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*ALEF* IS A KEY: BELONGING AND RESISTANCE IN MENA WOMEN'S  
FRAGMENTARY NARRATIVES

A Thesis Presented

by

Joy Burhan Sulaiman Mazahreh

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
Specializing in English

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## Abstract

In this thesis, “troubled” narratives written by women from the Middle East and North Africa tell stories of home and belonging. None of the narratives are whole, consistent, or ideal. They all shift and break into fragmented stories as a mechanism to remember things past, survive in the present, and hope for the future. As personal as these narratives are, the resistance relies in reading them as political texts. In each chapter, I view narrative shifts, such as voice changes according to story spaces, or anachronisms (as analepsis or prolepsis) as changes in form that reflect meanings of belonging and resistance in their historical, cultural, and political contexts.

Postcolonialism and transnational feminism, along with narrative and affect theory, inform my study in this thesis. I mainly adopt a Saidian mode of postcolonial resilience to stand against oppressive discourses. I echo Edward Said’s call for “writing back” through storytelling as a politics of hope instead of a politics of prejudice, blame, discrimination, and terror. My focus on women as writers and my ideas of intersectionality within transnational feminisms derive from the progressive politics of the Combahee River Collective and other related black feminist movements as well as Arab and Arab American voices like Nawal El Saadawi, Nadine Naber, Lila Abu-Lughod, among others.

From Iran, to Morocco, to Arabs in the diaspora, the multiplicity of the works I include in this study and the geographies they travel across is an argument of an achieved (yet inequivalent) commonality and solidarity with marginalized people and their struggles in this world. I also examine literature, the genre of the novel, and its narrative features (with a call in the afterword to study all MENA women’s cultural productions under a similar framework) as an access point to a better understanding and representation of such struggles.

While such shifts “trouble” the narrative, MENA women’s narratives in this thesis write back to the politics and form of the Eurocentric novel. Using the Saidian strategy of resistance, I find redemption in language and storytelling in speaking truth to oppressing ideologies and discourses. Thus, the collective and rich diversity of MENA women’s writings in their far-ranging narrative and literary techniques announces their strength and control over their own history and narrative.

إلى بابا، مثلي الأعلى—لا أحتفل بنجاحاتي إلا برؤية وجهك وسماع صوتك.

إلى ماما، صديقتي الأولى—لا يكتمل يومي إلا بحديثٍ يطولُ معك.

إلى سليمان، رفيقي الدائم—لا أحنّ إلا لذكريات أوقاتي معك.

إلى جويل، فرحة قلبي—لا أجد الجمال والإلهام إلا بك.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translation to English: To Baba, my role model—I do not celebrate my successes without seeing your face and hearing your voice. To Mama, my first friend—my day is not complete without my long conversations with you. To Sulieman, my forever partner—I do not long for memories unless they are with you. To Joelle, the joy of my heart—I do not find beauty or inspiration but in you.

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### ***Teta Liza: Stories of My Mother, My Grandmother, and the Land***

The first time I felt “troubled” was when I spent an evening at Teta Liza’s house without knowing when I would see Mama and Baba again. Earlier that day, I insisted that Mama attends my Christmas musical although she was very sick and had recently given birth to my baby sister. I was six years old, and this was the most important day in my life. She said she would make it but when I stood where I was supposed to on stage, I did not find her.

In the last row of the audience, very far away, I saw my mother’s friend carrying my younger brother in her arms. Baba picked us up after the performance and drove us to be with my baby sister who was staying at Teta Liza’s house. He said that Mama fainted during one of the performances while she was waiting for my turn, and that she was at the hospital. Baba said he will be back soon with mama, and they came at the end of the day to pick us up.

As insignificant as the wait time was, my world was shattered. My baby sister was crying in my aunt’s arms, my younger brother was asking where baba was, we were having dinner that mama did not prepare, and I did not know when I was going to see her again. Would we ever make it back to our home? Should I adjust to living in the spare room at Teta’s house and take care of my brother and sister for the rest of my life?

Now, I live in the US and Teta Liza lives in Canada. I call her to ask how she is. I also ask about the time she left home and never made it back. Teta Liza was born in Jaffa in 1938. She says she went to the Rosary School for Girls, and after class she would go to the beach and pick oranges from the trees in the park on the way back. She says the

beaches in Jaffa are the most beautiful in the world. I believe her. She also says that Muslims, Jews, and Christians lived happily together. She says they lived under the British mandate but would still travel across the country and celebrate holidays, even Halloween. She was only ten years old when the settlers started to appear, so her family escaped to Jordan. She says they left all their belongings at home and only took the key; they knew they would come back. Teta Liza now lives in Canada and has not returned home ever since.

She asks, “Do you also want to learn about Sido’s story *Allah yirhamu*, may he rest in peace?”

Sido was ten years older than Teta and was born in Jaffa too. “His house was on the beach and his neighborhood had museums. He went to the Orthodox School, *ahsan taa’lim*, the best education.” During the mandate, Sido worked as a mechanic for the British army. His family did not escape to Jordan like Teta’s but went to Lebanon. In 1950, his family moved to Jordan and gained citizenship like all the Palestinians at the time. Sido passed when I was one year old, He departed the world far away from his home, far away from the house that was on the most beautiful beach in the world.

In May 2021, six Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah, a neighborhood in Jerusalem, anticipated the decision of being evicted. For the first time in my life, I witnessed global attention to the protests against the decision. Globally, people were devastated also about the strikes on Gaza that were initiated days after. While most of the world were at home due to a global pandemic, many Palestinians were being stripped of their homes—just like Teta Liza. As devastating as the events were, it was fascinating to watch how Arabic-speaking communities used language to spread awareness and tell the



world a side of the narrative that is not heard. News and stories from Gaza and Sheikh Jarrah spread around the world in all languages, and there was no way to stop them. Although a ceasefire came into effect almost ten days later, many are still displaced, and the stories are continuing to be shared and told.

This thesis is an attempt to continue spreading stories and narratives that are not usually heard. I wish I could tell my six-year-old self how far away from home I am now, but how close to home I feel. I wish I could tell her that my “trouble” now is the paradox of learning about home away from home and how the real “trouble” is one like Teta’s—never being able to make the journey back.

In this thesis, “troubled” narratives written by women from the Middle East to North Africa tell stories of home and belonging. None of the narratives are whole, consistent, or ideal. They all shift and break into fragmented stories as a mechanism to remember things past, survive in the present, and hope for the future. As personal as these narratives are, the resistance relies in reading them as political texts. Every kitchen talk is a political manifestation, every meal bears more power to the fighters of the revolution, and every word is a retelling of a history waiting to be written by MENA women.

Seeing this work come to life has been a joy and an honor. I am deeply grateful for: Professor Helen C. Scott’s guidance and kindness in the past two years, thank you for being an unforgettable mentor since my first day at UVM; Professor Lokangaka Losambe’s time, support, and open doors; Professor Zeina Salame’s warm investment in my story and scholarship; and Professor Tina Escaja’s support. Many thanks to the Fulbright Program and the Binational Fulbright Commission in Jordan for granting me this opportunity; Brettene Sanders for finding a friend in me and I in her during my time

in Vermont; and Michael Williamson for believing in me and my work, this journey would not have been as memorable without your constant presence and support.

To my family—Baba, Mama, Sulieman, and Joelle—you are the light of my eyes.

## ***Illa Kul Al Asmaa'*, To All the Names: An Introduction**

*Alef is the letter, He is the shape*

*Of a Key*

—Ibtisam Barakat, “A Song for Alef”

I imagine a multiplicity of narratives when I think of exile as a concept and an experience. My grandmother’s story is one example, the families in Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, savoring each day in their homes as if it were their last, is another. Two years ago, I *chose* exile. I left Amman, a home I have known all my life, and arrived as a Fulbright scholar to the US. I am expected, as part of this exchange, to bring so much of home with me and share it with those around me. And although I have done that over the last two years, I have also been simultaneously creating a new space, my own home, in the new place I am now at.

While reflecting on my chosen exile, I also remember other experiences of displacement and dispossession. As much agency as I have had in my own experience and understanding of exile as a concept, many people do not share the same privilege. I remember working with tens of Iraqi women who told me stories of how they escaped war on foot, running away from death, crossing borders, walking in isolate deserts for tens of days with their families, and seeking asylum in Jordan. I cannot fathom the sudden experience of exile so many individuals face when I think of how surreal it was for me, even though I have prepared for my departure for many months, to live somewhere new.

With exile comes loss. Edward Said, in many talks, reflects on his experience visiting the home he was born in after years of exile. Arriving to the house, he finds it

completely transformed into multiple offices, no longer a *home*. Rather than going in, Said decides to gaze at it from the outside, and imagine it, as what he calls and theorizes, a “remembered presence.” In my chosen exile, I think of home under a similar light. I navigate the “inheritance of loss”<sup>2</sup> that has been passed through generations from my maternal grandparents unto me, while surrounding such inheritance with a “remembered presence.” Although my grandmother, mother, and I now live in different places, I remember the presence of us together, the stories we share, and the memories we hold. I also choose, by linking both concepts, to celebrate my exile. Rather than placing myself within a conflict and binary of belonging and alienation, I rather negotiate with such circumstances. And, while I carry this generational dispossession with me, I allow myself the possibility of existing elsewhere, of being more than one thing, and of continuously creating a new space for who I am and who I want to be. Looking back only helps me to look forward.

In this thesis, all the writers are women and from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). I identify with many of them, being myself a woman from the MENA region, but I also find commonality between my negotiations with troubledness (of identity and belonging) and what these writers aesthetically do in their work to navigate similar experiences. Although categorizing all the writers in this study under a singular group as MENA women might be perceived as essentialist, I aim to showcase—under this definition—the experience of “being a MENA woman” that produces such writers.

MENA women, and people in the region, have lived—over centuries—under histories of European colonialism, and more recently, under the continuity of US

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<sup>2</sup> Also the title of one of Kiran Desai’s brilliant novels.

imperialism. They have also survived numerous wars in the twentieth and twenty-first century, have prioritized solidarity with the Palestinian question, and have experienced the “Arab Spring.” This series of social, historical, and political forces create the common experience of being MENA. Throughout the thesis, I refer to such negotiations with troubledness as the “postcolonial” experience of “MENA women.” While I am aware of the limitations of such terms, I aim to highlight the common, yet diverse, experience of dispossession and liberation that many oppressed people from different identities and backgrounds share.

Although such common conditions shape the writers I am looking at in this thesis, they are not *just* MENA women. The multiplicity of works in this thesis reflects the diversity and variety of MENA women’s formal innovation. While all may have been in similar experiences of oppression, displacement, exile, or belonging, they each interrogate the form in which they write such experiences differently. Thus, they commit to creating cultural productions that do not only push back against Eurocentric ideologies, but also its form.

Even as a MENA woman, the way I approach such works and interact with them can be different than how other readers and intellectuals within and from the same region do. Thus, by emphasizing the diversity and variety of MENA women’s readership and authorship, I also recognize that such label is not a question of identity but rather a question of relation to global power. In this way, I can relate to the individualistic experiences in the variety of works included in this thesis both on a personal and collective level.

Deepa Kumar, an Indian-American scholar and activist, recognizes Orientalism as “[coming] into being in the context of European colonization” and other political forces and world systems mentioned before (18). And while such ideology and discourse has deeply affected the region, I do not assume that *all* MENA women writers have successfully produced works that do not engage with (or are) orientalist narratives. I have carefully chosen, however, the works in this thesis to reflect a creative, independent, and innovative selection that rather criticize the reductive orientalist image of the region (and women in the region).

In this thesis, I argue that the body of works included negotiate, through form, issues of belonging and resistance. I lay out in the first chapter how my research is informed by the liminality of Edward Said’s personal history and his literary, cultural, and political analysis. I also reflect on Nawal El Saadawi’s writings, commitment to praxis and analysis of actual material conditions, genuine internationalism, and intimacy with working-class women, which influence my scholarship of solidarity.

In chapter two, I analyze examples of narrative shifts in voice and point of view and ask what do particular shifts in novel-writing and narration bring to negotiations of belonging and resistance. I notice clear patterns on how voices shift in comparison to time and space. First-person restricted narrative voice can focus on interiority and is often considered the interior or personal voice of the narrator, allowing a sense of belonging to a particular space. Second-person narrative voice can serve as an invitation to the reader to share the same experience. It can also serve as a call for action to the reader regarding issues of injustice and/or alienation. Third-person can place a distance between the

subject and the narrative and can allow the possibility of not having a clear identity or relation to a certain time or space, without considering it a flaw or a conflict.

Chapter three focuses on Palestinian women writers as a case study. The works in the chapter use shifts in form to reflect and analyze the emotional state of finding home or making the journey back home (even when it is not granted in real-life). I expand my argument with new examples in chapter four and bring language as home (or a new space) into question. Rather than divorcing concerns of aesthetics and form with political concerns, I show the socio-political and cultural importance of such choices in how the narrative is written and told. I also view such “troubled” shifts as imitations of the fragmentariness of the diasporic and postcolonial experience, and as a call for solidarity in sharing and retelling such troubled narratives globally.

I dedicate this thesis to trouble. This thesis is to *Al ‘Um, Al Jadda, Al ‘Ard, wa Al Lughha* (الأم، الجدة، الأرض، واللغة), my mother, my grandmother, the land, and language—all feminine in Arabic. This thesis is to women and people all over the world. May *you* find meanings of home, belonging, and resistance. May *you* recognize that there is power in troubledness, and may *you* know that your story is heard.

### ***Najla: Remembering Edward Said and Nawal El Saadawi***

I remember when I found Edward Said and Nawal El Saadawi for the first time. I was introduced to Said in a “Literary Theory and Criticism” course during my bachelor’s degree at the University of Jordan. Despite his work not being assigned in the syllabus, the professor’s description of the Palestinian-American scholar who is “the father of postcolonialism” occupied my mind for a long time. Years later, on Mother’s Day,<sup>3</sup> I met the face of Nawal El Saadawi on my screen. A friend posted a picture of her in black and white framed with colorful flowers, and captioned it: “‘Feminism is embedded in the culture and in the struggle of all women all over the world.’ Rest in Peace Nawal El Saadawi (1931-2021).” I realized then that I met the mother of Arab Feminism the day she passed, on March 21<sup>st</sup> of 2021.

That same year, I packed my belongings and left Amman, Jordan, a home I have known all my life. Little did I know that I would carry the memory of Said and El Saadawi with me. Here in the US, I experienced *Al Ghurbeh* (الغربة), meaning exile, expatriation, and also alienation. In his introduction to *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said suggests that the world “gets into” literature. Literature is not abstract but determined by “historical experience, and in particular the experience of dislocation, exile, migration and empire” (xxxii). From that moment, my approach to literature was ruptured; as much as I still wanted to learn about the world through literature, I also longed to learn about my home while I was away from it.

As the experience of *Al Ghurbeh* becomes my reality, I refuge in Said and El Saadawi and have made them the father and the mother of my journey. I find

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<sup>3</sup> Mother’s Day in the MENA region is on March 21<sup>st</sup> every year.



reconciliation in the theoretical influence that they both have and how it, along with their interest in fiction (Said analyzing it and El Saadawi writing it), aligns with their interest in the real world. My own scholarship is informed by Said and El Saadawi's consciousness, activism, and scholarship, as well as the balance between their personal histories, literary criticism, cultural theory, and fiction writing. The most important lesson they have taught me thus far is that I cannot separate my interest in the world with my longing for home, and how—despite *Al Ghurbeh*— I can be at home *with* the world.

My first in-depth learning experience of Edward Said was watching *Edward Said: The Last Interview*, a two-hour documentary, and the final interview before his passing on September 24<sup>th</sup> of 2003 after suffering from leukemia. He talks to Charles Glass about his coming of age under colonialism and the deep layers of repression caused by it, as well as the anti-Arab racism he later experiences during his time in the US. He also talks about the reconciled duality and the impossibility of fitting into the stereotypical notions and binaries of colonial discourse, his development of exile as a concept, the rapture in being out of place, and the ecstasy in his concentration on humanity.

The documentary is one window into Said's life of scholarship dedicated to unpacking such concepts in close detail through literary and cultural examples and phenomena. Said's legacy does not only reside in his books and writings but also (as the focus of this thesis is on MENA women writers) in the writings of his daughter—Najla Wadad Said. After reading both Said's memoir, *Out of Place*, and his daughter's, *Looking for Palestine*, I find similarities and differences that have helped me gain a better understanding of my journey through *Al Ghurbeh*.

The following comparative reading is an anecdote to showcase personal experiences of exile and alienation that form the paradox of a “troubled” identity, and how to navigate such “troubledness” in the face of oppressive world systems. This is how each memoir begins:

Edward Said: All families invent their parents and children, give each of them a story, character, fate, and even a language. *There was always something wrong with how I was invented and meant to fit in with the world* of my parents and four sisters. Whether this was because I constantly misread my part or because of some deep flaw in my being I could not tell for most of my early life. (my emphasis, 3)

Najla Wadad Said: I am a Palestinian-Lebanese-American Christian woman, but I grew up as a Jew in New York City. I began my life, however, as a WASP. I was born in Boston to an Ivy League literature professor and his wife, baptized into the Episcopal Church at the age of one, and, at five, sent to an all-girls private school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, one that boasts among its alumnae such perfectly formed and well-groomed American blue bloods as the legendary Jacqueline Onassis. *It was at that point that I realized that something was seriously wrong— with me.* (my emphasis, 1)

While Edward Said zooms in from a worldly perspective, “*all families,*” to a personal one, “*my early life,*” Najla Said zooms out from the personal, “*I am a Palestinian-Lebanese-American Christian woman,*” to the political—and from the regional (*Boston/ Ivy League/ Episcopal Church/ Manhattan*) to the world. The paradox of the “troubled” identity comes to life simultaneously with displacement and movement and brings feelings of alienation to both of them. They both *know*, however, that something is *wrong*. And they both blame themselves for it.

