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RACHID EL DAIF'S *AN EXPOSED SPACE BETWEEN DROWSINESS AND SLEEP*: ABORTIVE REPRESENTATION

This study deals with Rachid El Daif's second novel *An Exposed Space Between Drowsiness and Sleep* (Fusḥa Mustahdafa bayn al-Nuʿās wa-l-Naum)[1] which first appeared in 1986. El Daif was born in 1945 in the village of Zgharta in North Lebanon. Novelist and poet, he is considered by some as a writer of war novels, a view opposed by El Daif who affirms that in his fiction, war is a mere stimulant that bares human beings and strips them naked, and that his novels are about man in time of war. As he asserts in an interview with *al-Safīr* newspaper, "I write about man, and war is nothing but a mode of behaviour."[2] These are the words of a man who remained in Lebanon throughout the war and had first hand information about how ordinary people lived through it. He himself survived a severe shoulder and neck injury when he was hit by shrapnel from an exploding shell in 1983. El Daif has published five novels all set in a war context: Al-Mustabid (1983), Ahl al-Zil (1987), Taqaniyāt al-Bu's (1989) and Ghaflat al-Turāb (1991). He has also published three volumes of poetry[3] and a collection of short tales whose main characters are children.[4] Two of his books have been translated into French (Fusḥa Mustahdafa Bayn al-Nuʿās wa-l-Naum and Ḥīna Ḥalla l-Sayf ʿalā l-Ṣayf) and two more are being translated into French and Italian. El Daif has just completed his sixth novel "ʿAzīzī al-Sayyid Kawabāta," which is due to come out soon.

In an illuminating article on El Daif's *An Exposed Space Between Drowsiness and Sleep*, Sabri Hafez writes that "the subject of the novel is the dubiousness of identity in a world where the war lords claim that they are so certain of their identity that they allow themselves to set up barriers, to kidnap, and kill people on their identity cards."[5] In this study, I will be dealing with *An Exposed Space Between Drowsiness and Sleep* as a narrative that

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[1] (Beirut: Mukhtārāt, 1986). The book has been translated into French under the title *Passage Au Crepuscule*, trans. Luc Barbulesco and Philippe Cardinal (Arles: Actes Sud, 1992).

[2] (November 2, 1991), 12.

[3] Ḥīna Ḥalla al-Ṣayf ʿalā l-Ṣayf, (1979), Lā Shayʾ Yafūq al-Waṣf (1980), and (Ayu Thaljen Yahbiṭu Bisalām (1993).

[4] Unsī Yalhū Maʿ Rita (1983).

[5] "Kābūs al-Ḥarb al-Lubnāniyya fī Fusḥa Mustahdafa Bayn al-Nuʿās wa-l-Naum," *Akhbār al-Adab*, 43 (May 8, 1994), 24.

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highlights the confusion of values and ideologies revealing the impossibility of attaining any clear-cut solutions or answers to the problems encountered. In the violence generated by the war, the individual is diminished, marginalized and simplified by a dark and threatening reality. The narrator and protagonist feels puzzled and perplexed in the turmoil of conflicting ideologies which overpower him and destabilize his views of himself as an independent, active and human being capable of achievement.

The narrative commences with the almost one-sided conversation between Abū ʿAlī, a Muslim Shiʿite, and the autodiegetic narrator,[6] a Christian who crosses the demarcation line between the two warring sectors of the city, and returns to his flat on the Muslim side of Beirut. He is visited by the concierge Abū ʿAlī who informs him of old and new tenants and the general state of the building. In the course of Abū ʿAlī's almost monological discourse, the narrator fastens on certain words, disconnected phrases or comments that trigger suppressed fears and terrors within him, feelings he had bottled up and tried to repress. The words spoken by Abū ʿAlī remind the narrator not necessarily of what has happened but rather of what is bound to happen, and the narrative exploits the mode of anterior narration to highlight the narrator's paranoia and state of terror. His abstract fears and scruples are concretized and visualized in the form of hallucinatory actions, images and tropes within the short span of Abū ʿAlī's visit. Abū ʿAlī tells the narrator:[7]

