

**The Role of Writing in Constructing the Self in Alawiyah
Sobh's *Mariam al-Hakaya* [Mariam the Tales] and Rabih**

Alameddine's I, the Divine

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by

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Abstract

The two novels analyzed in *The Role of Writing in Constructing the Self in Alawiyah Sobh's Mariam al-Hakayah [Mariam the Tales] and Rabih Alameddine's I, the Divine* share the theme of constructing self-identity. This study demonstrates how self-identity is dynamic and ever growing. In the first novel, Mariam the main protagonist succeeds in constructing her self when she decides to write her own story rather than wait for Alawiyah, the second main protagonist, to do so. Through the many metadiegetic narratives that Mariam narrates, Mariam identifies the extent of her objectification which is the condition that motivates her into constructing her self identity so as to become her own subject. Just as Mariam writes her memoir to construct her self, Alawiyah, the second main character, also uses writing as the means to constructing her self once more as a writer. In *I, the Divine*, Sarah is able to begin writing her memoir only when she becomes conscious that what has hindered her from her task is her inability to successfully construct her self. The incessant attempts at writing her memoir helps Sarah construct her self so that she understands what she is and enables her finally begin writing her memoir. *The Role of Writing the Self ...* shows the close relationship between writing about the self and constructing that self.

Introduction: Constructed Self in Alawiyah Sobh's *Mariam al-Hakayah* [Mariam the Tales] and Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine*

Self-identity is the outcome of inherited as well as social development; it is not a rigid state but is in fact very malleable. In addition, self-identity is not a given entity incapable of change, but it is in a constant state of construction. Furthermore, even though the inherited and social components of the self may be in existence, on their own, they do not result in a self because the right conditions are necessary for self construction to take place. In one sense, I believe that the self is like a dormant volcano that has all the components that will lead to an eruption when the conditions are suitable; so long as the conditions are not appropriate, no activity will take place. Moreover, the buildup for a volcanic eruption is similar to the slow process of construction the self undergoes. When the components of the self are present, and the conditions are convenient, the constructed self materializes. This materialization, however, is not similar to a volcanic eruption; it is rather like a rose. Unlike a volcano, the self does not announce its presence suddenly; it rather blossoms imperceptibly like a rose and announces its presence through indiscernible behavior modifications. Finally, just as an active volcano will continue to exercise its potential to erupt, the constructed self will continue to exercise its potential to change. The two novels, *Mariam al-Hakayah* by Alawiyah Sobh and *I, the Divine* by Rabih Alameddine demonstrate the validity of my hypothesis; through my study, I will show how narration in the above mentioned novels is instrumental to self-identity construction.

A study of the two novels will disclose that the two Lebanese writers Sobh and Alameddine are concerned with the development of self; moreover, no matter which language they use, both writers believe that writing is the means to construct the self. Both novels address a variety of issues such as the role of patriarchy in Lebanese

society, the superficial emancipation of women, and the effects of the Lebanese Civil War on society. However, what stands out for me is the question of self-identity and its formation which both novels develop. Because these novels have appeared after the Lebanese Civil War and at the closure of one century and the beginning of another, I think that the role writing plays in constructing self-identity which the novels' protagonists use when they undergo self-identity construction will prove to be important. As a result, I think that this aspect in both novels may be the reason why they become part of the corpus of Lebanese novels that explore the construction of self identity.

In *Mariam al-Hakayah* and *I, the Divine*, the main narrators construct their self identity through writing their memoir. Moreover, the two novels reinforce the idea that identity has the potential to constantly reconstruct itself given the right circumstances. Constructing the self can be perceived through a variety of means, one of which is narration. Kim Worthington writes that narrating the self is the result of scrutinizing the past and organizing it into a form that is clear to the narrator and anyone who wishes to understand him/ her (13). This function of self narration is perceived in *Mariam al-Hakayah* and *I, the Divine* since the respective narrators construct their self-identity through just such an exercise. In *Mariam al-Hakayah*, Mariam and Alawiyah construct their self-identity through writing. Mariam constructs her self by writing her memoir while Alawiyah does the same by rewriting her self as a writer. In *I, the Divine*, Sarah constructs her self as she repeats and modifies the various incidents in her life. While each novel shows that such a construction can be achieved, there is a difference in the means through which this is accomplished: in Sobh's novel, construction is the result of narrating the self through storytelling while in Alameddine's novel it is the result of recursivity. Finally, both novels develop the

concept of writing as the means to constructing the self, and both indicate that this construction has the potential to be ongoing.

As a literary genre, the Arab novel first appears with the *nahdah* movement, a literary and cultural rebirth that began during the nineteenth century. Arab writers have written historical as well as adventure novels. However, because these writers find themselves living in a culture that is more explicitly political and social, they tend to produce novels that deal predominantly with such concerns. Thus, since its initial appearance and until the present, the Arab novel continues to be largely concerned with presenting social and political ideas. Furthermore, since the novel is the preferred platform for presenting innovative concepts, the Arab writer uses this medium to experiment with both social and political notions in an effort to produce change and reform. Finally, I believe that the Arab novelists have succeeded in writing novels that are very innovative as the two novels in this study will show.