But, as Edward Said thinks of his life as a play in which he is constantly misreading his part, his daughter initially produces her life’s story as play, *Palestine*, then writes the stage on paper as a memoir. And while Edward hates his English name, Najla

hates her Arabic one.<sup>4</sup> Although Said lives between Palestine and Egypt most of his childhood and spends his adolescence and the rest of his life in the United States, Najla starts her life in the US while paying frequent visits to Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon. Their childhoods, however, are similar; culturally influenced by European and US literature, art, and film, as they both grow up speaking and studying in English.

Throughout their lives and their travels, both Said and his daughter feel out of place. Their feelings intensify when other people inform them of who they are, where they come from, and how they should perform their (troubled) identity. Edward Said recalls an interaction during his time in Princeton when he was asked to return to his country after completing his education because *his people need him*. He recalls being told, “there is so much misery and ignorance and illness among the Arabs that people like you are a crucial asset,” without being given the chance to respond (279). Najla Said writes about interviews she conducts with her theater group in New York City post-9/11 as she aims to understand the connotations behind being labeled as an “Arab-American”:

And when we did our interviews, we found that most of the people who *were* Arab used words like ‘love,’ ‘food,’ ‘home,’ ‘family,’ ‘laughter’ when we asked them what the word ‘Arab’ evoked. And most of the people who were not Arab used words like ‘sand,’ ‘desert,’ ‘camel,’ ‘terror,’ ‘mad,’ ‘angry,’ ‘Muslim.’ (226)

The resonance between both incidents, with almost five decades between them, is alarming. Clearly, from the interviews, those who identify as Arabs relate their identity to meanings of home and belonging. But those who do not identify as Arab—including the person from Princeton who told Edward Said to return to his country—associate the word

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<sup>4</sup> Until she reaches a beautiful reconciliation with her name, Najla Wadad Said, which translates to “a happy gaping wound of love” (225).

with stereotypical notions that (mis)identify millions of people in the MENA region and the diaspora.

Deepa Kumar uses the Saidian lens in *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire, 20 Years After 9/11* to portray how the infrastructure of empire for centuries has formed the matrix of anti-Muslim racism (and oppression) through mainstream media. She describes Islamophobia as a “racist logic” in seeing “all Muslims and those who ‘look Muslim’ [...] as ‘people who were collectively to blame for the actions of the few’” (2). Therefore, Islamophobia impacts “US war making abroad [while creating] new systems of racial control inside the US” (Kumar 13). The stereotypical nature of Orientalism and Islamophobia highly depends on associating, according to Nadine Naber, “a wide range of signifiers such as particular names [...] dark skin, particular forms of dress (e.g., a headscarf or beard) and particular nations of origin [...] as part of an imagined ‘Arab/ Middle Eastern/ Muslim’ enemy” (Kumar 6).

Both Edward and Najla Said’s experiences show that exposure to such notions and faulty opinions contributes to their individual sense of unfamiliarity and alienation. Najla’s feelings of unbelonging are also influenced by those stereotypes as she “was looking at the images of Arabs on TV and in the movies and then looking back in the mirror, confounded.” She continues, “I had never seen anyone who looked like an Ali Baba cartoon, nor did I ever hear my parents use funny words to magically open doors” (63). Her father has an almost-exact experience in his memoir:

It was very odd, but it did not occur to me that the cinematic Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sinbad, whose genies, Baghdad cronies, and sultans I completely possessed in the fantasies I counterpointed with my lessons, all had American accents, spoke no Arabic, and ate mysterious foods. (34)

Being brought up in privileged economic circumstances, both Said and his daughter were exposed to an upper-class, Eurocentric, Christian education. While receiving a biased (orientalist at times) education creates certain stereotypes about one's own people, popular cultural productions feed on the same misrepresentations while distorting their image even further by riding on the same stereotypes without the illusion of representation: Aladdin stills travels on the magic carpet on television but has green eyes and blond hair. As for Najla, she sees Aladdin, an "Arab" man, and her father, also an Arab man, but finds differences more than similarities. How can we not all have this "troubled" identity as we are exposed—day in and day out—to "troubled" media, education, and cultural productions that create such distortions of representation and identity?

After experiencing alienation and being out of place as a child, Said is determined not to raise his children the same way. Unlike his father, he does not name his children after the Prince of Wales, or in his words: seeks to "invent" the children, "give each of them a story, character, fate, and even a language" (3). Najla, however, longs for the safety in such invention as a child. She says: "as a little girl, I had desperately wanted my parents to believe in something, anything, the way 'other people' seemed to" (25).

Throughout *Out of Place*, Said narrates his journey to find his identity. After a childhood overwhelmed by the sensation of "a troublesome identity" (90), Said concludes that "now it does not seem important or even desirable to be 'right' and in place" (294). He prefers to "experience [himself] as *a cluster of living currents*" rather than "the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attached so much significance" (my emphasis, 295).

After narrating her New York City elite upbringing, her belonging to Yiddish culture throughout her childhood, her eating disorder and frequent visits to Lebanon and Palestine in her adolescence, her father's passing, and her celebration of identity through arts and theater in her adult life, Najla Said reaches a similar conclusion in her memoir:

When I began performing, I realized people were willing to listen, because it was simply my story, and *precisely because* it was sort of messy and embarrassing and atypical, yet also universal in its complexity; having a *mixed-up identity* actually makes it easier to relate to a larger and more varied group of people. (my emphasis, 254)

Both conclusions are important because they portray how the realization that one is more than one thing comes first, then subsequently, that these things are like a “lively current:” always changing. Najla's conclusion also shows that not only is it important to narrate and tell one's story, but that there is redemption to be found in the reception—in the fact that people *listen* and relate.

There are many connections between both memoirs, yet this anecdote portrays how Said and his daughter understand that firstly, and most importantly, there is *nothing wrong* with them—they are not the problem. Also, the problem is not restricted to how parents raise their children since what Edward and his wife, Mariam Said, have attempted to avoid is still able to interfere in their daughter's formation of her identity. One can even argue that trouble in this sense is not a problem. The issue, then, is pervasive. The paradox of belonging, even to one's own identity, occurs on a larger scale. There is a direct correlation between why colonized subjects and oppressed people think of their identity as “troubled,” and the oppressive world systems that have been in control for centuries over their lands, resources, and narratives.

Edward Said dedicates his life and scholarship to identifying such forces and to showcasing their troubling effect on postcolonial identity.<sup>5</sup> Through his work, Said also provides tools for the oppressed to resist such forces. The next chapters showcase powerful examples of MENA women writers who utilize the Saidian strategy for resistance in their narratives. *Al Ghurbeh*, after all, does not only occur when one moves to another country; the troubledness of unbelonging can penetrate to one's own self, even when existing right at home.

In the quest to self-identification and determination, MENA women writers shift the concept of “trouble” from their identities into the narrative. Thus, they produce “troubled” narratives that are not only out of place, but also scattered all over the place. Their narratives reflect a diaspora of oppressed MENA people who have suffered from manifestations of imperialism and capitalism (such as war and settler colonialism). Instead of internalizing what oppressive discourses force on them, the writers in this case study allow lively currents into their narratives and use narrative shifts to navigate ruptures in their identities or journeys towards home and belonging. The word “troubled,” in this sense, moves away from its negative connotation as it becomes a main pillar of such narratives and is used as a tool for belonging and resistance.

The Saidian strategy of resistance against troubled world systems relies on key concepts: *worldliness* through a *secular critical consciousness* (also referred to as *intellectual amateurism*) and *speaking truth to power* (or “*making the voyage in*”) through *contrapuntal reading* and *writing back*. These concepts are all essential to my navigation of my own *Al Ghurbeh* and to my understanding of being at home with the

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<sup>5</sup> See introduction for definition of “postcolonial identity.”

world, and to my ability to create a new space through language—or what Said calls in *The Last Interview*: “the human experience.”

In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, “Said shows how the worldliness of the text is embedded in it as a function of its very being” (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 27).

Worldliness is the realization that all texts are worldly, that they are events that take part in the social world, human life, and historical events (*The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said 4).<sup>6</sup> Said acknowledges that both the text and the intellectual (as a critic and/or reader) exist in a certain time or place and are both embedded within historical and political forces. On a macro level, the intellectual finds interest in the subject matter of the text while drawing attention to the context and looking for voices of representation (or subversive discourse). On a micro level, intellectuals listen to the text before responding to it as they accumulate observations and hold back on interpretations until all is fully absorbed.

To achieve worldliness as an intellectual and to be able to spot and analyze worldliness within the text, the critic/reader must create a distance from the mainstream reader who “unconsciously [holds the] ideological assumption that the Eurocentric model for the humanities actually represents a natural and proper subject matter for the humanistic scholar” (Said 22). The contemporary critic must also avoid temptations such as filiative cultural bonds (by birth, nationality, or profession) or affiliatively acquired methods and systems (by social and political conviction, economic and historical

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<sup>6</sup> Said derives his theory of worldliness from Roland Barthes’ “Theory of the text” on textuality and his claim that “the ‘world,’ like the Author, is also a function of textuality, of the structure of the text” (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 19).



circumstances, voluntary effort, and willed deliberation) (25).<sup>7</sup> Said suggests Gramsci's "organic complicity" of realizing the difference between instinctual filiation and social affiliation as the alternative, and he defines this alternative as the secular critical consciousness.

Said highly regards the secular critical consciousness as genuine knowledge since it shifts the intellectual's view of the text as a static block (situated and circumstantial) to viewing the text as a dynamic field (worldly and historical) (157).<sup>8</sup> He also encourages it as a way to resist logocentric fallacies such as "binary, axiological oppositions with one apparently equal term controlling the other, paternally organized hierarchies, ethnocentric valorization, [and] phallic insemination" (190).

On the importance of the secular critical consciousness for Said, Ashcroft and Ahluwalia write:

Criticism for Said is personal, active, entwined with the world, implicated in its progress of representation, and committed to the notion that the critic through oppositional spirit can reveal hypocrisy, uncover the false, and prepare ground for change. (32)

Since the purpose of acquiring a secular critical consciousness is to be freed from the restrictions of intellectual specialization, Said advocates for amateurism in intellectual life.<sup>9</sup> He asks intellectuals to remove themselves from the restrictions of the limited

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<sup>7</sup> See pages 16-24 in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Said creates a clear distinction between filiation (heritage or descent) and affiliation (process of identification through culture) and proposes affiliation as a feature of the worldliness of the text.

<sup>8</sup> In many intellectual spaces, secularism and invisible bias can be mixed. Scholars are accused of contradiction (many criticized Said for claiming secularism while advocating for the Palestine question) for holding certain advocacies while claiming secularism. The secular critical consciousness, however, exposes the hypocrisy of neutrality as a sugar-coat for siding with the oppressor.

<sup>9</sup> "When asked why he used the term *amateur* rather than 'generalist,' Said replied that he was drawn to the literal meaning of the French word, which means a love for something, very involved in something without being professional" (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 36).

vocabulary and conversations of the “specialists,” and to redirect their attention to real-life events of the society that have room for criticism.

Ashcroft and Ahluwalia conclude that “it is in such ‘amateurism’ that the worldliness of the critic can be fully realized” (35). Said’s use of amateurism as a concept is connected to ethical neutrality, to taking a fair view of things rather than judging based on instinctive filiation. By amateur here, Said means siding with humanity over and above one’s own side, and pursuing, again, ethical neutrality, rather than professional allegiance.

The oppositionality and liminality of worldliness as a concept are directly related to another important concept for Said: speaking truth to power. Worldliness is a crucial factor to postcolonialism because of the manner and the target it addresses. A worldly intellectual, with secular critical consciousness, approaches the text in a manner of involvement, and targets the powers that control the text and the narrative as they reveal voices that are misrepresented under such powers. Rather than placing empire as the background of the novel, the worldly critic/reader de-neutralizes such “backdrop” and addresses the protagonists’ supremacy in the novel in relation to colonial powers that are subjugating non-Europeans while benefiting Europeans. Rather than reading the Eurocentric novel only in the dominant voice of the narrator or its protagonist, a worldly intellectual prioritizes underrepresented voices and attempts to rewrite (or “write back” as I am about to discuss) the same narrative polyphonically.

Prior to theorizing “speaking truth to power,” “making the voyage in,” or “writing back,” Said addresses the oppressing powers that distort the truth and analyzes their importance in Eurocentric fictional narratives and cultural productions. In *Culture and*

*Imperialism*, he focuses on the novel “as a cultural artefact of bourgeois society,” an inseparable power to such productions. He writes:

The novel, as a cultural artefact of bourgeois society, and imperialism are unthinkable without each other [...] the novelistic hero and heroine exhibit the restlessness and energy characteristic of the enterprising bourgeoisie, and they are permitted adventures in which their experiences reveal to them the limits of what they can aspire to, where they can go, what they can become. Novels therefore end with the death of a hero [...] or with the protagonists’ accession to stability (usually in the form of marriage or confirmed identity [...]). (71)

Said calls the relation between the Eurocentric novel and oppressive world power systems, like imperialism and capitalism, as they appear in the novel as “the structure of attitude and reference.” Analyzing this structure questions imperial and capitalist systems’ influence on the Eurocentric novel and the role that these systems play in sustaining such narratives.

Said identifies the consequences of the structure of attitude and reference. First, he notes its “unusual organic continuity [...] between the earlier narratives that are normally not considered to have much to do with empire and the later ones [that are] explicitly *about* it.” Second, Said draws attention to this structure’s questionable contribution to an “infinitesimal politics that clarifies, reinforces, perhaps even occasionally advances attitudes about England and the world” (75).<sup>10</sup> Third is what Said calls the “overseas dimension,” which is the novel’s exploitation of Britain’s power abroad and “the international theme” for the sake of the protagonists’ wellbeing and prosperity (76). Fourth is what Said refers to as “the novel’s consolidation of authority” which allows such oppressive world systems “to appear both normative and sovereign,

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<sup>10</sup> When criticizing the Eurocentric novel, Said gives the most emphasis to the British novel due to the dominance of the British empire by World War One and its relation to the dominance of its “novelistic institution with no real European competitor or equivalent” (*Culture and Imperialism*, Said 71).

that is, self-validating in the course of the narrative” (77). The Eurocentric novel centralizes the European Self and marginalizes the non-European Other while making assumptions and “casual references” (93) that reflect the primariness of the Self in relation to the secondariness and the savagery of the Other. Imperialism and capitalism as oppressive world systems creep into such novels through such discourses that they create and engage in.

The structure of attitude and reference in the Eurocentric novel welcomes Orientalism as a geography-specific manifestation of imperialist thought. Orientalism enforces the same assertion of an ontological and essential distinction between the Occident—westward—and First World against the Orient—eastward—and the world referred to as Third. This binary relies on the assumption that “the Orient” cannot represent itself and must be represented by the “the West.” Said famously establishes the origins and capacities of Orientalism, exposes “orientalist structures and restructures,” and examines “Modern Orientalism” (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 56).<sup>11</sup> Ashcroft and Ahluwalia summarize Said’s argument in *Orientalism*, his most well-known work:

The essence of Said’s argument is that to know something is to have power over it, and conversely, to have power is to be able to know the world in your own terms. When this ‘something’ is a whole region of the world, in which dozens of ethnicities, nationalities and languages are gathered under the spurious category ‘the Orient,’ then the link between that knowledge and the power it confirms becomes profoundly important. The discourse of Orientalism becomes the frame within which the West knows the Orient, and this discourse determines both popular and academic representations of the Middle East today. (83)

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<sup>11</sup> In *Orientalism*, Said differentiates between Orientalism as an academic discipline emerging in the eighteenth century, Orientalism as a style of thought and writing, and Orientalism as a “corporate institution.”

I rely on this summary to emphasize the Foucauldian interrelation of knowledge and power and how Said utilizes Foucault's concept to portray how imperialist and capitalist world systems exploit this relation through Orientalism.<sup>12</sup> Imperialism uses the power of knowledge to dominate and control, while capitalism uses the power of knowledge to exploit and conquer. Consequently, both imperialist and capitalist world systems employ knowledge as discourse and exploit its power yet again to justify their ill-meaning actions. Said rids Foucault's concept of such powers and rather calls for the oppressed to resist using the power of knowledge and discourse. So, I also use this summary to point out that when Said calls postcolonial writers to speak truth to power, it is the "power to know the world in your own terms" that he is referring to and calling the amateur intellectual to fight against.

