Colonial Academic Alliance Undergraduate Research Journal

Volume 2 Article 5

11-11-2011

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Recommended Citation
Hughes, Micah A. Mr. (2011) "Representations of Identity In Three Modern Arabic Novels," *Colonial Academic Alliance Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 2, Article 5.
Available at: http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/caaurj/vol2/iss1/5

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Representations of Identity in Three Modern Arabic Novels

Introduction

This paper is an exploration of the complex formations of identity in contemporary Arabic literature in translation. More specifically, this is a study in the intersection of identity and the religious, political, secular, social, and sexual factors that make and re-make intersubjective experiences. This paper and its argument are designed to counter assumptions that identity is static; at the same time it seeks to analyze and problematize other reductionist conceptions of identity as immaterial or simply fluid and dynamic. Taking identity as the object and "problem space" of this study, this paper will seek to elucidate how the "political rationalities" of colonial practices created new spaces for political and social life and thus new ways of thinking and living in and beyond the colonial encounter (Scott, 1995, 1997). Using Foucault's concepts of discourse and power alongside recent innovations in postcolonial scholarship, each novel will illuminate the internal and the external effects of colonial policies, as described by each of the novels. I begin through outlining some key points of individual and communal identification in order to engage the novels *Seasons of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih, *Wild Thorns* by Sahar Khalifeh, and *The Story of Zahra* by Hanan al-Shaykh.

A key point of interest in this study will be power and how the unequal distribution of power across societies has affected the ways in which the characters of each novel experience life and community. I understand the Foucauldian concept of discursive power in the manner articulated by the anthropologist, Saba Mahmood. Mahmood says this of Foucault's analysis – "Power is to be understood as a strategic relation to force that permeates life and is productive of new forms of desires, objects, relations, and discourses" (Mahmood, 2004, p. 17). In this manner, this analysis is guided by Foucauldian discourses on power in order to show how identity is constructed and transformed in relation to power both within the self and in relation to the community. Furthermore, in this study it will be important to deconstruct epistemic binaries that simply reduce identity into simple sociological categories. In turn, this will complicate our understandings of the way in which different factors help construct and construe the processes of identification. In order to illuminate how specific modes of intersubjectivity are identified in these three modern Arabic novels, the intersection of the community and the individual will be a key point which will allow us to address how religion, sexuality, independence struggles,

and the modern State influence and redefine the interaction with the self, the other, and the community.

Another point of interest in this study is the multiple ways in which colonial powers sought to reconstitute the colonial subject in light of modernity or more importantly – modern practices of subjectivity and governmentality. In order to examine the manner in which each author portrays and articulates the relationship between the community and the individual it is important to analyze the structure of this relationship and how modernity has become integral to our understandings of this interaction. Furthermore, the politicization of identity is a central component of the colonial experience as the characters in the novels navigate and develop a response to imperialism, by adapting to, by fighting against, and by maneuvering around colonial/imperial policies. To address these issues will require the use of postcolonial and feminist secondary sources in addition to anthropological theory in order to deconstruct the traditional narratives that are espoused when discussing the formations of identity and its relation to the (post)colonial. Through the use of interdisciplinary sources, the adaptability of identity in navigating new ways through the decolonizing process, secularism, modernity, and war will hopefully become apparent. By examining the problems facing identity (or created through our discussions of identity), I predict that the elusive and ambivalent nature of identity formation, as portrayed in contemporary Arabic literature in translation, will actively engage problems that have historically affected societies faced with what is often perceived to be the totalizing forces of colonialism, secularism, and modernity.

In examining these novels, it is important to examine the historical processes that come to form our discourses on identity through locating the novels in their historical settings. Any discussion of identity as a construct that does not take into consideration the temporal nature of its analysis runs the risk of simply reproducing a narrative of the secular, Enlightenment subject as universally valid experience. By resorting to such a narrative, identity once again becomes reified and fashions itself to the analytical category that purports to study it. I want to avoid this danger by realizing that any discussion around identity must take into count the complex nature of identity as a process, not as a condition (Cooper, 2005, p. 73). Similarly any discussion of identity rooted in colonial and postcolonial struggles must grapple with the location of "modernity" in its explanation. I wish to neither to speak simply of universals nor of particulars, but instead in following the historian Frederick Cooper, "advocate a historical practice sensitive to the different ways people frame the relationship of past, present, and future [through] an understanding of the situations and conjunctures that enable and disable particular representations..." (Cooper, 2005, p. 149). It is here that the analysis begins.

Seasons of Migration to the North

Tayeb Salih's *Seasons of Migration to the North* is one of the most important postcolonial novels of the 20th century. Originally published in Arabic in 1966, the novel takes place in a small rural Sudanese village. Told from the perspective of the unnamed narrator, the novel begins with the return of the narrator to his village after studying in Europe for the past seven years. Upon returning home, the narrator is introduced to the village's latest member – Mustafa Sa'eed. Perplexed by the new-comer's disposition and interest in his own life abroad, the narrator soon learns of Mustafa's experiences, successes, and tragedies in England in a way that changes his life forever. As the novel progresses the narrator soon realizes that Mustafa Sa'eed is his doppelganger.[1] Faced with Mustafa's unexpected death, the narrator must navigate his many memories in order to understand the quickly changing political and social landscape around him. Initially refusing to see that things were no longer as they once were, the narrator poses many questions and struggles to find the answers to the most fundamental of issues – those relating to the very nature and worth of life itself. Put another way, the narrator navigates the terrain of modernization and its effect on identity in a way that concomitantly exposes his own Orientalist epistemology and his desire to overcome the perpetual "othering" that seems to plague his experiences.

Framework of Analysis: On Identification

An important feature of *Seasons of Migration* is its reversal of otherness and that reversal's importance to the main character's understanding of Self. The novel continually exposes the internal experiences of the narrator by continually referencing his similarities to Mustafa Sa'eed. It becomes clearer as the novel progresses that these interactions become internalized in the memory of the subject at hand. The importance of discussing these events through using the term identification as opposed to identity becomes more explicit when taking into account the connotations of both terms and their implications for social and political life. As articulated by the historian, Frederick Cooper. "Here again, *identification* calls attention to complex (and often ambivalent) *processes*, while the term *identity*, designating a *condition* rather than a *process*, implies too easily a fit between the individual and the social" (Cooper, 2005, p. 73). For this novel, studying the formation of collective identification is a more methodologically

[1] A doppelganger is "a literary technique by which a character is duplicated (usually in the form of an alter ego, though sometimes as a ghostly counterpart) or divided into two distinct, usually opposite personalities. The use of this character device is widespread in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, and indicates a growing awareness among authors that the 'self' is really a composite of many 'selves'" (Glossary of Terms - DE).

insightful point of analysis as opposed to an abstract notion of "identity", regardless of whether that identity is considered dynamic or static. In order to ensure that identity is not constricted or reified, Talal Asad has posited a corrective in *Formations of the Secular*:

> The general preoccupation in the social sciences with the idea of *identity* dates from after the Second World War. It marks the new sense of the word, highlighting the individual's social locations and psychological crises in an increasingly uncertain world. "This is my name," we now declare, "I need you to recognize me by that name." More than ever before identity now depends on the other's recognition of the self [emphasis original] (Asad, 2003, p. 161).

Talal Asad continues his discussion of identity by noting the semantic history through which the conceptual understanding of the word was used. Stated differently, Asad traces the change in what Wittgenstein would call its "grammar." Prior to its contemporary usage, identity related ideas of sameness, in which one who had "identical interests" had similar or the same values as his or her constituent part (Asad, 2003, p. 161). With that said, through tracing conceptual changes that take place in specific discourses around identity, the self, the community, and policies of colonization, I will be specifically defining the terms in the context of my research.