Mariam al-Hakayah and *I, the Divine* are Lebanese novels that are written in the traditions of both women's literature and autobiography. I believe that Alameddine's novel belongs to the Lebanese corpus rather than the American even though he uses the English language as the means to write his novel. Furthermore, Alameddine is not the first Lebanese writer to have published novels that are not written in Arabic; in fact, a number of Lebanese writers have used the English language to write some of their novels. In the early twentieth century, for example, Gibran Khalil Gibran wrote *The Prophet*, and Ameen Rihani wrote *The Book of Khalid*; more recently, Tony Hanania wrote *Unreal City*, and Ethel Adnan wrote *Paris, When it's Naked*. According to Geoffrey Nash, Gibran and Rihani used the English language because they wished to provide the western readership with an image of Arab culture as perceived by an Arab (2). Although Alameddine might not

have written his novel in English for the same reasons as Gibran and Rihani, I believe that in writing his novel in English, Alameddine is attempting to reach the western readership that also includes Arab descendents who do not read Arabic. Furthermore, the English language defamiliarizes the Lebanese reader who will, as a result, see his society through the language of another and recognize how he is perceived by that other. This recognition is important because it allows the Lebanese reader to understand that his problems are not unique to his culture but are universal. Finally, the novel belongs to the Lebanese corpus because it reflects the Lebanese people's efforts to construct their self-identity as depicted by Sarah's effort to construct her own self-identity by writing her memoir.

In *Al-Riwayah al-Nasawiyah fi Bilad al-Sham* [Women's Literature in Greater Syria], Iman al-Qadi begins by stating that controversy regarding what constitutes women's literature abounds. Some reject such a categorization because literature is literature whether it is produced by a male or a female while others label it women's literature because they believe that the literature that women produce centers on the self and is an emotional feminine product (Al-Qadi, 7). I oppose pigeonholing literature on the grounds of the writer's sex because I believe that both male and female writers are capable of writing novels that treat issues of concern to the opposite sex as Rabih Alameddine shows in *I, the Divine*, which deals with a female trying to construct her self-identity. Furthermore, I believe that if pigeonholing literature is to take place, then this should be on the basis of the subject matter. Therefore, I am not opposed to labeling the literature that centers on the female and presents her problems as women's literature regardless of whether it is written by a female or a male.

The corpus of women's literature in the Arab world addresses issues that concern both the society and period the writers live in. In Lebanon, for example, Layla Ba'albaki's *Ana Ahyā* [I Live] (1958) deals with the issue of a woman's personal freedom which the women's liberation movements in the sixties advocated. Layla 'Usseiran's *'Asafir al-Fajr* [The Birds of Dawn] (1968) is another example that shows the woman's active role in the Palestinian resistance and echoes the extent of women's involvement in the Palestinian plight. Hanan al-Sheikh's *Hikayat Zahrah* [The Story of Zahra] (1980) traces the main character's development and how the Lebanese Civil War affects her. Finally, the two novels in my study *Mariam al-Hakayah* and *I, the Divine*, which appear in 2001-2002, belong to the tradition of women's literature because they tell of female protagonists striving to construct their self-identity. These protagonists also reflect a womanhood that is capable of initiating self change instead of a womanhood that identifies the need for change but is either incapable of changing or fails in the attempt.

Although novels and autobiographies are two different literary genres, the objects of my study show that these genres share some similarities. On one hand, novels are works of fiction that present material which is the result of the writer's imagination; sometimes, however, the writer integrates a real event, person, or place into a work of fiction or the behavior or characteristic of an individual into one of his/her characters. This indicates that an element of the real can in fact be part of the fictitious. Autobiographies, on the other hand, are considered non-fiction because they are presumed to depict the life of a real person, and the events presented have actually taken place. However, in writing about events that have taken place in the past, the autobiographer falls back on his/her memory; as a result, even though the actual events might be true, the details that surround them are colored by the imagination.

Therefore, novels might make use of that which is real just as autobiographies incorporate fictitious elements. Edwar Al-Kharrat writes:

Although this [questioning the accuracy of events] may not exclude a genre that can be called austere – or strictly “honest” autobiography ... still I doubt whether an autobiographical work ... however, rigorously trimmed down to the most meticulous account of facts, can be completely free of bias, unconscious or otherwise or be innocent of at least a touch of fantasy. (10)

Finally, the two novels in my study are novels that reflect an intersection of traditions, for they reflect characteristics of both women’s literature and autobiography since they revolve around female protagonists struggling to construct their self-identity by writing about their life.

Since the narrators in my study decide to write their autobiography, they exhibit the potential autobiographies have for constructing the self. Patricia Spacks writes: “[Autobiography] assures its author of his existence beyond all possibility of philosophic denial. Through it he comes to terms with his past or exorcises it” (19). Mariam and Sarah, in *Mariam al-Hakayah* and *I, the Divine* respectively, resort to writing their memoir to proclaim the changes their introspection leads to; their narration results in a constructed self that reflects their success at overcoming their previous self-identity while Alawiyah’s narration in *Mariam al-Hakayah* ends in constructing her self as a writer and not a character in a novel. This study aims to explore how the self takes shape after it is scrutinized; moreover, since the act of scrutiny is continuous, the self is continuously reconstructed and modified.

Published at the beginning of the millennium, these novels reinforce the importance of constructing a self-identity that is the result of past experiences and that exhibits the potential for further change when the situation warrants it. In addition, not

much criticism has been written about either author doubtless because they are not as well established as other Lebanese writers. Sobh published her first book, *Nawm al-'Ayam*, in 1986 and waited fifteen years before she published her second novel, *Mariam al-Hakayah*, in 2002 and her latest novel, *Dunya*, in 2006. Alameddine published *Koolaid*s in 1998 and *I, the Divine* in 2001; although some criticism has been written about *Koolaid*s, not much can be found about his second novel *I, the Divine*. This lack in criticism is double-edged since it frees me from preconceived ideas, but it also prevents me from comparing my ideas to those of other critics.

The novel is a very valuable medium for writers, readers and critics. On one hand, the novel is one of the most suitable platforms for writers to experiment with and present ideas and concepts. For readers, on the other hand, the novel presents a spectrum of possible incidents and a variety of characters with whom either empathy or rejection is possible. By empathizing with a character, readers subconsciously encounter a self that they are not aware of and identify points of similarities and differences with that character. Therefore, the novel gives readers the opportunity to analyze and interpret themselves. Because literary critics study creative works, they find themselves delving into the subject of identity which belongs to the domains of philosophy and psychology. Moreover, through this intersection, critics reach a level of understanding which a study restricted to the philosophical or psychological domains might not have made possible.