"Speaking Truth to Power" is the title of one of Said's essays in *Representations of the Intellectual*. In it, he defines the term as "carefully weighing the alternatives, picking the right one, and then intelligently representing it where it can do the most good and cause the right change" (102). Thus, the secular critical consciousness acquired by the amateur intellectual (knowledge is power) allows them to speak truth to power. In his definition, Said provides strategies of resistance for amateur intellectuals and postcolonial writers, critics, and readers. The first is *contrapuntal reading* as "carefully weighing the alternatives" and "picking the right one," the second is *writing back* (or making the voyage in) as the intelligent representation that "cause[s] the right change."

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said calls upon amateur intellectuals and postcolonial writers to attempt contrapuntality by reimagining and rendering the

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<sup>12</sup> Said moves away from Foucault in his later works and develops a critique of poststructuralism for being unable to account for or express the ongoing inequalities of the world that he is interested in exposing.

imperialist text and world. He explains that contrapuntal reading realizes the paradox of the secondariness of the non-European in its essentiality to the primariness of the European, as explored by Césaire, Fanon, and Memmi (59). Said seeks to understand what is involved when the imperial gaze uses a “structure of attitude and reference” (62) in the formation of the superiority of the European Self by depending on the colonized inferiority in the form of the Eurocentric novel.

Through contrapuntal reading, Said calls for reading all the voices written in colonial texts (and generally US and European discourses), as well as putting in “an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented [...] in such works” (66). Thus, contrapuntal reading is a form of “reading back” from the perspective of the colonized. And while the Eurocentric novel only permits the European Self/narrator/protagonist to speak, contrapuntal reading allows a polyphonic approach to the novel, allowing *all* voices to narrate without being marginalized or hierarchized.

The Saidian strategy of resistance does not conclude with contrapuntal reading, as it places high emphasis on the ability to “make a voyage in.” In this process, postcolonial writers acknowledge the presence of the counter-narrative and attempt to use it to write back to imperialism. Although the concept of “writing back” initially seems like a response, it is rather a sign for the potentiality “for humans to negate their experiences, to imagine another world, a better world in which the colonizers and the colonized work together towards liberations” (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 116).

Said highlights the potentiality of writing back and reassures that “[the culture of resistance is] a culture with a long tradition of integrity and power in its own right, not

simply a belated reactive response to Western imperialism” (*Culture and Imperialism*, 222). He continues later in the book:

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about [...] *It is more rewarding—and more difficult—to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about “us.”* But this also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them in hierarchies [...] For the intellectual there is quite enough of value to do without that.” (my emphasis, 336)

This excerpt portrays Said in his highest level of amateurism. He does not underestimate the power of imperialist and colonialist discourses that have infected a multiplicity of the Global North’s cultural productions, but he also does not blame. Rather, he calls for a politics of hope that attempts change while encouraging collaboration. In his strategy of resistance and through his critical consciousness and spirit, Said does not entertain or engage with the binaries that oppressive world systems have created and that are still flourishing. He highlights, however, the rewarding consciousness that pushes away from labels and rather attempts concrete and sympathetic contrapuntality, one that fights—through language—for the right to resist, belong, and narrate.

The legacy of Said’s scholarship and criticism reaches many MENA women writers. Beyond the writers that are closely read in the following chapters, Nawal El Saadawi is one of many radical writers and thinkers who promotes a parallel for

resistance and his critical consciousness closely. Rehnuma Sazzad writes that El Saadawi is a Saidian “amateur” for two reasons:

I think Saadawi’s radicalism makes an interesting Saidian appearance as an ‘amateur’ for two discernible reasons. First, she acts as Gramsci’s ‘organic intellectual’ through her anti-hegemonic viewpoints. Secondly, she appears as Benda’s cleric through her commendable ethical strength. In any case, the justification of race, gender, and class domination through any supremacist ideologies is what she firmly stands against. (815-16)

As discussed earlier, both Gramsci’s “organic intellectuality” and the ethics of amateurism are essential for Said’s concept of worldliness. An amateur intellectual like El Saadawi is not affected by hegemonic viewpoints or ethnocentric models. Rather, “the link among the local, national and global domination is a key theme” in her works (Sazzad 822). As a worldly amateur, El Saadawi criticizes imperialist exploitation through the voices and lives of Egyptian women—including her own. Through her work and activism, El Saadawi stands strongly against male hegemony and religious fundamentalism and proves how such supremacist ideologies are at once universal and able to be resisted if people unite. Thus, the Saidian strategy for resistance applies to El Saadawi’s life and work because she speaks truth to power through them.

El Saadawi’s amateurism is most evident in giving up her medical profession to be a full-time fighter for justice. She removes herself from a highly professionalized and exclusive community and language to pave her way through a dual sense of activism and a critical consciousness as she creates connections with people both locally and globally. Moreover, El Saadawi makes another shift from politics to fiction which allows for a “particular amalgamation of senses and encounters that produce an effect or response” (Valassopoulos 33).



Part of the reason I had not known El Saadawi until the day of her passing is because she is a controversial figure. She is highly censored in many conservative spaces in the MENA region and is famously known to have been under political pressure.

Daphne Grace remarks that,

Despite her controversial reputation, El Saadawi remains one of the most influential and outspoken writers of both fiction and non-fiction in North Africa. Although her fictional works are arguably not ‘refined’ enough to rate as major works of literature, her themes are both revolutionary and provocative. The very fact that her texts sometimes reads [sic] as ‘raw’, also perhaps adds to the immediacy of the subject matter. (qtd. in Valassopoulos 31)

Valassopoulos finds the rawness that Grace alludes to essential to El Saadawi’s work in resistance and “speaking truth to power.” She seconds Amireh’s call for “a grounded reading of El Saadawi’s work; a reading that is not so quick to set her up *against* her literary and historical context, instead advancing a more responsible reading of her work that sees it as positioned alongside particular social and literary movements in Egypt and the Arab world” (32).

Amireh’s call for responsible reading informs this thesis that centers amateur and worldly reading of MENA women’s writings in global efforts of belonging and resistance. *Woman at Point of Zero*, one of El Saadawi’s most renowned fictional works, is an extension of the efforts of speaking truth to power from the writer to the reader, who is capable—through the power of language—to engage with such writings and to read them as integral to the global struggle and resistance against oppression.

Firdaus, the protagonist of *Woman at Point Zero*, is “troubled.” Like many of the women in this case study, she is not “ideal.” Of the ideal woman, El Saadawi writes: “the ideal woman in novels [written by Arab men influenced by the patriarchal system] is still

the beautiful, quietly angelic and obedient female, who does not show any particular boldness or ambition... a woman with courage or ambition, with eyes wide open, and who shows audacity and strength, is still considered ugly, repulsive, coarse, and vulgar.” (*The Hidden Face of Eve*, 338) “Troubled” is a key word for all the dissidents throughout this thesis. Beyond dissidence, troubledness includes meanings of unbelonging and exile as well as the proximity to feelings of alienation and loss when unable to find meanings of home and belonging. But the troubled woman continues to resist. She is ultimately able to recognize the troubledness of the world and is persistent to speak truth to it.

Firdaus faces the crime of female circumcision as a child, grows up under her uncle’s sexual harassment, and is forced to marry a man older than her father. Then, she runs away and makes a living out of her sex work. She attempts to find other jobs to gain men’s “respect,” only to find out that her “normal” job title does not change anything as every man she meets continues to exploit her and her body. After being heartbroken, Firdaus returns to her original job and finds pride in it. When a royal member asks for her services, she does not deliver his needs and convinces him that she has murdered a man before. She is arrested for murder, imprisoned, and later sentenced to die. *Woman at Point Zero* is her telling of her life’s narrative the day before she is executed.

This thesis examines narrative shifts in voice and time in a diverse selection of MENA women’s writings. It acknowledges that such writings, which are “troubled” in their sudden shifts and ruptures, are powerful tools to navigate belonging and resistance through language. *Woman at Point Zero* has these characteristics. The narrative shifts from the doctor’s voice to the prisoner’s voice, as she tells her life’s story, mirror the

shifts in time and place from the present-day prison cell to create one big analepsis from Firdaus' childhood leading up to the moment of her speech.

Shifts in point of view are very important in the narrative as the novella starts and ends in a voice different than Firdaus'. A woman doctor, like El Saadawi herself, attempts multiple times to speak to Firdaus when she first meets her in the prison. She begins by saying: "This is the story of a real woman. I met her in the Qantir Prison a few years ago" (1). When Firdaus finally agrees to meet the doctor the day before she is sentenced, she takes control of the voice of the narrative and tells her story in her first-person voice, as she narrates the next chapter: "Let me speak. Do not interrupt me. I have no time to listen to you. They are coming to take me at six o'clock this evening. Tomorrow morning I shall no longer be here" (11). The narrative shift that allows Firdaus to narrate her own story is an example of speaking truth to power as Firdaus is reclaiming what is taken from her and resisting systems that "assume control over women's bodies" as she shows how they are unable to dominate "her mind and spirit, nor, more significantly, *her voice*" (my emphasis, Saliba qtd. in Valassopoulos 41).

Furthermore, time shifts are crucial in Firdaus' narrative from the prison cell. Her narrative is in the form of a flashback, going back through space and time from her position on the cell's cold floor to the days she worked on the farm as a child. Although the analepsis chronologically moves towards the present, Firdaus' narrative is from her memory—the only thing she owns on the day before her death. Memory is utilized through storytelling as another form of speaking truth to power as it uses past experiences through literary devices like analepsis to narrate the present and find hope in the future.

Firdaus' story as one analepsis also contains a multiplicity of smaller analeptic moments. Throughout the novella, Firdaus recalls the pleasure she has once felt but now lost after the clitoridectomy, as she remembers the "far away yet familiar pleasure [...] an illusion, or a dream that floats away and is lost" (26). Valassopoulos echoes Assia Djebar's words on Firdaus' narrative that it "very much enacts how something originary (pleasure, desire) is taken away by the 'patriarchal, martial, police, bureaucratic, [and] political system' and how it is '*the memory of her body*' that gives her 'courage' and 'latent strength' to question the restrictions placed on her" (my emphasis, 41). Thus, this analeptic moment allows Firdaus to travel to past memories and find belonging there. Like the novels I will discuss in the following chapters, such memories do not only serve as a safe haven of belonging to something that no longer exists, but are a path that allows resistance in the present and the future. It is the memory of Firdaus' pleasure that allows her to control her body in the present and choose how to use it rather than being dominated under a system that allows others (especially men) to take control.

Like Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*, MENA women and their narratives in this study incorporate shifts in voice, place, and time in their stories and writings. Although such narrative shifts appear "troubled" on the surface level by causing confusion and disruption to the flow of the reading or the analytic experience of the intellectual, an amateur approach catches the worldliness in such ruptures as they reflect on the symbolic-level troubles of oppression and belonging. The narrative shifts in these work reflect worldly struggles of inequity in economic distribution, of involuntary displacement and dispossession, and injustice in societies. Unfortunately, a cultural divide between the Global North and the Global South continues to exist despite the

commonality in the struggles. Both Said and El Saadawi are “relentless in unmasking why the notion of the North-South cultural divide is kept alive by the media, ‘the international information order’” (Sazzad 824).

As a way of writing back against mainstream (mis)representations, MENA women writers in the following chapters use language to portray and represent such struggles. Their works write back to world systems that convince them and others around the world that struggle is regional and not universal. El Saadawi writes, “We women in Arab countries realize that we are still slaves, still oppressed, not because we belong to the East, not because we are Arab, or members of Islamic societies, but as a result of the patriarchal class system that has dominated the world for thousands of years” (xlviii). Both El Saadawi and the writers in this study question their social surroundings to critique such world systems as they are aware of how manifestations of oppression trouble their identity and the identities of oppressed people around the world.

Through the worldly element and the amateur lens of the intellectual in these MENA women’s writings, solidarity flourishes from the local to the global towards a united resistance against oppression, all speaking truth to power. El Saadawi concludes in *The Hidden Face of Eve*: “The complete and real liberation of women, whether in the Arab countries or the West or the Far East, can only become a fact when humanity does away with class society and exploitation for all time, and when the patriarchal system with its values, structures and vestiges has been erased from the life and mind of the people” (367).

### ***Badia*: Intratextual Narrative Voice Shifts as Belonging and Resistance**

*When you read a novel, you become another person. You have a totally new light, and you have a new conception of fighting and courage, of weakness and cowardice. You understand many things about yourself; how weak you are and how strong you can be.*

—Nawal El Saadawi, *The Progressive Interview*

*Bad Girls of the Arab World* exhibits multiple analyses of MENA women's cultural productions, such as teaching, filmmaking, novel-writing, or body activism. Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley define badness in the collection as the way “bad girls expose the borders of social normativities and thereby transform what it means to be a woman in the Arab world” (xi). In “Reel Bad Maghrebi Women,” Florence Martin and Patricia Caillé focus on film as a form of cultural production. They analyze badness in instances when “A ‘reel bad Maghrebi girl’ is then both in front of the camera (a female protagonist) and behind the camera (a defiant filmmaker)” (167).

Women's agency and presence on both sides, as director/creator and protagonist/actor, blurs existing heteronormative binary lines (male/female, superior/inferior, active/reactive) between who is expected to tell the story and who is expected, accordingly, to perform the story as it is told. The audience also plays an important role in fiction films directed by Maghrebi women: the spectator finds visual pleasure in watching women fight against injustice on the screen rather than within the heterosexual, racist, and patriarchal *grand récit* that “overshadows” their habitat, agency, and presence (169).

Leïla Kilani, “an acclaimed documentary maker, [...] explores questions of empowerment and agency and brings work, class relations, and globalization to the

forefront” in *Sur la planche*, her first fiction film (Martin and Caillé 176). The title of this chapter is dedicated to the protagonist, Badia, who is a relentless migrant worker in Tangier.<sup>13</sup> In the film, her power “lies in her ability to construct and narrate her own sense of self outside any specific value system or worldview” (176). Badia’s discourse gives her a sense of security as her vulnerability increases throughout the events of the film and allows her a sense of belonging as she constantly moves and “trespasses” to survive.

Badia is also the title of the chapter because she is the protagonist of Kilani’s *only* fiction film. After directing three documentary films, Kilani represents the stories and experiences she once documented in *Sur la planche*. What is the importance of fiction as a form of MENA women’s cultural production?<sup>14</sup> Amal Amireh, in “Publishing in the West: Problems and Prospects for Arab Women Writers,” traces literary reception of MENA women’s writings as cultural productions. First, she diagnoses the renewed interest in MENA women’s writings in the last century:

Reviewers of Arab women’s books seem to take their cues from the titles and covers. Unfailingly, they read these novels as sociological and anthropological texts that “reflect” the reality of Islam and the Arab world and “lift the veil” from what one reviewer called the “unimaginable world of Arab women.” (3)

The presentation of marginalized people’s writings to suit a *wider* audience de-authenticates the readers’ and the writers’ experiences and connections. Mainstream readerships who fall prey to such “covers” blind themselves from the harm of

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<sup>13</sup> Although the film is “one long flashback” of the events that lead to her arrest and might apply to the conversation on anachronisms in the next chapter, I point to Badia in this chapter to highlight her role as a narrator of her own story.

<sup>14</sup> My question here is concerned with fiction in all forms while realizing the differences in production and accessibility in different forms of fictional storytelling.

regionalizing global patriarchal, capitalist, and racist world systems to only one part of the world—which is evident Orientalism in this example.

Then, Amireh suggests what is to be done against the misuse of MENA women’s writings in the hands of readers and reviewers informed by (neo)colonial and (neo)orientalist biases:

There is no reason that any one writer or group of writers should shoulder the daunting responsibility of representing a whole culture. Diversity guards against stereotyping and pigeon-holing. Once western readers are exposed to a range of styles, nuances, and ideologies, they will learn that *Arab writers are individual artists, who speak in multiple tongues* and belong to vibrant and diverse cultural movements [...] The debate should go beyond “appreciative” criticism that condescendingly praises Arab women writers for “daring” to put pen to paper. Serious debates about fiction will remind readers that *they are reading not documentaries, but “literature,”* which draws on particular conventions and emerges from specific traditions. (my emphasis, 3)<sup>15</sup>

Amireh highlights the importance of multiplicity and diversity in representation against the myth of the single story.<sup>16</sup> This responsibility falls on both readers and writers. While Amireh calls readers to expose themselves to a wide variety of works, Lila Abu-Lughod in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving* warns readers against writers who benefit from “gendered Orientalism” in producing what literary scholar Dohra Ahmad has called “pulp non-fiction:” writings with defining themes like “force and bondage,” ones that misrepresent the MENA region as a violent, dystopic world rather than exposing the global inequities that cause such themes of danger and suffering (87-88).

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<sup>15</sup> Valassopoulos writes, “when Amireh writes that Arab women’s literature is not ‘documentary,’ this rings very clearly in my mind, for the core issue of *representation* is often left by the wayside in a discussion of Arab women’s cultural production. I am not speaking here of inaccuracies but of a reluctance to study and interpret the writing alongside a tradition of criticism that we seem to be accustomed to performing with other literary traditions” (3).

<sup>16</sup> See Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s “The danger of a single story” 2009 TEDGlobal talk.



