانفصال بتفاهم وبروح رياضيه، ولا تنقلب الدنيا رأسا على عقب فلن تعود الزوجة عاله على والديها، ولا خادمة عند زوجات اشقائها، فهي عامله وذات راتب وضمان يكفل كرامتها، وقد تظل في سكنها أو تنتقل الى سكن جديد، فلا تخرب الدنيا ولا يعيرها الناس بالطلاق، ولا يعدونه أم الفضائح، ولا يتحرشون بها كأنها قد صارت صيدا مباحا. تمضي الحياة عاديه كأن شيئا لم يحدث، فلا يخرب البيت ولا يتشتت الأولاد لأنه أصلا لا وجود لأكثر من طفل أو طفلين ... لا تتخاصم القبيلتان ولا تحدث بينهما قطيعه أبديه، وهذا هو الأصل عند أصحاب الوعي من أتباع أي عقيده سليمه. وكثيرا ما فعلها الصحابة الكرام فلم يستنكر أحد فعلتهم. ألم يطلق الزبير بن العوام وهو المبشر بالجنة اسماء بنت ابي بكر الصديق؟ وظل على حاله الصحابي المبشر بالجنة، وظلت ذات النطاقين بسيرها العطرة خير انثى؟

Such things would consequently make her inherit schizophrenia, coldness and dullness. It makes me run away from her, as you can see. (Tellawi 2007, p.70, my emphasis)[193]

When Reema expresses bewilderment at such insights, Wa'el replies: 'I can imagine you when you get married performing the role of the chaste and honourable woman for your deceived husband – the one we bury together – and then he would run away from you to his veiled or non-veiled secretary, inside or outside his office' (Tellawi 2007, p.70).[194]

The revelations that this narrative offers on sexuality are central to Arabs' misconceptions about sexuality. The notion of having to perform the role of the 'innocent, chaste, virgin' is presented as problematic for both women and men. The problem lies in the growing sense of insecurity and confusion that women feel about their sexuality and how to engage with it or suppress it. I discussed this perverse understanding of sexuality in Chapter Four and described how the wedding night and the beginning of menstruation are two crucial events in an Arab woman's life. They are turning points in a woman's sexual life and her understanding of her sexuality.

Moreover, this performance is not only presented as deceptive, it also becomes an added burden that is placed on women's shoulders. A woman has to struggle with this complete transformation from suppressed to active sexuality on her wedding night while being very cautious about how she presents her 'new' interest in sex. She must not reveal too much interest; that would make her husband suspicious that she has had previous sexual encounters. But at the same time she should not exhibit too little interest in sex, which would have other social connotations. Her task is therefore a complicated one involving a very cautious understanding of her sexuality and the role it plays in her gendered identity. A woman therefore needs to avoid jeopardising her life by not performing her 'act' properly. As Juliette Minces explains:

---

[193] لا تتذوق من طعامها الا القليل فلا أجد من يشاركني متعة الطعام، وهي كذلك تعرض مفاتنها وبدنها في غرفة النوم كأنما نحن في معرض أو مزاد، بينما لا تشارك في متعة أو احساس وكأن الأمر لا يعنيها. إنها مجرد مشاهدة للحدث، ومنتظره لأنهاء الفصل الختامي من المسرحية لتسدل الستار، كأنما قد لقنت درسا مفاده أنها دميه يتلهى بها الرجل، ولا حق لها في مشاركته، وربما فهمت أن ذلك من مظاهر الحشمة والذوق وحسن التربية، مما يعجب الزوج ويرسخ لديه القناعة بأنها بريئة لا علم لها بالأمر من قبل، فيعد ذلك من دلائل الشرف الرفيع، أما من تقبل وتشارك وتنسجم، فهي الفاجرة عديمة الحياء التي تسقط من عيني الرجل. ولعلها تظل في صراع بين البوح برغبتها ومتعتها، وبين كبتها واخفائها تظاهرا بالعفة الشرف كما لقنت، مما يورثها انفصاما وبرودا وبلاده، تجعلني أهرب منها اليك كما ترين

[194] وانني لأتخيلك عندما تتزوجين تمثلين نفس الدور من الطهارة والعفاف على زوجك المغفل-ونحن ندفنه سويا-فيهرب منك الى سكرتيرة محجبة او غير محجبة، خارج مكتبه أو داخله.

A woman who evinces any interest in the sexual success of her marriage, is in theory, likely to become suspect in her husband's eyes, especially in the early days of the relationship… it is still true that when a young girl is led to the bridegroom's bedroom, the only prenuptial advice her mother gives her is usually to be docile and 'above all don't move, or your husband will think that you have been with another man', chastity is crucial, in all things, and is an affair for the family, whose honour depends on it.' (1982, p.21)

A gendered understanding of sexuality is also presented through the character of Sawsan.

Our single men are our pain; they give themselves permission to do everything: entertainment, pleasure and sex. However, when one of them starts thinking of marriage, he will ask his mother to look for a cat with closed eyes – as he would assume – who has not seen a man in her life before him and will not know anyone after him. But the one whom he befriended, dated and loved and had fun with, deceived and ran away from, she does not deserve any pity regarding her fate or reputation. (Tellawi 2007, p.17)[195]

While women's sexuality is regulated, men have more freedom and confidence. The paradoxical views about male and female sexuality add another layer of complexity to women's struggles in conservative societies. Not only can men enjoy premarital sex without being harshly judged or criticised, they also have the option of choosing a 'virgin' wife afterwards, an option that is not available for women who choose to do the same. Thus, such 'perverse' gendered attitudes towards sexuality not only place women at a disadvantage, they also contribute to creating an unbalanced understanding of sexuality for both men and women. This attitude towards male sexuality is severely criticised by Fatima Mernissi.

Men transform themselves into dirt to pollute their partners, and by the same token they turn the sexual act into an act of destruction and degradation. The deflowered virgin becomes a lost woman, but the man, like the legendary phoenix, emerges from the fray purer, more virile, better respected. In psychopathological terms, this is known as schizophrenia: a contradiction so total, so all-embracing that neither individual men nor whole societies can accept it as valid without destroying themselves. (1982, p.186)

She therefore argues that, 'if men really respect virginity, all they have to do is to set up an exemplary pre-marital conduct as important for men as it is for women' (1982, p.186). This distorted construction of male sexuality is in turn presented as responsible for the way in which female characters in the novel behave with their

---

[195] عزَّابنا هم عذابنا، يبيحون لأنفسهم كل شيء: التسلية والمتعة والجنس، فإذا وصل أحدهم الى التفكير في الزواج، طلب من أمه أن تبحث له عن قطه مغمضة العينين – كما يتوهم – لم تر شابا قبله، ولن تر شابا بعده. أما التي صاحبها وواعدها وأحبها وتسلى بها، ثم خدعها وهرب، فأنها لا تستحق منه حتى الشفقة على مصيرها وسمعتها،

male counterparts. In thinking about dating Jawad, Ahlam remembers Sawsan's
advice 'refrain and do not be easy prey. A bird that is caught easily will easily be
given away; do not go out with him until you've known him at least a week'
(p.38).[196] In a similar scene, Fadwa reiterates such notions of 'cautious sexuality',

> These lines of defence through restraint need to be properly learned. They should not be
> crossed if a woman wants to guarantee a man's attachment to her, until she burns his
> heart and he finds no other option except her father's home.[197] Then all postponed and
> unsettled issues will be resolved, and the desired outcome will be achieved. (p.75)[198]

The arguments that the narratives in these scenes are making are significant. Their
significance lies in acknowledging the role that sexuality plays in aggravating
women's situation in the Arab world. The emphasis on strict sexual boundaries
reinforces the common principle of honour.

> In the Arab culture, family honour, or male honour is expressed by generosity of its
> members, honesty of its individuals, manliness (courage, bravery) of its men, and also
> through the sexual purity (virginity) of a sister or daughter and fidelity of wife and
> mother. Principles of 'sharaf' (honour), 'ird', and 'ayb' (shame) are valued in the Arab
> culture, and norms related to these concepts give meaning to family and female
> behaviour. These norms and practices control male and female social and sexual
> behaviour and act as effective checks on social relations (Aswad & Gray 1996; Barakat
> 1993; Beck & Keddie 1980; Kulwicki 1996). (Kulwicki, 2002, p.85)

The conservative forces that are presented as fiercely trying to maintain or reinforce
traditional mechanisms of control over women's sexuality are thus harshly criticised
in the novel.

Nonetheless, of all three facets of women's struggles, marriage is given centre
stage. The common notion of 'marriage is shelter' along with a number of other
misconceptions and attitudes around marriage are raised. These ideas are developed
in the novel within a discursive frame, particularly through 'conversations' between
Nisreen and Marwan. Through discussions about marriage, insight into notions of
womanhood and manhood are also offered. Not content with their informal
relationship, Nisreen approaches Marwan about their intention to marry. This is

---

[196] تعززي، تمنعي، لا تكوني صيدا سهلا، الطائر الذي يسهل اصطياده يسهل التخلي عنه، لا تخرجي معه قبل أقل من اسبوع

[197] Reference to the father's home is a common expression in Arabic culture denoting the fact that a
formal proposal to a woman needs to be made by approaching her father as the one who gives his
daughter away in marriage.

[198] هذه الخطوة الدفاعية من التمنع والتعزز لا بد من التمرس عندها، وعدم تجاوزها إن ارادت الفتاة أن تضمن زيادة تعلقه بها،
حتى تحرق قلبه فلا يجد سبيلا الا المؤدي الى باب بيت والدها، وعندها تحل القضايا المعلقة والمؤجلة، وتتحقق الاماني المنتظرة

where Marwan, through a series of dialogues with Nisreen, expresses his philosophy about marriage, what he describes as a 'burden' and a 'social security system'. 'Marriage my dear is a very heavy burden, heavier than a mountain and one that breaks the back' (Tellawi 2007, p.42).[199] After being asked why he got married himself, he replies:

> We get married? My dear we do not get married; our mothers, fathers, aunts, elder sisters, all of those choose and we only have the option to approve, and if they had the option to marry on our behalf they would have done so. Marriage here is like buying a watermelon before checking it. You and your luck. You might find it red and sweet or you may be unlucky and find it white and bitter with no taste. (Tellawi 2007, pp.42–43)[200]

Marwan is then depicted continuing with his logic,

> You do not know that marriage in our society is social security before anything else, it is maybe the first association of social security in history, which the West has adopted from us and applied to all members of society and then returned to us our old product with a few additions and alterations. (p. 44)[201]

In a later scene, after explaining to Nisreen how marriage functions in Arab societies, Marwan ironically resorts to biological determinism to support his views on women as a counter strategy to the conventional Arab perception of gender. He first raises the following questions: 'Who has created the view that women are a burden on men? And who has decided to imprison them at home and regard them as stubborn, passive and submissive?' (Tellawi 2007, p.107).[202] He then proceeds by giving an example from nature where he argues:

> Can't you see that, among all creatures, the females are more capable than the males in taking care of themselves, their partners and their little ones? A lion is the king of the jungle and its strongest predator, yet he waits for his lioness to hunt the prey for him and their cubs. (Tellawi 2007, p.107)[203]

Marwan then continues by providing examples of African tribes, particularly the Tuareg who reside in the Grand Sahara Desert, and how their women work at