Even though structuralism may have lost the impact it once had, I find its validity as a theoretical approach to a literary critical study unimpeachable especially when it is united with other more contextual approaches. Furthermore, because I believe that a literary study of texts contributes to an understanding of the self and the other, I will use a narratological approach and rely on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of

heteroglossia as well as Mieke Bal's ideas concerning focalization to show how self-identity unfolds in both novels. In addition, I will explore how the self construed as a malleable entity is constructed in both texts, and I will trace its development through the use of metadiegesis, recursivity, heteroglossia, and focalization.

In Sobh's novel, I will study the two main characters' constructions of their self-identity through their ability to write their narratives. For the first main character, Mariam, I will trace the perception of her self as a shadow thus showing how "[t]he self ... is not, in a post-Lacanian age, an ontological given, but rather a linguistic construct, a mere inscription in an unconscious psychic discourse" (Parkin-Gounelas, 4). The result of Mariam's self scrutiny is that she constructs her self through writing her memoir. In addition, by focusing on the metadiegetic element in Sobh's novel, I will demonstrate how Mariam understands her sexuality after scrutinizing her sexual experiences as well as those of the people surrounding her. Thus, I will explore how "sexuality is always constructed within the terms of discourse and power" (Butler, 40). The second main character whose construction of self-identity is also a function of narration is Alawiyah. For my exploration of Alawiyah's construction of self, I will take note of her discourse to show why and how she constructs her self through writing her self-identity outside the fictitious world she creates as a writer.

I will explain through the use of heteroglossia, focalization, recursivity and a psychoanalytic study of the element of fairytales in Alameddine's novel that Sarah's effort to write her memoir is her way of constructing a "revisable, provisional, but more or less readable self" (Worthington, 15). Through the use of heteroglossia and focalization, I will demonstrate how Sarah's perception of her self-identity evolves; moreover, a study of the recursive element in the novel will exhibit the constant construction self-identity undergoes. Finally, the psychoanalytic link between

fairytale and Sarah's perception of her family is another recursive element that reflects how Sarah constructs her self-identity until she is finally satisfied. Through this study of heteroglossia, recursivity, and focalization, I will point out how Sarah constructs her self thus revealing this exercise to be dynamic and a condition of introspection and writing.

Self-identity construction in *Mariam al-Hakayah* and *I, the Divine* develops the idea that self-identity is an on-going construction that is not restricted to time and takes place every time a need arises. This ability of the self to continuously construct itself does not reflect fickleness but rather the ability to adapt to situations while retaining an element of the old since self construction always makes use of previous states. Furthermore, writing also proves to be necessary when constructing the self because it is only through writing that the main narrators, Mariam, Alawiyah, and Sarah, succeed in concretizing their constructed self.

Chapter One: The Narrated Self in Alawiyah Sobh's *Mariam al-Hakayah* [Mariam the Tales]

Self-identity is not a given entity that is incapable of changing, but it is a construct, and it is constructed in Alawiyah Sobh's Arabic novel *Mariam al-Hakayah* through storytelling and writing. Patricia Spacks writes: "[T]o tell a story of the self is ... to create a fiction" (311); with these words, Spacks provides the link between the self and storytelling: both are constructed and fictionalized. The self is constructed when the right conditions convene, and a story is constructed when the relevant events are put together; in addition, both constructing the self and constructing a story are a function of fiction because the imagination plays an important role in their creation. The two main characters in this novel, Mariam and Alawiyah, succeed in constructing their respective self only after they participate in an act of writing. Mariam writes her memoir, and Alawiyah writes her self as a writer. The novel, therefore, uses both writing and storytelling when the self is constructed.

Even though *Mariam al-Hakayah* takes place mostly in Beirut, a part of it is set in a village in the south of Lebanon; furthermore, because it spans many years, the novel is a witness to the changes in the country such as the shift from village life to city life and the ravages and effects the Lebanese Civil War has on society. *Mariam al-Hakayah* tells the story of Mariam who is in her early fifties and is leaving Beirut for Canada to marry; she wants to say goodbye to her friend Alawiyah but is unable to find her. The novel spotlights the various events that contribute to Mariam's and Alawiyah's decisions to narrate themselves. Furthermore, through narrating her story, Mariam brings in other characters like Om Talal and Abou Talal, her neighbors, Ibtissam and Karim, her friends, Abbas and Moustafa, her boyfriends, as well as some of her family members like her mother and father, and two of her sisters: Suhaila and

Zeinab. These characters have three functions: to show how they affect Mariam's life; to produce a commentary on the struggles of the Lebanese society's female population in a patriarchal society; and finally to reflect the effects of the Lebanese Civil War on everyone.

Yusra al-Muqadim, a Lebanese critic, says that the novel is "a graffiti that colors life with its dualities and dichotomies in complete unity and polarity" (17)¹. Through the variety of characters and the similarities of events that Mariam relates, I believe that Sobh succeeds in presenting a narrative that relies on the dualities and dichotomies of life. She writes a novel in which self narration reflects the constant tension between what the self is and what the self wants to be which is reinforced through the unbreakable tension in the novel between what happens and what is told as well as between what the characters are and what they believe themselves to be. Finally, the dichotomy of fiction and metafiction reinforces the importance of storytelling in the novel.