In *Contemporary Arab Women Writers*, Anastasia Valassopoulos attributes “a particular amalgamation of senses and encounters that produce an effect or response” to fiction and stresses that “no amount of historicization can fully explain the anger, conviction as well as the sense of despair, joy and anticipation represented in these novels” (33). Kilani’s choice to create *Sur la planche* as a fiction film points to her agency. Extending from the director/creator to the protagonist/actor, Kilani grants the character of Badia the power to narrate, to tell her own story, rather than casting a voiceover narration onto her life’s documentary. This way, MENA women are able to control their narratives without the “aid” of restrictive forms of narration that force a discourse that is foreign to them.

Agency and narration come hand in hand. Yaqub writes that “the nature of agency and when and where it is exercised is at heart a philosophical question that hinges on a range of factors, including the formation of the subject and her desires, her capacities, and the consequences of her choices” (6). Although Badia gets caught by the police, she constantly attempts to redefine herself and her actions through narration. Instead of pronouncing herself a criminal, she “mumbles to herself: Better to be standing up, propped by one’s own lie, than to be lying down, crushed by someone else’s truth. I don’t steal: I get my money back. I don’t break in: I take back. I am not a trafficker: I trade. I am not a prostitute: I invite myself over” (Martin and Caillé 176).<sup>17</sup>

The construction of subjectivity through narration offers distinct ways to break free from existing histories and (mis)representations of MENA women in the world. How does agency through narration enable self-determination? How can agency through

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<sup>17</sup> More on the accessibility of film and its conversations with literature in the afterword.

narration write back to orientalist and imperialist discourses, to patriarchal traditions, and to capitalist and mainstream heterosexual world orders? How can self-determination through narration be a tool for navigation and survival in such a discriminating and troubled world?

Announcing power over one's narrative, however, can also be "troubled." When faced with clashing waves of racism, sexism, and classism, or when stormed by questions of identity, home, and belonging, one is called to use unconventional tools of navigation and survival as well as make precarious and troubled decisions. Novel-writing, as a form of MENA women's cultural production, provides fertile soil for analyzing such decisions closely. Intratextual narrative shifts as tools of navigation, survival, belonging, and potentially resistance are evident in Yasmin Crowther's *The Saffron Kitchen* and Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home*.

One of the main features of fictionality is narrative space(s). Buchholz and Jahn define narrative space as "the physically existing environment in which characters live and move" (Ryan 5). Marie-Laure Ryan categorizes narrative space into spatial frames, setting, story space, narrative world, and narrative universe.<sup>18</sup> Story space is "the space relevant to the plot, as mapped by the actions and thoughts of the characters. It consists of all the spatial frames plus all the locations mentioned by the text that are not the scene of actually occurring events" (Ryan 8).

Narrative shifts do not mean one thing. While narrative voices shift in relation to space, time, and unexpected events like war in both novels, these transitions represent different things. Narrators in *The Saffron Kitchen* use narrative shifts to represent home.

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<sup>18</sup> Spatial frames are relative to this analysis and are defined as "the immediate surroundings of actual events, the various locations shown by the narrative discourse or by the image" (Ryan 6)

Similar techniques in *A Map of Home* act as navigations, as an attempt to find home, or as a form of resistance against imposed meanings of home for a single narrator. In both novels, narrative voice shifts between first, second, and third-person points of view happens in relation to changes in story spaces. Since many of the story spaces in these novels resemble meanings of home for the narrators, they appear to have more steady narration in mentioned spaces and experience ruptures/shifts when experiencing moments of movement or displacement.

Yasmin Crowther's *The Saffron Kitchen* is a mother-daughter narrative that is told between two narrative spaces: Iran and the UK. When Maryam, the mother, learns about her sister Mara's death, she is overwhelmed. Being in London and away from her family in Iran resurfaces many of her past memories of home and exile. Her overwhelming longing projects as physical violence against Saeed, Mara's son who moves to live with her in the UK. It causes Sara, Maryam's daughter, to lose her unborn child when she protects Saeed from her mother. Haunted by regret and sorrow, Maryam leaves her family in London and travels home to Iran, to finally encounter all the past memories she has been running away from.

In *The Saffron Kitchen*, there are numerous story spaces that fall under three bigger narrative spaces: the UK, Iran post-1953, and Iran pre-1953. As the story spaces change, narrative voice shifts. The UK (mostly in present time and including flashbacks) is narrated in Sara's first-person point of view, Iran in the present time is narrated in third-person omniscient, and Iran pre-coup d'état is narrated in Maryam's first-person point of view. Why does narrative voice shift in accordance with socio-historic-geographical environments and with story spaces within such environments? What do

narrative shifts inform the reader on subjects of home, belonging, or resistance in this case?

While *The Saffron Kitchen* narrates Maryam and Sara's lives between Iran and the UK, it is beautifully embraced by a different story. The novel starts before the first chapter and ends after the last with "the stone woman's" story. Although the stone woman's story is narrated in third-person narrative voice, it addresses the reader in second-person:

In northeast Iran, on the plains of Khorasan, there is a village called Mazareh [...] It is a land of superstition, although the people are devout. *If you go there now, you will find a new prayer house of redbrick [...] If you look further [...] you may find wildflowers, ragged poppies, laid at the foot of a stone traced yellow with lichen. Look more closely, and you will see it is not one stone but two, body and torso, a stone woman who has stood there beyond remembering. You might pass by and never know she was there [...]* She is there now as the earth turns. Its currents lap through her. Rough or gentle, the blasts and blows of the seasons, the centuries, make her sing, although *she has no mouth, no tongue, no voice of her own. This is her story, one she might tell, should you care to listen.* (my emphasis, Crowther 1-2)

After addressing the reader, the narrator informs us, on the stone lady's behalf, that this is her story. Although the stone lady is in Mazareh and is unlikely to move, her story space carries on beyond her place and time.

Following her story, the first chapter, titled "London," narrates Sara's story, in the UK, in first-person point of view. After Sara narrates the events that resulted in losing her unborn child, she also narrates learning from her father, Edward, that Maryam will leave for Iran after purchasing a one-way ticket. Before leaving, Maryam sends her daughter a bouquet of flowers and a jar of Saffron, *Zaferan*. Sara narrates opening the jar:

I twisted the lid and lifted the jar to my nose, and it was as if I breathed in an essence of my childhood [...] I had a memory from when I was a small

child going to Dover with her, just the two of us [...] she had sat on a blanket and brought out a small red book. She had only ever shown it to me on a few other occasions.

‘This book brought me here, Sara, from far away.’ She had put her arms around me with tears on her face, not just due to the salty air [...] ‘Where are you?’ I said aloud in the quiet kitchen. I closed my eyes. (24-25)

There are three story spaces in the excerpt above. First, the story space that exists in the spatial frame of the plot as Sara is healing in her home in Hammersmith and opening the jar on her kitchen table. Her memory of Dover with her mother is the second story space that still takes place in the UK yet at a different time. The question, “Where are you,” is the third story space.

While both the first and second spaces fall under the UK as a larger story space, the third one is lost, not belonging to any. The third space is as lost as Sara, and Maryam at this point – who is on her way to Iran to heal an open wound that she can no longer ignore. After narrating her current situation and past memory in first-person, Sara’s narrative voice shifts as she addresses her mother in second-person pronoun “you” and travels, through this shift, miles away with her mother.<sup>19</sup>

Following Sara’s question, the narrative voice throughout the rest of the novel is unstable as it shifts according to the story spaces the narrative occupies. The second chapter, “Maryam’s Past,” is divided between Maryam’s story spaces in the UK, in Iran post-1953 (present time), and in Iran pre-1953. These spaces, however, are not all narrated in Maryam’s voice or from her point of view. Maryam’s story space in the UK is narrated in third-person omniscient point of view:

Maryam rested her own head beside her daughter’s, tears running into her mouth. She stroked Sara’s face, its stillness, and thought of another

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<sup>19</sup> The metaphorical travel in this narrative shift from first to second person, “where are *you*,” can also be read as foreshadowing to Sara’s physical travel from the UK to Iran to be with her mom later in the story.

hospital ward when she had been half Sara's age, military police at the door. (26)

The next morning she talked of going back to Iran for a while, and [Edward] nodded, as gray as the dawn. "Whatever's right for you and Sara." He felt he could do no more. (32)

Her story space in Iran, in the present time, is also narrated in third-person omniscient point of view, as she moves through Tehran, Masshad, and Mazareh – her final destination:

A week later, Maryam arrived in Tehran and stayed for a few nights with an old nursing friend, Parvin, in a tenement block at the foot of the Alborz mountains. (32)

A few days later, Maryam flew from Tehran to Masshad, along the spine of mountains that ran across the north of the country, through the ancient province of Khorasan. There she stayed with Shirin, her niece [...] from Mashhad, Maryam set out on the last stretch of her journey to Mazareh. It was the first time she returned to the village since she was a girl. (33)

The taxi lurched over potholes as the dusk softened, pinpricks of light appearing in clusters as night fell. The car eventually reached a scratched sign by the side of the road: *Mazareh* [...] *the past* brushed Maryam's skin and it was as if she saw her younger self, about sixteen years old, headstrong and restless, walking forward through the dusk and across the decades to welcome her: "Greetings, I am Maryam Mazar, and the seasons are changing." *She had left behind that voice long ago*. It had been 1953 the last time she had left Mazareh. *She heard her lost world calling and opened her arms to the dead and gone and to a place called home*. (my emphasis, 35)

Although the excerpts above include multiple spatial frames, such as Parvin's house in Tehran, Shirin's in Masshad, and the taxi on the way to Mazareh, they are all within the same story space: Iran post-1953. As in the UK, Maryam does not narrate her navigation through each spatial frame in present-time Iran. Her story is narrated in third-person omniscient until she reaches the sign of *Mazareh*. The story space shifts in this specific moment as Maryam's thoughts travel back to the past. She not only travels from her

current story space in present-day Iran back to the story space set in pre-1953 Iran, but she also travels from third-person omniscient to first-person; to the *voice* she has left behind long ago.

In first-person point of view, Maryam narrates the events that led to the uprising and to her exile alike. She begins her story space with “I am Maryam Mazar and the seasons are changing” (35). She then narrates her refusal of a suitor that her father selects at the age of sixteen; of working as a nurse instead with Doctor Ahlavi; and of Ali – her father’s assistant, her English tutor, and her lover. Maryam’s story escalates when she realizes that her upper-class father and family have escaped the uprising and that she is left behind. When Maryam roams the streets to find shelter, Ali finds her and keeps her in his small room to protect her for the night:

‘How did you find me today, Ali?’ I asked.  
He was watching the crowds from the rooftops, he said, carrying messages back and forth for my father. ‘I would not have missed your face.’  
I closed my eyes and held peace for another moment.  
‘My father will have missed you.’ (80)

Maryam catches fever after that night and discovers that her father knows that she spent the night in Ali’s room. Her father disowns her and sends her to the military hospital to examine her before abandoning her. Doctor Ahlavi mediates to send her to the nursing school there and her father accepts.

After going to nursing school in Tehran, Maryam moves to the UK and finishes narrating her story space; “then I was gone.” As the story space shifts to the present again, “in the taxi, decades later,” Maryam loses control over narrating her story:

Now, a lifetime later, she lifted the book to her face and breathed in its memories [...] Ali, when he was young; and the kitchen where she had grown up among saffron and coriander [...] ‘Where will you go, Ali?’ Maryam had asked all those years ago,

‘To Mazareh, of course, and wait for you to come and find me again.’  
(101)

When the story space shifts to present-day Iran, it narrates in third-person omniscient. The narrator tells of Maryam’s reunion with Ali, of their time (re)discovering Mazareh and each other’s presence, and of Maryam’s determination to not leave Mazareh again.

As the story continues to shift between present time Iran and the UK, the narrative voice shifts as well. Whenever the story space takes place in the UK, Sara narrates in first-person. In that space, Sara learns about her mother’s past from Doctor Ahlavi, who is a family friend. Whenever Sara asks questions about Maryam’s father, Mazareh, or Ali, doctor Ahlavi answers, “You should ask Maryam. Mazareh is *her* past” (emphasis in the original, 131). Sara also finds that her father, Edward, is heartbroken as he realizes that Maryam is not coming back this time. Edward also finds out that it is Ali, not him, that taught her all the poems in the red book: “*Her* poem, she called it, not ours, *hers*” (emphasis in the original, 152).

Maryam writes a letter to her daughter, Sara, and asks her to visit her in Mazareh. Spending time with Saeed teaches Sara about Iran more than ever. When they plan to paint the kitchen in saffron, Saeed reaches for the pile Doctor Ahlavi gives him and finds a fairytale:

‘Sara, look, there’s a fairytale inside the back cover.’ He held up a booklet of beige parchment, Farsi script uncurling across it. ‘The Story of Gossemarbart.’

I pulled up a chair and thought of Doctor Ahlavi, wondering if he knew it was there. We turned the pages and a fine red sand fell from their folds, dusting the table. Saeed touched it with the tips of his fingers. ‘it’s the same colors as the earth at Torbat, my family’s villa outside Masshad.’

‘Can you read the first line?’ I asked, remembering how my father would read stories in the summer evenings or winter lamplight.

Saeed traced the page from right to left. *Once upon a time, long ago, a girl child was born to the family of a shepherd living on the saffron slopes of*



*Gossemarbart, and so the mountain gave the small girl her name... He smiled and lifted the booklet to his face. 'It smells of home.'* (emphasis in the original, 161-162)

Parts of Iran's past penetrate Sara's story space in present-day UK. As it becomes part of her story and reality, Sara continues to narrate her story in first person. This excerpt, however, foreshadows Sara's travel to Iran to learn her mother's story, and since her movement from the UK to Iran results in changing her meanings of home and belonging, the narrative voice shifts.

In chapter four, "Mazareh," Sara travels to Iran to see her mother. As Sara moves from one story space to another, her narrative voice does not travel with her. Like Maryam's time in present-day Iran, Sara's time is also narrated in third-person omniscient. Sara spends her time in Mazareh having long conversations with her mother about home, love, exile, and belonging.

On her last night, Ali continues "The Story of Gossemarbart;" the story Saeed started reading to Sara in London. Gossemarbart is a shepherd's child that is given the name of the mountains of the saffron slopes, a land that is under a Khan's control. The year Gossemarbart is born sees a terrible drought and the shepherd does not have any produce to give to the Khan. The Khan decides to marry Gossemarbart when she is fourteen as a way for her father to pay his debt. Months before her fourteenth birthday, Gossemarbart meets an old woman in the mountains who tells her to fill some of the pool's water in her carrier—magical water that can set her free whenever she is in danger. She can only use the water once. When the wedding day approaches, Gossemarbart protests but the Khan cuts her tongue, so she drinks the water,

'Gossemarbart smiled again. Her spirit danced with the stars. And in the foothills near the mountain of her name, her body chose to rest as it does

to this day, *a stone woman*, kissed by lichen, sun, and snow, looking out over the land she loves.’ (238)

Ali knows that Doctor Ahlavi wrote this story for Maryam, for the military men who harmed her instead of examining her in the hospital room, and for being away from home for so long. Maryam stays in Iran with Ali and Sara returns to her husband Julian, her father Edward, Saeed, and to the news of carrying a new child.

In the last chapter, “Home,” Sara narrates her story space in the UK in first-person point of view again; “Shall we read some more Gossemarbart?’ I asked Saeed” (257). In the next page, the story of Gossemarbart completes what it started before the first chapter of the novel. The following is the complete section:

Far away, the stone woman sighed out across the land, a flute, a drum, a song, a whisper, and Maryam walked alone into the foothills beyond Mazareh. She looked up at the sky where clouds tore apart in a slipstream of wind. Soon the seasons would change and coarse grass would grow again through the melting snow. Then there would be new knots for her to tie in the desert straw strands, and fresh wishes to be made, along with other stories to be told of the dead and gone, and of lives just begun. (258)

There is a clear pattern indicating that narrative voice shifts in accordance with changes to story spaces in *The Saffron Kitchen*. Narrative shifts are acts of belonging. There are three narrators for each story space: Sara narrates the UK, Maryam narrates her past, and Gossemarbart narrates Iran’s present.

*Each narrator narrates her home.* While this close-proximity to home can be portrayed in the use of the first-person narrative voice, why does Gossemarbart narrate in third-person omniscient? First, the chapter titles give it away: if “Maryam’s Past” is narrated in Maryam’s first-person narrative voice and “Home” is narrated by Sara in the UK, then “Mazareh” is narrated in Gossemarbart’s voice; it is “*her story, one she might tell, should you care to listen.*” Second, first-person narrative voice appears exclusively

when the narrator is at home. Since the UK is not Maryam's home, her story there is not narrated in first-person. The same applies to Sara when she visits to Iran and the first-person voice she uses in the UK is replaced with third-person point of view in Iran.

Third, I find redemption in Gossemarbart's use of third-person narrative voice.. From the opening page of *The Saffron Kitchen*, we learn that she has "no mouth, no tongue, no voice of her own" (2). Later, from Ali's narration, *her story* becomes clearer when we learn that the Khan cut her tongue. Third-person narration is Gossemarbart's voice, her hope after losing her own, and her metaphorical connection to the land and its present.<sup>20</sup> She does not only tell her story, but the story of the present people of Iran.

