

Introduction

LEBANESE WOMEN AND LITERATURE

Since we are dealing with texts written by women, the question that comes to mind is whether or not there is a unique or particular way in which women inscribe representation. My examination of texts written by women as well as men from the 1950's to the present reveal that no clear-cut or categorical differences occur between texts written by men and those written by women. There seems to be no difference in the language they use or the techniques employed in their writing. Is it a question of content then which makes texts written by women different?

Unlike men, women have been viewed as too personal and too self-absorbed in both their lives and their writing. Their texts are thought to be autobiographical and subjective, and their writing is viewed as generally restricted to private and secondary issues related to the domain of the house and the kitchen sink, rather than to public and ideological issues. To start with, one could say that such subjective themes are not solely restricted to women writers. Many fictional works by male writers can likewise be viewed as autobiographical or semi-autobiographical. For example, in *Idle Days* (Ayyām Zā'idah, 1991) by Hassan Daud, the character of the old man is based upon Daud's own grandfather as Daud himself has communicated to me, and *Mathilde Building* (Bināyat Mathilde, 1983) is based on a building in which Daud's own family actually lived. Again, Rachid al-Da'if's novel *Dear Mr. Kawabata* ('Azizi al-Sayyid Kawabāta, 1995) is loaded with autobiographical elements starting with the name of the protagonist/narrator which coincides with the author's own name Rachid, to his involvement with the Communist party, to references to a town that one finds no difficulty in identifying as Zgharta, al-Da'if's own hometown.

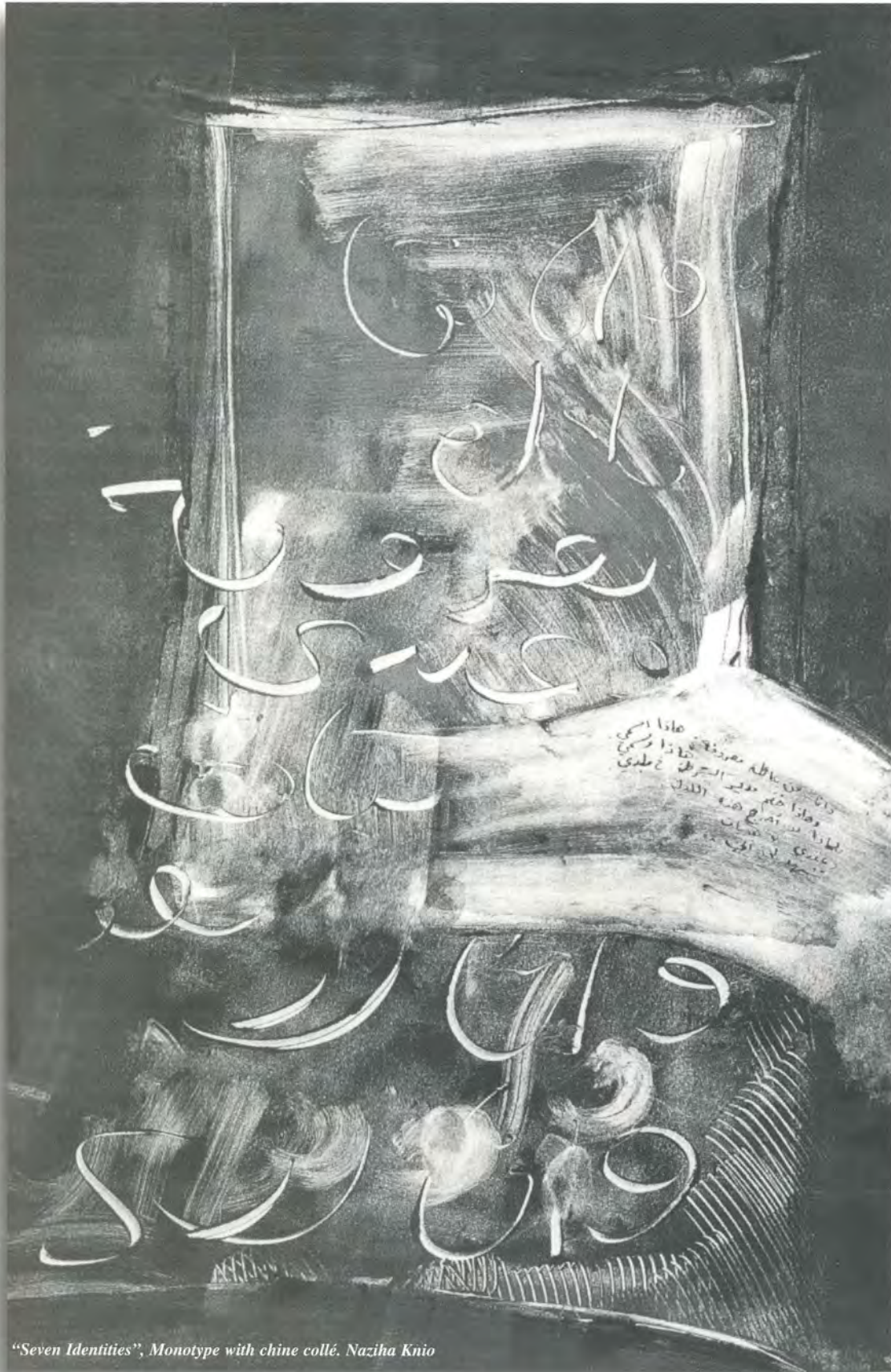
Such autobiographical references do not seem to constitute any drawbacks for these writers, though they seem to be problematic when it comes to women's writing. A novel written by a woman is generally considered a literal rendering of the writer's own personal life. Ghada al-Samman complains that critics have fallen into the trap of referring to her characters and herself interchangeably: "they argue with me about the conduct of the heroines of my stories and pronounce their moral judgments upon me to the extent that I was once afraid of being thrown into jail because one of my heroines had committed a crime" (Al-Samman, *Al-Qabīlah Tastajwib al-Qaīlah*, 1981, p.162).