Sobh fictionalizes the writing of both autobiographies and biographies in two ways: first, she integrates herself in her own writing by naming one of the main characters after herself and sharing at least one aspect of her own history with that character. Her namesake in the novel, Alawiyah Sobh, has written a book *Nawm al-Ayam* [The Days of Sleep] and published it in 1986 just as Sobh has done. The second way Sobh fictionalizes writing is by presenting two main characters, Mariam and Alawiyah, who are involved in writing narratives in the primary diegesis. Mariam decides to write her autobiography for two reasons: the first reason is that she is unwilling to wait until she finds Alawiyah to discover what has happened to the novel she is writing. The second reason is that she wants to narrate her self. Alawiyah, on the other hand, decides to write a biography of Mariam because she finds it easier

than writing about herself. The novel presents a world that is filled with dichotomies. We get events that are presented in the primary diegesis, and others that are presented in the metadiegesis; we get characters that belong to the world of Mariam, and others that are fictionalized and also belong to the metadiegesis. Therefore, there is a dichotomy between what is presented in Mariam's world and what is presented in Alawiyah's world.

The novel presents a total of thirteen chapters and a mix of voices. With the exception of chapter six and thirteen, these chapters are interchangeable without any loss of coherence since they are not restricted either to time or place. Chapter six, however, conforms to the unities of time and place because it is Mariam's effort at writing her family history. Moreover, it seems to be out of joint because it focuses on just Mariam's family. In addition, since it is Mariam's attempt at writing her own autobiography in the metadiegesis, some of its events are repeated in the primary diegesis where she tells Alawiyah her family history. Finally, the only link chapter six shows with the primary diegesis is Mariam's introduction of Alawiyah's name and a reminder that she has already told Alawiyah the family story. Chapter thirteen, moreover, is not interchangeable because it opens with Mariam announcing that she has found a much changed Alawiyah. This announcement seems to offer a solution that contradicts one aspect of one critic's comment on the narrative's plot: "[The novel] does not follow the traditional trajectory that sets off from a fixed point to reach a climax and then find a solution" (Salman, 13).² Chapter thirteen, furthermore, ends ironically with Alawiyah as the object of Mariam's focalization thus reflecting a complete turnabout with Mariam writing Alawiyah into the primary diegesis instead of Alawiyah doing the writing. In addition to the variety in diegetic structure, Sobh also presents a multi-voiced novel. The novel is narrated by Mariam except for two

chapters. In chapter eight, Ibtissam is the narrator who takes matters into her own hands and tells her story. Then in chapter nine Alawiyah turns the tables on Mariam and questions Mariam's interest in her; moreover, chapter nine exposes the problems Alawiyah has dealing with the fictitious world. Structure in *Mariam al-Hakayah* is very interesting because it reflects yet another aspect of the dualities and dichotomies that abound in the novel.

Sobh's novel presents a diegesis that enfolds within it other metadiegetic narratives. The primary diegesis presents Mariam's search for Alawiyah and Alawiyah's struggle to resume her writing while the plethora of metadiegetic narratives function as foils to the primary narrative by setting off both major characters' problems. Mariam's development is revealed through the use of the metadiegetic narratives that show why she decides to write her own autobiography. Alawiyah, on the other hand, is trapped by these metadiegetic narratives which cause the dichotomy that forces her to write herself out of the metadiegesis, so she can resume writing. Mieke Bal says that when embedded narratives (the term "embedded narratives" is analogous to the term "metadiegetic narratives" that I am using) become more important than the main fabula (the term "fabula" is analogous to the term "diegesis" that I am using): "[t]he primary fabula [will] hardly [be] more than the occasion for a perceptible, character-bound narrator to narrate a story" (54), and she adds:

The function of the embedded fabula is then no longer merely explanatory. The exposition influences the primary fabula. Consequently the structure of the narrative levels becomes more than a mere story-telling device; it is part of the narrative's poetics, and needs to be understood for the narrative to be fully appreciated. (54)

Another function of metadiegetic narratives is that they function as “a latent source of unity and closure, ... [and they also have] the potential to produce fragmentation and open-endedness” (Nelles, 149). The metadiegetic narratives in *Mariam al-Hakayah* are “a latent source of unity” because they provide the link between Mariam and Alawiyah, and they are the reasons that stop Alawiyah from writing. These metadiegetic narratives also contribute to the novel’s fragmentation because they don’t contribute to developing a plot. They are spot events whose purpose is to provide clues for Mariam’s development and problems for Alawiyah to overcome. Finally, these metadiegetic narratives contribute to the “open endedness” of the novel since their function is not to develop the plot but to develop the two main characters Mariam and Alawiyah within the primary diegesis.

Constructing the self in this chapter is the result of writing: Mariam, the first main character, constructs her self-identity by writing her own story instead of relying on Alawiyah to write it while Alawiyah constructs her self-identity by dissociating herself from the narrative she is writing about Mariam. By focusing on the metadiegetic narratives and showing how shadow is used as a motif and sexuality and storytelling are used as themes, I will trace the conditions that prepare the ground for Mariam’s success at constructing her self-identity. Both shadow and sexuality in the metadiegetic narratives cause Mariam’s awareness in the primary diegesis that she is objectified; believing she is a shadow cancels her ability to initiate any actions whereas her perception of her passive sexuality takes away her ability to be an active participant in her sexual relationship with Moustafa. Then, I will focus on how writing contributes to Alawiyah’s loss of her self-identity as a writer and how this condition also lays the ground for her ability to successfully reconstruct her self-identity as a writer. Through the theme of storytelling in the metadiegetic narratives, I

will demonstrate how Alawiyah realizes in the primary diegesis that because she lives in a fictitious world of her own creation, she is unable to write; as a result, she decides to dissociate herself from that world in order to be able to write Mariam's story.

Finally, I will make two conclusions. The first conclusion is that narrating one's self is what leads to self-construction because as Worthington writes: "[Narrating oneself] anticipate[s] coherence and closure or, at the very least, followability" (15). The act of self narration will, therefore, provide Mariam with a better understanding of herself.