Unlike the narrators in *The Saffron Kitchen*, Nidali does not know where her home is and is on the search to find it *through* narration. The narrative interplay in *A Map of Home* by Randa Jarrar is as a tool of navigation against the conflicting identities Nidali, a girl narrating her bildungsroman, cannot seem to fully grasp. "I don't remember how I came to know this story, and I don't know how I can possibly still remember it," is the first sentence in *A Map of Home* as Nidali starts her story in first-person narrative voice. The first-person point of view is consistent until Nidali moves to Texas with her family, after escaping war in Kuwait and temporarily living in Egypt. Moments of fear emerge as Nidali "would wake up and search the room around [her] for a clue about where [she] was" (Jarrar 218). Nidal is unlike her friends from the US and feels out of place:

"I sat and watched [Mama], jealous of how easily she seemed to root herself here. Me, I felt splintered, like the end of a snapped-off tree branch. I had even taken to talking to myself. Keeping me company,

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<sup>20</sup> As the stone woman, Gossemarbart becomes part of the land. It can also be argued that nature becomes her voice too, as her whispers travel through the voice of the wind. (Crowther 258)

narrating my own movements. In this way, *me* became *her*, *I* became *Nidali*, *you*, *she*.” (emphasis in the original, 231)

The coloration between diasporic movement and “troubled” identity results in Nidali’s narrative shifts. The ruptures caused by being away from home do not resolve easily as Nidali faces the reality of living in a new country. Thus, narrative shifts continue to occur as she navigates the new (story) space she is in.

On the next page, “You are a Fourteen-Year-Old Arab Chick Who Just Moved to Texas” (232) is fully narrated, like the title of the chapter, in second person. The sudden shift to second-person resembles the interchanging life circumstances of girls like Nidali, always on the go, in search of home. Hanadi Al-Samman seconds Michel de Certeau’s contention of the “parallelism between linguistic uttering and pedestrian uttering” that reinforces the association between “here/there.” This initiates an interaction between an “I” and “*another* relative to that ‘I,’ and thereby establish[es] a conjunctive and disjunctive articulation of places” (emphasis in original, 160).

Chapter sixteen in Jarrar’s *A Map of Home* is fragmented into fifteen parts, including first, second, and third narrative voices. Part eleven is one line; “It’s hard to buy a house when you have a criminal record” (Jarrar 249). The addressee of the second-person pronoun “you” in this example is vague. From the context of the story, and when aligned to the fourteen other parts of the chapter, one can intuit that it is addressed to Nidali’s Baba, as a threat to call the police if he physically harms her again because of rumors of her sexual encounters with students from her school.

Yet the second-person pronoun speaks louder to me. Can it be addressed to any Arab, to Nidali herself, because “cops in America don’t like Arabs [in general, and definitely not the ones] who hit their teenage daughters” (249)? The second-person

narrative voice comes as an imperative, a reminder for an immigrant on how to behave, a tool of navigation – in search of home. Narrative shifts as tools of navigation must not be considered coping mechanisms as such consideration limits the power of these shifts and remains the protagonist-as-narrator on the reactive side, still unable to control the narrative. This consideration also situates MENA women as reactive characters responding to events rather than active narrators who are creating meaning while navigating their agency through such events. In *A Map of Home*, shifts in narrative are forms of resistance, resistance as a way of “writing back” against changes of home, new and imposed homes, and shaking grounds of belonging caused by war.

In chapter sixteen, and as the story comes to an end, Nidali never ceases to continue using a variety of first, second, and third-person narrative voices to narrate her story. She narrates not only her own journey to find home, but her family’s, especially her father, her Baba. Despite the similarities in their feelings and realities of home and belonging, there is an on-going conflict in their relationship:

I wondered if Baba never wanted me to be a woman because he never wanted me to struggle. It’s funny that he called me “My Struggle”:<sup>21</sup> for a long time, I thought he meant I was *his* struggle. (Jarrar 258)

Nidali’s wondering circles back to the beginning, to the day she was born, to the story she does not remember how she came to know (1), to the day she was born and named in St. Elizabeth’s in Boston, with her name foreshadowing her future like her mother has feared.

Nidali continues to struggle with her father as she insists on attending college in Boston rather than commuting to the university across the street. Her father forces her to

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<sup>21</sup> Literal translation of *Nidali*, her name.

write compositions, or *combozishans*, in preparation for her statement of purpose: “essays, every day, preferably in both English and Arabic, about something purely Arab, or relating to my Arabness, or to a famous Arab” (260). After discarding her unserious *combozishans* that clearly mock her father and his ways, he forces her to “write down his thoughts on when Arabness and Americanness first met” (266).

Even after Nidali receives a letter of acceptance from the small Boston college she wants, her father refuses:

“*You*,” he turned to me, “will stay at home, finish college and get a PhD and whatever other degrees you want. *Staying home will help you focus*. Who knows what would happen if you go far away? You may lose sight of everything I planned for you.”  
“But I have my own plans. And I’m determined to see them through, Baba.”  
“What do you want?” he shouted again.  
“I want to be happy,” I said, without thinking.  
[...] “But Nidali... what is more important?” Baba said, and paused.  
“Your happiness or mine?” (my emphasis, 281)

Although both Nidali and her Baba have lost many homes, their navigations of home remain different. Baba addresses Nidali in second-person to stay at the home he made in first-person, “*You*... stay at home... everything *I* planned.” While Baba’s home is in Palestine and is not one that he can return to, Nidali’s birthplace is Boston, and she has the chance to spend more time there doing what she loves. Baba chooses to cling to the small things he has, like his trailer in Texas, and to think of it as *home*. He also chooses to impose his conception, his narration, of home to what his family thinks of as home. Whenever Nidali, however, thinks of home, she chooses to *run away*.

Unlike the narrators of *The Saffron Kitchen*, Nidali has to fight to narrate: she puts on different narrative voices in different places and times, or all at once, in order to find her voice. She can narrate horrific experiences like war in first-person, but uses first,

second, and third-person voices as she struggles to put her feelings of belonging as a fourteen-year-old Arab girl in the US into words.

Writing her own story, in her own voice, or voices that are not hers, seems to grant Nidali the right to narrate her future after all. Her numerous attempts of running away open her father's eyes. The night before she leaves for Boston, her mother hands her a box of all her compositions and writings since she was little and said, "These are your writings... These are your words. You will be a writer, no? You must keep all of this for posterity. I want you to write" (289). Nidali's mother realizes the space Nidali has created for herself through language and writing. She also chooses to materialize such space into a box. Able to carry it with her wherever she goes, Nidali's new space becomes her home.

In the examples of Badia, Sara and Maryam, and Nidali, narrative shifts are all in dialogue with concepts of home and belonging; they are all representational of "the characters' experience of their social surroundings and their interiority" (Valassopoulos 35). When the protagonist takes control of the narrative, she invites us to be part of this extremely personal experience. The intimacy in the second-person perspective and in El Saadawi's words, "when you read a novel you become another person," is the hope I find in such narrative shifts. Not only do the spaces within each perspective allow the characters/narrators to learn more about themselves and their surroundings, but they serve as an invitation to find ourselves too.

Dena Al Adeeb, an Iraqi born scholar and artist, refers to the "troubled" linguistic utterings as ruptures, but still manages to find continuity within them—despite displacement. She says,

The ruptures I experienced as a result of the multiple displacements became a position for me to explore my multiple and complex identities. The ruptures caused not discontinuity, but rather a continuity flavored by layered and multifaceted experiences that *inspire me to find different modes of expression*. (my emphasis, “Dissidents, Displacements, and Diasporas,” Naber 214)

MENA women’s narratives, in this chapter, then must not be viewed as documentaries, exhibits, or insider takes of a mysterious world, but as interactive stories and examples of resistance against controlled modes of narration. Their stories are forgiving examples of handling troubled events like poverty, discrimination, war, and displacement in troubled ways such as shifting between narrative voice perspectives. They are also reminders that there is hope, even a hope as big as finding home, in such ways that serve as micro-acts of resistance.



## ***Falasteen: Anachronism as the Journey Back Home***

*These days it is easy to forget that [...] Palestine meant not bullets and stones and bulldozed houses, but prophets of old and the promise of salvation. To speak of Palestine was to conjure up place names round and full in the mouth – Bethlehem and Nazareth, Gethsemane and Golgoth; it was to remember the Sea of Galilee where Jesus called Peter and James to be fishers of men, fields where he cured the lame and gave sight to the blind, pathways perfumed by the tread of his sandals.*

—Evelyn Shakir, Bint Arab

*Falasteen*, the title of the chapter, is Palestine’s name in Arabic. It is a feminine name in the Arabic language that is given to many girls as well. *Falasteen* is the name of a beautiful land, and also the name of a raped land. It is the name of a land that births fighters, the name of a land that still resists. *Ismuha Falasteen* (اسمها فلسطين), *her name is Palestine*, is a very popular response in MENA and the diaspora when we hear the land named otherwise. Naming plays such an important role in resistance because a name cannot be replaced, no other name is recognized, no other name exists in the collective memory, and no other name is allowed to be said except for *Falasteen*. Whenever I meet a new *Falasteen*, I tell her the story of my grandmother and the key. We look at each other. We both know that *Falasteen*, her name, is the key.

Although my mother is Jordanian, her parents and grandparents are from Palestine. When the war escalated in 1948, both my grandmother and my grandfather’s families ran away but they always kept their house keys. “They thought it will only be a couple of weeks,” my mother used to tell me, “they thought they were going to use the key to open their front door after everything goes back to normal.” But it never went back

to normal. Today, many Palestinians in the diaspora still own their keys; a materialistic representation of Haq Al Awda (حق العودة): their right to return. In the span of seventy-four years, the key has become a collective symbol of resistance. This symbol has also materialized in other objects in the Palestinian household. Stories of our ancestors, tales of the resistance, and narratives of the land become visible in handmade robe embroidery, audible in the Aweehas and Mawaweel,<sup>22</sup> and tangible in the olive oil tanks in the pantry.

Abstractly, Al Thakira Al Falasteeniya (الذاكرة الفلسطينية), the Palestinian Memory,<sup>23</sup> has also become an important concept in the MENA region and diaspora. Like the key, the embroidery, or the olive oil, the Palestinian Memory is part of the past that members of the Palestinian collective consciousness can hold on to in their journey to gain their right to return. The Palestinian Memory does not escape Palestinian narratives; it is a central theme for MENA writers as “the idea of Palestine itself needs to be continuously dreamed of in order to be kept alive” (Valassopoulos 99).

At the UN International Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, Betty Friedan told Nawal El Saadawi: “Please do not bring up Palestine in your speech. This is a women’s conference, not a political conference” (Elia 141). In her essay, “The Burden of Representation: When Palestinians Speak Out,” Nada Elia explores the root cause behind Friedan’s words: the expectation from mainstream feminism of MENA women to deliver one narrative: “the oppression of Arab women by Islamic fundamentalism” (140). In the context of Palestinian women, Elia writes that “it cannot be over emphasized that a

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<sup>22</sup> “Awecha” is a sound, not a word or verb. It is usually articulated in a loud, sing-song way as the beginning of the traditional Arab “mawwal” (موال) which are short poems popular at festive occasions such as weddings.

<sup>23</sup> I hesitate to refer to the Palestinian Memory as nostalgia although it is akin to having mixed emotions in recalling what is past and beautiful with what is no longer the case in the present. Other than Memory being the literal translation for the Arabic term, I choose the word for its vividness over the vagueness of nostalgia.

Palestinian woman's dignity, her individual rights, and her freedom are denied her by Israel, not her Muslim next of kin" (150). Mainstream feminism and Eurocentric discourses fail to acknowledge the undeniable and interrogable connection between the political and the personal in MENA women's narratives and lives.

For Palestinian women, self-determination is absent on multiple levels both in fiction and real-life. Beyond the oppression they suffer by settler colonialists and their discriminating laws, Palestinian women face another challenge: mainstream historical narrativization relies on their disappearance as national agents from the Palestinian Memory. Amireh writes that such disappearance is due to how the world in general and mainstream feminism in particular address gender and nationalism. The way "they privilege sexual politics to the exclusion of all else, such as history, class, war, and occupation" is most evident in their discourse on Palestinian women ("Palestinian Women's Disappearing Act," Amireh 32).<sup>24</sup> Palestinian women writers intervene into this narrative by introducing a method of resistance to such dominant—i.e., imperialist—discourse(s) into their fiction. It is a way of "writing back" against biased histories that undermine their private and public roles in the Palestinian resistance. It allows Palestinian women to rewrite their names in the collective Palestinian Memory.

In "Arabiya Made Invisible: Between Marginalization of Agency and Silencing of Dissent," Noura Erakat writes:

The erasure of context in the discussion of gender equality and Palestine is an irresponsible act. *It is nothing short of racist to attribute a society's behavior to its character rather than its environment.* Countering this

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<sup>24</sup> This is also evident in the exploitation of sexual politics through "pink-washing" in favor of the occupation's government. Supporters of the Zionist regime tend to highlight one aspect of its liberal agenda, such as a few governments' support of non-Palestinian LGBTQ+ communities in order to turn a blind eye on the inhumane crimes committed against Palestinians. By 2023, this argument will not be as well-supported anymore since one of the most far-right governments will be sworn in this year.

discourse is made increasingly difficult when one's identity as a strong Arab woman is taken for granted and her political activism is conceived as extreme and irrational. (my emphasis, 182)

The environment surrounding Palestinian women is devastating. They live under a seventy-four-year-old Zionist occupation saturated in war crimes against the Palestinian people. Living under the boot of the occupation, Palestinian women live a life of mourning and death.<sup>25</sup> In his introduction to *The Question of Palestine*, Edward Said touches on basics that are essential to my analysis in this chapter. First is “the continuing existence of a Palestinian Arab people” despite the genocide and ethnic cleansing. The second is that, more generally,

Human beings individually and selectively are entitled to fundamental rights, of which self-determination is one [...] No human being should be threatened to ‘transfer’ out of [their] own home or land; no human being should be discriminated against because [they are] not of an X or Y religion; no human identity should be stripped of [their] land, national identity, or culture, no matter the cause. (xvi)

The right to self-determination also demands the right to narrate. As a community, the Palestinian people are intimately connected with their past and their history of suffering as essential tools to survive in the present (“Permission to Narrate,” Said 47). Their narration of the home they lost in the past grants them a home in the present, despite their displacement across the world. Bashir Abu Manneh complicates Palestine as a theme in realist novels and shows how the Palestinian novel, specifically, is a “political challenge, hope, and possibility to the decay and decomposition of both collective and individual agency” (512).

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<sup>25</sup> While images of mourning mothers, daughters, sisters, and lovers surrounding assassinated Palestinian men are more commonly displayed in media, women martyrs like Journalist Shireen Abu Akleh – who was assassinated while covering the occupation's brutal attacks on Jenin on May 11, 2022 – must not be forgotten.

As resistance and belonging go hand in hand, Palestinian women writers in this chapter also make a metaphorical journey back home (one they are unable to do in real life) through their writing. In “Where is Home? Fragmented Lives, Borders Crossing, and the Politics of Exile,” Rabab Abdulhadi writes:

‘Going home’ means more than taking a journey to the place where one was born. The ability to go, the decision to embark on such a trip, and the experience of crossing borders to one’s “native” land involve an examination of the makeup of the individual and the collective self [...] For the Palestinian exiled, then, *going home* brings back memories of one’s worst nightmares at international borders: interrogation and harassment, suspicion of malintent, and rejection of one’s chosen self-identification. *Going home* ceases to be just about traveling to where one was born; instead, going home is transformed into a politically charged project in which the struggle for self-identification, self-determination, freedom, and dignity become as salient as one’s physical and mounted safety. (emphasis in the original, 315 – 316)

This metaphorical journey back home also empowers Palestinian women to take back their right to a home that has been stolen, and to keep the collective (and increasingly global) dream of a free Palestine alive. In the following examples, Palestinian women writers negotiate between their gender and political identities. They use literary devices to navigate through space (from diaspora to Palestine as home) by navigating through time (from present to past or vice versa). This theme appears and is traceable across authors/works; however, individual examples of the collective Palestinian Memory mean different things for the distinct narrators who utilize them for the sake of forming collective belonging and resistance.

Like perspective shifts in the writings analyzed in the previous chapter, fragmentary narratives also play an important role in demonstrating “the journey back home” within Palestinian women’s writings. Through their writings, they translate the collective Palestinian Memory into literary devices like analepsis and prolepsis, and shift

between the past, present, and future to resist the reality of the Palestine they know and inhabit. While memory consists of stored information in mind, it is also the way of remembering the order of things. Anachronisms like analepsis (flashback) and prolepsis (flash-forward) are time-related narrative techniques that relate to the *order* of the narrative and control story-discourse relations (Scheffel et al.).

Analepsis and prolepsis as anachronisms are critical to the collective consciousness in the following works. One of the reasons why the Palestinian memory is important to the collective because it becomes a metaphorical home that attempts to fill the void of a real one. Analepsis serves as a return (as a journey back home) through storytelling. In the same way, prolepsis provides a journey, towards the future, towards hope. The novels in this chapter are very nostalgic for a time that has gone. But they are also very present. They do not end with the dispossession, they always have a sense of moving forward, of a possibility for things to keep alive. Anachronisms serve as an important reminder that the place does not change. Zeina Arafat's *You Exist Too Much*, Susan Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World*, and Sahar Khalifeh's *My First and Only Love* use anachronisms to announce that Palestine was, is, and always will be Palestine, and that time can tell so much about the story of the past, present, and future of the land.