Mustafa Sa'eed and the Narrator – The Experience of Difference:

Seasons of Migration to the North is an important novel describing the manifestations of colonial policies and the way in which these policies have become embodied by those who have studied in Western systems of education and thus have been under the tutelage of a specific type of power and knowledge. This process in turn makes the characters a type of colonial subject who is exposed to the "productive" aspect of colonial policies through the production of new colonial spaces and thus new colonial subjectivities (Scott, 1995, pp. 193, 195, 198). This is portrayed through complex interactions between the unnamed narrator of the novel and the people of his Sudanese village. These tensions are again manifested in the relationship between the narrator and Mustafa Sa'eed, a new resident of the narrator's home village.

The novel begins with the return of the narrator from seven years of studying and "delving into the life of an obscure English poet" (Salih, 1993, p. 9). Upon his return, he is confronted with questions from his friends and family about life as he experienced it abroad. He recounts:

> Everyone had put questions to me and I to them. They had asked me about Europe. Were the people there like us or were they different? Was life expensive or cheap? What did people do in winter? They say that the women are unveiled and dance openly with men. 'Is it true,' Wad Rayyes [a local villager and a friend of the Narrator] asked me, 'that they don't marry but that a man lives with a woman in sin? (Salih, 1993, p. 3)

Evidently, the novel begins with this reversal of "otherness" where the West represents the foreign object that has narrative relation to the villagers in light of their experiences with modern reforms and colonial encounters. For the narrator, these questions are not unexpected, but the interactions that follow come as a surprise. Upon visiting the narrator at his family's home, Mustafa Sa'eed inquires into his life abroad in a way that is shocking to the narrator.

> 'They say you gained a high certificate – what do you call it? A doctorate?' What do you call it? He says to me. This did not please me for I had reckoned that the ten million inhabitants of the country had all heard of my achievement.
>
> 'They say you were remarkable from childhood,' Mustafa Sa'eed continued.
> 'Not at all.' Though I had spoke thus, I had in those days, a rather high opinion of myself.
> 'A doctorate – that is really something.'
>
> Putting on an act of humility, I told him that the matter entailed no more than spending three years delving into the life of an obscure English poet.
>
> I was furious – I won't disguise the fact from you – when the man laughed unashamedly and said: 'We have no need of poetry here. It would have been better if you'd studied agriculture, engineering or medicine.' Look at the way he says 'we' and does not include me, though he knows that this is my village and that it is he – not I – who is the stranger (Salih, 1993, pp. 8-9).

First, in the narrator's mind there is a direct correlation between success and advanced education in the West. This is manifested in his arrogant statement – "for I had reckoned that the ten million inhabitants of the country had all heard of my achievement." Second, this experience of physical and emotional distance from his place of origin is an important aspect of the (post)colonial experience. In this interaction with Mustafa Sa'eed, the narrator begins to experience anxieties and insecurities with which he is unfamiliar – anxieties that accompany his

realization of being different, of having changed, and of not simply belonging to that which he had once known so well. The argument that stems from this interaction is not simply that being abroad has changed him in ways that living and maturing in the village of his youth was *incapable* of doing. On the contrary it is that his time abroad, his time in the "West", has restructured his attitude towards his community, it has in effect attempted to colonize that which is within – thus creating a new "subject." This reversal has in turn translated into conceptual realignment in the way life and relationships are understood and experienced by the narrator. It is not Mustafa Sa'eed who is seen as the stranger, although both internally know that he is by virtue of being born outside the village. Rather, it is the narrator who *feels* as if he is the stranger – an emotional state linked to the internal violence done by colonial practices.

Who is Mustafa Sa'eed? –The Politics and Poetics of Difference:

As *Seasons of Migration* progresses, much is revealed about Mustafa Sa'eed that drastically changes the manner in which he and the narrator interact. This change is brought forth through an unexpected "drinking session" with Mustafa Sa'eed. This interaction lays the foundation through which the remainder of the story progresses. This important scene begins with the narrator and Mahjoub, the village president of the Agricultural Project Committee and a long time friend of the narrator, sitting down for a drink. The narrator describes this interaction:

> About a week later something occurred that stunned me. Mahjoub had invited me to a drinking session and while we were sitting about chatting along came Mustafa to talk to Mahjoub about something to do with the Project. Mahjoub asked him to sit down, but he declines with apologies. When Mahjoub swore he would divorce if he did not, I once again saw the cloud of irritation wrinkle Mustafa's brows. However, he sat down and quickly regained his usual composure (Salih, 1993, p. 13).

After many drinks "Mustafa sank down into the chair, stretched out his legs, and grasped the glass in both hands; his eyes gave the impression of wandering in far-away horizons." Much to the surprise of the narrator, Mustafa began to recite English poetry in a "clear voice and with an impeccable accent" (Salih, 1993, p. 14). Mustafa Sa'eed has opened the door to his past, but what could a man like Mustafa know about English poetry? How does he speak so clearly, so eloquently, so confidently? The narrator describes this moment with disbelief, as if "the men grouped together in that room – were not a reality but merely some *illusion* (emphasis mine)," a description that will be associated with Mustafa throughout the course of the novel (Salih, 1993, pp. 14-15). After the

closing of the scene, the reader is left with one unanswered question: Who is Mustafa Sa'eed?

As the novel progresses, we learn through interactions between the narrator and Mustafa that Mustafa Sa'eed has actually experienced life in Europe in ways similar to, yet different from the narrator. Sa'eed was sent to be educated in Cairo at a young age with a British family – the Robinsons. Mrs. Robinson, who was an important person in the life of Mustafa Sa'eed, taught him "to love Bach, Keat's poetry… and Mark Twain" (Salih, 1993, p. 28). Although a kind-hearted and arguably well-intentioned family, The Robinsons, embody a type of Orientalist stereotype – learned men and women, intimately familiar with the intricacies of Arabic poetry, interested in Islamic philosophy and architecture, and attempting to assist in furthering the education of local peoples. Mustafa does not admit to thinking in this manner about the Robinsons. In fact Mustafa admits that, "I was wrapped up in myself and paid no attention to the love they showered on me" (Salih, 1993, p. 26). Mustafa was always thinking in terms of accomplishment and self-gratification. Even when he was in Cairo, he dreamt of the next "mountain" which he must conquer, a "mountain" which lay farther than he had ever ventured before. Hence upon completing his education on Cairo, Mustafa Sa'eed left for what he describes as "London and tragedy" (Salih, 1993, p. 27). There he excelled in his studies and eventually acquired a doctorate. Employed by universities in Britain; he published works in the field of economics. In London, Mustafa experienced love, encountered many women, conceived of the East as seen through the West, and sought pleasure through death.

Mustapha Sa'eed: Orientalism of the Self

I suggest that Mustafa's experience describes and illustrates the distinctive qualities of how European identity is constructed through interaction with Europe's others. It is through this creation of the modern subject in light of local struggles to reclaim and/or reconstitute identity that the paradox of liberal, Western colonial ambitions can be laid bare for critical inquiry. Post-colonial narratives of subjectivity often times rigorously outline the manner in which certain technologies of disciplinary power constitute new ideas of personhood through attempts at modernization by the Colonial state. Talal Asad draws our attention and critical analysis deeper by suggesting that the scholar pay closer attention to the hegemony of Western formations of identity and therefore to the goal of the colonial project, not just is disruptive power. By drawing our attention to this contradiction, Asad illuminates for the reader the ways in which the "totalizing" efforts of colonial modernity function in a dubious manner. Furthermore, we are able to see how this interaction between Europe and 'the

East' relates to ways in which modalities of identification create new subjects out of the local population. Asad says:

> The idea of European identity, I say, is not merely a matter of how legal rights and obligations can be reformulated. Nor is it simply a matter of how a more inclusive name can be made to claim loyalties that are attached to national or local ones. It concerns *exclusions* and the desire that those excluded recognize what is included in the name one has chosen for oneself. The discourse of European identity is a symptom of anxieties about non-Europeans (Asad, 2003, p. 161).