> It took me such great effort to open your door. I spent a whole day in the storehouse trying to find a key that fits. I tried scores of them and I almost thought of breaking the lock, but finally I found the right key. I asked one of my relatives who had escaped the violence in the suburb to stay in your flat to make sure no one occupies it.
> I was scared.
> Poor man.
> His brother was shot by a sniper in the suburb.
> My fear intensified until it reached a peak when his [the concierge] relative entered my flat after I had extinguished the candle and slipped into bed. The darkness was thick, but he walked about the flat like it was daylight.
> ...
> His brother never meddled in politics. He worked as a porter in a public school. He was twenty-six years old, he was married with one child, and his wife was pregnant.
> When I heard him turn the key in the lock, I jumped out of bed into the balcony where I lay in a corner. He looked all around the flat, and when he did not find me, he took off his clothes and slept in my bed putting his gun under the pillow. I spent the night half-naked on the balcony (pp. 18-19).

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[6] See Gerard Genette's typology in *Narrative Discourse*, trans. J.E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell, 1980), p. 248.

[7] All translations used are my own and are based on the 1986 edition.

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The narrator's obsessive fears are in response to the violation of boundaries, those imposed by the civil war. From the start, he directs our attention to his amputated arm, to the violation of the sanctity of his body and his mind, his physical, moral as well as religious boundaries. Thus the crossing of the green line by the narrator remains an act of defiance, an undermining of the newly installed authorities. His is a shift away from logocentrism,[8] and a subversion of binary oppositions. As a young man, he admits to have joined other men from his village in the attack on the "other," a neighbouring Muslim village. They had poisoned the wells, ravaged, burnt and exterminated village and villagers in retaliation for the sacrilege of their own religious symbols and their dead:[9]

> They assaulted a man from our village, cursed and reviled his cross, insulted and abused the Virgin Mary, cast a slur on her, showered her with accusations . . . violated her, treated her like a slut. . . . They beat the man up, rained blows upon him, cut the gold chain that carried the cross, and spat upon the cross. Then they went to the cemetery, destroyed all the crosses and pissed and shat over the graves and removed the remains of the dead, cut down the trees under which our ancestors used to take shelter, and burned the trees along with the corpses. News of such monstrosities reached the village and the people surged and billowed and lost their heads. The old recovered their youth and the young suddenly came of age; the women stuck to their guns and refused to submit to their husbands before revenge was taken. The youth, like myself, were astounded. The news came down upon us like thunderbolts, earthquakes, hailstorms, volcanic lava, fire and torrential rain. . . . In a flash, we were at the spring that waters their village . . . I carried, along with other compeers, a bag of poison too heavy for even a mule to carry. . . . and to make sure no one survives, we emptied the bag into the spring at dusk, the time of their return from the fields. So, they drank and went to bed and never woke up again. And those among them who were lucky enough not to drink before going to bed, were massacred the following morning. Armed to the teeth and like resolute conquerors we entered the village. We left no male survivor without annihilating him, no female without wiping her out, no life without extinguishing it. We left no hen, no beast or tree standing on its trunk. We burnt their crops and then we moved into the graveyard and devastated it. We set fire to it and turned it into hell, and the flames went up until they reached the sky. At night, I went back to the village alone, sneaked into the water reservoir where I emptied a tank full of gas-oil. I awaited the

[8] The fixed and unchangeable centre from which meaning emanates. See Jacque Derrida "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 279-80.

[9] Commenting upon the Lebanese "tribal" society, Evelyn Accad writes: "in a society where the dead must be revenged and in light of a failing State. In the kidnappings and counterkidnappings, the reprisals and counterreprisals, sometimes spontaneous, sometimes organized, a ruthless amplification of violence follows . . ." *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), p. 30.

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news. It was decisive, casualties by the dozens: nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhea, dizziness.

I gloated over it.