*Zeina Arafat's You Exist Too Much* is recounted by an unnamed narrator who uses analepsis to recall memories of home (Palestine) while finding her new home in the US. In this novel, the journey back home is not concerned with the destination, since the narrator/protagonist is able to visit Palestine throughout the narrative. Instead, it is utilized to understand her current life events and the journey to find home, love, and meaning within them. When she goes home to Palestine in the present time, a soldier by

the border questions the protagonist sexual orientation. After this incident, she comes out as queer to her mother and some of her family members but does not receive support or acceptance from any of them in return. She realizes that she suffers from a “love addiction” that is responsive to the lack of love from her mother and her home that she lost.<sup>26</sup> This unnamed narrator longs for “unattainable love, as a quest for the familiar, a quest for home, for a homeland that may not exist. A quest for a mother” (Arafat 257).

Before the first chapter of the novel and at the end of almost every chapter, the narrator uses analepsis, on a new page that looks like a new chapter but without a number or a title. In the first half of the novel, almost all flashbacks take place in (or are about) Palestine. Here are the first sentences of some of those analepses/vignettes:

In Bethlehem when I was twelve, men in airy white gowns sat at a three-legged table outside the Church of the Nativity. (before chapter one, 3)

I remember falling down the stairs when I was two and looking up to see my parents laughing at the top. (end of chapter two, 19)

I was four when the first intifada began. (end of chapter three, 38)

By mid-July of my childhood summers in Jordan, I was homesick for America. (end of chapter eight, 118)

In college, after things ended with Kate, I couldn't make myself straight no matter how hard I tried. (end of chapter ten, 145)

Through these examples, the narrator visits past events to understand her present. In the second half of the novel, the ending of most chapters change. Rather than memories of the narrator's childhood and adolescence, the end of chapter twelve narrates her mother's upbringing. This analepsis is especially powerful, as it confines the present events in

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<sup>26</sup> The narrator suffers from an uncontrollable need to fall in love often. Once comfortable with a partner, the narrator instantly seeks emotional comfort from a new lover, and so on. She receives help from a treatment center, “The Lodge,” where she is diagnosed with “love addiction.”

chapter twelve to two pages while filling up the rest of the chapter with the mother's narrative:

As first ranked in her class, a distinction that still exists at the Quaker Friends School in Ramallah, Alia Abu Sa'ab's firstborn daughter, Minister of Finance Khaled Abu Sa'ab's first granddaughter, the owner of two highly pronounced cheekbones and the first girl in 1960s Nablus to wear a London-imported miniskirt, Laila Abu Sa'ab was certain to have a great life. (end of chapter twelve, 161)

The following chapters end in the same form as the ones before them, yet begin to narrate present events or expressing anxieties about the future. Verb tenses change too, such as the following examples:

I'm not sure what I'm expecting to happen at the LGBTQ center reading on Sunday night. (end of chapter sixteen, 236)

My mother runs out of the living room of her apartment and returns with a Qur'an. (end of chapter eighteen, 252)

The end of the last chapter is a hybrid of past and present:

Soon after I move into her apartment, Anouk and I watch a home video of my family from 1990 [...] Anouk touches my arm and asks if I'm okay. 'You seem elsewhere,' she says, and I am. (end of chapter nineteen, 258-259)

While the last excerpt is non-analeptic, the narrator's consciousness is in the past, with her mother in the home video. The multiplicity of the narrator's identities makes it difficult for her to be at one place, at one home. While most of her memories exist in the same geographical locale between Palestine and Jordan, she longs and feels homesick towards the US during her childhood visits.<sup>27</sup> The narrator accepts help and understands her sexual identity better throughout the novel, but the support does not reconcile her mother's acceptance. The narrator is self-conscious about being out of place: "I'm aware

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<sup>27</sup> Although they spend most of their trips in Amman, her mother used to take the narrator and her brother Karim to Nablus for at least ten days during their summer visits (Arafat 182).



I can be exhausting, ‘you exist too much,’ my mother often told me” (134). Although the narrator slowly breaks out from her habit of unhealthy relationships and finds reassuring love with Anouk, her longing for home, (and) her mother, remain(s).

The narrator and her use of analepsis are representative of many Palestinian lives and their search for home and belonging in the diaspora. Also, the narrator’s mother’s discourse is symbolic of that of the occupation. Does the occupation not tell the Palestinian people that they “exist too much” on a daily basis? Does the occupation not force people to flee out of their homes and away for people they love and force them to be what they are not?

In “The Long Road Home,” Sherene Seikaly describes belonging as transience, which reaffirms the important connection analepsis has to memory in Palestinian women’s writings. She writes,

The tools of the occupation are daily refined. Its most recent iteration is the onset of one of the largest and most expensive ‘separation’ devices now being honed by the Israeli military apparatus. The very idea of Palestine, much less its actual landmass, is shrinking under the weight of [...] years of oppression. Geography itself is assaulted, as more lives and olive trees are uprooted, displaced, and destroyed [...] *The fragmentation of Palestine relies on a continuous process of removal and distancing people from land and history, and, perhaps, most painfully, distancing people from one another.*

The long road home is one I will always travel. *The search for belonging is based on its very impossibility.* It is the search for the sense of home that is more important and more powerful than the destination. (my emphasis, 301)

Resistance lies in persisting [in the act of returning home/in the struggle to return home] despite being forced not to.

While Arafat’s novel has an unnamed narrator, the narrator in Susan Abulhawa’s *Against the Loveless World*, on the other hand, has four names and uses analepsis to be at

home while writing her life's story in "The Cube," a high-security solitary-confinement cell. She starts writing her life's story in 194 coding<sup>28</sup> while simultaneously narrating it to the reader. She decides to do so after being interviewed by multiple journalists from imperialist nations who are attempting to narrate her story without her:

'I'll answer your question: No. I was *not* gang-raped the night Saddam invaded Kuwait.' She seemed disappointed, but moved on to ask how I became involved in the resistance. She called it "terrorism." (Abulhawa 7)

There are two ways in which this is a clear attempt to "write back" against the myth and the danger of the single story. First, and more generally, the narrator in *Against the Loveless World* has four names (Nahr, Yaqoot, Almas, Nanu): "*What are they doing? What am I doing? Just dance, Nahr. Dance, Yaqoot. Dance, Almas. Almas. Almas. My name is Almas. One. Two. Three names. Four: Nanu. Jihad. Drink a little more Red Label. Sip, sip. No, drink. Count.*" (emphasis in original, 50 – 51). The narrator in *You Exist Too Much* has none. The diversity in naming and narration displays the multiplicity of stories rather than the dominance of singular myth.

Second, mainstream feminism and the media's emphasis on portraying MENA (and Palestinian) women as sexually oppressed to avoid addressing their political oppression, as discussed above, adds another level of danger because even in its misrepresentation, it masks itself as representation. The stories the journalists visiting Nahr work on can appear to the mainstream readership as "representation" since it features an underrepresented person. They can also seem unconventional, almost daring, and brave, since it is about an imprisoned Palestinian woman and ex-sex worker.

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<sup>28</sup> 194 code is an encrypted method of writing in which the informed reader can read the first, fourth, and ninth word of each sentence to read the message.

But underrepresentation does not call for, and is not solved by, misrepresentation. Rather than focusing on the subjectivity and therefore self-determination of the women they are writing on and giving them space to narrate and write their own story, the aim of misrepresentation is to prioritize and please a liberal agenda and readership that is drowned in normalizing imperial and capitalist pursuits. Out of the immense stories in the Palestinian voices in the diaspora, some stories conform to the dominant ideological norm.

Etaf Rum's *A Woman is No Man* is an example on how repressive climates can produce literary works that pander to the dominant ideology and conform to the orientalist distortion of Palestinian women's lives. Although the narrative is powerful in many ways, it seems to please a mainstream audience. After suffering from generational gender oppression, Deya is saved by her "Americanized" aunt, Sarah, who escapes her oppressive Palestinian family in Brooklyn and opens a library in Manhattan. Lila Abu Lughod complicates Spivak's "white men saving brown women from brown men" and describes how in mainstream narratives "brown women seem to want to be rescued by their white sisters and friends" (101).<sup>29</sup>

The novel starts in Deya's voice, a Palestinian American girl born to Palestinian parents in Brooklyn: "I was born without a voice, one cold, overcast day in Brooklyn, New York." She then addresses the reader: "You've never heard this story before" (Rum 1), and concludes: "The year is 1990, and we are in Palestine. This is the beginning" (2). The next pages narrate, through analepsis and prolepsis, the stories of Deya, Isra (her mother), and Fareeda (her paternal grandmother).

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<sup>29</sup> Also see Ahmad's "pulp non-fiction" in chapter two.

For the girls and women in *A Woman is No Man*, the setting is almost always the kitchen or the bedroom in a Brooklyn apartment in an Arab neighborhood. Isra, the daughter-in-law, is destined to be imprisoned in the house of her husband Adam and under the rule of her mother-in-law, Fareeda. However, Sara, the daughter, is immediately urged as soon as she turns fifteen to accept a suitor and commit to her husband's home for life. Both Sara and Isra have a strong bond over their love for books to escape the unrealistic set of expectations enforced by Fareeda. In a way, it was an escape from the real-world systems they live in and the house they were trapped in. Isra explains to Sara the reason behind her favorite book, *A Thousand and One Nights*:

“But it is not about real life,” Isra said. “It’s about the strength and resilience of women. No one asked Scheherazade to marry the king. She volunteers on behalf of all women to save the daughters of Muslims everywhere. For a thousand and one nights, Scheherazade’s stories were resistance. Her voice was a weapon – a reminder of the extraordinary power of stories, and even more, the strength of a single woman.” (99)

The personal lives of Isra and Sara and later Deya and her sisters (Isra’s daughters) are depicted to be under the control of Fareeda and Khaled (the grandparents). However, even Fareeda’s actions are a result of the treatment she received from her mother and her mother-in-law, and Khaled’s treatment is mainly a projection of the trauma he experienced when his land and home were stolen by occupation forces in Palestine as “the tragedy of the *Nakba* bulging in his veins” (116).

Anachronisms as a literary device allows the reader to be able to learn Fareeda, Isra, and Deya’s story and find connections between them. Although the novel constantly shifts between the past (Isra and Fareeda) and the present (Deya), time—in many ways—

remains static. Both Deya and Isma experience/witness honor killing,<sup>30</sup> both live in abusive households, and both are expected to live up to unrealistic expectations. While this compare and contrast has a powerful potential to critique abusive patriarchal world systems that are not strictly regional, the novel does not fulfill this purpose as Sara (the “Americanized” daughter, Rum 180) is portrayed as a “white” savior to both Isra and her daughter, Deya. She “runs away” from the oppressive household and lifestyle, wears different clothes, and runs her own bookstore—that most probably sells books in English.

The redemption is in viewing Isra not as the demeaning woman her husband and his family think she is, or who society expects her to be. Not only is she the protagonist of Rum’s novel but is also strikingly similar to Abulhawa’s protagonist, which is one more observation I want to note as I circle back to Nahr. While Nahr is imprisoned in a maximum-security prison cell, Isra is also held captive and cannot leave her house. They both, however, resort to language, as Isra reads and Nahr writes. They also both try to get out, although Isra is murdered by her husband when she is found in the train station, with her four daughters.

Analepsis assists Nahr, in *Against the Loveless World*, in writing her story from her prison cell. Memories of her life as a sex worker in Kuwait align with her memories as a member of the resistance in Palestine as she, through her self-determined/representative writing and narration, “re-examine[s] and reconsider[s] the unequivocal link between politics and the personal... [and enacts] how the political and

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<sup>30</sup> Honor killing is the act of murder by male members of the family of female members (daughter, sister, wife) to “protect” the family’s honor. In many places in MENA, it has a reduced sentence and is considered a duty rather than a crime in many social spaces.

the social are mediated, lived, performed, and experienced through the personal”

(Valassopoulos 111):

“Alone in the open outdoors, the memory of Kuwait came back to me, the long-ago place in a long-ago time on the beach, when a broken shard of glass dug deeper and deeper into my back with each thrust of the man on top of me. I felt shooting pain from the scar that marked that night on my body forever, and it occurred to me how much my life had changed. Two frightful nights alone in nature, one fraught with despair and a sense of endings, the other ripe with possibility, life, love, anticipation, and power – both personal and collective.” (Abulhawa 249)<sup>31</sup>

After finishing writing her story, Nahr wonders why she started narrating it in the first place:

I don't know what compelled me to write it all. To set the record straight? To lay bare with love what others find offensive? To pass the time? To mark my place in the world? To inject life into this lifeless box? To declare simply that I survived? To keep Bilal near me?  
Perhaps I will destroy it all and start over. Maybe I'll soak all the pages in water.  
(343)

Nahr's self-narration and its continuous use of analepsis in recalling previous events is an attempt to both belong and resist. Analeptic innovation and experimentation are deeply embedded in Palestinian writing. Bashir Abu-Manneh touches on Kanafani's use of analepsis and flashbacks in *Men in the Sun* that serves “the realist purpose of representing the contours of historical crisis. Private thoughts and memories are invoked historically as markers of the burdens of contemporary Arab reality” (522). Stuck in a tank while being smuggled from Iraq to Kuwait, analepsis in Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* is a release

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<sup>31</sup> The first frightful night mentioned in this analepsis is in reference to being raped on the beach while running away from a man during her job as a sex-worker in Kuwait. The other frightful night is in reference to an operation she organized and executed with the resistance to reverse sewage water from her Palestinian village to a neighboring settler colony. Her successful operation caused her being arrested and imprisoned by the occupation forces.

of burden and a fresh breath of air that provides the freedom to portray the characters' thoughts and feelings without constraint.

In *The Cube, Against the Loveless World's* Nahr writes her life's story with the assistance of analepsis for the same reason. She frees herself from her literal imprisonment under the occupation's oppression and from her metaphorical one imposed by the narration and misrepresentation of mainstream media. Nahr's narrative writing and analepsis is also a journey back home. On a metaphorical level, she finds belonging in recalling past memories spent with loved ones while being lonely in a prison cell. But literally, her writing reaches Bilal, and she is freed shortly after in a prisoner exchange. Her writing of the past manifests her self-determination in the present as she reunites with her family and Bilal, the man she loves, in Jordan.

Lastly, Sahar Khalifeh's *My First and Only Love* narrator uses analepsis to blur the lines between personal and collective memories and makes the journey back home to the Palestine she loves after a life of exile. The novel is narrated by Nidal, who – after her return from exile and a life as a roaming artist – arrives to her family's home in Palestine. She remembers the past, works on a project to renovate the house in the present, and imagines a better future (26). While many of Nidal's memories are of Rabie, "her first and only love," they all take place in pre-1984 Palestine and during the British Mandate. She narrates memories of her strong-willed grandmother, who raises leaders of the revolt, Amin, and Wahid Qahtan. While Amin fights the occupation with his pen, Wahid defends the land against settlers with the sword, with fighters like Rabie by his side. As a member of the Qahtan family, Nidal narrates her personal life through the political

revolution of her uncles, announcing her memories and what she saw as a Palestinian girl in an important voice that narrates the Palestinian Memory as a whole.

In first-person narrative voice, Nidal says,

I returned to recall the memories, the tenderness of family life, the dust of the earth, my grandmother's stories, the hearth, the lemon rinds, and the water pipe. But all of a sudden, I found myself standing on a land filled with explosives, corpses, bones, and skulls - some belonging to Arabs and some to Jews, some to those who repented and some to those who betrayed. (Khalifeh 61 – 62)

Despite flashbacks of war, loss, and tragedy, Nidal insists that she “remembered love and tenderness” (194). The excerpt above and Nidal’s perspective on it reflect the essence of the Palestinian Memory. While the Palestinian Memory, especially of pre-1948, consists of memories of the land— “the dust of the earth ... the lemon rinds”—it is scarred with memories of war and loss of home. Resistance in the Palestinian Memory, however, relies on what we choose to carry on. Edward Said calls it “the art of memory” and reflects on how such memory in its collective form gives its people “a place in the world” (“Invention, Memory, and Place”, Said 179).<sup>32</sup> Thus, collective memory takes part in rewriting a more just history.

Rabie makes an appearance in front of Nidal’s house in the present time and stays at her house for a while. Upon meeting after being separated for many years, they both agree after finding and reading her uncle Amin’s memoirs that “history is what we write, and not what we say and hide in the closed boxes of the heart that we carry with us to the afterlife in the darkness of the grave” (383).

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<sup>32</sup> In the same paragraph, Said also warns how such “refashioned memory” can be misused and exploited to manipulate a false past narrative for “urgent purposes in the present.”



The discovery of Amin's memoir is a key moment in the narrative not only because it provides (and is told in) a different voice but also because it is a materialized form of the Palestinian Memory that has traveled through time but not place. The memoir provides a different perspective on the events Nidal recalls through her first-person narration and analepsis. For example, Nidal learns of her mother's role in the revolt, and more specifically, of her time as Al-Husseini's nurse. This information transforms misconceptions Nidal had of her mother and her absence from most of her childhood.