Asad's critical analysis is a particularly illuminating critique of what he sees to be constitutive of discourses on European identity and by extension Western power. Taking Asad's concept further, one can read *Seasons of Migration* and the character of Mustafa Sa'eed as the embodiment of the colonial project's new target – the subject (Asad, 1993, pp. 323, 324).

Moving away from securing spaces for production of goods, the colonial and postcolonial goals of European power moved towards the creation a new identity – one that would desire what the European desired and would think and act how the European was taught to think and act. This new colonial target was designed to be much more effective in securing the legitimacy of the colonial project. David Scott, in an illuminating article titled *The Aftermath of Sovereignty*, shows how these new political rationalities have created what he later calls "the tragedy of colonial Enlightenment." While *Seasons of Migration* takes place after direct European rule has ended, the community in which the narrator is a part still experiences the tragedy of "postcolonial futures" (Scott, 1996, pp. 18-19).

Furthermore, Asad's methodology allows for a deeper analysis, particularly in how the concept of being European translates into internal discourses of foreignness and alienation for the subject of European power. As Musafa Sa'eed and the narrator demonstrated, *Seasons of Migrations* ties the colonizing mission of the imperial powers abroad to that similar mission towards those that live in European society, or are remade (whether it is entirely successful, we are required to ask) in the light of European ideals and values. Are we to maintain a critical distinction between the two? I think not. The character of Mustafa Sa'eed once again illuminates this very important colonial contradiction. Mustafa Sa'eed, as well as the narrator, embodies these symptomatic "anxieties"

mentioned by Asad. I suggest we are to understand this as a more subtle form of colonial "subjectivation" (Mahmood, 2004, p. 17).[2]

Asad critiques this notion in a particular way that further provides conceptual clarity, the kind of clarity that Tayyib Saleh has captured in Mustafa Sa'eed – the colonial subject who has digested the discourse of otherness, of lived Orientalism, and of colonial alterity *par excellance*. But Sa'eed and the narrator do not express these attitudes towards the self and the community in the same manner. By acknowledging that "for liberals, no less than for the extreme right, the narrative of Europe points to the idea of an unchanging essence," Asad is able to call into question the popular discourse that characterizes minorities living under the modern state, who are often viewed in similar manners as the Orient – as unchanging essences that threaten the purity of the European (Asad, 2003, p. 165).

Mustafa embodies these "anxieties" in his relationship with the women he meets in London. Mustafa tells one of his lovers, "[His] house is right on the bank of the Nile, so that when I'm lying on my bed at night I put my hand out the window and idly play with the Nile till sleep overtakes me" (Salih, 1993, p. 39). Later he admits that, "My store of hackneyed phrases is inexhaustible. I felt the flow of conversation firmly in my hands, like the reins of an obedient mare: I pull at them and she stops, I shake them and she advances; I move them and she moves subject to my will, to left or to right" (Salih, 1993, p. 39). Again, Mustafa Sa'eed has chosen not to reject this characterization but instead to embrace it, to perpetuate it, to submit to its authoritative claims. These "claims" include not only how the Occident views the Orient, but how the Orient (and thus the Oriental) views itself – thus the pervasive nature of Orientalist discourse that excludes the subject from being either Oriental or Occidental, and all that those claims assume. Sa'eed embraces the power of his exotic language in the imagination of the women that he seduces. He knows that this Orientalism furthers his standing and is willing to become what they want him to become. He recognizes that the European women see him as a symbol; he recounts that, "She gazed hard and long at me as through seeing me as a symbol rather than reality" (Salih, 1993, p. 43). This ingestion of identification is much more than assimilation; it is the perpetuation of a lived colonialism and a product of a discursive authority.

Furthermore, the supposedly unchanging essence that is used to categorize Europe is also a quality bestowed upon the Sudan in the mind of the narrator. Yet it is brought about through a different historical process. While Europe's essence

[2] Subjectivation, according to Saba Mahmood, is a paradoxical, Foucauldian concept that expresses "the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent" (Mahmood, 2004, p. 17).

remains one of progress and continuity, the Orient remains that of backwardness, tradition, and simplicity. According to the narrator, there is something calming in returning to the place of origin, especially after living in the ever-progressive West:

> My mother brought us tea. My father, having finished his prayers and recitations from the Koran, came alone. Then my sister and brothers came and we all sat down and drank tea and talked, as we have done ever since my eyes opened on life. Yes, life is good and the world is as unchanged as ever (Salih, 1993, p. 2).

But one must ask, is this sentiment historically viable? While there is, of course, a sort of emotional response to the issue of return to home and family that registers on a deeper sensory level, something much more interesting emerges from the excerpt quoted above than simply the emotional response of departure and return or the welcomed familiarity of habitual family rituals. A type of historical narrative with an implicit Orientalist teleology becomes a part of the narrator's description of the Sudan – life is as it always has been and always will be, and nothing more needs to be said about it. In other words, using inductive reasoning, the narrator, anxious to reclaim an unchanged past, generalizes his familial routines and imposes them on the entire country, perhaps the entire world. There is an intrinsic quality *bestowed upon* the East, an unchanging essence that has at once preserved the traditions that are held most dear to the narrator – family tea time, mother and father's intimate daily routines, and the reading of the Koran – all of which constitute a history of time and place that is at once immortal and essential. The problem arises when the narrator mistakes these routines as an affirmation that the world is as "unchanged as ever." And yet, the narrator's perception does change, but only though a complex interaction with the village and the memories of its latest member.

As Mustafa Sa'eed confides more in the narrator about his life outside of the village, the narrator becomes more aware of their connection, but also of their differences. The relationship between Sa'eed and the narrator does not end with the death of Mustafa Sa'eed, which comes as a shock to everyone in the village. The narrator says, "Was it likely that what had happened to Mustafa Sa'eed could have happened to me? He said that he was a lie, so was I a lie? I am from here – is not this reality enough? I too had lived with them [the Europeans]. But I had lived with them superficially, neither loving nor hating them" (Salih, 1993, p. 49). The narrator continues:

> True I studied poetry, but that means nothing. I could equally well have studied engineering, agriculture, or medicine; they are all means to earning

> a living…. Over there is like here, neither better not worse… The fact that they came to our land, I do not know why, does that mean that we should poison our present and our future? Sooner or later they will leave our country… Once again we will be as we were – ordinary people – and if we are lies we shall be lies of our own making (Salih, 1993, pp. 49-50).

In light of Mustafa Sa'eed's drowning, the narrator reflects on all that he had learned about the world in the Sudan and afar through both Mustafa's life and his death. He does this through a monologue about the inner workings of colonialism and its seemingly benign effects on life for the people of the Sudan. These inner thoughts of the narrator illuminate the different stages of Mustafa's intellectual development and the developments of the narrator. Mustafa Sa'eed realizes the colonial ambitions of the British and yet concomitantly embraces and capitalizes on the Orientalist stereotypes in order to perpetuate and enrich his love life. The narrator, on the other hand, continues to dream of a day when the Sudan would be as it once was, untouched by the hands of the British. In fact, he believes that it will happen in due time. But is this a possibility? We know that the Sudan's interaction with colonial modernity has brought technological "progress" in the form of Agriculture Committees and water pumps – symbols of modernization throughout the novel. Yet, while these modern inventions expedite life in ways that traditional farming patterns had not, there is a sensibility that is taken for granted by the narrator. Contrary to the narrator's wishful thinking, Sudanese society after its interaction with "colonial structures" of modernity would not be the same.[3] The people in the village were aware of this interaction and had already made adjustments in ways that the narrator was still vehemently resisting. Life is not and would never be the same; Mustafa Sa'eed represents these deep transformations both in the village and in the narrator. Mustafa Sa'eed, a mirror image of the narrator, chooses death, and the novel poses the question: would the narrator too choose death?