Again if texts by women are said to deal with the limitations and restrictions of the home plot, many texts by men writers center around inner rather than outer space. Among such works are *Mathilde Building* by Hassan Daud and *Technicalities of Wretchedness* (Taḡaniyyāt al-Bu's,

1989) by Rachid al-Daif, where action takes place predominantly inside the domain of the house and concentrates on household chores. On the other hand, many works of fiction by women deal with women venturing outdoors, and either feeling ill at ease especially in restaurants and cafes as in *I Survive* (*Anā Aḥyā*, 1958) by Layla Baalbakki, or going all the way and entering the male arena in order to realize themselves. Among such works is al-Samman's story "There is No Sea in Beirut" (*Lā Baḥrā fī Beirut*, 1963) where the protagonist moves from Damascus to Beirut in her search for freedom, and in *Solo on a Missing String* (*Taqāsīm 'ala Wataren Dā'e*, 1992) by Nazek Yared where the narrator shuttles between Palestine, Egypt and Beirut in her desire to acquire education and achieve personal independence. Again it is within the domain of open spaces and uncouth nature that the female artist is able to realize her creative potentials as the narrator in "The Poetess and the Goldfinch" (*Mahaḡḡāt al-Raḡīl*, 1996) by Emily Nasrallah explicitly asserts. These open spaces envisage new possibilities that go beyond the constraints of society and open new vistas and new possibilities.

Based upon the above, can one deduce that there are no differences between men's and women's writing? In answer to this question one could say that woman's contribution lies in a discourse that is rendered from a female rather than male point of view. For the first time, women are constituting themselves and are speaking in their own distinctive and individualistic voices, and the world they represent is, for the first time, perceived from a new and different angle of vision. In many of these texts the first person narration prevails, and, in some cases, confessional narration dominates the scene. In this manner, they are actually challenging cultural representations of women and overrunning gender differentiation. In a lecture given by the Palestinian writer Sahar Khalifeh on the International Day of Women at The Lebanese American University (1997), Khalifeh defines herself as a writer who intends to write about a real woman with flesh and blood, not the symbol or metaphor that one finds in texts written by men.