[199] الزواج عندنا يا عزيزتي حمل ثقيل وأثقل من جبل، ويهد الحيل

[200] نحن نتزوج؟ يا عزيزتي نحن لا نتزوج، أمهاتنا يتزوجن وآباؤنا وخالاتنا واخواتنا اللائي يكبرننا، كل اولئك يختارون ونحن لا نملك الا الموافقة، ولو كان بمقدورهم أن يتزوجوا بدلا عنا لفعلوا. الزواج عندنا مثل شراء البطيخ لكن ليس على السكين، انت وحظك، فقد تجدها حمراء وحلوه، وقد يكون حظك منحوسا فتجدها قرعه بيضاء لا طعم لها

[201] أنت لا تدرين أن الزواج عندنا هو ضمان اجتماعي قبل كل شيء، ولعلها أول مؤسسة للضمان الاجتماعي في التاريخ، اقتبسها الغرب عنا وطبقها على كافة أفراد المجتمع ثم أعاد الينا بضاعتنا القديمة مزيده ومنقحه

[202] فمن الذي جعل من المرأة عاله على الرجل؟ ومن الذي قرر حبسها في المنزل بليدة خامله مستسلمة؟

[203] انظري الى الطبيعة الا تجدين الأنثى أقدر من الذكر على تدبير شؤونها وشؤون صغارها عند سائر الكائنات؟ إن الاسد ملك الغابة وأقوى سباعها ينتظر لبؤته لتصطاد الفرائس لصغارها وله

farming while the men engage in horseback riding and fighting when necessary, otherwise they rest and engage in light types of work. Finally, he provides a closer and more relevant example of agrarian societies in the Arab world where women engage in all types of farming tasks. Then, he repeats the question, 'Who has decided to imprison women and to leave them as burdens instead of making them partners?' (Tellawi 2007, p.107).[204]

I find the employment of this theoretical framework particularly useful. The decision to offer an alternative perception of gender using this method is suggestive of a great awareness about the society in which Arab women live. In the Arab context, where the prevailing critique about womanhood is one that leans towards essentialising women and referring to their natural role as carers, using a counter-argument by relying on the same theoretical framework (biological determinism) would seem like a rational thing to do. Realising the difficulty of changing the dominant social perception of women and men, the novel presents ways of refuting such claims by using the same tool but in a different direction as plausible ones. Far from repeating the same rhetoric about the necessity of liberating women, Tellawi's work can be seen as a pioneering effort in the nascent field of gender studies in the Jordanian literary context.

Moreover, the novel presents new insights into masculinity and femininity in this form of patriarchal society. The character of Marwan is depicted making the claim that it is only when a woman is widowed that her sense of womanhood becomes fully developed (Tellawi 2007, p.114). In a dialogue with the various female characters, who were a bit surprised at this proposal, he justifies his views. He describes the difficulty of women's lives from childhood until marriage. He then focuses on life after marriage and how a woman enters a new phase of social oppression represented by bearing children (preferably males) and pleasing her new family. In all of this, the woman is represented as a victim of patriarchal control. After the death of her husband, she starts gaining tremendous social power, which is further reinforced by her children (mainly the males) who allow her to recompense for all the injustices she has endured throughout her life. *The Hornet's Nest* presents the absence of a

---

فمن الذي قرر أن يحبس المرأة ويتركها عاله بدل أن تكون شريكه؟ [204]

dominating male figure as a prerequisite for women's liberation and acquisition of social power. This absence is more beneficial for women when the husband dies rather than occurring through divorce. This is mainly attributed to social perception of divorced women in Arab societies which is negative because they are held more accountable for the failure of their marriages. They are also perceived as a threat to married couples and single men. Hence, the phrase 'a hundred widows but not a divorce' is constantly repeated.

> And the eternal question that confuses women and has no answer: how can a deep river run dry and stop flowing while the streams that branch from it continue to flow and nourish? In what sense can the green and smooth branches have the right to blossom and grow, while the trunk of the tree is left to dry and harden? A woman would take a deep breath in secrecy and feel comforted that the long nightmare [referring to the (dead) husband] that has been weighing on her shoulders for ages has been alleviated once and for all. Therefore, don't be bewildered if you see her cheer from the bottom of her heart: a hundred widows but not a divorce? (Tellawi 2007, p.116)[205]

Through the presentation of this view on womanhood, Tellawi's ideas are in accord with Deniz Kandiyoti's notion of the 'patriarchal bargain'[206] but he adds to her critique the impact of the absence of the male figure, who is representative of patriarchal control. So, where Kandiyoti focuses on women gaining more power as they age as compensation for enduring all forms of oppression, Tellawi focuses on the power that is acquired as a result of losing the husband. Another difference between the two is that, where Kandiyoti emphasises the role of social class and place of residence (rural/urban) in enhancing a woman's position, these factors are ignored in *The Hornet's Nest*.

The narrative continues by offering a new vision of masculinity. The male protagonist claims that 'a man fully develops into manhood after the death of his father' (Tellawi 2007, p.214). He stresses the difference it makes to men's everyday lives when the father is no longer in the picture. The absence of the father figure, it is argued, allows a man to develop in a more stable and less stressful way. The man

---

[205] ويظل السؤال الأبدي يحير المرأة ولا تجد له جوابا: كيف يجف النهر العميق بينما تستمر الساقية المتفرعة منه في جريانها؟ وكيف تستمر الأغصان الغضة في النمو والخضرة بينما يتجبس الجذع الرئيس للشجرة؟ تتنفس المرأة الصعداء في سرها، وتطمئن الى أن الكابوس الابدي الذي كان جاثما على صدرها قد انزاح مره واحده والى غير رجعه، فهل تستغربين إن همست في أعماقها (مئة رمله ولا طلاق).

[206] Deniz Kandiyoti refers to the Patriarchal Bargain when describing how some women will, under social pressure, accept the injustices that are being practised against them and the burdens of being a woman until they become older, when they gain tremendous power compared to when they were young wives (Kandiyoti 1988).

thus gains more confidence to make decisions and to lead his life away from the scrutiny and strong grip of his father, who has the upper hand in family affairs. Here, the novel does not address the macro level of living in a patriarchal society.

Through these presentations of womanhood and manhood, both women and men are depicted as victims of patriarchal societies. Although more focus is given to women, the notion of men as also victimised promotes the view that women and men are more similar and connected than different and detached. By characterising them both as victims, there seems to be an attempt to bridge the gap between them and to propose new ways of addressing women's dilemmas in Arab societies. One contributing factor in this call for a better understanding between women and men is the reliance on a constructive dialogue between Nisreen, the female lawyer, and her male colleague Marwan, in which he analyses social misconceptions about women and then attempts to theorise gender from an Arab perspective.

There are significant places where complications of tradition and modernity are brought forward. This was done using two methods: comparing and contrasting western and Arab societies and in drawing on classical Arab poetry and proverbs. Tellawi brings western perceptions of marriage into the narrative in a scene in which Hala tells her flatmates about of marriage. The perspective of the novel shifts via Hala, as she compares 'liberal' western society to 'oppressive and conservative' Jordan. She is depicted as a sales representative who spends her time travelling between France, Italy and Austria. When all six characters complain about negative social perceptions of marriage in Arab societies and how this results in many people viewing it as a burden, Hala fascinates her colleagues by telling them how the marriage in the West bears no resemblance to how it is perceived in traditional Arab societies. She starts by explaining the process of dating and its significance in allowing future couples a better chance of learning everything about each other. She describes how open-minded western people are to their daughters and sons dating and how supportive they are of their choices. The process of dating and moving in with each other, as the character Hala explains, allows women and men to experiment with what it is like living with that particular partner before making the big decision to marry, which should be based on total satisfaction and love. Hala summarises the success of western marriage custom in contrast to traditional Arab ones in the following points: the flexibility in choosing a partner, the elimination of

all social barriers that could stand in the way of the couple getting to know each other and the presence of a supportive society that does not prejudge its members based on their personal decisions.

Throughout the novel, discussions about different facets of gender inequality in the Arab world were constructed by using the tradition/modernity paradigm. This figures in the characters' discussions where they suggest new and unconventional ways of tackling oppressive patriarchal practices and then juxtapose them with a line of poetry from an old Arab era to create irony. When discussing the necessity of family planning, as opposed to the favouring of a greater number of children that prevails in most Arab countries, the character of Hala recites the following line of poetry:

بغاث الطير اكثرها فراخا   وام الصقر مقلاة نزور

(Birds give birth to numerous offspring whereas an eagle barely lays an egg) (Tellawi 2007, p.25).[207]

Similarly, when discussing western perceptions of female sexuality and the absence of so-called honour killings, one character then adds the following:

لا يسلم الشرف الرفيع من الاذى   حتى يراق على جوانبه الدم

(A high honour is only spared trouble when it pours blood down its sides) (Tellawi, p. 47), and another quotes a more common and colloquial proverb:

شرف البنت زي عود الكبريت يولع مرة واحدة

(A girl's honour is like a matchstick that is ignited only once) (Tellawi, p.47).

Here, the use of poetry and proverbs from an old Arab era serves to highlight the dynamics of Arab thought, which is trapped between a longing for a modern future (one that promotes a more optimistic view of women) and the powerful impact of tradition in resisting social change. It is also indicative of the sense of confusion and hesitancy that some Arab nations exhibit when confronted by persistent calls for change and reform.

---

[207] This verse denotes the importance of quality and not quantity when discussing the topic of having children. This was part of a poem that a man named Kuthair recited to Abdel Malik Bin Marwan in defense of himself after he was belittled by Bin Marwan.

It is important to remember that such discussions are depicted as being carried out by female characters who are presented as young, experienced and educated women. These female characters are portrayed as being capable of reflecting on their negative experiences and to search for promising solutions to their problems. Their debates together are very different from the type of conversations that the character of Diana has with housewives in salons. In that setting, such women are represented as superficial and having a narrow perception of life, particularly when discussing women's social burdens. Their perspective is criticised in the novel as traditional, archaic and backward.

Through the interplay between a dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity, *The Hornet's Nest* thus engages in a dialogue between these modes and explores their impact on how gender is represented in an Arab society. Tellawi paints a picture of ambitious women who are attempting to break away from the norm by embracing 'modern' views on womanhood (that emphasise individuality, more freedom, and less social and cultural restraints) as a liberating mode of life, and of women who cannot do so or who, despite striving to escape from traditional perceptions of womanhood that casts them as subordinate to men, find themselves trapped in a vicious social cycle. More importantly, such representations of women stress gender as an active component of the characters' lives. This echoes West and Zimmerman's argument that, 'A person's gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but more fundamentally, it is something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others' (1987, p.140). Therefore, their strong consciousness of themselves as gendered beings enables Tellawi's characters to maintain their agency and control over their lives. They have the option of conforming to social expectations or choosing other more liberating alternatives that will bring more social satisfaction, without outward defiance of patriarchal social structures.