Mariam al-Hakayah, furthermore, reflects how, for Mariam and Alawiyah, the act of narration grounds the self which Anthony Kerby defines as "the distinct individual that we usually take ourselves to be, an individual, therefore, that also knows itself to be" (4). The second conclusion is that through the dichotomy of fiction and metafiction in the primary diegesis, the novel reflects how fiction is a part of both everyday life and narration; furthermore, the novel indicates the importance of allowing both to cohabit rather than collapse into each other.

Kerby writes that the self is an entity that an individual takes herself/ himself to be (4); in addition, the self is "created by the use of a vocabulary" (Rorty, 7). Therefore, for Mariam to construct her self so as to be her own subject, she has to believe she is an individual, and she has to use the appropriate vocabulary to reflect who she is. In this chapter, I will show how the language Mariam uses reflects the individual she believes herself to be by showing how the shadow motif helps Mariam conceptualize herself. As Mariam searches for Alawiyah, she begins a journey of self discovery and realizes that she is objectified and dehumanized; this realization causes her to work on what would lead to subjectifying and humanizing herself.

Through the shadow motif, Mariam realizes that she functions as an object. The word "shadow" *al-zil* in Arabic, in *Al-Munjid al-Wasit*, has different connotations

which are used in the novel. One of its connotations is the shape that appears when an object intercepts the rays of light. Some time after Ibtissam's marriage, Mariam decides to visit her one Sunday; instead of spending the time talking to each other, Ibtissam spends the whole time talking on the phone. Through the language she uses, Mariam objectifies herself and Ibtissam by using the words "shadow" and "light" when she says: "I was only the remainder of a shadow that is separating from its light" (274).³ The relationship between light and shadow parallels the relationship between Ibtissam and Mariam with the former representing "light" while the latter representing "shadow." Mariam's statement indicates her realization that Ibtissam no longer needs her and decides to eliminate Mariam from her life; as a result, Ibtissam will not even allow Mariam to be her shadow. Therefore, Mariam both dehumanizes and degrades herself by saying she is a "shadow" which is an object that lacks definition while she gives Ibtissam power because she is the "light" that gives definition; as a result, even though Ibtissam is objectified, she has more power while Mariam lacks it. This, then, indicates how her awareness of her self as an object constitutes a condition that will later contribute to Mariam's self-construction.

Mariam's conception of self through language is perceived by developing the shadow motif, first as an object that intercepts the rays of light then as a reflected image. As a reflected image, the word "shadow" which Alawiyah uses when she refers to Mariam allows Alawiyah to dehumanize Mariam, then to fragment her, and finally, to make her an extension to herself. Alawiyah dehumanizes Mariam when she decides to write Mariam's story because to her Mariam is "the shadow, the shadow of all the novel's heroes and the shadow of my [Alawiyah's] memory and the heroes' memories" (10).⁴ Since Mariam is the shadow of Alawiyah's memories, then those memories are as lacking in specific details as a shadow lacks the specific details

of its object; furthermore, Alawiyah succeeds in denying Mariam of even a rough texture, so Mariam becomes a bland shapeless dehumanized reflection. Finally, this use of “shadow” results in constructing Mariam as an object that moves because someone else or something else has moved her; moreover, since she is constructed as an object, she is incapable of making decisions.

Alawiyah succeeds in dehumanizing Mariam by making her first her shadow and then fragmenting her. Mariam recognizes that Alawiyah fragments her into organs that have specific functions:

Alawiyah changed me to a mouth that speaks for her and ears that listen for her; she made me steal their [Mariam’s friends and neighbors] tales and stories; she made me give her the stories as gifts. (11)⁵

With these words, Mariam acknowledges that Alawiyah does not even perceive her as a whole person, for to Alawiyah, Mariam is only someone who functions on her behalf since Mariam wants to write about Alawiyah and her friends. Therefore, she makes Mariam her extension when she dictates what Mariam will say and hear. Finally, Mariam realizes that agreeing to have Alawiyah write about her is akin to letting Alawiyah dehumanize, fragment, and control her. This acknowledgement is another condition that results in Mariam reconstructing her self-identity to reflect her changed awareness of her self.

Worthington believes that the words a person uses are important because “only through language and acts of (linguistic) interpretation do we arrive at a conception of who we are” (25). Worthington’s statement about the way the self is conceived becomes very important when Mariam refers to herself as a “shadow.” She says, “Even when I see my shadow in the dark – and I only see it in the dark – I ask, ‘Where is Alawiyah to see my shadow with me?’” (11).⁶ This identification of herself

as a shadow reinforces the identification that the other characters have made about her. Through her words, she denies herself any existence whatsoever since a shadow appears where there is light not where there is darkness; moreover, since Mariam admits that she is Alawiyah's extended shadow, Mariam's "shadow" is not to be hidden even from Alawiyah. Finally, this perception of herself as a shadow becomes one of the conditions that contribute to placing Mariam on the path that will lead her to constructing her self through narrating her life in chapter six.

Becoming aware of her objectification, Mariam begins the gradual transition into subjectivity by constructing her self. This transition begins through the same motif that shows her objectification: "shadow." She says that because she is able to see Abbas with new eyes "fire runs through my veins and I am able to escape from my cold lonely shadow" (31).⁷ Therefore, because of her awareness of her relationship with Abbas, she is able to escape her "shadow," her inseparable companion; this awareness is the first condition to self construction and the first step Mariam takes towards changing her perceptions of her self. She picks up this momentum of change when she asks Abbas how he is after the night of shelling the city has experienced. This personal question then snowballs into a discussion about dreams and hopes which continues to snowball until she tells him out of the blue: "I have a longing to love!" (33).⁸ Her declaration is important on two counts. First, her statement shows that she is not going to allow the ongoing Civil War to kill her figuratively; as a result, she initiates the sexual act by showing she is a willing participant. Second, this comment reflects the result of her changed perception of her self when she says that her ability to perceive Abbas differently and her resulting actions make her feel "a different Mariam" (34).⁹ Therefore, by retelling this sexual encounter, Mariam realizes that she has succeeded in constructing her self; she is no

longer a reflection of an other because she can make decisions and succeed in following them through; she feels that she is not just a body that is controlled by others, but a person who has autonomy. This sense of autonomy indicates Mariam's self development. This awareness of her newly constructed self is what makes her feel she is "not a shadow" but "a woman" when she says: "Then my world changes and fills up with warm secrets that make me feel I am a woman and not a shadow for the shell that is my body" (35).¹⁰ This declaration reinforces Mariam's change from a shadow to a self that is aware of its presence.