Suppose they learn their lesson (pp. 23-24).

The parodic and stylized discourse employed by the narrator in this passage reveals that he has outgrown this and sees the stupidity and madness of such deeds. In his struggle for autonomy and freedom, he admits his complicity in the atrocities committed by his own people and asserts that now he is a changed man:

> But now I have changed. My thoughts and convictions have changed. I was then a rash and heedless young man; otherwise, I would never have done what I did. No rational human being will ever instil poison in a village spring and kill all the people of the village (pp. 22-23).

His sense of guilt and keen alertness to danger sharpen his imagination and his tendency to exaggerate, fantasize and fictionalize. When Abū ʿAlī tells the narrator of his relations, a pregnant woman and widow, her son and brother-in-law, who have escaped the violence in the Southern suburb of Beirut, and are temporarily staying with his family, the narrator, unable to face a terrifying and confusing reality outside, plunges into the marvellous and fantastic[10] and begins to envisage them sharing his own flat. The intruder is visualized in the menacing figure of the male (the brother-in-law) who is seen as harrassing and tyrannizing everybody, particularly his sister-in-law, her child and the narrator.

In his attempt to tell us how he lost his arm, he comes up with three different versions or scenarios, highlighting the marginalization and capriciousness of the subjective all-knowing narrator. Derrida writes: "in the absence of a center or origin, everything becomes discourse . . . that is to say, a system in which the central signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification infinitely,"[11] producing what John Mepham refers to as "abortive mimesis,"[12] where the reader is unable to arrive at a fixed or coherent solution and is faced not only with an uncertain situation but also with one that is inconsistent and contrary to reason. For example,

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[10] For an illuminating distinction between the fantastic and the marvellous see Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1981), p. 85.

[11] Jacque Derrida asserts that the text should be seen as an endless stream of signifiers with words only pointing to other words without any stability of meaning or "transcendental signified," as he refers to it. See "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," p. 280.

[12] "Narratives of Postmodernism," in *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, ed. Edmund Smyth (London: B.T. Batsford, 1991), p. 151.

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the narrator swears he is telling the truth, but at the same time he tells at least three different stories of how he died, going so far as to say that his remains were put in a plastic bag and delivered to his family who decided to take revenge. The narrative here dispels the illusion of reality and uncovers its own artificial nature, sliding into metafiction. In this context, the narrator's unreliability is highlighted and the view of the individual as unified and coherent entity is challenged, producing a diminished image of a man marginalized and simplified by the war. Commenting on the use of repetitions, Hafez writes that they have the function of not only "initially deferring the truth," but turning this deferral into a "permanent situation through the repetition of incidents . . . in such a manner that certain elements are repeated while others reappear with changes."[13]

At the ideological level the three different versions of the loss of the arm highlight the sense of inevitability and emphasize the point that the individual is threatened in his crude physical existence, with the body and the physical world taking on new dimensions. The use of pairs and doubles is reinforced by syntactic and episodic repetitions that reverberate with echoes: the two arms, the two legs (blown up by a car bomb), the two males (Abū ʿAlī and the narrator), the narrator and the brother-in-law, the two children (born and unborn) the two women in the same flat (married and unmarried), the two pregnant and widowed women, the two bedrooms, the mirror reflections (Abū ʿAlī sees himself as a Christian and the narrator as a beautiful woman)[14] and so on.

Such repetitions create a haunting and obsessive atmosphere, exaggerating the narrator's gnawing fears, his estrangement and susceptibility:

> When a knock was heard at the door for the first time . . .
> Then a second knock . . .
> Then a third and a fourth and another and a fifth time. . . .
> I was killed on the spot.
> They killed me for fear of me, I'm sure.
> They were afraid of me, so they killed me (p. 7).

At the same time, such reverberations function as a strategy for survival, diluting his fears through the drill of repetition, serving to bring home to him a sense of reassurance, a rhetorical defence against the threat posed by the war:

[13] p. 24.