Through these characters, Tellawi presents both the traditional and the modern critique of handling the gender discrimination, in particular regarding marriage, divorce and employment, and leaves the reader to decide for her/himself which approach is most suitable to tackle the controversial topic of women in conservative Arab societies. The neutral stance that is explicit in the novel's presentation of gender inequality is perhaps suggestive of the magnitude of the complexity and confusion that are present in the debate on women. Unlike the novelists who were

discussed in previous chapters and who were very clear in providing their thoughts on women's staggering problems, Tellawi's hesitation is illustrative of a third group of people who are lost in the debate on women, a debate that has been polarised into either reclaiming tradition or embracing modernity. It is this technique of 'hesitancy' – or ambivalence – that enables *The Hornets' Nest* to be a significant novel that has a great deal to contribute to Arab feminism. The uncertainty draws in readers, enabling them to empathise with the social injustices experienced by women in a fictional setting; the novel could thus be read as a call for a process of re-evaluation of conventional social norms and structures in order to create a promising and more fulfilling life for both women and men.

Conclusion

In providing a critique of the polarisation of tradition and modernity, this chapter has demonstrated how a new Arab feminist consciousness is formulated in the work of contemporary writers. I argue that the novels of Samiha Khreis, Rifqa Dodin and Faisal Tellawi are pivotal amongst present-day Jordanian novels. Through their work, gender is evoked to explore how women and men are conceptualised in society in terms of their biological sex. The authors suggest that an examination of the term gender should precede any initiative aiming to address women's subordination to men in conservative societies. They propose that a clearly defined conception of gender is a step in the right direction. Here, I would like to assert that clearing away such misconceptions alone would not necessarily bring about justice and hence should be followed by sufficient political action to improve women's lives. Yet I still argue that their introduction of the term is a significant step forward. The mere choice of stressing gender, in the work of Jordanian writers, demands the questioning of the categories of man and woman and proposes viewing them as social and cultural, rather than the traditional view that marks them as biologically determined. It is also an optimistic choice that opens the way for solutions and for positive change. The use of the term gender also allows space for engaging with academic scholarship about this term, which has become a fundamental aspect of any debate surrounding women's studies.

Moreover, I suggest that the writers' introduction of gender in this context serves as a tool to promote academic and professional scholarship, because the term is

widely circulated, even if it implies a reliance on western knowledge where gender as a discipline is more well-established than in Jordan or various other parts of the Arab world. All of these writers believe that possessing a clear understanding of the subordinate status of women as a social group should be an inseparable part of a wider developmental agenda targeting women.

From the mere emphasis on gender inequality to gender theory, these novelists present their views of how women are socially constructed as less valuable than men and how this could be resolved. Whereas Faisal Tellawi places great emphasis on the need to bring negative gender practices to the surface, Rifqa Dodin and Samiha Khreis were more concerned with gaining a deep academic and thorough understanding of how women are socially constructed to fulfil certain patriarchal needs and to achieve certain goals. I find both approaches towards improving women's lives significant. Unlike the novelists who were discussed in Chapters Four and Five, they were able to find common ground between the anti-western and predominately conservative approach in Asya Abdel Hadi's notion of Islam as an emancipatory tool to reclaim women's value in society and Fadi Zaghmout's and Afaf Bataineh's radical pro-western approach of direct rebellion and destructive resistance against a situation that is beyond reformation. I hope that the contributions of such writers will pave the way for the emergence of new novels that will be more daring in embracing women's struggle for liberation as central themes and that will bring more dimensions to this complex and controversial debate on women in the Arab world.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

The dynamics of womanhood and manhood in contemporary Jordanian novels form a multi-layered picture of gender inequality, best understood within its wider socio-cultural frame. In Jordan, various significant rights have been promulgated. Jordanian women can, for example, vote, access education and work, and are becoming increasingly visible in the public sphere. Nevertheless, gender equality remains unattainable. Socio-cultural 'common-sense' rigid notions of gender remain insufficiently tackled, placing Jordanian women at a disadvantage.

In this thesis, I aimed to examine the way themes and questions of womanhood and gender inequality are raised in the contemporary Jordanian novels I selected. Different, yet inter-related, perspectives shaped my framework. I had been, for instance, aware of my position as a feminist being, a feminist researcher, and most sensitively and focally, a Jordanian woman. I was aware throughout the research process of the instrumental role of literature in helping me unveil and critically tackle certain perceptions, questions, and issues I perceive as responsible for the subordination of woman.

I have argued that, as gender inequality in Jordan continues to be discussed by focusing on specific political, economic and developmental aspects of women's struggles, such as female unemployment, education, political representation and economic dependency, literature and particularly novels can uncover other facets of women's lives. Novels can provide a platform to access resources on attitudes towards the social and cultural aspects of this struggle, which includes representations and perceptions of womanhood and manhood. The emergence of literary debate on feminist topics is in itself a phenomenon worth investigating, as it may indicate that these topics are no longer considered insignificant and that there is a shift in the social perception of such issues. It may also point to nascent liberal attitudes towards women in society at large, but either way, these discussions afford researchers a window of opportunity that was not available before. More importantly, these novels open up political questions about women's position in society by

shifting the focus on everyday experiences of women and concomitant gendered power relationships.

The picture that emerges from investigating contemporary Jordanian novels is a complex one, in which I have divided the novelists into three camps. The first group contextualises their critique in the form of a pro-western stance that advocates emulating the western experience in dealing with women. The novelists in this group promote notions of defiance against patriarchal Jordanian society, a society that in their view is beyond redemption. The second category of novelists advocates an anti-western critique in which notions of Islamic values of gender equality and the Hadiths of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) about women's elevated status in Islam are upheld. Such values are posited against what is presented as an 'immoral' and 'unethical' West where both women and men are depicted as having flawed understandings of gender equality. Thus, this approach warns against falling into the trap of western liberal values, which are imbued with double standards and promise only an 'imagined utopia'. The novelists in my final category present their work as attempting to focus less on the political questions involved in discussions on women in the Arab world. Instead, this approach is one that seeks common ground by maintaining the significance of traditions without losing sight of useful modern discourses on women, regardless of where they originate.

Under the first category, I began by exploring the work of Jamal Naji *When Wolves Grow Old* (2008), Taher Al-Odwan *Anwaar* (2002), Afaf Bataineh *Outside the Body* (2004) and Fadi Zaghmout *The Bride of Amman* (2012), novels that advocate a rebellious stance against tradition in favour of modernity. Naji and Al-Odwan promote instances of rebellion against male domination through unconventional depictions of female sexuality, while Bataineh and Zaghmout focus on illustrations of defiance in the form of suicide and escape. Bataineh condemns Jordanian society in her critique of the patriarch, represented by the unjust and harsh father figure who torments, censors and abuses women (his wife and daughters) and in her critique of honour killings. Through depicting the escape of her protagonist, Muna, from Jordan to Scotland as 'lucky', she begins drawing comparisons between the two societies. Similarly, Zaghmout condemns Jordanian society through his critique of the traditional perception of marriage as the destiny of women in Jordan

and a primary part of their identity, and in his critique of honour killings as an archaic and vicious practice.

These novelists framed their perceptions of womanhood through a critique of the patriarchal system in Jordan. Through representations of an 'oppressive patriarchal society', Naji, Al-Odwan, Bataineh and Zaghmout present unconventional notions of womanhood. Despite being victimised by patriarchal control and the individual men who are contributors to domination, the female characters are depicted as self-conscious, defiant and eager to find a way out. They are thus 'active' victims, women who, despite their circumstances, are attempting to challenge existing oppressive structures using the limited resources available to them. Emphasising the destructive nature of patriarchy as an impediment to gender equality, the solutions they offer are contextualised in the form of a clash between the modern and the traditional and between the East and West. I engaged with the ideas they offered by utilising Sharabi's theorisation of 'neopatriarchy'. While I argued that his robust critique of patriarchy was useful, I was critical of his claims about modernity as purely western.

I then explored the work of Asya Abdel Hadi in *The Bitter Winter* (2010). Through this novel, I investigated how 'the religious' was deployed in discussions about women and their position in society. I paid particular attention to how Abdel Hadi, was utilising religious texts to provide progressive understandings of gender. In her novel, she adopts a defensive stance against modernity and in support of tradition. In *The Bitter Winter*, Abdel Hadi condemns western feminism as emblematic of modernity, arguing that it is a mere illusion and that women's lives in the West are a source of pity and sorrow. She calls for a return to the traditional values presented in the Holy Qur'an and Hadith, which she regards as the essence of a progressive understanding of gender. Abdel Hadi blames misogynist male interpretations of the Holy Qur'an and the Hadith for the deteriorating situation of women in the Arab world. She argues that it is only when Arab Muslim women and men reread the Islamic Holy Scripts and learn from the Prophet's (PBUH) teachings in the treatment of women, that women's subordination will eventually be remedied.

Thus, in both of these approaches, the novelists presented tradition and modernity as mutually exclusive. Their representations were framed as a clash between a pro-western agenda that looks to the West as the solution or as a 'saviour' from

traditional Arab societies and an anti-western agenda that distances itself from western thoughts on gender equality. However, do discussions about women in the Arab world have to be contextualised in terms of these oppositional forces? Is there any possibility of an alternative strategy?

I argued for the need to look beyond the dichotomies of tradition and modernity, and advocated for a less antagonistic stance towards modernity in the hopes of formulating an intrinsically Arab method that would be more suitable for tackling gender inequality in Jordan, and in the Arab world more broadly. Thus, this thesis proposes an alternative strategy for addressing gender inequality, one that seeks common ground without entering into the destructive polarised debate. This approach draws upon, and extends, the implicit argument of Samiha Khreis and Rifqa Dodin in *The Empire of Nara's Papers* (2004) and *Match Sticks* (2000), in which they allude to ways of benefiting from the ideas of western gender studies without rebelling against Jordanian, Arabic common values and tradition. I show how insight into gender theory does not have to be contextualised as a cultural clash, through readings of novels that collapse this oppositional stance and attempt to find common ground that can bring more hope for Arab women's lives.

Finding the polarisation of the debate on women counter-productive, I argued for the necessity of shifting the tone from opposition and hostility to tranquillity and collaboration. This shift involves, first, the rethinking of modernity as an indigenous 'western' project and, second, a shift away from how the terms 'modern' and 'traditional' are commonly perceived as oppositional. Despite their opposing views, both traditionalists and modernists seem to hold the view that modernity is western. This tendency to perceive the modern as western is without doubt an outcome of colonialism and its lived experience and continuous presence in the region. In this regard, Gurminder Bhambra argues that, 'Interrogating the colonial inheritance is not only about arguing for a critical perspective on European forms of knowledge; it is also about problematising the very assertion that forms of knowledge are European. In the process, nothing is lost except a certain insularity' (Bhambra 2007a, p.7). Moreover, as Abu Lughod states, 'the tricky task in all this is how to be sceptical of modernity's progressive claims of emancipation and critical of its social and cultural operations and yet appreciate the form of energy, possibility, even power that aspects of it might have enabled, especially for women' (Abu-Lughod 1998, p.12). In my

attempts to advocate for new understandings of modernity (and to a lesser degree tradition), I have found inspiration in the way Hussein Jumʿa conceptualised this concept by contending that:

> Modernity is thus not at odds with tradition or transcending it; it is a civilised human adaptation between originality/authenticity and contemporaneity and any modernist method that is built on the basis of rupture with tradition is a destruction of one's own , nationalist, cultural and even humanist personality. And if we were to believe in adopting an advanced modern mentality to build renaissance and culture then we believe at the same time that we are capable of renewing our tradition for the realisation of an advanced modernist movement that is in balance and in harmony with tradition through understanding it and analysing it based on scientific, accurate and methodological analysis. (2005, p.9-11).