Conclusion

Seasons of Migration to the North has shown that discussions about identity and the factors that account for the manner in which people identify themselves as individuals or in larger collectives must take into account the multiplicity of factors that shape our conscious and unconscious affiliations. It is not acceptable to speak about subjectivity and intersubjectivity in abstract terms that give meaning to groups of people by compartmentalizing identity in order to fit our methodological tools of analysis. We must take into account the historical

[3] For two interesting debates on modernity see Abu Lughod's *Remaking Women* and "Modernity" in Cooper's *Colonialism in Question*.

factors that shape, limit, and redefine the way in which societies understand themselves in the larger contours of their world. As the novel shows, colonial rationality was not simply a one sided experience between a greater power seeking to extract wealth that left "traditional" societies lacking infrastructure and the ability to extract their own materials to produce capital. While that might be a part of the colonial experience, the characters of *Seasons of Migration* show how colonial power dismantled and transformed modes of identification as such, leaving deeper chasms in how people experienced life and community.

As demonstrated through the fictional journeys of Mustafa Sa'eed and the narrator, it is possible to conclude that the subjectivities are largely shaped by one's interactions with sources of power. These sources of power authorize certain types of histories and identities. The postcolonial condition is comprised of navigating these sources of power in order to understand how identity is created or transformed through these interactions. Mustafa Sa'eed eventually is consumed by this antagonism and instead chooses to die in order to end his pain, in order to stop his "wanderlust." In the end, the narrator, haunted by his memory of the late Mustafa Sa'eed, chooses to live life regardless of the quickly changing socio-political landscape of the Sudan. The narrator would not simply be molded in the image of modernization and the West, but he would fight to secure some form of identity that was his own, that was resilient.

Wild Thorns

Sahar Khalifeh's novel, *Wild Thorns,* recounts the experiences of a group of Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories after the violence and destruction of the 1967 war. While the novel follows the experiences of multiple characters, its particular focus is on two main characters, Adil and Usama. Adil and Usama are cousins who have experienced two different versions of occupation and thus have chosen to respond to the complexities of their situations through different means. Adil, who has remained in the Occupied Territories, works inside Israel as a laborer, an often undignified position in the imaginary of proper Palestinian resistance. Usama, a part of the Palestinian Diaspora, moved to Kuwait in order to earn a living and has recently returned after the death of his father and the loss of his job, but carries much more "radical" beliefs about what should be done in response to the constant humiliation and occupation experienced by the Palestinians. Both Adil and Usama must navigate the geo-political terrain of occupation and resistance in order to provide for themselves and for their families. Thus, Adil and Usama complicate our understandings of the way subjectivity is produced. Critical theory often underestimates the role of the

community in creating the necessary environments for the subject's self understanding. *Wild Thorns* draws our attention towards the role of community and thus allows us to see how certain preoccupations with the individual as site of resistance in scholarly literature does not produce a methodology that adequately describes the actions taken by the two protagonists.

Furthermore, *Wild Thorns* explicitly calls into question the manner in which communities interact with official state policies of occupation. Khalifeh's characters illuminate the contradictory paths taken by individuals that concomitantly desire a unified community and a Palestinian homeland, yet differ significantly in the way they wish to achieve their unification and political representation. By refusing to allow the reader and critic to resort to the binary oppositions[4] that often color scholarly thinking when addressing issues of action in the public sphere, Sahar Khalifeh refocuses our attention on the role of identity in subject formation and effectively blurs the lines that might theoretically be drawn when addressing the roles of the individual and the community. As shown through the characters of Usama and Adil, theoretical binaries become incapable of providing readers with the tools they need to understand and navigate the complicated literary landscape that *Wild Thorns* provides. Furthermore, in order to avoid reifying abstractions such as "identity" and "resistance", this analysis will focus on the external interactions of the characters in this novel. By placing each character's "identity formation" in their specific historical context, there exists a better foundation for describing the actions taken by the novel's characters. It becomes clear that our binary sociological understandings of resistance and oppression, religion and secularism, the individual and the community are too simplistic and thus become generalizing forces that obfuscate our understanding of the *processes* of identification.

Wild Thorns represents the external manifestations of the process this paper calls "identification" or "identity". By focusing on the communal motivations of currently occupied Palestinian people to collectively carve out political and social spaces for action, we can draw conclusions about how people act in the face of what appear to be "totalizing processes." In order to focus on the manner in which collective identification and groupist mentality plays into the formulations of Palestinian collectivity, the argument will construct a narrative of individual and collective action by Palestinians in the novel.

[4] I am referring to such binaries as religion/secularism, oppression/resistance, individual/community, etc. For more information see Mahmood, 2004; Asad, 2003; Connolly, 1999.

Now to turn to Frederick Cooper and his book, *Colonialism in Question* in order to provide further analytical clarity on the connotations involved in using identity exclusively as an analytic category. Cooper writes:

> The problem is that *identity* is used to designate *both* such strongly groupist, exclusive, affectively charged self-understandings *and* much looser, more open self-understanding, involving some sense of affinity or affiliation, commonality or connectedness to particular others, but lacking a sense of overriding oneness vis-à-vis some constitutive "other" (*Colonialism in Question*, Frederick Cooper, pg. 75).

Cooper draws our attention to the dual nature of identity as a term that we use without ever elucidating our methodological understandings of the term itself. It is from Cooper's understanding that this paper's framework for discussing identity is built. Furthermore, it is through historicizing and localizing action and identity that will allow critical remarks about the *processes of identification* as opposed to the ambiguous, yet ubiquitous *conditions of identity* to be made.

The relationship between the characters Adil and Usama reinforces the validity of studying identity from the standpoint of collective engagement. Discussions around identity often invoke the inviolable nature of humanity and subjectivity, but by taking this approach we can see that our assumptions about what constitutes the universal definition of the individual turns out to be the historically located model of the liberal, *modern* self. My interest here is not to discuss which historical and philosophical concept of subjectivity is more desirable, rather to draw attention to discourse on freedom and what Saba Mahmood highlights as "positive" and "negative" freedom and the way in which the liberal tradition has been integral to the ascendancy of the latter over the former.

Informed by the recent literature on the place of "the subject" in the fields of philosophy and the social sciences, Mahmood states that, "In short, positive freedom may be best described as the capacity for self-mastery and self-government, and negative freedom as the absence of restraints of various kinds on one's ability to act as one wants" (Mahmood, 2004, p. 11). While this paper and its analysis of *Wild Thorns* would argue that the liberal tradition of self-fashioning does not exclude aspects of "positive freedom" it is centered on the ability of the subject to act free of restraint and coercion and thus negatively.[5] Furthermore, it can be argued that focusing on the negative aspects of freedom obfuscates the

[5] For an interesting discussion on the nature of positive and negative freedom see Christman, 2005.

workings of power in the creation of the modern subject as well as assumes the way in which power, authority, and coercion play into "technologies of the self" and the process of "subjectification"[6] as explained by Foucault (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984, pp. 11,17). My point is not to suggest that Adil and Usama are in some way *pre*-modern, or too traditional, but that the assumptions most prevalent in discourses on identity assume that the *modern* subject, as articulated by currents of liberal thought, are universal rather than historically located, free of constraint and therefore somehow modern and civilized. It is precisely through the combination of "self realization with individual autonomy" that Mahmood brings to the forefront the constitution of the subject as a modern analytical category (Mahmood, 2004, p. 11). It is through this conceptual explanation that this paper seeks to construct the discussion about Adil and Usama and the way in which they understand modes of action in their specific context.