Mariam continues to make the transition into subjectivity thereby displaying her changed perception of her self when she decides that she no longer wishes to be Alawiyah's shadow: "I understand that my shadow has been choking from its isolation and from being a shadow" (417).¹¹ Her statement indicates her rejection of a self that lacks substance which is a necessary condition to the self construction she is undergoing. Then, she takes matters into her own hands and starts making decisions thereby asserting her self as a subject in command of herself. This is further reinforced when she rejects Alawiyah's efforts to transform her into the object of her novel. Moreover, her decision to narrate her own story results in two consequences. The first consequence is constructing her self, and the second is understanding that self. By narrating her own tale, Mariam acquires autonomy and subjectivity because "it is from this story [the narrative or life story the self constructs for itself] that a sense of self is generated" (Kerby, 6); this concrete construction of her self becomes clear when Mariam, in chapter six, takes matters into her own hands and begins her own narrative with the words: "I am Mariam" (111).¹² Furthermore, this exercise in narration helps Mariam understand who she is and where she wants to be which enables her to plan for her future. Therefore, she solidifies her construction of her self

by narrating that self through writing her autobiography, and she becomes aware of her self by becoming as Kerby writes conscious of the narratives that she lives with and in (6) which is what leads to the second consequence of Mariam's decision to write her own tale. Finally, by writing her story, she is able to understand her past; she accepts her present; and she anticipates what her future might bring her.

Two elements help Mariam construct her self: "shadow" as a motif and sexuality. I have already shown how "shadow" is a condition that provides the grounds for Mariam's success at constructing her self-identity. Now, I will take the theme of sexuality and show how it helps Mariam construct her self-identity. Through the sexual experiences of the characters she comes into contact with, as well as her own experiences, Mariam reaches an understanding of herself that culminates in agreeing to marry Amin twenty-five years after he first proposes.

Mariam rejects the self that is subjected by sex when she tells the story of Om Talal and Abou Talal who function as a foil in the metadiegesis. After Abou Talal marries Om Talal, he uses his physical force to rape her, and so "for long years she trembled in fear and stood her ground like a frightened rabbit every time he came into the house and gave her 'the look'" (361).¹³ When he is young, he brags about his sexual ability and beats her; however, when Abou Talal is old and infirm Lacan's "power of the Phallus" (Butler, 56) shifts hands from him to Om Talal who abuses and mistreats him by rejecting him physically and even making fun of his sexual advances. With this shift in power, she has no problem in telling all that visit her of his impotency, and she even beats him. From both Om Talal and Abou Talal, Mariam learns that sex can subjugate a female and that this subjugation and power can change sides with age.

If from Om Talal, Mariam learns sexual activity only subjugates a female, she learns from her own sexual experience with Moustafa that sex also dehumanizes. When Mariam is in her mid twenties, she has her first sexual experience with Moustafa. From him she learns that, for a female, sex is shameful and leads to objectification while, for a male, the sexual act functions as a reaffirmation for his potency and an enhancement for his self esteem. Moustafa's lovemaking transforms Mariam into a lifeless object that is useful only because it sustains and nourishes his body. Mariam says:

Moustafa was responsible for making me a stranger to my body as he took off my clothes until my body became a piece of meat ... once more my body disappeared, and he continued to eat it as a dog eats his food. (56-57)¹⁴

The sexual act, as reflected through this passage, gives Mariam object qualities and Moustafa animal characteristics; she becomes a "piece of meat" that can be cut up and sold and that does not have any distinctive features except that it can sustain; furthermore, when Moustafa makes Mariam "a piece of meat," he also makes her available to anybody who can pay the price; thus, she loses her ability to select with whom she would like to have a sexual relationship. Moustafa, on the other hand, becomes "a dog" that lacks the finer feelings of a human being and is interested in satisfying his own primordial need for sex only. Finally, the sexual act becomes a meal that only Moustafa enjoys.

The theme of sexuality continues to be a condition that leads Mariam to her self construction, but this time, she falls back on her friends' first experience with love and sex. From Ibtissam and Karim, Mariam learns that love can function differently for females and males. Ibtissam loves Karim and is not afraid to show him her love. She uses songs: "Hey, handsome, I am afraid to lose you" and "See how big

the sea is, my love for you is as big as the sea” (86)¹⁵ to tell him of her love. The songs Ibtissam chooses show that even though she is not very sure of Karim, she is willing to take the risk and voice her love for him. Furthermore, she is not afraid to tell him that she loves him in public for all to hear. Karim, however, takes her declarations lightheartedly and assumes she is just crazy. Moreover, he does not verbalize his feelings for her, and the only time he voices his love first is when he tells her: “I love you, but I can’t marry you; we have to leave each other” (95).¹⁶ Therefore, to him, expressing his love is possible only when it is not productive; it serves to soften the blow of rejection. Mariam learns that the word “love” is used as a means to an end. This knowledge becomes another condition that affects her self construction and is apparent when she accepts Amin’s proposal twenty-five years later.