It is this form of inclusiveness that, I have argued, is most useful for discussions about Arab women, ones that open up new ways and solutions to staggering gendered dilemmas. It is unfortunate that not enough efforts have been made to interrogate the origins of modernity and to revolutionise its common perception in the Arab world. Equally disappointing is the lack of critical work that interrogates more subtle meanings of tradition.

While I find the contestation with the origins and implications of gender understandable (to a certain degree), from an Arab perspective, I argued for the necessity of moving beyond the political dimensions (the common debate about the origins of the term and its consequences on Arab society) of the concept and to engage with what western scholarship has to offer on gender. This engagement need not be understood as valuing western knowledge and denigrating indigenous tools as worthless; it should be seen as opening the gate for more 'possible' solutions for women's social struggles in the Arab world. I argued that such an approach provides more hope for women in the Arab world. Dodin and Khreis criticise the polarisation of tradition and modernity and present their case as one that draws upon western gender theories without having to be contextualised in the form of cultural betrayal. They depict a shift in how gender is conceptualised in society towards a position that is contingent on a broader and more complex understanding of this term in a way that transcends essentialist or reductionist views. Moreover, this leap becomes readily accessible to both women and men through academic insight, as presented by Khreis, or through proper training, as presented by Dodin. Thus, having insight into the meanings of gender becomes a transformative agent that is capable of mobilising

both men and women to promote an active view of gender, one that acknowledges women's agency over their own lives.

   In their critique of the forms of patriarchy and gender inequality that persist in the Arab world, Bataineh and Zaghmout are reiterating the same arguments made by Arab liberal/radical feminists such as Nawal El Saadawi. I have argued that their uncritical embrace of western feminism is problematic. I have highlighted the dangers of falling into cultural essentialism and orientalising the East. So, while it is arguably valid to condemn systems that contribute to gender inequality by reproducing certain images and perceptions of womanhood, rectifying this by giving up on the society as a whole is certainly not the answer. This is why I describe the propositions made in these novels as catastrophic. My greatest contention with Bataineh's critique is not only focused on how she upholds western feminism, but also on how she ends her novel by having her protagonist physically and psychologically transform from an Arab woman into a western one. This transformation becomes all too ironic when her protagonist decides to join a women's organisation and then to visit Jordan and preach about women's rights. I do not read the character's physical transformation only in the light of her fearing for her life, I read it as another tragic attempt at adopting a western identity. This notion of having a western or westernised person speak about women's rights in developing parts of the world speaks volumes about the long-term impact that colonialism has left on both the colonised and the coloniser. This is partly because it presents a clear manifestation of the cultural colonialism that persists in Arab societies. It also risks slipping into culturally essentialist views, not only about one's own culture, but also about others.

   Equally unproductive is the second approach, presented by Abdel Hadi in *The Bitter Winter.* Her approach of devaluing the West, and western feminism in particular, in addition to upholding Islamic values and implying in one way or another that they represent a superior status compared to other tools, is also problematic. Abdel Hadi's antagonistic stance towards the West is understandable owing to colonialism and the prolonged western involvement in the region; nevertheless, her critique is guilty of essentialising the West. Her critique also presents the case for gender inequality and positions Islam as the solution to these problems, a position that in itself is controversial considering the patriarchal nature

223

of religions, Islam being no exception. While Abdel Hadi makes valid arguments about the necessity of adhering to common progressive Islamic principles about women and of condemning Islamic fundamentalists, her arguments fall short of providing a feasible strategy for moving forward. Moreover, her decision to provide solutions to gender discrimination using an Islamic framework excludes not only Christian Jordanians, who form six per cent of the population, but also those who are not comfortable with operating within such a framework, myself included. In her critique, she is echoing Muslim women who are trying to dissociate themselves from western perceptions about women and to establish an intrinsically Muslim/indigenous method for themselves. These feminists are very attentive not only to western feminism but also to the terminology itself.

Thus, while I set out to explore representations of women's everyday battles with social oppression and gender inequality, I was surprised at how discussions of these issues were framed within wider political debates about tradition and modernity, East and West, colonialism and western hegemony. Such debates were all too explicit, which made brushing them away seem impossible. Although I had not intended to become embroiled in a political debate about Arab women, I had anticipated that such debates would surface at one point or another. However, I did not expect the immensity of how the 'political' came to weigh in on what I thought would be a social and cultural issue, which made me ponder the question: could the over-emphasis on the political serve as a diversionary technique to draw attention away from a country's failure to tackle women's subordinate status?

On a personal level, I do not see myself in favour of either liberal or conservative approaches to promoting women's freedom from domestic and gender discrimination, but if I was compelled to choose between the two then I would side with the conservatives in order to safeguard my interests, since the liberal approach is a risky one, especially for women. Discussions about gender equality are very problematic in the Arab world; speaking about it requires caution and care, particularly if the speaker is a woman as her words can easily be taken out of context and vilified if she dares to tackle the problems of women in an untraditional way. The most common accusations made against those who speak in favour of freedom and equality are that they are western imitators, traitors, and corrupt in Islamists' terms. The reality for liberal women in Jordan is not promising. Such women are

vilified, ostracised and defamed, with some having their work banned, like novelist Huzama Habaib, who wrote '*Asl al-Hawa (Origins of Desire)*, in 2010, in which she focuses on female sexuality as a mechanism of liberation, and Afaf Bataineh, who criticises patriarchy in Jordanian society in her 2004 novel *Kharij al-Jasad (Outside the Body)*.

Within the overall framework of tradition and modernity, many themes surfaced across the majority of the novels. The most significant of these is a critique of the destructive effect of patriarchy on women. The notion that 'marriage is shelter' was raised as a dominant issue. The preferential treatment of boys compared to girls was also criticised, in addition to reductionist notions of gender. Through these themes, the traits of passivity, weakness and vulnerability that are often attributed to women were replaced with those of self-consciousness determination and defiance.

Despite the absence of a fully-fledged academic discourse on gender in Jordan, I was fascinated by the novelists' (explicit or implicit) engagement with aspects of gender theory and feminist ideology. Gender socialisation, the sex/gender distinction, biological determinism and gender as 'doing' were all explored in their work in an attempt to establish the root cause of women's subordinate status in society, to work out daily struggles and daily survivals, and to develop ways of moving forward. Nonetheless, their engagement with gender was not devoid of obstacles. Such a contention in a literary domain is not surprising if we consider how these terms and concepts are contextualised in other settings. Ferial Ghazoul, for instance, poses the following questions:

> How can we study a secondary concept like 'gender' when the principle one, 'citizenship', that involves both men and women as citizens, is absent? Can we impose foreign concepts like 'gender' on another social reality, such as the Arab world, which has its own specific language for referring to women's rights issues, namely, the status of women, or personal status law? Indeed the very word has no Arabic translation. How do you explain the West's willingness to fund any project having to do with globalisation, civil society, gender and governance? Are these concepts value-free? (Ghazoul in El Sadda 2014, p.25)

The issues that Ghazoul raises highlight the problematic nature of the gender struggle in Arab societies. Despite the necessity of opening up debates about gender in Arab societies, such matters (ones related to women) are relegated to a secondary status when compared to the fundamental concept of citizenship that involves placing

equal emphasis on both women and men. Ghazoul in this sense is showing the explicit 'irony' of focusing on an important element of the feminist struggle in the absence of its pre-requisites: civil society and good governance. The contention with terminologies and concepts also stresses the intersectionality of the feminist cause to which Arab women are subjected. As a result, their plight becomes one that not only addresses their social disadvantage due to their gender; it is extended to include broader political problems involving hegemony and national sovereignty. Moreover, Najla Hamadeh makes the claim that,

> Arab feminists are sometimes lured into focusing on 'gender', 'empowerment' and 'good governance', regardless of the relevance of these concepts to their causes. Sometimes they do this to imitate the more powerful feminists and sometimes in order to participate in global conferences and/or to acquire funding from international organisations. This causes them to neglect their more pressing problems, such as the problem of family legislation. It also creates a rift between them and the vast majority of poor and peasant women, who have not had a western-style education, as well as from the national struggle against western hegemony. In so doing, they lose perspective, time and effort, as well as the support of their wider local population. (Hamadeh 2014, p.360)

Focusing on another dimension of the uneasiness of engaging in projects about gender, Hamadeh points to the significance of considering the context in which such projects are to be implemented. In Arab societies when women are struggling with 'fundamental' issues such as poverty and discriminatory legislation, initiatives around 'gender' in current circumstances are perceived as 'trivial' and to an extent 'harmful;' (by prioritising certain issues at the expense of others). She asks, for instance, 'are we to blindly follow present-day western feminism's current involvement with political representation? Experience may show that acquiring political rights while still denied family status rights results in arriving at decision-making positions nominally, but not effectively' (Hamadeh 2014, p.360).

   Khadija Al-Uzaizi explains that, 'despite the development of Arab feminist discourse over the last three decades of the twentieth century, it did not rise to the level of a true feminist ideology, either in its intellectual depth or in its tackling of women's issues' (Al-Uzaizi in Al-Ghanim 2014, p.154). It is a discourse, Al-Uzaizi claims, that,

> with few exceptions, lacks any philosophical dimension, most of it remaining subject to isolated personal interpretations that focus on the victimised, weak and abused woman. Some have, in the meantime, adopted western feminism and its axioms as a model for solving Arab women's problems, without looking at the contextual framework in which

orbit they revolve, or the limits of their interpretive potential outside their local cultural context. (Al-Uzaizi in Al-Ghanim 2014, p.154)

She goes on to say, 'Both sides have failed to formulate a theory that expresses their respective visions for a better society, and encompasses the main values that any change in women's conditions in the Arab world would require' (Al-Uzaizi in al-Ghanim 2014, p.154). These arguments resemble mine about the novels not often addressing the 'root cause' of women's oppression and social struggles in life.

I am in agreement with Al-Uzaiai and find the invisibility of an intrinsically Arab feminist discourse alarming. This is mainly because such an absence ignores the centrality of gender to so many strands of discrimination that Arab women face, such as negative stereotypes, misconceptions about womanhood, the pervasiveness of biologically reductive views about women, and honour killings. I hope that I have demonstrated how various discourses are implicated in the ways in which gender is represented in Jordanian novels.

Although I have focused my efforts on investigating contemporary feminist Jordanian novels, my analysis remains limited in scope and size. This thesis, completed in a little over three years, does not cover all the Jordanian feminist novels that were published between 2000 and 2012. It covers those that I was able to find and purchase in-store or online. There may well be a handful of others that I have not accounted for due to the reasons I have explained in Chapter Three. I also do not cover readers' reviews because it is a very difficult task to do so given the lack of online platforms to access readers' responses to novels. Throughout my research, I was very conscious of these limitations. While I have focused on the new millennium up until the year I started my project, I have not explored feminist novels written during the 1990s and earlier periods. This was partly because of the limited availability of resources documenting these novels and partly because I was interested in how a new chapter in history would influence literary production at that time. It perhaps also arises from the way in which Jordanian writers and critics have written about the Jordanian novel and how they bracket them under certain decades (the novel in the eighties, seventies, sixties, etc.). In addition to these constraints and the practical considerations with which I had to contend, I do not pretend that my theoretical and methodological choices are the only way to conduct this research.