While Adil and Usama express the complex interaction between agency, resistance, and communal self-fashioning, Adil ultimately resorts to a binary mode of action.[7] The omniscient narrator states, "The individual was of no importance when the fate of the community was at stake. And Adil himself was only one individual" (Khalifeh, 2009, p. 86). This sentiment was stated again a page later:

> That had actually been the one difference between Adil and himself [Usama]. Economics didn't determine history, Usama had always insisted. Materialism wasn't the motivating force; it was neither the incentive nor the objective. What about principles, ethics and values? What about truth and justice? In spite of their wide differences, they'd always agreed on one point: the value of the individual only existed through the group (Khalifeh, 2009, pp. 86-87).

The significance of the above-mentioned quote lies not in the two character's rejection of Western individualism, a hegemonic concept that purports to be universally valid, but in the rich complexities that often resonate in the

[6] As defined by Foucault, subjectification is the "way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject" (from "the Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structualism and* Hermeneutics, by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow , cited in Foucault & Rabinow, 1984, p. 11)

[7] I am not suggesting that his capability of thinking about agency is as simple as the statement above; I am merely resisting the urge to impose the philosophical complexities of freedom in a way that is not compatible with the character's understanding of himself in light of his community. Yet, I still find it fruitful to place Adil's conception of agency in the larger philosophical debate.

actions of the two protagonists.[8] Adil and Usama's actions might be in opposition to this paradigm of individuality, but these actions are not easily relegated to the realm of collectivism as a concept. Their responses to occupation and resistance show that resorting to epistemic binaries restricts our ability to understand the complexities of identification and through that, what many would call "their identity."

Both protagonists' differing approaches to the Occupation shows a distinct way of constituting the subject. Usama thinks his form of resistance, namely armed resistance, to be the correct and morally responsible approach to their situation, and urges Adil to see the same.

> "Adil, I don't know how to begin, but you know the way you are acting is wrong. What would people say about us, Adil? Don't you see you are setting a bad example for the other men? And what if your father found out you're working over there, in Israel, like a common laborer? Have you thought of that? I tell you, he'd prefer to die a thousand deaths rather than see his son sink as low as this" (Khalifeh, 2009, p. 95).

Usama's accusations continue against Adil. What is particularly interesting in Usama's account of Adil's actions is that Usama expects Adil to not only stand against occupation, but also to exercise the social responsibility of not partaking in such a "low" position. Usama's combination of class and resistance is not reducible to some sort of prevailing cultural logic, but rather points to the *experiences* that have constituted his *choice* to identify with resistance in any way possible. This is made clear when Usama says, "I don't believe it. I'll never believe it. I just don't believe you've forgotten your own country and the occupation" (Khalifeh, 2009, p. 98). This accusation is particularly interesting due to the sentiment that is expressed. How could Adil forget the occupation? It is mentally impossible for Adil to do such a thing. The reality of the situation is that his *entire* life is shaped by the occupation. What Usama is *really* saying is in regards to the *type* of life that Adil is living in response to the situation that both are faced with.

Adil's response is even more accusative and hurtful than Usama's claim against Adil. He retaliates, "The proof that I haven't forgotten my country is that I haven't left it" (Khalifeh, 2009, p. 98). Adil's statement referring back to Usama's time in Kuwait makes a particularly important point. The nature of resistance, the way one views the proper Palestinian response, is shaped by one's practical and

[8] Yet the validity and universality of this sentiment is historically and temporally located within the complicated nexus of a secular, liberal (and arguably colonial) modernity and its link to the theological paradigms of Protestant Christianity (Anidjar, 2006).

daily experiences, not by static assumptions about the *correct* response to a given situation. Now that both characters have argued about the proper place and target of political action within the confines of Palestinian resistance, what does the novel have to say about the relationship between the Palestinians and the Israelis?

Otherness – Zuhdi, Shlomo, and the Palestinian Prisoners

The issue of "otherness" is heavily debated in *Wild Thorns* particularly in the character of Zuhdi. Zuhdi works inside Israel because there is little work inside the West Bank for Palestinian laborers. It is almost impossible for Zuhdi to continue feeding his family without making the move to Israeli industry. Things are not easy for Zuhdi, and he is weary of his decision to work among his occupiers. It does not take long for before Zuhdi is detained after assaulting a fellow Israeli worker, Shlomo.

Zuhdi's imprisonment, however, draws an important distinction in the book's overall representation of "otherness". After Zuhdi is placed in prison with other Palestinians who have committed crimes, Zuhdi begins to question the way that Palestinian liberation discourse is constructed by his peers. We are told:

> He ate alone, wondering, Why are they [his fellow Palestinian prisoners] ostracizing me? Aren't these men Arabs like myself? Or rather, aren't I an Arab like them? Working in Israel doesn't meaning being Israel's agent. Don't they understand that ... If these people treat me like this when I'm here with them in prison, he thought, how will they treat me when I am on the outside … He had a sudden memory of the man on the ground, his head split open, his eyes staring upwards, and he felt regret and a deep sense of guilt. Shlomo wasn't bad. He knew that now (Khalifeh, 2009, p. 128).

Zuhdi is now aware that simply being Palestinian does not translate directly into solidarity. He has a new understanding of his relationship to his so called "Palestinian identity". Zuhdi's time in prison has forced him to ask critical questions about what it means to be Palestinian and indirectly what being Palestinian means in relation to being an Israeli.

Instead of talking about identity and "the other" that seems to be in strict opposition to himself, Zuhdi realizes that what constitutes identity is not concretely defined. "Being Israeli" does not stop Zuhdi from seeing the ways humans are socialized to understand their national identities as dependent on

maintaining a certain distance from their "others".[9] While we are never told whether Shlomo comes to the same conclusions as Zuhdi, Zuhdi's epiphany about how identity plays into discourses on otherness and resistance are intrinsically more complex than what meets the eye. The methodology of social scientists does not give adequate attention to the blurring of lines that often occurs when we shift focus from meta-theory, meta-narratives, and social predictability to a more localized understanding of human interaction (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 79-88). In order to avoid these theoretical problems that arise from generalizing social and political phenomenon, I have chosen to discuss the process that informs how one is identified by a political, economical, or social movement, instead of resorting to rigidly defined terms of representation.

By maneuvering around these sociological and methodological problems, new questions arise that at first were not as resilient. Is it possible to describe the political and social traditions that allow the individual, in this case Zuhdi, to identify on a personal level with Shlomo? In *Why I Am Not A Secularist*, William E. Connolly hints at ways that one can situate the displaced modes of identification that characterizes the role of "identity" in political discourse.

> They [the unrepresented] carry within them the expectation that no theoretical system will ever be complete; that every explanation will periodically meet with surprise; that each identity is to a considerable extent an entrenched, contingent formation situated at the nexus between self-identification of its participants and modes of recognition institutionally bestowed upon it; that a formation typically contains internal resistances and remainders; and that it might become otherwise if some of these balances shift (Connolly, Why I Am Not A Secularist, 1999, p. 41).