[14] Rosemary Jackson writes that "it is remarkable how many fantasies introduce mirrors, glasses, reflections, portraits, eyes—which see things myopically, or distortedly, or out of focus—to effect a transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar." p. 43.

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> No one saw me enter the building and I saw no-one at the entrance or on the pavement. None of the boys who usually gather on the pavement near the building entrance saw or even noticed me (p. 10).

His is a desperate attempt at restoring sanity, at bridging the gap between himself and the Muslims sharing his flat by subverting this oppositional binarism. However, in the narrator's search for resemblances and analogues, for a state of "entropy" and "undifferentiation,"[15] he discovers differences, and the only sense of solidarity and compatibility he encounters is in the identical atrocities committed on both sides—Christian and Muslim, in East as well as West Beirut. In his search for wholeness, he encounters fragmentation and disintegration. In such a volatile atmosphere, relationships and alliances are constantly shifting, and the individual, to use Miriam Cook's words, is "doomed neither to understand nor to act, but only to be acted upon."[16]

In his attempt to defend himself as though he were in a courtroom, he sees the ambivalences, contradictions and complexity of the situation. He says as if addressing members of a jury in an attempt to bring them round to his own point of view:

> This is a glaring proof that the whole business was masterminded, planned and plotted by the woman, the two men and especially the concierge (p. 59).

or when he defends himself:

> I swear by all the heavens that I am telling the truth. I did not know anything and I did not know that my brother was capable of this, and until now after what happened, I'm not sure that he did what he did. I even go as far as saying that he is innocent, and suppose he were guilty? What is my crime? (p. 51)

He sees himself as victim and oppressor, executioner and executed, and realizes that he cannot extricate himself from what he represents at the public level. He realizes that he has become a mere subject or a representative of an ideology. Therefore, the act of crossing the boundaries between the East and West sides of the city remains an act of blurring differences, though at the same time remaining an act of defiance. The narrator shifts from oppressor to victim, and since none of the binaries remains constant, the line begins to blur. In this world of fantasy, "perception becomes increasingly confused, signs are vulnerable to multiple and contradictory interpretation, so that 'meanings' recede indefinitely, with 'truth' as a mere vanishing point,"[17] an ungraspable mirage or shadow. In such an atmos-

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[15] See Jackson, pp. 72-73.

[16] *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese War: 1978-82* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 97.

[17] Jackson, p. 38.

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phere, the role of sufferer and prey and that of tyrant and oppressor are acted out and actions and roles constantly switch places. As Mikhail Bakhtin puts it: "everything is prepared, as it were, to pass over into its opposite . . . everything is taken to extremes, to its uttermost limit. There is nothing in the novel that could become stabilized . . ."[18]

The narrative is submerged into the logos, the tribal, the public, the stereotype. It is such external and extrinsic factors—social, religious and political—that turn the narrator into a mere representative, restricted and mitigated by the past and present as well as by forces over which he has no control. The discourse drifts towards the concrete manifested in the dismembered body. This slide can be seen as a logocentric impulse, a desire to place his fears into a concrete and visible mould, to give form to his abstract verbal utterances, to unite signifier and signified. At the same time, his despair with ideology drives him into the anatomical realm in an obsessive attempt at reassembling his fragmented and dismembered body.

His reaction to the intruders is to be viewed in this context. If he reacts against those who see him as a representation or abstraction, he falls into the same ideological trap in his views of others. His discourse remains differential[19] and his tendency for literalization and symbolization is constantly subverted by the shiftiness of the signifying and the semiotic.[20] He views the woman in the house as a stereotype of the Shiʿite woman. Her name is omitted and she is referred to as the "woman," the "wife" or "she," just as the man is merely referred to as the "brother-in-law." Abū ʿAlī as well as the brother-in-law are seen by the narrator as mere stereotypes of violence.