Many women are refusing to perceive themselves the way men perceive them, and in this manner they are creating alternative truths and representations. For instance, in *The Latin Quarter* (*Al-Ḥayy al-Lā'ini*, 1953) by Suhayl Idriss and *The Shadow and the Echo* (*Al-Zil wa al-Ṣadā*, 1989) by Yusef Habshi al-Ashkar, the women (both French and not Lebanese or Arab) are hardly credible characters. They are representatives of the authors' own views of what women should be like rather than real women. These females are nothing like Lena in Baalbakki's *I Survive* or Zahra in *The Story of Zahra* (*Ḥikāyat Zahrah*, 1980) or Faṭṭūm in *Al-Lijā*



"Seven Identities", Monotype with chine collé. Naziha Knio

Quarter (*Hayy al-Lijā*, 1969). They fade away in comparison with the solipsistic, self-centered, extrovert female in the works of Ghada al-Samman and the short stories of Layla Baalbakki, who have emerged out of silence into obsessive self-definition. If there is an air of adolescent raving and "naive romanticism" about some of them, to use Julia Kristeva's words, these women are all too prepared to indulge in the discovery of female selfhood.

What then are the major constituents of Lebanese women's writing? The problem of mapping contemporary Lebanese women's fiction since 1960 is not easy. One could say, however, that these works are generally characterized by versatility, variety and multiplicity, showing the complexity and variation of this literature. In addition to the above mentioned subjective trends, other texts written by women tend to have a strong political as well as social orientation, and the subjects are anchored securely in time and place. This is understandable given the political and intellectual climate of the past forty years or so. The Lebanese war, in particular, is one major factor that drove women further into the public arena after having invaded the very privacy of their homes, making it virtually impossible for them not to react, or to remain on the margin.

Therefore, many women opted to legitimize themselves as women by writing about and taking stands on such topics as the Lebanese war, freedom, independence, immigration, traditional values, gender problems, nationalistic issues, issues related to liberation, the Palestinian problem etc.

Such themes can be found in short stories by Nur Salman, Nuha Samara, Nuha Mussallam, Daisy al-Amir, Emily Nasrallah, Ghada al-Samman, and in longer works of fiction. In **The Snake's Mark** (*Khat al-Af'ā*, 1970), Layla Ussayran deals with major issues notably the liberation of Palestine. The characters she presents are in constant search for meaning, identity and human values. Emily Nasrallah rejects worn out village traditions and pursues freedom from such restrictions. In **The Oleander Tree** (*Shajarat al-Duflah*, 1968) the female protagonist feels alienated and seeks refuge in nature. Retreating into herself, she searches for truth and justice, but the only consolation comes from nature. In **The Circle Point** (*Nuḡḡat al-Dā'irah*, n.d.) by Nazek Yared, the protagonist finds in work and a career for a woman the first step towards real and genuine liberation. Such fiction presents women as active, self-determined agents playing a positive and constructive role in society and striving to exert control over their lives by challenging the patriarchal order. These texts written within the realistic mode provide a very effective vehicle for the representation of themes that are overtly social and political.

By restricting their narratives to purely public and general issues, some writers choose self concealment in the use of male persona and the distancing third person narrative, evading the alluring and rather embarrassing first person. Others go a step further and insist on adhering to abstractions and generalities and emphasizing ideas and moral values rather than the actual story itself. One could say in this context that these writers have manifested a greater courage in the expression of their thoughts than ever before. In their desire to be heard and accepted by the patriarchal society, and in their attempt to adopt masculine attributes, some have incorporated semi-documentary material and have remained close to journalistic writing in order to legitimize their social, political, and moral stands. Other works can be viewed as speculative ramblings taking on fictional trappings. In this respect, one could say that these texts reveal and fight for a unified selfhood, a rational, coherent, and effective identity, and an active role within the patriarchal society.