Noting that with every identity comes difference and that these differences are not concretely defined but arise when one group attempts to institutionalize its identity over-and-against another, one is left with the contingent and often ambivalent nature of identity, as such. Through applying Connolly's notions of identification to Zuhdi, one can see how the register of intersubjectivity is complicated by placing each character in their own "nexus" and therefore by navigating the terrain in which identities interact and displace each other or renegotiate the spaces where each interact. In this nexus, participation in the community through interaction with the "other" is placed in the larger political

[9] For an illuminating critique of the need to seal off identity over and against difference in political theory see Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox, expanded edition,* 2002.

and social institutions that define the subject through law, discourse, and resistance.

Connolly's point is made even clearer in Shlomo and Zuhdi's relationship. While we might assume that Zuhdi has more in common with the other prisoners by virtue of them being Palestinian and thus under occupation, we find that Zuhdi is able to identify with Shlomo on the level of class thus complicating the strict binaries between the Israelis as occupiers and the Palestinians as occupied. Economic concerns are a problem both for Shlomo and Zuhdi creating connections that extend between both stopping Zuhdi from easily sanctifying his own identity over Shlomo's. Both characters are laborers, although Shlomo might enjoy more privileges than Zuhdi due to his national affiliation. While this point is crucial to understanding the Israeli-Palestinian dynamic, it is made secondary to how Zuhdi experiences community and difference. Zuhdi *identifies* more with Shlomo than he does with his own people.

The modern Israeli state is predicated on exclusions, ethnic and economic.[10] It can be said that Zuhdi *chooses* to work in Israel proper as a laborer, but this is problematic for many reasons. Primarily, as a Palestinian, his choices are drastically *limited* by the imposition of the Israeli state and their attempts to crush on the yet-to-be-unified Palestinian resistance as well as ordinary Palestinian life. Yet through all of this, Zuhdi and Shlomo are brought together through their economic situation. As will later be discussed by Adil and Usama, not everyone can *afford* to resist the Occupation in the same manner. Thus, these "remainders" of class distinctions still plague the ways the characters in the novel interact.

Conclusion

> "Come on, my friend," said Zuhdi encouragingly. "Don't despair."
>
> "But I *do* despair," Adil murmured. "I fight my despair with despair itself. Do you understand? Well, neither do I. I don't really understand this strange mixture of feelings I have, I don't know how to explain what's going through my mind. I am confused and I can't exactly define my own position. Peace, brotherhood – hopes of idiots and dreams of birds. Maybe. I don't know. Yet I still dream. I dream of the impossible. But I ask you, is it possible, to grow roses from thorns" (Khalifeh, 2009, p. 177).

[10] See Piterbeg, 2001 & 2009 for interesting discussions on the factors that went into the creation of the State of Israel.

Adil, Usama, and Zuhdi are initially brought together under the umbrella concept of nationality and occupation. But as the quote above shows, there is neither a universal definition of belonging nor of resistance that can be subsumed under the analytical category of *Palestinian identity*. This is not to say there is not ground for collective resistance or solidarity. But to assume that by virtue of being subject to occupation, intersubjective affiliations are essentially similar and concretely defined is to misconstrue the actual factors that affect one's mode of identification. As the above quote shows, confusion is major factor in the constitution of identity especially in traumatizing scenarios. One's identity, even within the contours of his or her own community, is often times in limbo due to historically located situations that problematize understandings of oneself in light of one's community.

The Story of Zahra

> *Women have the power, what she [Etel Adnan] has called the magic power, to heal societal wounds with the atomic power of their words. Language and literature in such a formulation are not decorative descriptors external to their subject; they are interventions in a political situation* (Cooke, 1999, p. 75).

The *Story of Zahra* by Hanan al-Shaykh chronicles the life of a young girl, Zahra, as she comes of age during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). The novel delves deep into Zahra's thoughts and psyche linking her deepest emotions to the changing social and political circumstances of the day. Simultaneously engaging both the external and the internal manifestations of war and its effects on the mind of the narrator, *The Story of Zahra* draws our attention to the connection between the sensual, the personal, and the political in order to describe the geo-political terrain of Lebanon, as well as Zahra's own experiences.

The novel begins with Zahra as a young girl following her mother around as she meets a man, who is not Zahra's father, in secret. Eloquently depicting the small things that preoccupy Zahra's mind, Hanan al-Shaykh is able to capture the innocence of the young Zahra only to show over time how war and sex, intimately linked in the novel, challenge the person that Zahra aspires to be. As Zahra matures, she moves to North Africa to stay with her expatriate uncle Hashem. Zahra eventually marries one of Hashem's friends, Majed. Unhappy with her marriage, Zahra returns back to Lebanon and is consistently disturbed by and frustrated with her state of affairs. Concerned and exasperated by the changing conditions of life during the war, Zahra ventures out into the streets of Beirut and eventually meets a rooftop sniper. After becoming intimately involved with this

character, Zahra starts to find a sense of belonging through their peculiar relationship. Zahra becomes pregnant with the sniper's baby which inevitably leads her to frantically revisit her experiences through her doubt-filled memories. Eventually Zahra is killed by the very person she loves the most, her sniper. In the end, Zahra's personhood is recreated in light of the brutality of war and is ultimately destroyed by the one thing that paradoxically brought her some form of sanity and stability: the civil war.

Framework of Analysis

My interpretation of the novel is guided by Miriam Cooke's notion of the "Beirut Decentrists." Cooke describes the Beirut Decentrists as "a group of women writers who have shared Beirut as their home and the war as their experience…" (Cooke, 1999, p. 75). Cooke continues describing this group of women as being decentered in two particular ways. First, they are physically decentered because of the tangible effects of the war on their daily lives, and second they are intellectually decentered because they wrote for *themselves* in marginal positions, finding solidarity in that interaction. She writes, "[This] allowed them discursively to undermine and restructure society around the image of a new center" (Cooke, 1999, p. 75).[11] Furthermore, these women "questioned the binary epistemology that organizes war into neat dichotomies like friend and foe, victory and defeat, front and home front" (Cooke, 1999, p. 76).

Furthermore, Hanan al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* will be the unifying novel that ties together both internal and external understandings of identification. Zahra's experience with her community, family, and nation as well as with herself shows that the formation of identity is not only fluid, but what is assumed to be a "concrete" manifestation of one's identity must really be examined in its larger socio-political context, in order to understand its formation as such. We must pay closer attention to the particularities of identity as a process so that essentialist claims or universalistic assumptions about the construction of identity and the political/social rationalities that accompanies communal and individual affiliations are not assumed in our analysis. This approach to identity can be illuminating when the discussion of identity is contextualized in the experience of the Lebanese War. It is Zahra's experience that brings together war and the remainders of the postcolonial past, such as sectarianism, and shows how both can simultaneously affect the psycho-social aspects of life, womanhood, and all of the social interactions that might occur during one's lifetime. *The Story of* Zahra brings the two previous novels together to reinforce the notion that, "Identification can be carried more or less anonymously by discourses or public

[11] Quoted from Cooke, *Wars Other Voices*, p. 3

narratives" (Cooper, 73), therefore showing that the specific type of person created through discourse is not simply personal or communal, but a "messy" combination of the two.

The Story of Zahra lends itself to critical feminist and nationalist thought and provides a unique, yet plausible, explanation for war's affects on identity. While Zahra's experience, as well as the experience of the characters in *Wild Thorns*, might not fit neatly into the postcolonial period, per se, it is the postcolonial remainders that find themselves expressed in both novels as later expressions of colonial and postcolonial contexts. Once limited to specific conceptual time frames when discussing the "postcolonial" world, it becomes possible to make distinct claims about the effects of colonization on the "modern social imaginary" of the people affected (Taylor, 2004). *The Story of Zahra* will help to illuminate these questions and shed light on the construction of identity amidst chaotic psycho-social factors affecting the individual as a representative of national experience.