The narrator too remains a non-entity, a slave to an ideology to the very end. The narrative overlooks what the narrator does for a living, and when he uncovers his name towards the very end, the name "Yūsuf" comes as a shock to the reader. It strikes one as too small and diminutive, too short of one's expectations. It is as though the name, like the arm, has been amputated and is no longer of any use to the bearer. This fragmented person seems to "render unstable the traditional unified identity and subjectivity of character."[21] The individual is overpowered and vanquished by the tribe, the semiotic by the symbolic.

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[18] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 167.

[19] Ferdinand de Saussure writes that in "language there are only differences without positive terms." *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Bashin, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (New York: MacGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 120.

[20] For Julia Kristeva's distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic see *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 21-106.

[21] Hutcheon, p. 90.

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The narrator's sense of guilt and his feelings of innocence, his personal subjective fears and his tribal and ideological affiliations and sense of public guilt, constitute the major tensions of the narrative. The external inferno represented by the stifling heat and the internal hell highlight the "hellish" atmosphere for though the fire burns, light is not visible. It is a blasted wasteland with no light or water, a world of sterility and death. The world shrinks into a flat and the flat into a prison cell:

> Once he [the brother-in-law] bought a padlock and fastened it on the outer side of the door [the narrator's bedroom], and began locking it before going to bed keeping the key in his pocket. . . .
>
> Then for reasons that did not escape me, he started to open the door for one hour in the morning and return after an hour to lock it up again (pp. 30, 31).

The prison cell reflects the narrator's feelings of coercion and constraint and his paranoiac fears as well as his inability to communicate and his sense that perhaps he deserves this fate. He sees any word spoken by Abū ʿAlī as a personal affront; he sees the unbridgeable gap between them at all levels. The narrator emerges as a man incapable of dialogue, and the language used seems to subvert rather than enhance dialogue. Abū ʿAlī rattles away while the narrator catches only glimpses of what he says. The words that strike him have the effect of real bullets, turning language into a mere instrument of war:[22]

> He [Abū ʿAlī] started on the work again.
> – The blind is out of order.
> – ....
> – One reel is broken.
> – ....
> – I'll try to take it down, but you won't be able to lift it up after that.
> – ....
> – Did I tell you they tried to occupy Sālim's flat when he was away?
> – At this point I became silent.
> – Had I not interfered at the right moment, they would have occupied the flat.
> – Also at this point I became silent.
> – At first I din't notice what was happening for they came at night when the light was cut and went up and down in the dark. It was my wife who first noticed them.
> I hurried to the door when I heard the knocks, but he stopped me:
> No, no. Don't reveal yourself. Let me open the door. . . .
> He went down the stairs. . . . and then came back alone after shutting the door behind him.

[22] Commenting on Ummaya Ḥamdān's works, Miriam Cook writes: "language has been decimated to keep time with the bullets," p. 115.

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> Six men.
> I darted to the door and without any caution or hesitation, I opened it with my left hand, took one step outside the door and said in a high-pitched tone: Yes?
> I no longer remember anything.
> I was shot on the spot. They killed me for fear of me, I'm sure. They were afraid of me, so they killed me. And the concierge was there with them. He was the only unbearded person among them. The rest had short, thick, black, well-trimmed beards. They were all tall except the concierge, and they all shot at me including the concierge. But how could that be when he was unarmed? This is a serious loophole in my testimony, I admit (pp. 13-15).

Abū ʿAlī is vexed because he is seen strictly as a concierge rather than a human being. He is viewed by the narrator as a mere stereotype of the dishonest Shiʿite concierge in the context of the war. The same can be said of the narrator who is seen by Abū ʿAlī as a mere Christian living on the west side of Beirut.

Bogged down by such restrictions, the narrator attempts to break the deadlock, if not at the general public level, at least, at the private personal level. Since he cannot handle the hard impenetrable world of male hegemony, he tries to do it through the softer, more accessible world of the female. In the presence of the male his reaction is:

> I'm certain they killed me for fear of me. They were afraid of me, so they killed me. And the concierge was one of them, and he was the only one without a beard, while the others were bearded. They had thick, black, well-trimmed beards, and they all shot me, including the concierge (p. 7).