There is a multitude of ways that a researcher could have used to investigate these novels. However, my choices stem from my understanding of novels as an important site for the exploration of social issues in contemporary, still conservative and restrictive Jordan. Nonetheless, these limitations indicate that there is always room for future work on the subject of feminism in Jordanian novels or similar topics. One way to develop this project further is to conduct interviews with the novelists themselves and hear what they have to say about their literary work and their contribution to the feminist cause. This is in fact a future project that I have at the back of my mind. Another possible way to develop this project is to embed readers' reviews about those novels, through conducting reading groups with Jordanian women (and men) around the novels and researching the readers' views.

Despite its centrality, the way in which feminism features in Jordanian novels remains under-researched in academic literature. With the exception of a handful of resources, much work still needs to be done. Moreover, there has been little cross-fertilisation between feminist literary criticism and perspectives from Arab women's movements and feminist activism. This thesis attempts to bring these fields together. Studies tend to focus on each field in isolation without considering how one affects or influences the other. Being attuned to the gaps and limitations of work on Jordanian feminist novels, I have attempted to read the novels in conjunction with their social, political and historical context and with feminist and social theories. Through establishing a relationship between the text, the context and theory, I hope that I have managed to provide an account of the complexity of the issues that the novels attempt to flesh out.

Amid the ongoing struggle to define and engage with feminism, this thesis has demonstrated the ways in which contemporary Jordanian novelists are engaging with ideas of feminist thought. While the norm in Arab society and culture has been to highlight the debate about tradition and modernity being mutually exclusive, a debate I argue is redundant, some Jordanian novelists were able to bring varying techniques for tackling the problematic issue of women in Arab societies to a state of convergence. In *Match Sticks* and *The Empire of Nara's Papers*, Rifqa Dodin and Samiha Khreis provide an alternative vision for women in Jordan and for the Arab world more broadly. They propose a shift in focus from wider and more controversial political debates about Arab women to more practical strategies that are

grounded in a national context. Their critique is one that seeks to find methods and solutions for progress even if this means borrowing from western theories. Interestingly, they both maintain traditional social structures. Their proposal is one that borrows from 'modern' tools represented by introducing the 'modern' concepts of gender and 'gender studies', without dismissing 'tradition' as necessarily static and without being preoccupied with the political dimensions of the debate on women that castigate modernity as the antithesis to the progress of women in the Arab world. My primary aim has been to demonstrate the ways in which these Jordanian novels are an important, even vital site for the exploration of women's lives, and for understandings of womanhood and manhood in contemporary Jordan. These novels, I argue, are an asset for the feminist cause, and my hope is that such understandings will lead to changes in gender relations and women's lives, both in Jordan and the wider Arab world.

List of References

Primary resources:

Abdel Hadi, A. (2010). *The Bitter Winter*. Amman: Duroob. ‏عبد الهادي، أسيا. (٢٠١٠).‏
‏الشتاء المرير. عمان: دار دروب.‏

Abdel Raziq, N. (2011). *Romina*. Amman: Fada'at. ‏عبد الرازق، نبيهة. (٢٠١١). رومينا.‏
‏عمان : فضاءات.‏

Abdel Salam, S. (2010). *The Bitter Sack*. Beirut: Dar Al-Farabi. ‏صالح، عبد السلام.‏
‏(٢٠١٠). صرة المر. بيروت: دار الفارابي.‏

Abu Amarah, S. (2010). *Scheherazade at the Presence of His Excellency*. Amman:
‏أبوعميرة، سعاد. (٢٠١٠). شهرزاد في حضرة صاحب الجمهورية. عمان: دار‏ Dar Ma'moun.
‏مأمون.‏

Abu Rab, S. (2000). *The Searcher of Tenderness*. Al-Mafraq: The Academy for
‏أبو الرب، صلاح الدين. (٢٠٠٠). الباحث عن الحنان. المفرق: الأكاديمية للنشر.‏ Publishing.

Al-Atrash, L. (2010). *A Yearning for that Autumn*. Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers.
‏الأطرش، ليلى. (٢٠١٠). رغبات ذاك الخريف. بيروت: العربية للعلوم.‏

Al-Atrash, L. (2005). *Ports of Illusion*. Beirut: Dar Al-Adab. ‏الأطرش، ليلى. (٢٠٠٥).‏
‏مرافئ الوهم. بيروت: دار الآداب.‏

Al- Gur'an, N. (2003). *The Witch*. Irbid: Rozana. ‏القرعان، نايف. (٢٠٠٣). الساحرة. اربد:‏
‏روزانا.‏

Al-Odwan, T. (2002). *Anwaar*. Beirut: Bulaq. ‏العدوان، طاهر. (٢٠٠٢). أنوار. بيروت: بلاق.‏

Al- Razzaz, M. (2000). *A Night of Honey*. Beirut: Arab Association for Studies and
‏الرزاز، مؤنس. (٢٠٠٠). ليلة عسل. بيروت: المؤسسة العربية للدراسات والنشر.‏ Publishing.

Al-Samhouri, M. (2010). *A City that Does Not Leave House*. Beirut: The Arab
Association for Studies and Publishing. ‏السمهوري، محمد. (٢٠١٠). مدينة لا تخرج البيت‏
‏بيروت: المؤسسة العربية للدراسات والنشر.‏

Al-Tamimi, F. (2011). *As If, It is a Joke*. Beirut: Dar Al-Adab. ‏التميمي، فيروز. (٢٠١١).‏
‏كأنها مزحة. بيروت: دار الآداب.‏

Amayreh, M. (2009). *Prisons of Glass*. Amman: Dar Ward. ‏(٢٠٠٩). ‏عمايرة، منصور.
سجون من زجاج. عمان: دار ورد.

Awad Allah, I. (2011). *The Dreams of Yousef*. Amman: Fada'at. ‏عوض الله، ابراهيم.
‏(٢٠١١). *أحلام يوسف*. عمان: فضاءات.

Awad Allah, I. (2007). *The Thirst of Wheat*. Amman: Yazouri. ‏عوض الله، ابراهيم.
‏(٢٠٠٧). *ظمأ السنابل*. عمان: اليازوري.

Balbisi, R. (2011). *Salma*. Amman: Fada'at Press. ‏بلبيسي، رلى. (٢٠١١). *سلمى*. عمان:
فضاءات.

Bataineh, A. (2004). *Outside the Body*. Beirut: Al-Saqi. ‏بطاينة، عفاف. (٢٠٠٤). *خارج
الجسد*. بيروت: الساقي.

Dodin, R. (2000). *Match Sticks*. Amman: Al-Faris Publishing House. ‏دودين، رفقة.
‏(٢٠٠٠). *أعواد ثقاب*. عمان: دار الفارس للنشر.

Dumra, N. (2006). *Faded Shadows*. Amman: Dar: Fada'at. *ظلال* ‏(٢٠٠٦). ‏ضمرة، نازك.
باهتة. عمان: دار فضاءات.

Habaib, H. (2009). *The Origins of Desire*. Beirut: The Arab Association for Studies
and Publishing. ‏حبايب، حزامى. (٢٠٠٩). *أصل الهوى*. بيروت: المؤسسة العربية للدراسات والنشر.

Khreis, S. (2009). *Dancing With the Devil*. Amman: Dar Nara. ‏(٢٠٠٩). ‏خريس، سميحة.
الرقص مع الشيطان. عمان: دار نارة.

Khreis, S. (2008). *Us*. Amman: Dar Nara. ‏نحن. عمان: دار نارة ‏(٢٠٠٨). ‏خريس، سميحة.

Khreis, S. (2006). *The Empire of Nara's Papers*. Amman: Al-Shouruq Publishing
House. ‏خريس، سميحة. (٢٠٠٦). *إمبراطورية ورق نارة*. عمان: الشروق للنشر.

Khreis, S. (2003) *The Plate*. Amman: Dar Azmina ‏خريس، سميحة. (٢٠٠٣). *الصحن*. عمان: دار
أزمنة.

Khreis, S. (2000). *Opium*. Beirut: The Arab Association for Studies and Publishing.
‏خريس، سميحة. (٢٠٠٠). *الخشخاش*. بيروت: المؤسسة العربية للدراسات والنشر.

Naeem, L. (2010). *And Whisper Never Ends*. Beirut: The Arab Association for
Studies and Publishing. ‏نعيم، ليلى. (٢٠١٠). *والهمس لا يتوقف أبدا*. بيروت: المؤسسة العربية
للدراسات والنشر.

231

Naji, J. (2010). *When Wolves Grow Old*. Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers. ناجي، جمال.
(٢٠١٠). *عندما تشيخ الذئاب*. بيروت: العربية للعلوم والنشر.

Nasr Allah, I. (2010). *The Terrace of Shame*. The Arab for Science. نصر الله، إبراهيم.
(٢٠١٠). *شرفة العار*. بيروت: العربية للعلوم و النشر.

Rahal, G. (2010). *In My Mind*. Beirut: The Arab Association for Studies and
Publishing. رحال، غصون. (٢٠١٠). *في البال*. بيروت: المؤسسة العربية للدراسات والنشر.

Rawashdeh, H. (2010). *The Diaspora of a Woman*. Amman: Dar Fada'at. رواشدة، هدى.
(٢٠١٠). *اغتراب امرأة*. عمان: دار فضاءات.

Sha'lan, S. (2004). *Falling in the Sun. Amman*: Waraq Association. الشعلان، سناء.
(٢٠٠٤). *السقوط في الشمس*. عمان: مؤسسة ورق.

Tawfiq, Q. (2009). *A Story Called Love*. Amman: Fada'at. توفيق، قاسم. (٢٠٠٩). *حكاية*
اسمها الحب. عمان: دار فضاءات.

Tayem, M. (2010). *Faces in Broken Glass*. Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers. تيم، منى.
(٢٠١٠). *وجوه في مرايا متكسرة*. بيروت: المؤسسة العربية للدراسات والنشر.

Tellawi, F. (2010). *Who Hangs the Bell?* Cairo: The Centre of Arab
Civilization. تلاوي، فيصل. (٢٠١٠). *من يعلق الجرس*. القاهرة: مركز الحضارة العربية.

Tellawi, F. (2007). *The Bee Hive*. Cairo: The Centre of Arab Civilization. تلاوي، فيصل.
(٢٠٠٧). *وكر الزنابير*. القاهرة: مركز الحضارة العربية.

Zaghmout, F. (2012). *The Bride of Amman*. Amman: Fada'at. زغموت، فادي. (٢٠١٢).
عروس عمان. عمان: فضاءات.

Secondary resources:

Abed, T. (2009). When Wolves Grow Old A Novel That Transgresses Taboos. *Al-Itihad Newspaper*. [Online]. Available at: http://www.alittihad.ae/details.php?id=11256&y=2009 [Accessed 13 June 2014.]جريدة الإتحاد .عندما تشيخ الذئاب رواية تقتحم المسكوت عنه .(٢٠٠٩) .عابد، توفيق

Abu Khalil, A. A. (1997). Gender Boundaries and Sexual Categories in the Arab World. *Gender Issues*, 15(1), 91-104.

Abu - Lughod, L. (2013). *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge; London: Harvard University press.

Abu-Lughod, L. (2001). Orientalism and Middle East Feminist Studies. *Feminist Studies*, 27(1), 101-113.