Zahra and the Political Landscape of War

Throughout the novel there is an interweaving of Zahra's internal experiences and the experiences of being at civil war in the political landscape of Lebanon. The novel describes what Cooke calls "different degrees of being at war" (Cooke, 1999, p. 76). These "different degrees" are signified by Zahra's internal struggle with finding a place for herself and Lebanon's external struggle of a similar kind. It is not within the scope of this paper to elaborate on the material and political (local or global) justifications and provocations of the Lebanese Civil War, but instead to call attention to the psychological effects of the war, whether factual or imagined, which are described by and manifested through Zahra's experiences. This is made evident when Zahra first corresponds through writing to her ex-patriot uncle, Hashem, who intimately links Zahra and Lebanon. He writes, "I used to wonder, when I finished reading each letter, whether Zahra was aware that it was only through her writing that I maintained my links with both my family and my country" (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 67). When Zahra finally arrives to Africa to stay with Hashem, he says that it was only then that he began to breathe again, and that it was "through her [he] hoped to absorb all [his] life, both here and in Lebanon" (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 69). Zahra provides the mental escape into the comfort of his memories that Hashem is looking for. Ann Marie Adams clarifies exactly what Zahra represents for Hashem, and in turn for her lower class husband, Hashem's friend, Majed.

> Although Zahra's ostensible appeal to each man may appear to be based on disparate factors-as a legal citizen of his beloved country, Zahra is

> immensely appealing to her exiled uncle, while her bourgeois status attracts her impoverished husband-it remains clear that Zahra's national figuration is predicated on neither her citizenship nor her class, but on her gender (Adams, 2001, p. 203).

To Hashem, Zahra *is* Lebanon, and to Majed, Zahra *is* status, but she is not reducible to either alone. This characterization of Zahra-as-symbol has important implications for the rest of Zahra's story. What does Zahra-as-symbol/Zahra-as-Lebanon mean for the novel? Is Zahra simply a metaphor for the homeland? I suggest these metaphors are worth looking into for two reasons. First, Zahra gives us an important insight into how women's bodies are used as expressions of situations of war. Second, the manner in which these metaphors are constructed in light of Zahra's identity allow for critically instructive points of insight into the role of sex and war on subjective experiences.

Reflections on Nationalism –Some Uses and Abuses of the Woman's Body

In *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, Lila Abu-Lughod discusses the link between women and the nation in the postcolonial world. Through her discussion of womanhood and the factors that shape it in contemporary discourse, Abu-Lughod states that "in the postcolonial world women have become potent symbols of identity and visions of society and the nation" (Abu-Lughod, 1998, p. 3). This is absolutely true for Zahra. The trope of the homeland is constantly referenced in *The Story of Zahra*. The continuous tying of nationalism to women and war is made especially clear through Miriam Cooke's brilliant analysis of the nation in the writings of the Beirut Decentrists.

> The dynamic, reciprocal relationship that the Beirut Decentrists write themselves as having with their nation is at the heart of what I call humanist nationalism. This loyalty is to be contrasted with statist nationalism. I call the later "statist" because of the insistence by its advocates on the overlap between an imagined[12] – the nation – and a public entity – the state. Whereas statist nationalism is absolute and is constructed within a binary framework of differentiation and recognition, positing the nation "out there: from time immemorial and awaiting discovery by those who "naturally" belong to it, humanist nationalism construes the nation as dialectic, as both produced and productive. Lebanese women's writings thus redefine nationalism and extend it to reveal its humanist dimensions (Cooke, 1999, p. 76).

[12] The reference here is to *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson, (Anderson, 1991).

By contrasting both "statist nationalism" and "humanist nationalism", Cooke is able to draw from the literature an important shift in the way the trope of the nation is used and understood by the Beirut Decentrists. This shift in the use of "the nation" allows the authors to make important connections between women and the homeland in ways that do not submit *exclusively* to the authoritative claims of nationhood while concomitantly exposing the problematic nature of the concept for those who are not wielding its "totalizing" power.

While it is sometimes argued that the juxtaposition of the woman's body and the nation is a point of masculine privilege and signifier to the disparate position of power in society, It is argued that this is precisely what the characters in *The Story of Zahra* do to both Zahra and Lebanon. It is because of this juxtaposition that Zahra can embody the pains of Lebanon literally and metaphorically on her own body. Zahra's experiences, both with her sexuality and the men with whom she has relations, provides an interesting parallel and critique of war and its effects on the landscape of Lebanon. Anne Marie Adams, in her article *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, suggests that the use of the nation by women's authors like al-Shaykh:

> Demonstrate how the "problematic" of the nation can figure prominently in works that consciously reject oversimplified national discourses and identities. In particular, al-Shaykh's texts can be seen as an attempt to redress the gendered discourses that have undergirded national endeavors through an increasingly cartographic narrative strategy, a strategy that allows the author to "map" a new relationship between women and the nation (Adams, 2001, p. 202)**.**

This is precisely what happens to Zahra in the novel. As Lebanon is destroyed internally by its own citizens, Zahra is destroyed by her own insecurities, her own experiences. She is effectively betrayed by herself. But, it is important to draw attention to the fact that this is not necessarily Zahra's desire to be "destroyed", and one could posit that it is not Lebanon's desire either. By drawing the parallel between war, sex, the homeland, and Zahra's body, we are not neglecting the complex relationship between Lebanon and those outside factors that made the war possible. Zahra's experiences draw our attention to this as well. We can see that Zahra is *acted upon* in ways that she finds disconcerting, gratuitous, and against her own desires. Zahra alone is not culpable for what happens to her. Although Zahra as a person can act out as an agent of her own will, she finds herself restricted by other factors that complicate her desire to stop what is happening to her and around her. She is inextricably linked to her surroundings and the power of the situations that are imposed upon her. Similarly,

Lebanon's complex relationships with her surrounding countries played a role in fueling the Lebanese civil war in many different ways.

Zahra and the Sniper: Desire in the Cross-Hairs

As the novel draws to a close, Zahra is in Beirut during the intense fighting waged in largely civilian quarters. She sneaks out almost daily to meet with her lover, a sniper on the top of one of the nearby roofs. Initially Zahra fears the sniper as all civilians did. He represents the many faces of war– indiscriminate killing, power, and fear. Yet for Zahra, this marks the first time that she *embraces* an intimate relationship with another man. Zahra recounts, "Days become long during wartime, but my days of war grew short. Each morning I would think about the afternoon and of meeting my sniper. Each night I would think of the warmth of his body on mine. A shudder of pleasure would run through me" (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 151). Zahra's secret relationship with the sniper becomes an obsession. For the first time in her life, she finds pleasure *because of* the chaos. She says:

> Here is this god of death, who has scorned the loss of my virginity once, twice, a hundred times, the sniper to whom I am grateful for accepting my despite my plainness, because he realizes that beauty is not everything. I hear, close by, scattered gunshots, yet feel as if they are a great distance. This war has made beauty, money, terror, and convention all equally irrelevant. It begins to occur to me that the war, with all its miseries and destructiveness, has been necessary for me to start to return to being normal and human (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 161).

As Zahra's relations with the young sniper continue, Zahra becomes pregnant. She loses touch with her family and her health. The only meaningful thing that exists for Zahra is her relationship to the sniper. One night as Zahra wanders in the streets, perplexed by the drastic changes she is enduring, she is shot. Others around her scream and point out the presence of a nearby sniper. Could this be the same sniper that is her lover? As the bullets enter her body, she falls to the ground. Zahra is destroyed by the one relationship, the one man that truly brings her the perception of satisfaction. The sniper is at once her reason for a meaningful life and the cause of her destruction. Again, Ann Marie Adams draws our attention to the problematizing of Zahra as a symbol of Lebanon and what this means in the context of her relationship with the sniper.