In *Mariam al-Hakayah*, Mariam comes to the understanding that both love and sex function differently for females and males. This knowledge is another element that provides the suitable conditions which result in her self-construction. She learns from Karim and Ibtissam that if, for the male, sex reaffirms the male’s potency and enhances his self esteem, for the female, sex has liberating qualities. Karim unlike Moustafa voices the sense of supremacy he feels after the sexual act; he tells Ibtissam that having a woman empowers him; Ibtissam, however, is not offended by his words; she tells him: “Oh, it does not matter; I am not upset if you feel when you are above me that you are controlling me” (94).¹⁷ The key factor here is that her sexual encounter with him mellows her, so she is not offended by his words. She feels so secure in her love for him that she interprets his words to mean that she pleases him and not that he has control over her as a woman. Furthermore, her love for him frees her from any inhibitions, so she yells her love from the car; however, his response is:

“You are embarrassing me; lower your voice” (94).¹⁸ This exchange suggests that love frees Ibtissam and allows her to break the restrictions of her society, yet this lack of inhibition on her part displeases Karim who tries to restrict her to expressing herself in private only. To Karim, love is just a word that enables him to have sex with a woman; to Ibtissam, on the other hand, love is a word that frees her and enables her to break all the societal taboos. Mariam learns that the sexual act which is accompanied by love continues to function as a reaffirmation of self for the male, but for the female such an act liberates.

The final example that shows how the theme of sexuality reflects how Mariam constructs her self is her decision to marry Amin twenty-five years after refusing him. Her decision to marry him even though “the calmness of Amin is the calm of a small shallow lake that is constant in its lack of change since it cannot aspire to move beyond its limited shores” (318)¹⁹ reflects all the lessons she has learned about sexuality which condition her self construction. She settles for Amin after they have both grown old because, as she learns from Om Talal, he is now incapable of threatening her with his sexual power. She seeks a “shallow lake” because she has experienced depth with Abbas and finds out that a deep and meaningful relationship is not possible. Finally, she chooses Amin even though she does not love him because she learns from Ibtissam that love does not always lead to a happy ending. Thus, the motif of shadow and the theme of sexuality are the suitable conditions that result in Mariam constructing her self as a woman capable of making decisions.

I have shown how for Mariam constructing the self is accomplished through writing. Furthermore, the conditions that lead Mariam into constructing her self through writing her own story are the two elements, “shadow” and “sexuality.” Now, through the third element, I will show how fictionalization is not restricted to writing

but overflows into oral accounts; furthermore, just as self-construction can result from writing narratives, it can also result from oral narratives. Through the metadiegetic narratives, the theme of storytelling in the metadiegetic narratives reflects the dichotomy between fiction and metafiction in the diegesis and metadiegesis in two ways and results in self-construction. First, the narratives show how and why the characters feel the need to fictionalize their situation. Second, they show why Alawiyah has to construct her self-identity as a writer. The need to fictionalize reality is summed up by Mariam who theorizes that events are reworked when they are retold to suit the storyteller: “Did my mother create stories so she would believe them?” (30)²⁰ Therefore, just as events are fictionalized in order to make life palatable and survivable for the people in Mariam’s life, the reverse is also true for Alawiyah who needs to fictionalize her own role in order to continue realizing the fiction she creates. The end result of this act of fictionalization is similar to the result of writing a memoir; both contribute to the construction of self.

A close look at the theme of storytelling in the metadiegetic narratives will show why Suhaila Mariam’s sister fictionalizes her life in order to construct a self that is more acceptable to her. Whenever Suhaila watches a romantic movie and sees the difficulties the lovers have to overcome before their relationship culminates in marriage, she tells her children: “This is exactly what happened to me and your father; you cannot believe what we suffered before we could marry” (139).²¹ However, the reality of her life in the metadiegesis is that she never has the opportunity to have a relationship with her husband before they get married because she sees him for the first time fifteen days before the wedding day. Furthermore, Suhaila’s mother makes sure Suhaila never has the opportunity to speak to her future husband; as a result, she never has the opportunity to be alone with him. Therefore, through recreating who she

and her husband are, Suhaila constructs two different self-identities. She shows that her creation of a romantic version of her marriage is necessary, so she can continue to bear the boring and uninteresting relationship she has with a husband who verbally abuses her by saying she is “an animal a donkey” (139)²².

Another event which reflects how the self is reconstructed through fictionalization is seen in the following example. Fatmah, Mariam’s mother, is running after her daughter Zeinab to punish her for not paying attention to the task which she entrusts her with. The result is that Zeinab gets injured. This event results in being fictionalized twice. The first fictionalization takes place when Zeinab rejects her mother and tells her:

No, you are not my mother. My mother is there far away. And my brothers and sisters are there; I want to go to them; they are waiting for me.
(29)²³

Zeinab’s response shows that she cannot believe that her mother is instrumental in injuring her, so, to escape this fact, she proclaims that the woman professing to be her mother is an imposter; moreover, since her brother’s interference is what causes the conflict between her mother and herself, she also rejects him when she says that her brothers and sisters are elsewhere. The second attempt at fictionalizing the event is perceived when the mother recounts the events that lead to Zeinab’s injury; she says:

This is the truth, as you can see me and I can see you. I knew that the spirit was the one who was pushed and who hit her head on the edge of the well, so she pushed my daughter and injured her head, in the name of God.
(29)²⁴

The mother’s story shows that she is unable to take responsibility for hurting her daughter, so to assure herself, her daughter, and the other listeners that she is not to

blame for her daughter's injury, she puts the blame on an evil spirit. What stands out in all this is that no one voices another possible explanation for the event: Zeinab's injury is simply an accident. No one pushes Zeinab, but because she is running and is not paying attention to what is in front of her, she trips on the well's cover and falls down. Both Zeinab and the mother fall back on their interpretation of the event rather than the event itself simply because it makes the event more dramatic. Finally, the act of fictionalization in this event is used to construct self-identities that are not unexciting.