Abu-Lughod, L. (1998). *Remaking Women Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Abu Nidal, N. (2009). *Gardens of a Female Theoretical and Applied Studies in Feminist Creativity*. Amman: Dar Azminah. حدائق الأنثى .(٢٠٠٩) .أبو نضال، نزيه دراسات نظرية وتطبيقية في الإبداع النسوي. عمان: دار أزمنه.

Abu Nidal, N. (2004). *Rebellion of a Female in the Novels of Arab Women and a Bibliography of Arab Feminist Novels (1885-2005).* Beirut: The Arab Association for Studies and Publishing. تمرد الأنثى في رواية(2004) .أبو نضال، نزيه المرأة العربية وببليوجرافيا الرواية النسوية العربية. بيروت: المؤسسة العربية للدراسات والنشر.

Abu Odeh, L. (2010). Honour Killings and the Construction of Gender in Arab Societies. *American Journal of Comparative Law*, 58(4), 911-952.

Abu Sha'ar, H. (Eds.) (2008). *The Woman and the Role: a Jordanian Insight*. Beirut: The Arab Association for Studies and Publishing. المرأة .(٢٠٠٩) .أبو الشعر، هند والدور، نظرة أردنية. بيروت: المؤسسة العربية للدراسات والنشر.

Abu Sulayman, H.A. (1993). Crisis in the Muslim Mind. *Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought*, 4-22.

Ahmed, L. (1992). *Women and Gender in Islam Historical Roots of a Modern Debate.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Ahmed, L. (1982). Feminism and Feminist Movements in the Middle East, a Preliminary Exploration: Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, People's Republic of Yemen. *Women Studies International Forum*, 5(2), 153-1968.

Al-Ali, N. (2000). *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: the Egyptian Women's Movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Al-Ali, N. (1994). *Gender Writing/Writing Gender: The Representation of Women In a Selection of Modern Egyptian Literature*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

Alatiyat, I. and Barari, H. (2010). Liberating Women with Islam? The Islamists and Women's Issues in Jordan. *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 11(3-4), 359-378.

Alatiyat, I. (2003). *The Women's Movement in Jordan: Activism, Discourses and Strategies*. PhD, Freie Universität Berlin.

Al-Ghanim, K. (2014). The Intellectual Frameworks and Theoretical Limits of Arab Feminist Thought. In J.S., Makdisi, N. Bayoumi and R.R. Sidawi (Eds.). *Arab Feminisms Gender and Equality in the Middle East.* London: I.B. Tauris in Association with Centre for Arab Unity Studies, pp. 145-156.

Al-Ghitani, G. (1987). *Najib Mahfouz Yatadhakar*. Cairo: Akhbar Al-Yawm. الغيطاني،
جمال. (١٩٨٧). نجيب محفوظ يتذكر. القاهرة: أخبار اليوم.

Ali, K. (2013). *Sexual Ethics and Islam Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence.* London: Oneworld.

Al-Maini, A. (2010). When Wolves Are Discovered? A Preview of When Wolves Grow Old. *More Than Life Blog*. [Online]. Available at: http://morethan1life.blogspot.co.uk/2010/02/blog-post_6155.html [Accessed 13 June 2014]. المعيني، أحمد حسن. (٢٠١٠). متى تتكشف الذئاب؟ عرض لرواية "عندما تشيخ
الذئاب". مدونة أكثر من حياة.

Almala, A. (2014). *Gender and Guardianship in Jordan: Femininity, Compliance, and Resistance*. PhD Thesis. SOAS, University of London.

Al-Nabulsi, S. (Eds.). (1993). *The Jordanian Novel and its Position within the Arabic Novel*. Amman: Azmina Press. النابلسي، شاكر. (١٩٩٣). *الرواية الأردنية وموقعها على خريطة الرواية العربية*. عمان: دار ازمنه.

Al-Naimi, S. (2011). Burhan Al-Asal: Arab Women and Sex, from the Forbidden to the Erotic. *Hadhramaut News*. [Online]. Available at: http://www.hadhramautnews.net/news-588.htm [Accessed 15 March 2014]. النعيمي، سلوى. (٢٠١١). برهان العسل. المرأة العربية والجنس. من الحرمنة إلى الإباحية. حضرموت نيوز.

Al-Naqshabandi, B. (2001). *The Political Participation of Women in Jordan and in Some Arab Countries*. Beirut: The Arab Association for Studies and Publishing. النقشبندي، بارعة. (٢٠٠١). *المشاركة السياسية للمرأة في الأردن وبعض الدول العربية*. بيروت: المؤسسة العربية للدراسات والنشر.

Al-Omari, M. (2010). Outside the Body Novel: A (Fragile) Jordanian Copy of the *Girls of Riyadh* or a Personal Dissection and not a Social One. *Star Times Blog*. [Online]. Available at: http://www.startimes.com/f.aspx?t=23397843 [Accessed 09 May 2014]. العمري، محمد حسن. (٢٠١٠). رواية خارج الجسد نسخة أردنية (هشة) لبنات الرياض أم تشريح شخصي لا مجتمعي. منتديات ستار تايمز.

Al-Qadoumi, W. (2013). When Wolves Grow Old Broke all Novelistic Taboos. *Inkitab*. [Online]. Available at: http://www.inkitab.me/?p=333 [Accessed 11 March 2014] القدومي، وليد. (٢٠١٣) . عندما تشيخ الذئاب تكسر المحرمات. انكتاب.

Al-Qasim, A. (2008). The Language of Sex of Arab Women Writers and its Effects on Readers. *Alhewar*. [Online]. Available at: http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=124111 [Accessed 14 March 2014] القاسم، أحمد. (٢٠٠٨). لغة الجنس لدى الكاتبات العربيات وأثرها على القارئ. الحوار.

Al-Rai Newspaper. (2006). Editorial: "Outside the Body" Motives of Revenge Does not Produce a Novelistic Work. [Online]. Available at: http://www.alrai.com/article/150661.html [Accessed 24 March 2014]. جريدة الرأي. (٢٠٠٦). خارج الجسد. دواعي الانتقام لا تنتج عملا روائيا.

Al-Rai Newspaper. (2006). Editorial: Anwaar for Taher Al-Odwan in Televised
Drama by Nazih Abu Nidal. [Online]. Available at:
http://www.alrai.com/article/158030.html [Accessed 10 November 2015]
جريدة الرأي. (٢٠٠٦). انوار الطاهر العدوان في عمل درامي تلفزيوني.

Al-Sa'afin, I. (1993). The Jordanian Novelistic Narrative from the Beginnings. In. S.
Al-Nabulsi (Eds.). *The Jordanian Novel and Its Position within the Arabic
Novel*. Amman: Azmina Press. السعافين، إبراهيم. (١٩٩٣). النص الروائي الأردني منذ
البدايات. عمان: دار أزمنة.

Al-Salhout, J. (2011). Jamal Naji's Novel When Wolves Grow Old. *Al-Hewar Blog*.
[Online]. Available at: http://www.m.ahewar.org/s.asp?aid=245867&r=0
السلحوت، جميل. (٢٠١١). عندما تشيخ الذئاب لجمال ناجي. منتديات .[accessed 11 March 2014]
الحوار.

Al- Sharmani, M. (2014). Islamic Feminism Transnational and National Reflections.
Approaching Religion, 4(2), 83-94.

Al-Tal, S. (1985). *Introductions to Women's Issues and the Jordanian Women's
Movement*. Amman: The Arabic Institution of Studies and Publications. التل، سهير.
مقدمات في قضية المرأة والحركة النسائية الأردنية. المعهد العربي للدراسات والنشر. (١٩٨٥)

Al-Tafsir of the Holy Qur'an. [Online]. Available at: http://www.altafsir.com/
[Accessed 24 May 2014].

Al-Tamimi, F. (1999). *Thirty*. Al-Sharjah, U.A.E.: Department of Media and
التميمي، فيروز. (١٩٩٩). ثلاثون. الشارقة: قسم الثقافة والحضارة.Culture

Amawi, A. (2001). *Against All Odds Jordanian Women, Elections and Political
Empowerment*. Amman: Konrad Adenauer Foundation Amman.

Amireh, A. (2000). Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational
World. *Signs*, 26(1), 215-249.

Araji, S. K. and Carlson, J. (2001). Family Violence Including Crimes of Honour in
Jordan: Correlates and Perceptions of Seriousness. *Violence against Women*,
7(5), 586-621.

Attwood, F. (2006). Sexed up: Theorizing the Sexualisation of Culture.
Sexualities, *9*(1), 77-94.

Badran, M. (2011). From Islamic Feminism to a Muslim Holistic Feminism. *Institute of Development Studies*, 42(1), 78-87.

Badran, M. (2009). *Feminism in Islam Secular and Religious Convergences*. Oxford: Oneworld.

Badran, M. (2005). Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 1(1), 6-28.

Badran, M. (2001). Locating Feminism: The Collapse of Secular and Religious Discourses in the Mashriq, Agenda. *Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 16(50), 41-57.

Badran, M. (1995). *Feminists, Islam and Nation*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Badran, M. (1986). Islam, Patriarchy and Feminism in the Middle East. *Trends in History*, *4*(1), 49-71.

Baffoun, A. (1982). Women and Social Change in the Muslim Arab World. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 5(2), 227-242.

Bakar, Y. (2010). We Are Not In The Era of the Novel; Rather We Are In the Time of Poetry. [Online]. Available at: http://www.alapn.com/ar/news.php?cat=3&id=10579 [Accessed 14 June 2014]. بكار، يوسف. (٢٠١٠). نحن لسنا في زمن الرواية بل في زمن الشعر. ونعاصر أزمة نقد ناتجة عن أزمة في النقاد. وكالة أنباء الشعر.

Bakr, O. (2015). The Interpretive Legacy of Qiwamah as an Exegetical Construct. In Z., Mir-Hosseini, M. Al-Sharmani, and J. Rumminger (Eds.). *Men in Charge? Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition*. London: Oneworld, pp.44-64.

Barakat, H. (1993). *The Arab World Society Culture and State*. Berkeley: The University of California Press.

Barlas, A. (2002). *Believing Women' in Islam Unreading Patriarchal Interpretation of the Qur'an*. Austin: The University of Texas Press.

Baron, B. (1994). *The Women's Awakening in Egypt, Society and the Press*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

Barret, M. (1980) *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis*. London: New Left Books.

Bhambra, G. (2011a). Talking among Themselves? Weberian and Marxist Historical Sociologies as Dialogues without 'Others'. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 1-15.

Bhambra, G. (2011b). Historical Sociology, Modernity, and Postcolonial Critique. *The American Historical Review*, 111(3), 653-662.

Bhambra, G. (2007a). Multiple Modernities or Global Interconnections: Understanding the Global Post the Colonial. In N. Karagiannis and P. Wagner. *Varieties of World-Making: Beyond Globalization*. Vol. 14. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, pp. 59-73.

Bhambra, G. (2007b). *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bier, L. (2011). *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt*. Stanford University Press.

Bin Shawi, H. (2010). When Wolves Grow Old: The Beauty of Narration and the Creativity of Writing. *Djazair News*. [Online]. Available at: http://www.djazairess.com/djazairnews/10606 [Accessed 13 June 2014]. بن الشاوي، هشام. (٢٠١٠). "عندما تشيخ الذئاب" لجمال ناجي: فتنة السرد وألق الكتابة. الجزائر نيوز.