> Zahra, the reader is forced to remember again and again, is but a troubled young woman whom various men attempt to constrain and understand within the dogma of their own nationalist politics. In this way, the character literalizes and problematizes the abstract appropriation of the

> female body in nationalist rhetoric. Forced to bear the political and ideological burden of the various movements about her, Zahra is finally destroyed by the very agent, the war, that she thought would bring her freedom (Adams, 2001, p. 204).

Conclusion

At the novel's close and Zahra's end, we are left with some lingering questions about the role of women in war, as well as the role of the body in wartime literature. Is the subject to be defined in light of the socio-political landscapes that at once shape and influence how we interpret women's role in society? Or, should we place the struggle of women in binary categorizations such as oppressed, abused, and coerced or resistant, free, and participatory? It is suggested here that strict categorizations only constrict the multiple factors that constitute agency. Furthermore, strict categorizations neglect that agency is a contested political and social space that is subject to systems of power. As Foucault has stated, there is no such thing as liberated spaces *per se*, only liberating acts (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984, p. 245).[13] For Zahra it was the space carved out by the war that allowed her to act in a way that she conceived as liberating, but this was a dubious space ultimately ending in her destruction. Ann Marie Adams states,

> As [the] furtive meetings demonstrate, the link that holds Zahra to her lover is a tenuous one, predicated on proximity and historical contingency. Zahra's naive belief that she can settle down with the sniper and begin a family is thus unrealistic. According to Miriam Cooke, the "war had opened up new vistas, but within its own logic. It could not yet be used to transcend itself"[14] (Adams, 2001, p. 205).

Like Zahra's inability to use the war to "transcend" herself and the realities that she faced as a consequence of the war, neither are we able to "transcend" *modes of identification* in order to arrive at a sociological *concept of identity* that truly reflects the process of living. Again we find that identity, as a construct, is often defined as something that a person has or obtains. Often this is understood as an abstraction, unrelated to historical processes. But as I have tried to show here, the "politics-of-becoming" is comprised of multiple interactions that must be contextualized (Connolly, 1999). Causation is never singular nor is it

[13] "On the other hand, I do not thing that there is anything that is functionally – by its very nature – absolutely liberating. Liberty is a practice" (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984, p. 245).

[14] From Miriam Cooke, War's Other Voices: Women Writers and the Lebanese Civil War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 58.

solely the actions of individuals unrelated to their experiences with the world around them. Identity is, in the end, a product of the discursive traditions that shape and reshape the way people understand themselves in light of the political and social factors that individuals and communities encounter.

Conclusion: The Final Critique

We have now effectively traced three different modes of identification that allows us to contextualize and discuss the place of identity in colonial and postcolonial Arabic literature in translation. First, we examined the internal manifestations of difference and Orientalism in the characters of Mustafa Sa'eed and the narrator in Tayeb Salih's *Seasons of Migration to the North*. Second, we looked at the external factors that contribute to the ways in which communities and individuals within those communities negotiate their allegiances, or what is often referred to as *identities*. Adil, Usama, and Zuhdi showed us that identity is actually a place of identification that is contested and at times counter-intuitive. In Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns*, being Palestinian does not mean there is unity or singularity in the political or social position one takes. Navigating the contours of a society under occupation rarely allows for concrete, nationalistic generalizations. There are multiple expressions of the Palestinian experience, none of which can be reduced to a unified "Palestinian identity." Thus, as I have argued throughout this paper, the connotations intrinsic to using an unqualified term like *identity* to describe and generalize experiences within communities by individuals does not outweigh the benefit of focusing on the rich complexities that factor into intersubjectivities and the contestability implicit in partaking in such a discussion. Finally, Zahra demonstrates that women's roles during war carve out spaces for political and social interactions that are not simply subject to patriarchic assumptions. Although Hanan al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* portrays Zahra as an allegory for Lebanon, to simply assert that Zahra is an object of paternalistic discourses on women and war is to seriously obfuscate the radical sexual and social spaces and practices carved out for acts of liberation practiced by Zahra at the close of the novel, practices, although liberating, ultimately led to her demise.

As stated throughout this paper, the complexities of identity must be contexualized in order to be sensitively discussed. Furthermore, this contextualization must not be solely governed by or justified through the theoretical models of individualism, secular liberalism, and modernity implied in many modern studies of identity. Social scientists must recognize that the manner in which one identifies with his or her community (whether as an individual or a representative of a larger body) must seriously be investigated. Relying on sociological assumptions or binary abstractions tends to only reify the object of

study and refashion identity in the image of theory. We must move away from these empiricist methods in order to embrace the fullness of life and how, as humans, people identify themselves in specific localities and temporalities. In short, there is no universally applicable, discursively neutral definition of identity.

Talal Asad reminds us of the necessity to place identity (and like it liberalism, secularism, and modernity) in context in order to have a more honest, more transparent scholarly interaction. Asad warns us of characterizing certain communities in sharp distinction from our own when he says:

> Nor does it mean that every identity should become so mobile that-as some post-modernists would have it – no one can be continuously one kind of moral being belonging to a distinctive community. What it does mean is that the members of each tradition should be prepared *to* engage productively with members of others, challenging and enriching themselves through those encounters (Asad, 1997, p. 195).

It has been argued here, in line with Asad's provocation, that identity neither be reified in the image of a particular nationalist, liberal, or traditional narrative, nor described as an entirely mobile or immaterial, but that identity be discussed within the contours of the community in which it flourishes and finds sustenance. One need not be able, as a participant of a specific community, to delineate or make transparent all of the factors that allow it to be intelligible to other members of a community or tradition. But, the scholar should at the very least take into account this relationship of intelligibility within a tradition and not overwrite this experience in order to give an account based on some theoretically robust concept.

Furthermore, this analysis has taken three distinct novels as its object of study not to elucidate something particular about "the Arabic novel" nor to make an overarching claim about the role of postcolonial literature, but rather in order to bring different disciplinary modes of scholarly engagement and enquiry to bear on the expressions of identity manifested in the novels discussed. While all three novels engage different and sometime disparate experiences of modernity (in *Seasons of Migration*), class and occupation (in *Wild Thorns*), and gender and war (in *The Story of Zahra*), it has been my goal to use these expressions of identity to offer a counter narrative to that of the liberal, modern self in hopes of showing how identity can be a fruitful point of engagement that brings to light different modes of being in the world that need careful articulation.

As Timothy Mitchell has shown in his essay on the stages of modernity, the concepts that we use at once locate and invoke a certain image that is descriptive, yet carries normative understandings as well. Mitchell's discussion of

modernity's place has important ramifications for our discussion of identity. Identity, like modernity, arose out a particular discourse that is located historically and temporally (Mitchell, 2000). It is often assumed that discourses on identity arose particularly out of discussions on the place of the subject in philosophy and other social sciences. This preoccupation with identity is a product of post-World War II theory and has a complex genealogy that cannot be traced back to one particular discipline (Gleason, 1983). It has been important for this study to recognize, as Mitchell does, "When themes and categories developed in one historical context, such as a region of the colonial world, are reused elsewhere in the service of different social arrangements and political tactics, there is an inevitable process of displacement and reformulation" (Mitchell, 2000, p. 7). I have suggested in this paper that *identity* is one such displaced and reformulated concept and should be used in light of the many factors that contribute to *identification as a process*.

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