If some writers opt for an effective public role, other female writers participate in the celebration of individualism by speaking about themselves forcefully, and directly, violating female propriety and transgressing gender boundaries. Many of these texts (short stories by Baalbakki and al-Shaykh) are tinged with the hue of eroticism and the hedonistic enjoyment of the body. Other texts incorporate exotic settings (particularly in the works of al-Shaykh) in order to underline the erotic and unrestricted atmosphere. By so doing, these women express a desire to use and control their

own bodies and manifest a more active female sexuality. In this manner, one could say that these texts deliberately attack phallogocentric and patriarchal attitudes and propose a healthier and more balanced sexuality than texts written by male writers.

It is true that some writers identify themselves with the body and nature; however, far from barring them from participating in the historical and political sphere, sexual awareness is for them very strongly aligned with a new political consciousness and liberation from political oppression as seen in **The Gray Danube** (*Raḡīb al-Marāḡī' al-Qadīma*, 1973) by al-Samman. Themes related to sexual pleasure, homosexuality and lesbianism can be seen in short stories and novels by Hanan al-Shaykh, particularly in **Women of Sand and Myrrh** (*Misk al-Ghaḡāl*, 1988) as well as in the novels of Ilham Mansur For Hiba (Ilā Hiba, 1991), **Hiba's Passage through the Flesh** (*Hiba fī Riḡlat al-Jasad*, 1994) and **The Sound of the Reed Pipe or The Autobiography of a Place** (*Ṣawṭ al-Nāy aw Sīrat Makān*, 1995). Here the female writer appropriates the male role by writing a daring erotic text, and thus shocking and disturbing by her gender.

Other texts such as Nuha Samara's "Two Faces One Woman" (*Al-Ṭāwīlāt 'Ashāt Akthar min Amīn*, 1981) go into the extreme of representing an emasculated female who forces herself into the male arena, doing what men do, practicing the art of shooting and using a gun, and defiantly cutting off her hair, symbol of her femininity. In this manner the female protagonist experiences the ambiguities of selfhood and gender roles. In other texts like **The Stone of Laughter** (*Ḥajar al-Dahik*, 1990), Huda Barakat presents a feminized man who seeks to recuperate androgyny by opting to live in a protected female inner space doing the chores of a woman or housewife, in a subversive attempt to explore the other by dissolving gender boundaries. In this novel, femininity is presented as the behavioral norm, while masculinity is treated as an ugly aberration showing that men and women alike are victims of gender codes. Other texts portray man as the oppressor and highlight the social and economic advantages which men have over women and the abuses of authority in which they engage especially within the deeply entrenched and almost immutable structures of the family unit. In the first part of Balqis al-Humani's **Al-Lija Quarter**, we note the traditional binary opposition between the aggressive male and the passive female; however, the roles are reversed half way through the novel, and it is the woman, Fattum, who assumes a dominating and controlling presence by holding the reins and appropriating the role traditionally assigned to man.

Many women writers firmly believe that it is through the medium of language that they can enter the male arena. The fictional works of many women betoken confidence in the written word. Words are tools by which they can understand the world, make sense of history and testify to what one has witnessed. At the same time, some other writers note the