Brand, L. (1998). *Women, the State, and Political Liberalization Middle Eastern and North African Experiences*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bulbeck, C. (1998). *Re-orienting Western Feminisms Women's Diversity in Postcolonial World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bullock, K. (2002). *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes*. Herndon, Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought.

Ceccato, D. (1995). The Figure of the Lover in Popular Arabic Drama of the Early Twentieth Century. In R. Allen, H., Kilpatrick, H. and E. De Moor, (Eds.). *Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature*. London: Al Saqi.

Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincialising Europe*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Clark, J. and Shwedler, J. (2003). Who Opened the Window? Women's Activism in Islamist Parties. *Comparative Politics*, 293-312.

Cohen-Mor, D. (2005). *Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories*. State University of New York Press.

Cooke, M. (2001). *Women Claim Islam Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature.* New York; London: Routledge.

Cooke, M. (2000). Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies. Nepantla: *Views from South*, 1(1) 91-110.

Cooke, M. (2000). Women, Religion and the Postcolonial Arab World. *Cultural Critique*, (45) Spring, 150-184.

Cooke, M. (1999). Feminist Transgressions in the Postcolonial Arab World. *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 8(14), 93-105.

Coomaraswamy, R. (2003). *Integration of the Human Rights of Women and the Gender Perspective: Violence against Women*. UN, 2003.

Dababneh, A. (2006). *The Jordanian Women's Movement: A Historical Analysis Focusing on Legislative Change*. PhD Thesis. University of Leicester.

Darraj, S. (2002). Understanding the Other Sister: The Case of Arab Feminism. *Monthly Review*, 3(1).

Darvishpour, M. (2003). Islamic Feminism: Compromise or Challenge. *Iran Bulletin: Middle East Forum*, 55-58.

De Beauvoir, S. (1973). *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books.

Dodin, R. (2008). *The Discourse of the Contemporary Arab Feminist Novel.*
Amman: Publications of Greater Amman Municipality. دودين، رفقة. (٢٠٠٨).
خطاب الرواية النسوية العربية المعاصرة. عمان: منشورات أمانة عمان.

Droeber, J. (2003). "Woman to Woman"- The significance of Religiosity for Young
Women in Jordan. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 26(5), 409-424.

Dunne, B. (1998). Power and Sexuality in the Middle East. *Middle East Report,*
(206), 8-11.

Edwards, M. (2005). *Islamic Fundamentalism since 1945*. London; New York:
Routledge Taylor and Frances.

El Feki, S. (2013). *Sex and the Citadel Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*.
London: Vintage Books.

El- Guindi, F. (2003). *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance (Dress, Body, Culture)*.
Oxford: Berg.

EL Saadawi, N. (2007). *The Hidden Face of Eve Women in the Arab World*. London;
New York: Zed Books.

El Saadawi, N. (1988). Introduction. In N. Toubia (Eds.). *Women of the Arab World
the Coming Challenge*. London; New Jersey: Zed Books.

El Saadawi, N. (1982). Woman and Islam. *Women Studies International Forum*,
5(2), 193-206.

El Saadawi, N. (1980). Arab Women and Western Feminism: An Interview with
Nawal El Saadawi. *Race Class,* 22, 175.

El Sadda, H. (2014). Gender Studies in the Arab World: Reflections and Questions
on the Challenges of Discourses, Locations and History. In J.S., Makdisi, N.
Bayoumi and R.R. Sidawi (Eds.). *Arab Feminisms Gender and Equality in
the Middle East.* London: I.B. Tauris in Association with Centre for Arab
Unity Studies, pp. 19-30.

Embassy of Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Washington D.C. [Online]. Available at: http://www.jordanembassyus.org/page/culture-and-religion [Accessed 10 July 2014].

Eyadat, Z. (2013). Islamic Feminism: Roots, Development and Politics. *Global Policy,* 4(4), 359-368.

Faqir, F. (2001). Interfamily Femicide in Defence of Honour: The Case of Jordan. *Third World Quarterly*, 22(1), 65-82.

Garcia, K. (2014). Islamic Feminism in the Time of Democracy. Law School Student Scholarship. Paper 472. [Online] Available at: http://scholarship.shu.edu/student_scholarship/472. [Accessed 15 March 2015].

Gatens, M. (1996). *Imaginary Bodies. Ethics, Power and Corporeality.* London: Routledge.

Ghanim, D. (2009). *Gender Violence in the Middle East*. Westport, Connecticut; London: Praeger.

Ghoussoub, M. (1987). Feminism or the Eternal Masculine in the Arab World. *New Left Review*, 1(161).

Gills, R. (2003). From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification: The Resexualisation of Women's Bodies in the Media. *Feminist Media Studies*, *3*(1), 100-106.

Gillian, C. (2011). *Joining the Resistance.* Cambridge: Polity Press

Gillis, S. Howie, G., and Munford, R. (Eds.). (2007). *Third Wave Feminism A Critical Exploration.* Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gocek, F. and Balaghi, S. (1994). *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity, and Power*. Columbia University Press.

Goldschmidt Jr, A. (2008). The Historical Context. In J. Schwedler, D.J. Gerner. (Eds.). *Understanding the Contemporary Middle East*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, pp. 37-84.

Golley N. (2004). Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women? *Third World Quarterly*, 25(3), 521-536.

Goodwin, J. (2003). *Price of Honour Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence on Islamic World.* New York; London: PLUME.

Graham-Brown, S. (2003). The Seen, the Unseen, and the Imagined: Private and Public Spaces. In R. Lewis, and S. Mills. *Feminist Postcolonial Theory a Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 502-519.

Grafton, D. (2012). The Arab Shaykh: Authority in Christian and Muslim Communities, and Questions of Social-political Reform. *Islam and Christian –Muslim Relations*, 23(1), 19-30.

Gray, H., D. (2013). *Beyond Feminism and Islamism*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Husni, R. and Newman, D.L. (2007). *The Status of Women in Islamic Law and Society*. New York: Routledge.

Haddad, Y. and Esposito, J. (Eds.). (1998). *Islam, Gender and Social Change*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hamada, B. I. (2001). The Arab Image in the Minds of Western Image-Makers. *Journal of International Communication*, 7(1), 7-35.

Hamadeh, N. (2014). Recognition of Difference: Towards a More Effective Feminism. In J.S., Makdisi, N. Bayoumi and R.R. Sidawi (Eds.). *Arab Feminisms Gender and Equality in the Middle East.* London: I.B. Tauris in Association with Centre for Arab Unity Studies, pp. 31-40.

Hasan, M. (2012). Feminism as Islamophobia: A Review of Misogyny Charges against Islam. *Intellectual Discourse*, 20(1), 55-78.

Hatem, M. (2014). What Do Women Want? A Critical Mapping of Future Directions for Arab Feminisms. In J.S., Makdisi, N. Bayoumi and R.R. Sidawi (Eds.). *Arab Feminisms Gender and Equality in the Middle East.* London: I.B. Tauris in Association with Centre for Arab Unity Studies, pp. 3-18.

Humm, M. (1986). *Feminist Criticism: Women as Contemporary Critics*. Harvester.

Hussein, M. (2010). *Virginity and Culture: A Study in the Anthropology of the Body*. Damascus Dar Publishing and Distribution.

Ilkkaracan, P. (2002). Women, Sexuality and Social Change in the Middle East and the Maghreb. *Social Research,* 69(3), 753-779.

Jacquemond, R. (2008). *Conscience of the Nation Writers, State and Society in Modern Egypt*. Cairo; New York: The American University in Cairo Press.

Jeenah, N.E. (2006). The National Liberation Struggle and Islamic Feminisms in South Africa. *Women's studies international forum,* 29(1), 27-41.

Jeenah, N. (2001). Towards an Islamic Feminist Hermeneutic. *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 21, 36-70.

Joseph, S. and Slyomovics S. (2001). *Women and Power in the Middle East.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Joseph, S. (1996). Patriarchy and Development in the Arab World. *Gender and Development*, 4(2), 14-19.

Jum'a, Hussein. (2005). 'Modernity Does Not Mean Rupture with Tradition'. *Newspaper of the University of Damascus*, 21(3, 4), 9-11. [Online]. Available at: http://www.damascusuniversity.edu.sy/mag/human/images/stories/00900.pdf جمعه، حسين. (٢٠٠٥). الحداثة لا تعني القطيعة مع التراث. مجلة [Accessed 01 April 2016] جامعة دمشق.

Kandiyoti, D. (1996). *Gendering the Middle East Emerging Perspectives*. London; New York: I.B.Tauris Publishers.

Kandiyoti, D. (Eds.). (1991). *Women, Islam and the State*. London: Macmillan.

Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with Patriarchy. *Gender and Society*, 2(3), 274-290.

Karam, A. (1998). Women*, Islamism and the State Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt*. London: Macmillan Press.

Karmi, G. (1996). Women, Islam and Patriarchalism. In M. Yamani *Feminism and Islam Legal and Literary Perspectives*. Reading: Ithaca Press.

Khalil, I. (2007). *In the Feminist Arabic Novel*. Amman: Ward Books. خليل، إبراهيم. (٢٠٠٧). *في الرواية النسوية العربية*. عمان: دار ورد.

Kikoski, C. (2000). Feminism in the Middle East: Reflections on Ethnographic Research in Lebanon. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy,* 11(4), 131-146.

King, A. (2009). Islam, Women and Violence. *Feminist Theology*, 17(3), 292-328.

Korany, B. (Eds.). (2010). *The Changing Middle East: A New Look at Regional Dynamics*. Cairo: American University of Cairo Press.

Kulwicki, A.D. (2002). The Practice of Honour Crimes: a Glimpse of Domestic Violence in the Arab World. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 23(1), pp.77-87.

Lamrabet, A. (2015). An Egalitarian Reading of the Concepts of Khilafah, Wilayah and Qiwamah. In Z., Mir-Hosseini, M. Al-Sharmani, and J.Rumminger (Eds.). *Men in Charge? Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition*. London: Oneworld, pp.65-87.

Larzeg, M. (1988). Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria. *Feminist Studies*, 14(1), 81-107.

Mahmood, S. (2009). Feminism, Democracy, and Empire: Islam and the war on terror. In H. Herzog, and A. Braude .*Gendering Religion and Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.193-216.

Mahmood, S. (2005). Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject. In F. Nouraie-Simone *On Shifting Ground Muslim Women in the Global Era*. New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, pp.111-152.

Majaj, S. L., Sunderman, W. P. and Saliba, T. (2002). *Intersections Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Majid, A. (1998).The Politics of Feminism in Islam. *Signs*, 23(2), 321-361.

Mamdooh, A. (2012). When Wolves Grow Old. *Al-Riyadh Newspaper*. [Online]. Available at: http://www.alriyadh.com/712264 [Accessed 10 March 2014].

ممدوح، عالية. (٢٠١٢). عندما تشيخ الذئاب. مجلة الرياض.

Mansur, Y., M. Shteiwi and N. Murad (2009). *The Economic Underpinning of Honour Crimes in Jordan*. Amman, Information and Research Centre, King Hussein Foundation. منصور، شتيوي، مراد. (٢٠٠٩). التبعات الاقتصادية لجرائم الشرف في الأردن. عمان: مركز المعلومات والأبحاث، مؤسسة الملك حسين.