The entrance of the brother-in-law petrifies him:

> And my heart began to beat fast. I felt severe pain in my right shoulder and forced myself into subduing this loathsome need for throwing up (p. 89).

He contemplates marrying a Muslim woman to protect himself physically, but dismisses the idea. His family, background and religion render the act inconceivable. He refuses to tamper with his Christian identity and his ideological stance. He crosses the borderline only to return with a renewed sense of his Christian identity; however, he still sees his salvation as through the female in general, and not necessarily the pregnant widow in his flat. He sees her as the "stereotypical peacemaker,"[23] as the only creative force within a destructive atmosphere, a redemptive model of love (she gives him food, cries over his death and worries about him), fertility and regenerative strength. At the same time, he envisages her taking severe action against

[23] See Sandra Gilbert, "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War," in *Speaking of Gender*, ed. Elaine Showalter, New York and London, 1989, p. 290.

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him for supposedly killing her husband, imprisoning and torturing him, further problematizing the binaries of male/female:

> I began feeling the need for water again . . . My tongue was parched and heavy . . . But how can I tell her that (p. 91)?

She infiltrates the very texture of his thoughts, but remains "a subject in process,"[24] that cannot be represented except in its shiftiness. He plunges into this feminine world and goes as far as transgressing gender boundaries, seeing himself as a woman in the mirror. Her evident physicality and child-bearing identify her with the body. She becomes a signifier of his desire for peace and security,[25] as well as of his desire to reach out for the other; however, at the same time, the religious and political discords and differences intensify through the constant deferment of physical contact.[26] His relationship with her is characterized by the obliteration of speech, her response being to the signifying rather than the signified, as seen in the rhythm of her movements, her body and her voice. It is her silence that provides the impetus for fictionality and the sense of deferred meaning. The narrator enters the realm of fictionality and indulges in fable-making; however, the referential and symbolic infiltrate the very texture of the semiotic. The narrator's desire for a world free of differences and violence is constantly subverted and violated by the aggressive phallic impulse, reminding him that he is a Christian at war with Muslim Beirut, and his efforts fail to materialize. As Jackson puts it, "the gap between signifier and signified dramatizes the impossibility of arriving at definitive meaning, or absolute 'reality'."[27]

The narrator, whose own physical boundaries have been violated, attempts to cross the demarcation line between East and West Beirut and subvert the boundaries set up by the war authorities; however, the apocalyptic reality of the war, the general confusion and discord as well as his own feelings of anxiety, suspicion and fear, frustrate any attempts at communication and reconciliation. The religious, cultural, political and social barriers everywhere turn the individual into a mere instrument of the dominant ideology. The narrator discovers his ineffectiveness at all levels and realizes that he is a man with no identity but a public one, a Christian living in Muslim West

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[24] See Kristeva, pp. 100-103.

[25] Miriam Cook writes that "women were involved in the war not as fighters but as conflict resolvers and as mothers . . ." p. 166.

[26] The text uncovers the narrator's own incapacity for love, reflecting a general lack of sympathy, tolerance and magnanimity. There is no evidence in the narrative that he has ever loved anyone. Referring to a ring he possessed, the narrator writes: "they almost despaired of finding my corpse, but they finally identified my body from the ring which was not stolen, and on which was engraved the name of the first woman that ever loved me," (p. 99) and not the first woman he loved.

[27] p. 41.

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Beirut, without any private, independent or integral personality. In his lonely search for wholeness and integration, he discovers fragmentation and disintegration. The general sense of insecurity and inconsistency is underlined in the repetition of scenes and incidents, disrupting narrative linearity and uncovering the general stalemate and stagnation. The fact that the narrator sees himself as victim and oppressor, sufferer and avenger highlight the point that everything is open to a variety of interpretations and explanations revealing the shifting instability of everything. Thus, in an atmosphere charged with irreconcilable ideological differences, hatred and violence, it is not surprising that the narrator finds no other outlet but his sleeping pills.

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