treachery and inadequacy of male language. According to Ghada al-Samman, the patriarchal pen should be stifled and clichés should be discarded *The Gray Danube*, (*Rahīl al-Marāji' al-Qadīmah*, 1973). This strong sense of the inadequacy of language and the way language controls and dominates the life of an individual can be seen in Emily Nasralla's latest novel **The Slumbering Ember** (*Al-Jamr al-Ghāfi*, 1996). The novel is riddled with proverbs that are used extensively by the inhabitants of Jurat al-Sindyan in order to show the restraining effect of language and culture not only on their speech, but, more significantly, on their very actions and thoughts. In the same manner, the female narrator of **The Stone of Laughter** employs the language used by men in order to disrupt this language and reveal its shortcomings. Hers is a deliberate and calculated immersion in the patriarchal order to subvert this order. Other writers create utopias that are set against a frustrating and disorienting reality. Among such examples are Nuha Tabbara's "The Deserted Mansion" (*Rabī' bilā Wurūd*, 1992) and Nada Amin al-Awar's "The Chamomile Flower" (*Laytahā Šabī*, 1993). In these works the writers create fantasy worlds to compare with and comment upon the world controlled by men. Other writers employ magic realism to overrun a world based upon fixed and irrefutable assumptions. This can be seen in Najwa Barakat's **Decent People on a Bus** (*Bās al-Awādim*, 1996) where a variety of tales and stories are told by different commuters on a bus heading South. The novel challenges the assumptions of realism by emphasizing the importance of subjective narration and personal truths rather than general truth, and in this manner, subjective reality turns out to be no less important than objective reality.

In other works of fiction, the supposed identity and essence of character escapes us. In **Suicide of a Dead Man** (*Intihār Rajul Mayyit*, 1970) by Hanan al-Shaykh, we are presented with a ghostly character seen solely from the middle aged man's point of view. The man's obsession with the young woman, Dania, at a critical period in his life drives him to see her strictly from his point of view and define her in relation to his personal, psychological needs. This is a book that interrogates character as the bearer of an essential truth and fixed identity. The interest in character is replaced by shifting, erratic, and fluid inter-relations among shadowy half articulated characters. Similarly, in some short stories by Rene al-Hayek, the characters are hardly recognizable, challenging man's intellectual pretensions to knowledge and expressing skepticism about his ability to understand the world. The past hidden and the future uncertain, these nameless characters immersed in the daily routine of housework feel the emptiness of the present. The story entitled "The Man without his Belongings" (*Portrait lil-Nisyān*, 1994) highlights causes rather than effects in such a manner that one observes without comprehending, and if the reader fails to understand these characters, it is not because they are intangible or shadowy. If they do not possess a fixed identity, it is because they are more genuine and more true to life. This is a fluid and unstable identity that women who have lived on the margins for so long

fully understand and endorse.

There are other works that bare their own devices and incorporate metafictional elements by telling the reader explicitly about the process of writing. Many of these texts are short stories rather than novels. Among such works are "Chez Temporel" by Rafif Fattuh (*Tafāṣīl Saghira*, 1980), a story told in fragments and from many points of view, "A Subject for a Story" (*Hadīqat al-Sukhūr*, 1969) by Salwa Safi and "The Ordeal" (*Safīnat Hanān ilā al-Qamar*, 1964) by Layla Baalbakki. At the same time, some of these stories abandon linear plot in favor of cyclical plots that highlight the repetitiveness of a woman's life within the home boundaries as seen in "The Fourth Stage" (*Al-Balad al-Ba'īd al-ladhī Tuhib*, 1962) by Daisy al-Amir where a strong sense of uncertainty prevails. This is the story of a nameless female immersed in the daily routine of housework, living the present and divorced from both past and future. Finally, one could say that some of these works can be described as hybrid texts incorporating dialogues, letters, memoirs, documentary material, and self-conscious comments on the writing process. A good number of texts tend to make use of the memoir more than any other form as seen in **The Smothered Echo** (*Al-Šadā al-Makhnūq*, 1986) by Nazek Yared, **Beirut 75** (1975) by Ghada al-Samman, **The Story of Zahra** by Hanan al-Shaykh and many others.

To sum up, the flourishing state and vitality of women's fiction reveals, if anything, woman's ability to find a voice and play an active and positive role. Women writers have used different themes and adopted a variety of techniques to represent themselves, and their voices that have risen out of silence are being heard distinctly.

The file includes a variety of topics ranging from critical studies of single writers, a variety of writers, book reviews, and a short bibliography of selected Lebanese women writers. It is hoped that this file will give the reader a panoramic view of Lebanese and some Arab women's achievement in the field of Literature.

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