Massoud, S. (2008). A Subjective Reading of Outside the Body. *Diwan Al-Arab*. [Online]. Available at: http://diwanalarab.com/spip.php?page=article&id_article=15294 [Accessed 23 October 2013]. مسعود، سامر. (٢٠٠٨). قراءة موضوعية في خارج الجسد. ديوان العرب.

Mehdid, M. (1993). A Western Invention of Arab Womanhood: the 'Oriental' Female. In H. Afshar (Eds.). *Women in the Middle East perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation.* Hampshire; London: Macmillan, pp.18-58.

Mehrez, S. (2007). Translating Gender. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 3(1), 106-127.

Mehrez, S. (1994). *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction Essays on Naguib Mahfouz, Sonalla Ibrahim, and Gamal al-Ghitani*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

Meriwether, M. and Tucker, J. (1999). *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East.* Boulder, Colo: Westview Press.

Mernissi, F. (1996). *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*. London; New Jersey: Zed Books.

Mernissi, F. (1992). *Islam and Democracy Fear of the Modern World*. Cambridge: Perseus Publishing.

Mernissi, F. (1991) *Women and Islam an Historical and Theological Enquiry*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Mernissi, F. (1987). *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Mernissi, F. (1975). *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing Company.

Mernissi, F. (1982). Virginity and Patriarchy. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 5(2), 183 -191.

Mikkola, M. (2011). Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Minai, N. (1981). *Women in Islam: Tradition and Transition in the Middle East*. New York: Seaview Books.

Minces, J. (1982). *The House of Obedience Women in Arab Society*. London: Zed Press.

Mir-Hosseini, Z. Al-Sharmani, M. and Rumminger, J. (Eds.). (2015). *Men in Charge? Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition*. London: Oneworld.

Moghadam, V. (2005). *Globalising Women Transnational Feminist Networks*. Baltimore; London: The John Hopkins University press.

Moghadam, V. (2003). *Modernising Women Gender and Social Change in the Middle East.* Boulder; London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Moghadam, V. (2002). Islamic Feminism and its Discontents: Towards a resolution of the Debate. *Signs*, 27(4), 1135-1171.

Moghadam, V., M. (1992). Patriarchy and the Politics of Gender in Modernizing Societies: Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. *International Sociology*, 7(1), 35-53.

Moghissi, H. (1999). *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism the Limits of Postmodern Analysis.* London; New York: Zed Books.

Mohanty, C. (1991). *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. *Feminist Review*, (30), 61-88.

Moi, T. (1999). *What Is a Woman and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moi, T. (1986). Feminist Literary Criticism. *Modern Literary Theory*, 204-221

Mojab, S. (2001). Theorising the Politics of 'Islamic Feminism'. *Feminist Review*, 69, 124-146.

Moten, A. (2011). Modernity, Tradition and Modernity in Tradition in Muslim societies. *Intellectual Discourse*, 19, 1-13.

Mussel, S. (2009). Book Review: *Gurminder Bhambra Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2007.

Najambadi, A. (2000). (Un) veiling Feminism. *Social Text*, 18(3), 29-45.

Narayan, U. (1998). Essence of Cultural and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism. *Hypatia*, 13(2), 86-106.

Nashat, G. and Tucker, J.E. (1999). *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Restoring Women to History*. Indiana University Press.

National Department of Literature and Publishing. (2001). *The Jordanian Woman. Amman*: Department of Literature and Publishing.

Nsheiwat, F. K. (2004). Honour Crimes in Jordan: Their Treatment under Islamic and Jordanian Criminal Laws. *Penn State International Law Review*, 23(2).

Oakley, A. (1985). *Sex, Gender and Society (Towards a New Society)*. London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Oakley, A. (1972). *Sex, Gender and Society*. London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd.

Obeidat, A. (2008). *The Jordanian Feminist Novel between Commitment and Narration from 1973-2002*. Amman: Publications of Greater Amman

عبيدات، أروى. (٢٠٠٨). *الرواية النسوية الأردنية بين الالتزام والسرد*. عمان: منشورات Municipality. أمانة عمان.

Ouedghiri M. (2002). Writing Women's Bodies on the Palimpsest of Islamic History: Fatima Mernissi and Assia Djebar. *Cultural Dynamics*, 14(41), 41-64.

Pettygrove, W., M. (2006). Obstacles to Women's Political Empowerment in Jordan: Family, Islam, and Patriarchal Gender Roles. Independent Study Project.

Rahal, G. (1999). *Mosaic*. Amman: Dar AL-Shourooq. رحال، غصون. (١٩٩٩). *موزاييك*. عمان: دار الشروق.

Rahman, F. (1982b). The Status of Women in Islam: A Modernist Interpretation. In H. Papanek and G. Minault. (Eds.). *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia.* Delhi: Chanakya Publications.

Rahman, M. and Jackson, S. (2010). *Gender and Sexuality: Sociological Approaches*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Rajan, R.S., and Park, Y. (2005). Postcolonial Feminism/Postcolonialism and Feminism. In H. Schwarz and S. Ray (Eds.). *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp.53-71.

Robbins, M. and Rubin, L. (2013). The Rise of Official Islam in Jordan. *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, 14(1), 59-74.

Roded, R. (1999). *Women in Islam and the Middle East a Reader*. New York: I.B. Tauris.

Ruane, R. A. (2000). Murder in the Name of Honour: Violence against Women in Jordan and Pakistan. *Emory International Law Review*, 14(3), 1523-1580.

Ryan, C. (2008). Islamist Political Activism in Jordan: Moderation, Militancy, and Democracy. *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 12(2), 1-13.

Sa'ar, A. (2005). Postcolonial Feminism, the Politics of Identification, and the Liberal Bargain. *Gender and Society*, 19(5), 680-700.

Sabbagh, S. (2003). *Arab Women between Defiance and Restraint*. Northampton: Olive Branch Press.

Sahafi. (2011). Editorial: Afaf Bataineh denies that her novel was accepted at the Amman Book Festival. [Online]. Available at: http://www.sahafi.jo/arc/art1.php?id=3b2533b9250bed4afada89ce503c83d10 166e064 [Accessed 24 March 2014]. صحفي. (٢٠١١). عفاف بطاينة تنفي بان روايتها قبلت في مهرجان الكتاب في عمان.

Saleh, F. (2001). Arabic Poetry Remains The Prime Literary Genre Despite The Spread of The Novel. [Online]. Available at: http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?issueno=8070&article=61771#.VyxyA NUrLcv [Accessed 14 June 2014]. صالح، فخري. (٢٠٠١). ما زال الشعر العربي سيد الأنواع الأدبية بالرغم من رواج الرواية. جريدة الشرق الأوسط.

Saliba, S. G. (2006). Beyond Orientalism and Islamophobia: 9/11, Anti-Arab Racism, and the Mythos of National Pride. *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 6(2), 245-266.

Saliba, T. (2000). Arab Feminism at the Millennium. *Signs*, 25(4), 1087-1092.

Scott, J.W. (1986). Gender as a Useful Category of Historical Analysis. *American Historical Review*, 91(5), 1053-1075.

Seedat, F. (2013a). When Islam and Feminism Converge. Hartfred Seminary, 404-420.

Seedat, F. (2013b). Islam, Feminism, and Islamic Feminism: between Inadequacy and Inevitability. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 29(2), 25-45.

Sharabi, H. (1988). *Neopatriarchy A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Shamsul Alam, S.M., (2002). Women in the Era of Modernity and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Case of Taslima Nasrin of Bangladesh. In T. Saliba, C. Allen and J. A. Howard *Gender, Politics and Islam*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 235-268.

Sheehi, S. (1997). Failure, Modernity and the Works of Hisham Sharabi: Towards a Post-colonial Critique of Arab Subjectivity. *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 6(10), 39-54.

Sika, N. (2011). The Millennium Development Goals: Prospects for Gender Equality in the Arab world. *Journal of International Women's Studies,* 1(3), 27-42.

Sonbol, E. A. (2003). *Women of Jordan Islam, Labour and the Law*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Stanley, L. and Wise, S. (1993). *Breaking Out Again: Feminist Ontology and Epistemology*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Stowasser, B. F. (1993). *Women's Issues in Modern Islamic Thought. Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*. J. E. Tucker. Washington, DC, Indiana University Press.

Subrahmanyam, S. (1997). Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia. *Modern Asian Studies*, *31*(03), pp.735-762.

Talhami, G.H. (1996). *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt*. University Press of Florida.

Taraki, L. (2008). The Role of Women. In J. Schwedler and D. J. Gerner (Eds.). *Understanding the Contemporary Middle East*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, pp.345-372.

Taraki, L. (1996). Jordanian Islamists and the Agenda for Women: Between Discourse and Practice. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 32(1), 140-158.

Taraki, L. (1995). Islam Is the Solution: Jordanian Islamists and the Dilemma of the Modern Woman. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 46(4), 643-661.

The Department of Statistic in Jordan Website. http://census.dos.gov.jo/ [Accessed 10 July 2014].

The Holy Qur'an

The League of Jordanian Writers Website. http://www.jo-writers.org/ [Accessed 15 May 2013].

The Ministry of Culture in Jordan Website. http://culture.gov.jo/new/ [Accessed 15 May 2013].

Treacher, A. (2003). Reading the Other Women, Feminism, and Islam. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 4(1), 59-71.

Tucker, J. (1993). *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

UNHCR. Country Operations Profile – Jordan. [Online]. Available at: http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486566.html [Accessed 12 December 2015].

UNRWA. Jordan. [Online]. Available at: http://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/jordan [Accessed 10 November 2015].

Valassopoulos, A. (2007). *Contemporary Arab Women Writers' Cultural Expression in Context*. London; New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.

Wadud, A. (2006). *Inside the Gender Jihad Women's Reform in Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.

Warrick, C. (2009). *Law In The Service of Legitimacy Gender and Politics In Jordan*. Surrey: Burlington: Ashgate.

West, C. and Zimmerman, D. (1987). Doing Gender. *Gender and Society*, 1(2), 125-151.

Walby, S. (1986). *Patriarchy at Work*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Wiktorowicz, Q. (1999). State Power and the Regulation of Islam in Jordan. *Journal of Church and State*, 677-696.

Williamson, J. (2003). Sexism with an Alibi. *The Guardian*, 31, pp.1-3.

Zaghmout, F. (2015). Starting Off as a Jordanian Blogger, I Never Dreamt of the Day I Will be Launching My Book in UK. And it just happened! *The Arab Observer*. [Online]. Available at: https://thearabobserver.wordpress.com/ [Accessed 15 November 2015].

Zaghmout, F. (2015). Sexual and Physical Rights are a Primary Component of Human Rights Awareness in "Gender" for Better Societies and Better Justice. *7iber*. [Online]. Available at: http://www.7iber.com/2015/06/concept-of-

زغموت، فادي [Accessed 24 November 2015]. gender-for-more-just-society/
(٢٠١٥). الحقوق الجسدية والجنسية ركن أساسي في التوعية للحقوق الانسان في الجندر لشعوب افضل.

Zuhur, S. (2008). Criminal Law, Women and Sexuality in the Middle East. Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East: Challenges and Discourses. In P. Ilkkaracan (Eds.) *Deconstructing Sexuality in The Middle East*. Aldershot, Ashgate, pp. 17-40.

Zuhur, S. (2003). Women and Empowerment in the Arab World. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 1-22.