Since most of the events in the memoir were unknown to the narrator (Nidal), they are revealed to her simultaneously with the reader and therefore affect her present and continuing narrative. This sobering moment serves as a reminder of how dynamic and adaptable historical narrativization must be and emphasizes the collectivity of creating and remembering such history. It also shows the multiplicity of sources in narrating the Palestinian story. And as the narrator achieves the same level of processing the retelling of history as the reader while reading the memoir, she listens rather than tells, and invites the reader to participate in this collective celebration of life and death.

Set between the British Mandate and the present occupation, Khalifeh uses conventional repetitive analepsis<sup>33</sup> to smoothly shift between flashbacks and present events, making the personal memories of Nidal, an exiled Palestinian woman, a political account of a history that was once thought to be made only by Palestinian men. In the end, Nidal narrates:

I return now to my own surroundings and [Rabie] sleeping in my bed. It is nighttime, it is cold and windy, and I can hear the sounds of bullets being fired. We have now passed the year 2000 but we still live in the era of siege. *It was them yesterday, and it is us today.* The world turns and does not stop, but the

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<sup>33</sup> Conventional repetitive analepsis is a narrative mode that uses multiple flashbacks that tells many times what happened once (Genette qtd. in Scheffel et al.)

circle is empty, and time is of the essence [...] Is it possible for anyone to imagine what we do not have, and which we are not part of? I didn't live during that period and I did not know that man [Abdel-Qader al-Husseini]<sup>34</sup> or befriend him, but my heart amazes me; it is moaning as if due to the separation and the loss of their beloved! [...] Isn't it strange that we can experience things we have only imagined, as if they were a part of us, of our present, of our past [...] *Isn't it strange that we remember what is not ours?*" (my emphasis, 387 – 388)

Nidal recognizes that her recollections, which are forever embedded in her personal and in the collective Palestinian Memory, are part of a continuing presence of war in her current experience that still exists with the “bullets being fired” till this day. It is hard to separate the political from the personal in Nidal’s memories because it includes memories of people she had not known but who are essential to the collective memory as a whole. In the same way, the personal cannot be separated from the political as Nidal’s recollection becomes a present retelling of historical events through a young girl’s eyes.

The present narration of past events generates hope for the future. Rabie and Nidal fall in love again despite the siege and “offer gifts to the newborns [of the village] and place flowers on [tombs of the dead]” (393). Bashir Abu-Manneh says that “Khalifeh shows how working-class solidarity and truth in a solely Palestinian context are the real foundation of an emancipated future” and adds that “*the real companion of the Palestinian novel, then, is the ebb and the flow of the revolution*” (my emphasis, 533). After a dizzying journey between past and present, life and death, the narrator is finally able to narrate the future in the children she meets and the dead she remembers.

Moving through time using a consistent narrative voice while relying on analepsis, and anachronisms more generally, as a narrative tool puts the narrator in the

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<sup>34</sup> Abdel-Qader al-Husseini (1908-1948) was one of the founders of the Holy War Organization and a leader of the revolt. He fought alongside the Palestinian freedom fighters and was killed defending the village of al-Qastal in 1948 (*The Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question*).

position of spokesperson of the past and present (and of the future in cases of foreshadowing). In this sense, Nidal as a narrator has agency not only over her story, but also the story of her mother, grandmother, uncles, and the Qahtan family along with Rabie. Is Rabie or Palestine Nidal's first and only love? Although fragmented in its achronological order, narrative here is also a sign and a tool of belonging and resistance. It puts the Palestinian narrative in the hands of a woman, allowing her agency over her story and many others in a time of colonization, when the British mandate and the Zionist settlers were claiming everything – land, houses, roads, and Palestinian lives – as their own.

In Palestinian women's writings, memory becomes a place: a home to own and return to in the face of oppression, exile, and denial of the right of the land. The resistance in *Palestinian Memory* relies on its purpose of creating this space of home and belonging. Analepsis as a literary device challenges oppression over previously told and enforced narratives and thus highlights the importance of the memory of the people. Analepsis, for Palestinian women writers, becomes the road to take on the metaphorical journey back home.

Analepsis in these examples also serves as prolepsis. The Palestinian example allows readers to look back to the past while simultaneously imagining the future. I do not believe that both anachronisms can be separated. Remembering life before the occupation allows us to imagine life beyond it. The Palestinian memory affects the Palestinian imagination and self-determination. Prolepsis as a literary device in these works does not necessarily serve as a device to narrate future events *within* the text, the act of narration serves as prolepsis to imagine, hope for, a better future, *beyond* the text.

Deya's reflection on her mother's past allows her to stand up against her grandparents and declare that she will go to college rather than get married. Nahr's memory-writing becomes her redeeming grace as it makes its way out of The Cube and allows Bilal to find her. Only the remembrance of my grandmother's past allows me to see our future, I am a product of the histories I read. *Memory is a proleptic moment*. The last line of each of these works can be read as a proleptic moment too, it serves as a continuation of the Palestinian Memory and people. As I move towards the future, "I carry all of my histories in my pocket" (Zaatari 74).

While writing her life's story, Nahr in *Against the Loveless World* remembers reading James Baldwin with Bilal (her lover and leader of the resistance) during the imposed curfew from the occupation raids. After reading Baldwin's line, "... if we had not loved each other none of us would have survived," Nahr asks:

'Do you think that's how we survived?' I asked.  
[Bilal] put the book down, thought for a moment, and looked at me.  
'I don't see how else anyone can survive colonialism. Understanding our own condition, I think in saying 'loved each other,' Baldwin doesn't just mean the living. To survive by loving each other means to *love our ancestors too. To know their pain, struggles, and joys. It means to love our collective memory, who we are, where we come from,*" he said, and after a silence for both of us to soak up that thought, he continued reading.' (299)

This is a beautiful moment in the text because it symbolizes what Nawal El Saadawi says in *The Hidden Face of Eve*: "And yet the 'high politics of a country' and the 'great issues of society' are not related to, and are never really settled in the meeting halls, corridors, and salons for which these men and women have such a great predilection. They rest, in fact, with the small events and details of the daily life of millions and millions of men and women" (371).

Nahr's self-narration and writing, like the other narrators and writers in this chapter, creates a space for such "high politics" to exist in the Palestinian Memory. It gives priority to not only the daily life of the oppressed but the memory and the longevity of such life and its details. High politics exist within the personal and the collective memories of the people, and moves across texts between nations, from Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* to Nahr's memoir in prison, to make its way to confined spaces like homes, and all the way to the mind – to the memory.

## **Zaynab: Narratology as Solidarity**

*Alef knows  
That a thread  
Of a story  
Stiches together  
A wound.  
Alef the letter,  
He's the shape  
Of hope.  
Like me,  
A refugee.  
For me,  
My refuge.*

—Ibtisam Barakat, “A Song for Alef”

In her memoir, Ibtisam Barakat writes her life story with the assistance of the first letter in the Arabic alphabet; Alef (أ). She dedicates the book “To Alef, the letter,” who is transformed into a character throughout the memoir and who becomes her close friend. Barakat divides her narrative to three parts: “a letter to no one,” “the postal box of memory,” and “a letter to everyone.” The memoir is set in 1981, as Barakat recalls how the Six-Day war in 1967 interrupts her childhood, how she continuously separates from and reunites with her family, and how she lives as a Palestinian refugee – constantly moving, constantly away from home. I read “a letter to no one,” “the postal box of memory,” and “a letter to everyone” as a three-part process of belonging, resistance, and solidarity, and ultimately as a process that leads to liberation as I look back at the works in this thesis.

In chapter two, I explore MENA women’s writings as extremely personal narratives, written to no one (in particular). They are used as tools to navigate meanings of home and created as spaces to find belonging within them. I read these works as troubled narratives that navigate geographies to find home and belonging using

unconventional modes and shifts of narration. I have previously introduced the novel under “cultural production;” this understanding comes from Said’s definition of “culture” in *Culture and Imperialism*, in which he defines it in two ways:

First of all it means all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure [...] Second, and almost imperceptibly, culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been know and thought, as Matthew Arnold put it in the 1860s [...] You read Dante or Shakespeare in order to keep up with the best that was thought and known, and also to see yourself, your people, society, and tradition in their best light. (xii-xiii)

Unfortunately, the Eurocentric novel that Said studies was structurally impacted by capitalist imperialism. The danger in its dominant structure and form also exists in what the Eurocentric novel relies on to create such narratives. Within its structure of attitude and reference, this dominant form of the genre relies on and is influenced by capitalist and imperialist world systems that exploit the novel’s aesthetic form to create false narratives. These world systems impose ideologies that encourage discriminating discourse and misrepresentations that prioritize the European Self and subordinate the non-European Other. The Eurocentric novel situates middle-class and elite Europeans as the center of the narrative and pushes all other identities to the periphery.

The existence of the Other is only a point of reference to the existence of the European Self: “what mattered was not Asia but Asia’s *use* to modern Europe” (*Orientalism*, Said 115).<sup>35</sup> Therefore, although the Other is narrated in the dominant Eurocentric novel, the Other never narrates. The Eurocentric novel exerts its voice as an authority that narrates the Self, while prohibiting the Other from their right to narrate. In

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<sup>35</sup> See Said’s reading of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* in *Culture and Imperialism* (84-97).

other words, the Other is the object rather than the subject of the narrative. This authority is the univocal European narrator that is linear and habitually confined to third-person omniscient narration.<sup>36</sup>

In between both definitions of culture, Said puts major emphasis on the power of narration in relation to culture:

A great deal of recent criticism has concentrated on narrative fiction, yet very little attention has been paid to its position in the history and world of empire [...] *stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history.* (my emphasis, *Culture and Imperialism*, xii)

Said emphasizes the redeemability of narrative fiction as a form. He showcases, through his works, how narrative fiction can be used to “write back” to “the best that has been known and thought.” He calls for “*writing back* to the metropolitan cultures, disrupting the European narratives of the Orient and Africa, replacing them *with either more playful or a more powerful new narrative style*” (my emphasis, 216). The core of the colonized attempt to self-narrate and write back exists in the collective effort to fight and ultimately break free from the world systems that control such narratives.

In *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, Lila Abu-Lughod begins by sharing her conversation with Zaynab, “a woman who lives in a village in southern Egypt” and the woman who is the title of my chapter. As Abu-Lughod explains her latest research to Zaynab and how she is challenging “the West [’s belief] that Muslim women are oppressed,” Zaynab interrupts her:

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<sup>36</sup> Of course, anomalies in the British and European novel exist. There are novels with multiple narrators or more than one story line. What I am highlighting here, however, is the fact that the Other’s story is never prioritized over the main character’s story in such narratives (who is almost always a representation of the European Self) and the history and destiny of the side characters highly depends on the main character.



‘But many women are oppressed! They don’t get their rights in so many ways—in work, in schooling, in...’  
[... Abu-Lughod] was surprised by her vehemence. ‘But is the reason Islam?’  
[...] It was Zaynab’s turn to be shocked. ‘What? Of course not! It’s the government,’ she explained. (1)

Zaynab lives a modest life and never leaves her village. She never receives an education but remains knowledgeable on what is happening on the ground in 2011 Egypt. Like Zaynab, many MENA women find themselves “placed in certain social classes and communities in specific countries at distinct historical moments. [Their] desires forged in these conditions and [their] choices limited by them” (Abu-Lughod 18). By naming “the government,” Zaynab explains how people in power do not care about people in poverty.

In the meetings with Abu-Lughod that follow, Zaynab expresses her anger about police brutality and unjustified arrests against protesting Egyptians. MENA women are limited by the conditions of war, injustice, and brutality that they inhabit within the univocal narratives that are imposed on them even as these narratives remain foreign to them. Yet, at the same time, those same narratives play a role in shaping their past, present, and future. Moreover, mainstream feminism and media have historically imposed narratives to control their personal and public lives as mainstream narratives determine which side of the story to tell, what part to fabricate, what to cover, and what to reveal.

Imposed univocal narration silences MENA women. But, when writers in this thesis create powerful narratives out of such moments. They transfer what is univocally narrated to a universal and “contrapuntal” narration: a form of storytelling that obtains a different sense of what is going on in the world and the text (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 92). Thus, the diversity of voices in these writings offers a multiplicity that is able to

decentralize mainstream and often unreliable narratives and show the variations of struggle and resistance in MENA women's lives and communities.

As discussed in chapter two, *The Saffron Kitchen* and *A Map of Home* are examples of contrapuntal, shifting narratives that adapt to and resist everchanging surroundings. They can be seen as “letter[s] to no one.” I understand how Maryam, Sara, and Gossemarbart's narratives in Crowther's novel are personal testaments of love, honor, family, and home. Within these personal stories—and between the narrator and her narrative—such shifts contribute to self-determination and the construction of subjectivity. Nidali's narrative in *A Map of Home* is personal too. Her own writings literally become “letters to no one” when her mother gifts her back all her compositions in a box when she is preparing to leave for college (Jarrar 289).

Moreover, Anastasia Valassopoulos writes that “novels enact ways in which the political and social are mediated, lived, performed and experienced through the personal” (5). Thus, what on the surface looks like a “letter to no one” is not necessarily a private narrative that hides away from everyone. Instead, it is a narrative that seeks salvation and redemption away from the mainstream eye and quick assumptions on behalf of the reader engaging with such writings. When the reader approaches the narrative with a critical rather than a pitiful eye, the power of the narrative extends to the reader while following those shifts. The resistance surfaces as the shifts allow the narrators, writers, and readers to break free from existing misrepresentations in implied and unreliable histories.

Farida Abu-Haidar analyzes contemporary Arab women's writers use of the colloquial instead of the dominant language in writing (which is a reoccurring sight in the texts in this case study). Fadia Faqir, a Jordanian-British writer, says in this light,

The authors create a different language where [...] women's daily experience and oral cultures are placed at the epicenter of the current discourse. Since the dominant language excludes them, they pushed standard Arabic closer to the colloquial in order to be able to present their experiences as completely as possible. (qtd. in Valassopoulos 87)

I read MENA women's use of a contrapuntal and unconventional narrative voice and intratextual shifts instead of a univocal one in the same way. Since the dominant voice has excluded MENA women, they push a new "troubled" form of narration to truly reflect their personal experiences, and to allow the reader to see the political in such experiences.<sup>37</sup>

Second, MENA women's narratives are "postal boxes of memories" that honor stories of the past to resist discriminatory historicization while navigating the present. Like a postal box, MENA (or Palestinian, per my examples in the last chapter) women writers use narrative tools and literary devices such as analepsis to write, like Barakat, to pen pals from all around the world to tell them memories of love, family, and war. The use of the collective memory allows extremely personal narratives and remembrances to become public as these writers find a common space (like a postal box) capable to keep all their memories safe.

While Said views memory—especially in its collective historical experience—as liberation and reconciliation, he simultaneously warns against the tendency to exploit it by "using collective memory selectively by manipulating certain bits of the national past, suppressing others, elevating still others in an entirely functional way" ("Invention,

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<sup>37</sup> Again, this is not always the case. A great example of MENA women's writers use of a univocal narrator is Isabella Hammad's *The Parisian*. Narrated in a consistent, univocal third-person omniscient voice, Hammad writes a narrative that does not necessarily "document" or "represent" her personal life. The omniscient narrator tells the story of Medhat, a Palestinian man between France and Palestine during the British Mandate.

Memory, and Place,” 179). Thus, just as oppressive world systems abuse narratives and history to impose false justifications for discriminating against the Other, imperialist ideologies also misuse memory to normalize a fabricated version of history and therefore justify imperialist and colonial actions. Mainstream historical narrativization and the reverse tendency of anti-colonial narratives to falsely idealize the colonized are clear examples of such misuse and exploitation which reduce history for both sides.

In my exploration of Palestinian women’s writings, I write in chapter three how memory, especially in its collective form, can be used as belonging and resistance simultaneously by allowing the exiled Palestinian to make the metaphorical journey back home. I also showcase examples of present manifestations of past memories: materially in household objects and the key, and abstractly through the Palestinian Memory that passes between generations.

I think of “the postal box of memory” as an integral part of narratology in MENA women’s writings because it holds a material space for such memories. I also think of the postal box of memory as a part of the process of liberation because it takes the personal from “a letter to no one” and feeds it to the collective— “a letter to everyone”—as it carries specific moments of the narrator’s daily life to the political, social, and historical memory of the collective.

Readers must realize that narration for MENA women is a complex process that connotes issues of belonging, homeland, agency, and self-determination. And while I place such women’s writings within a largely collective memory in this thesis, I read each story under its own context and light in order to honor nonequivalence despite commonality. I mention my approach because I understand the danger in dismissing such

processes if the reader is only compelled to admire the surface of these writings, or the women's "courage to write," without acknowledging the literary value of such writing.

Thus, narrative shifts and literary devices in these examples can be used to challenge mainstream habits of reading MENA and global anglophone literatures. There is also potential for such processes of self-narration and empowerment, home and belonging, focalization and point-of-view to extend beyond MENA women, as I find hope in viewing their writing as a universalist text: "a letter to everyone."

*Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution* is a non-fiction essay collection of different voices during the 2011 uprisings "from Tunis to Damascus." In her introduction, Syrian Samar Yazbek shows the importance of memory-writing as part of the process of liberation through self-narration. She says,

Through personal experience and human detail these testimonies give a sense of how the movements that became revolutions first began [...] These accounts vary between the personal and the general, but all express a single point: that writing in a time of revolution is part of the process of change. (6-7)

Algerian Ghania Mouffok contributes her essay "We Are Not Swallows" to the collection. She begins this work:

'Soon 'they' are going to put metres round our necks and measure the air we breathe and charge us for it,' a young man said to me. Don't interrupt me. Don't ask me who 'they' are. Because it's 'them' too. 'They', 'them' – that's what we call our indescribable leaders, that's how we keep them at a distance from our destinies, our descendants. They bring bad luck and we know that. Don't interrupt me. I'm writing so I don't forget. (92)

Mouffok's writing illustrates the process of liberation: "a letter to no one," "the postal box of memory," and "a letter to everyone." As in "a letter to no one," she personalizes the political experience of 2011 Algeria. Mouffok echoes the mass protests in the streets

within the personal voice of her writing. She also makes a clear distinction between “I/we/us” and “they/them:”

“*On the other side of the world, people said we’re Arabs, that it’s the Arab Spring, but it was winter. In Algeria, swallows come in spring, but we’re not swallows. We’re Arabs, but first and foremost we’re ourselves. When we rise up like waves, we win back our bodies, rediscover our spirits and answer only to ourselves.* (my emphasis, 94)

Mouffok emphasizes this distinction to showcase what the mainstream discourse says about Algeria, compared to what the people of Algeria (through her personalized voice) really want to say. The self-determination through narration— “we’re not swallows”—is obvious in her writing and its personalization, as she literally rewrites the “letter to no one” metaphor as “[we] answer only to ourselves.”

At first, I questioned Mouffok’s choice: does not such distinction feed into the binary opposition of *us versus them, European versus non-European, good versus bad?* First, I saw that the alienating “them” was inverted to refer to the oppressor. Then, I noticed that Mouffok does not engage in a binary in the first place. Like the “troubled” narratives I have previously analyzed, Mouffok incorporates second-person pronoun “you” throughout her essay to mediate between the personal “I/we” and the distant “them.” The second-person “you” addresses the reader as a call for action between conflicting discourses: “And *you, the reader* ... [...] do you know that my prison is yours and your freedom will be mine? *They said* we’re making spring. But you, reader... do you know that we’re not swallows? *We’re* the people of the world” (my emphasis, 109). In one sentence, Mouffok combines first, second, and third-person pronouns to demonstrate the multiplicity of her personal experience, shifting through the process of liberation from a very personal “letter to no one” as “a lonely witness” (95) in the start of

her essay, to a universal “letter to everyone” as she addresses the reader as a central part of the process in the last sentence of the essay (qtd. above 109).

As she transitions, Mouffok undeniably writes to “the postal box of memory.” In the middle part of the essay, she writes: “The number of corpses in our ‘Republic of lies’ piles up, *but our memories rebel*. That’s what happens. Can our memories do otherwise, I wonder? Sometimes I write, sometimes I’ve had enough – that’s the truth” (my emphasis, 98). Then, over the next two pages, Mouffok continues to narrate contemporary Algerian history in her own voice, repeating the phrase, “I remember,” fifteen times in those two pages. Here, her personal memory is essential to the street, as her memory rebels and the street mirrors the rebellion. It is as if Mouffok has to pass through memory lane to transform her very personal “letter to no one” into a universalist “letter to everyone.”

I dedicate this chapter to Zaynab, a woman from a village in southern Egypt, because I want to see the day when she is able to narrate her story too. Zaynab is clearly aware of how mainstream ideologies have failed MENA women, but the oppression of poverty does not grant her the right to write. What if, as invested readers of MENA women’s writings, we extend their voices to people like Zaynab? What are the implications of taking this step to empower detained working-class and oppressed women in MENA who are far from the dream of finding ones who listen to them narrate their belonging, their resistance, and ultimately their liberation?

There is brilliance in the imagination that MENA women’s “troubled” writings offer. Their narrative elasticity and their unconventional shifts between voice, space, and time channel real-life forces and differences into fiction. The value in this representation goes beyond diversity. It presents narrative fiction as an access point to experiences that

cannot get published. Although fiction contains complicated layers of mediation, it offers insight to real-life experiences that do not have the voice, time, or space to be narrated. Therefore, it appears natural for Edward Said to write his memoir and for Nawal El Saadawi to establish a career in fiction, as both of their interests in the world and their consciousnesses allows them to translate their activism into fiction.

Belonging and resistance cannot be achieved without solidarity. While the Eurocentric novel's ethnocentric and individualistic form exploit the narrative of the Other to prioritize the narrative of the self, the solidaristic and global voices of the MENA women writers in this thesis reveal the importance of promoting the collective as a central theme of the genre. Personal writing in narrative fiction and non-fiction cannot exist without staging the Self in relation to the Other. Of course, this relation is not similar to the one in the Eurocentric novel that exploits the narrative of the other to prioritize the narrative of the Self, but in the humanistic approach that Said defines as "worldliness" and brings into the novel (as discussed in chapter one). Rather than depending on colonial conquests for the prosperity of the European Self (what is previously referred to as Said's concept of the "overseas dimension" in the structure of attitude and reference), global literature views the world away from forms of mono and ethnocentrism (*The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said 53). It shifts focus towards a world of solidarity that exists in the text and a text of solidarity that exists in the world. It is left up to the reader (and the critic) to mediate between the two.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Should the writer be included in this process? Throughout my research, I have encountered both well-received and less applauded novels and memoirs. Some are attractive to the mainstream eye; others might have been more radical than expected. As a reader, I choose to find hope despite general reception (or authorial intent) as I look for redemptive moments despite the work's overall effect.



Aijaz Ahmad, a critic of postcolonial theory, does not undermine the universality of such personal stories. In “‘Show Me the Zulu Proust’: Some Thoughts on World Literature,” he traces the accumulation of individual “intellectual creations” to “common property,” noting that “national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature” (19). Therefore, MENA women’s writings do not only mediate unheard local experiences but also feed into an international, universal collective of narrative fiction.

In their manifesto, *Feminism for the 99 Percent*, Arruzza et al. theorize narrative fiction writing during times of war. They say:

*Struggle is both an opportunity and a school. It can transform those who participate in it, challenging our prior understanding of ourselves and reshaping our views of the world. Struggle can deepen our comprehension of our own oppression – what causes it, who benefits, and what must be done to overcome it. And further, it can prompt us to interpret our interests, reframe our hopes, and expand our sense of what is possible. Finally, the experience of struggle can also induce us to rethink who should count as an ally and who as an enemy. It can broaden the circle of solidarity among the oppressed and sharpen our antagonism to our oppressors. (my emphasis, 55)*

It is without surprise that MENA women’s writings of war and conflict in this thesis are the summit of self-determination through narration. Through struggles of war, as well as capitalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or classist oppression, these writers pave their way out of experiences of struggle into the light of belonging and resistance through self-narration. Hosam Aboul-Ela, an Egyptian-American scholar and writer, encourages regarding “the Muslim woman as intellectual” and highlights how MENA women’s use of Anglophone literature—as a language and a medium parallel to the continuing relationship with their local communities—bridges critiques of local oppression to

analyses of global oppression (143, 147). Therefore, their writings can be seen beyond any regional categorization as universal texts: “a letter to everyone.” In this context, readers across the globe can find not only meaning, but (hopefully) reconciliations of belonging and resistance in such works.

MENA women’s writings become “a letter to everyone” when they do not keep their narratives for themselves. This transformation happens when the authors choose to resist mainstream narratives that aim to narrate the problem for them, when they utilize the novel as a forum for broader perspectives beyond the literary elite, and when their texts often express the aspirations of working-class women. It happens when the world these texts want is one where all women can be heard. More importantly, it happens when MENA women writers realize that the word “letter” in “a letter to everyone” is not just in their writing—it is the letter Alef.

In her dedication for *Tasting the Sky*, Barakat writes: “May we find the language / that takes us / to the only home there is— / one another’s hearts.” In part three, “a letter to everyone,” Barakat connects belonging and resistance with memory and language:

I am midway from forgetting to remembering. I do not know how long it will take before I return to all of myself. Yes, an echo still warns “Learn to forget” [...] I will never regret that I chose to remember [...] Dear everyone: Written on my heart, all that I lost—my shoes, a donkey friend, a city, the skin of my feet, a goat, my home, my childhood—shattered at the hands of history. But my eternal friend Alef helps me find the splinters of my life ... and piece them back together. (169)

Barakat then writes a poem, “A Song for Alef,” that presents language as a refuge against the misrepresentations of the world. The key to emancipation starts with the first letter in the alphabet. My favorite thing about Alef (ا) is that it looks like a key: a key for everyone. Alef is like the key my grandmother always keeps, even when she will never open that front door. Alef is the letter that allows her to tell me her story over the phone.

Alef is the letter that that allows me to write it down on paper. Alef knows that a thread of a story stitches a wound.<sup>39</sup> Alef is a key to narrate. Alef is a key to hope, belonging, and resistance. Alef is a refuge and a refugee.

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<sup>39</sup> See chapter's epigraph.

***A'ashat Al Asami, Long Live the Names: Fragmentary Narratives Beyond the Novel***

*Does anything more than danger stimulate our  
creativity? And does anything threaten our  
creativity more than danger?*

—Nawal El Saadawi, 'Dissidence and Creativity'

My first thought when I finished reading my list for this project was that I want everyone to read and know these works. That same month, I founded a virtual book club for my community in Amman. With the help of two of my friends, we managed to provide copies for ourselves and people who joined us for the first few book discussions and slowly, the book club started to grow. As I am writing this, the thirty-seven members are meeting in person for the first time and more people are coming to know the works by voices I know they have always wanted to hear.

My conversations with Professor Helen C. Scott while I was putting this thesis together also pointed out my biggest concern: How can we make these works accessible? What forms of MENA women's cultural productions are more available than others? We also asked: What are the limitations of the novel as a genre in expressing meanings of home and belonging for these women? What boundaries does the novel as a genre create in limiting the accessibility and the diversity of readership of their writings?

While all the works in thesis use Alef (language) as a key to narrate the right to their subjectivity and self-determination, the multiplicity of the analyzed works serves to show the diversity of voices in MENA women's cultural productions; each with a different style, plot, and characters. Moreover, the fragmentary narrativization within each narrative (either through voice shifts or anachronistic ruptures) serves to prove the diversity of meanings that can be found within a single work.

Yet, almost all the works I analyze are in written form, with the novel as a genre dominating most of the texts included, as they write back to the Eurocentric novel, its form, and associated discourses. This afterword, therefore, is an attempt to expose readers to a world of MENA women's creative productions. It is also a step towards acknowledging the various mediums and genres they use to portray similar meanings of home, belonging, and resistance, without hierarchizing one over the other.

Beyond the novel, women in MENA and the diaspora narrate their lives and their stories in all forms and shapes. For centuries, orature has been a founding stone of storytelling from many cultures and geographies around the world including MENA. In many traditions, women pass their stories from one generation to another by telling them to their children, singing them in songs, or embroidering them on clothing, and keeping them as household items. Many women in MENA also tell stories and rewrite histories in their domestic spaces, decorating every corner, spreading aromas of herbs and spices in every room, and preparing meals their mothers and grandmothers taught them how to make. They leave these spaces to their daughters and children to carry them on to the future.

Evelyn Shakir's *Bint Arab* is a well-written history of the first Arab immigrants to the US through the stories of their women. Shakir describes the historical collection in its multiplicity of voices as a collage (196) as each voice originates from a different source and coexists with a range of other voices in a novel space, mimicking the diaspora. One of Teta Liza's nearest possessions to her heart is a mid-century vinyl player and console. Before she moved to Canada, she asked mama to keep it in our house, she told her she can throw anything away, *illa il musajel* (إلا المسجل), except for the vinyl player. And

while she left part of her story with Mama before moving away, she narrated another part of her story to me—years later—over the phone, asking me to keep this part of her story in my work. Although the vinyl player does not work properly, Mama still centers the console in our living room back home. And although many MENA women’s stories are fragmented, incomplete, and not ideal, I honor Teta Liza’s story as I add it to the collage of fragmentary narratives in this thesis.

Marjane Satrapi’s *The Complete Persepolis* is one of the most well-known examples of MENA women’s narratives. Satrapi makes unconventional choices in telling her life’s story as she publishes it first as a graphic memoir, which then becomes a major motion picture. Both the memoir and the film are highly accessible since one can get a grasp of Satrapi’s story just by looking at the pictures or watching the film (available to wide audiences online). The beauty in the fragmentariness of Satrapi’s memoir is in its limitation, the drawings—and the film—are in black and white only, Iran’s story of war and the revolution are narrated in first-person voice, and meanings of belonging and resistance are told from a child’s point of view for the first half of the work.

As an amateur intellectual, I view Satrapi’s work as troubled in its limited coloration (and animation in film), and I invite myself to participate in the troubledness. I find meaning in the limitation by noticing the worldliness of such work, how the coloration and the lack of detail in facial features of the characters is reflective of how Satrapi herself might have viewed life in war and exile. Rather than only applauding Satrapi for her bravery in narrating her story to the world against regional patriarchy and fundamentalism, I situate her story in a universal context and find meaning in it. I look around me and start seeing my own world in that manner too, how can I as an

intellectual create meanings of home, belonging, and resistance in black and white drawings as well?

I also found fragmentariness in another form of MENA women's cultural production, the stage. Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* and Hannah Khalil's *A Museum in Baghdad* are works that incorporate similar techniques of fragmentariness to the ones I have discussed thus far. While *The Black Eyed* uses narrative voice shifts to navigate home and find resistance, *A Museum in Baghdad* relies on anachronisms on stage to create similar meanings.

In Shamieh's *The Black Eyed*, Aiesha meets on the gates of the afterlife three women who want to enter the room of the martyrs (audience). Aiesha tells them that she has already been to the room and has made it back—although it is well known that no one can leave the room once they are in it. They do not believe her and instead address “characters” sitting with the audience, who do not answer back. Similar to narrative voice shifts, the fragmentariness of addressing characters who exist on stage and others who are imagined to be existing in the audience is similar to shifts from first-person narrative voice to second person “you” in the novels I have previously analyzed.

Like the use of second-person, the unrecognizable and silent characters blend with the audience and so the audience becomes a character in the play. The audience identifies the silent addressees among them: Tamam is looking for her brother, Delilah for Samson, and the Architect for the man who killed her (in 9/11). While the silent characters in the audience do not respond to the characters on stage, their lines gradually become more fragmented as they collectively try to make meaning of their situation after they interrupt each other earlier in the play:

DELILAH & TAMAM. The point is  
DELILAH. it pushes,  
TAMAM. forces,  
DELILAH & TAMAM. the big hand forward!  
TAMAM. With enough movement,  
DELILAH & TAMAM. the times will change / Little hands,  
enough movement,  
AIESHA. Times change.  
CHORUS (AIESHA, DELILAH & TAMAM). Hands, movement,  
change. / Wait! (86)

On stage, the women realize that they are more alike than different, and they gradually start completing each other's sentences. Each woman's part becomes more fragmented as the play proceeds, with one of the characters starting a thought and the others completing it.

Khalil's *A Museum in Baghdad* is fragmented as the stage is divided between "then/now/later" (28). The play narrates the story of Gertrude Bell preparing for the grand opening of a museum in Baghdad in 1926, and an Iraqi woman named Ghalia preparing for the re-opening in 2006. The future—then—is limited, as both actions in the past and the present narrate it. While characters in both times are not aware of each other's presence, only Abu Zaman (translates literally to "the father of time") can travel between the three sets, "a character who straddles time and space, trying to affect the future" (2).

As the play advances, many events in the past naturally affect the present, yet many of the events in the past and the present become identical to the point that both Gertrude and Ghalia start sharing lines and saying them simultaneously. They both answer Abu Zaman at the same time: "GERTRUDE/GHALIA. I prefer to be among the artefacts—that's why I'm here" (23). The importance of onstage anachronism relies in the reoccurrence of past events in the present and the way they affect the future;



“MOHAMMED. They’ll remake the world anew. Inspired by their past” (48). Despite his ability to move through time, Abu Zaman is skeptical. He asks, “What’s the point in seeing the future if no one will listen to you” (58)?

Nadia Yaqub views many of MENA women’s narratives and stories as troubled (“bad”)—dissident—and also sees the power in their fragmentariness. She writes that “bad Arab girls are adept at using the tools of their linguistic and cultural heritage to challenge attempts to silence them” (10). Not one medium is completely accessible to all MENA women and people around the world, yet these examples invite the reader/intellectual/audience to see the action *within* the text “as a viable alternative” (Valassopoulos 57). The multiplicity of the works in this thesis as “plural narratives encompassing Arab histories and experiences” (*Arab America*, Naber 216) shows that such alternatives are unlimited and endless.

MENA women’s creativity is everywhere. The works in this thesis and beyond portray the beauty of their use of language to create art in the face of danger. I long to walk down the streets of Amman and meet with their art; look at their murals in old neighborhoods, hear their conversations in small cafes, know the change they are making everywhere they go. But until I return, language is my home. I search for MENA women’s voices wherever I am. Here in Burlington, I hear a woman speak Arabic on the phone. I leave my seat and I go tell her: “Alef is my friend too.”

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