The need for make believe is summed up in Abbas and Mariam's sexual relationship. Abbas and Mariam undress and name their private parts; this activity is necessary, so they can show each other that they are not afraid to speak their private thoughts; through these actions, they reveal that they are not afraid to challenge the fraudulent daily requirements of social acceptance. However, this practice backfires because Abbas begins to fear Mariam; the situation proves to be too acidic for him:

He started to be silent with me and became afraid of what he said and what he named and what he discovered. I stopped wanting to meet him because I did not want to face his fear and be nakedly silent when confronted by such great fear. (323)²⁵

The result is that Mariam begins to pander to his fear by not meeting his eyes and behaving as if she believes him when he tells her about "his powers in the office ... and his wife's obedience" (322)²⁶. Mariam discovers that "when love is divested of the layers of lies, then the lovers can no longer reach the point of perfect harmony and closeness" (84).²⁷ As a result, make-believe is necessary in constructing the self because, through fictionalization, self-construction can be molded in such a way as to represent the self that the character wishes to have. Finally, the element of storytelling

in the metadiegesis shows that the people in Mariam's life as well as Mariam herself find it necessary to fictionalize their lives because their life is either unacceptable to them, too boring, or too harsh.

So far, I have shown how and why the characters in the metadiegesis need to fictionalize their lives. The next section develops three main points: first, I will show what Alawiyah's problem is, then why she needs to reconstruct her self-identity as a writer, and finally how she does it. First, Alawiyah's problem stems from her inability to differentiate her self-identity as a writer from the fictionalized characters she creates; in fact, for her, the two have merged into each other in such a way that the line that delineates each has disappeared. What happens to Alawiyah is similar to Ibtissam's perception of Mariam. Ibtissam's mother asks Ibtissam if Mariam is beautiful; Ibtissam's response is that Mariam is very beautiful; however, this opinion is countered by her mother's: "Can't you see that she has bowed legs and her teeth are protruding?" (51)²⁸ The mother's response depicts the dichotomy between what is real and what the character interprets as real. To Ibtissam, Mariam is beautiful because she is able to see beyond her physical appearance. Ibtissam does not see the Mariam who has bowed legs or protruding teeth; she sees the Mariam who is understanding, supportive, and caring; she sees and values Mariam's inner qualities rather than her appearance. This event shows that Ibtissam ceases to see the Mariam that everyone sees, so, to her, Mariam is "as beautiful as the moon" (51).²⁹ Perceiving Mariam as beautiful is Ibtissam's way of fictionalizing reality; this modification of reality can pass without consequences for Ibtissam because it does not affect the way she lives her life. For Alawiyah, however, such modification of reality has dire ramifications; when she incorporates the experiences of the characters she creates into her own personal experiences, Alawiyah stops functioning as a writer.

Alawiyah's problem is that the fictionalized events she has her characters experience have now become hers. An example of this aberration is when she believes she has experiences similar to Ibtissam's. She believes she has gone out with a man who "laughed just as Karim did when he discovered that Ibtissam was a virgin" (308),³⁰ and she also believes that she is rejected by a man who tells her like Karim tells Ibtissam: "I love you, I love you, I loved you, but I can't marry someone from a different sect" (308).³¹ This aberration is not restricted to her characters' experiences, for she realizes that the fictionalized world she has created in her fiction has taken her over to such an extent that even her features have begun to take on the appearance of the characters she has created: "I can't see my face in the mirror. Sometimes I see Ibtissam's face, and at other times I see Mariam's" (302).³² These instances show that like a chameleon changes colors to blend with the environment it finds itself in, Alawiyah has taken on the characteristics of the characters she creates; furthermore, the line that separates her from what she fictionalizes has collapsed, and the world of fiction has overtaken her. The result is that she has become her novel: disjointed and fragmented.

Once she realizes that her life and the world of fiction she produces have merged into each other, she tells Mariam:

No, I won't be able to write or fill any paper and discover if I am still alive until I dispose of all the empty spaces in myself, but how can I empty them, Mariam, if I don't understand them? (406)³³

Her statement shows that she realizes she has to reconstruct her self-identity by removing all aspects of fictionality from her life because what she writes is what makes her believe she has experiences like Ibtissam's. Therefore, the "empty spaces" she tells Mariam of represent her lack of any personal experiences which she has

filled by assimilating the experiences of the characters she writes about. As a result, she decides that she will not “write or fill any paper” because she realizes her existence is in danger of becoming totally absorbed by the fictitious world. Finally, she realizes she is unable to put what she hears in some sort of coherence in a novel because she has been compromised by the material. She has become as disjointed and fragmented as the stories she has heard. Therefore, in order for Alawiyah to regain her identity, be independent of the characters she creates, and write the tales into a novel, she has to organize herself and write herself as a self that is separate from the characters she is dealing with. She has to be able to cohabit with the fictitious world she creates.

Constructing her self-identity by dissociating herself from her fiction proves to be very difficult for Alawiyah because as Mariam explains, Alawiyah only experiences life through writing:

I am sure she lives life and discovers life through writing. If she doesn't write “air” she does not breathe. If she does not write “flower” she does not remember that there are flowers in life. (283)³⁴

Since Alawiyah's world is that of fiction, it is the only world that she knows and understands. Furthermore, only through writing does her world reflect definition and specificity because the art of fictionalization allows her to have experiences that she normally would not have. Finally, writing just like breathing happens for Alawiyah without conscious thought. Therefore, when she tells Mariam that she will not write until she “dispose[s] of all the empty spaces” (406) in herself she is not rejecting life as Mariam thinks; she is simply holding her breath and taking a break from writing in order to find the means to construct her self once more as a writer.

In this last section, Alawiyah begins to separate her self from the fiction she creates, so she can ground her self in the reality of her life as a writer. Since Alawiyah constructs her self through the language she uses, her solution is to reject the characters and deny them any existence: “I don’t know them” (299).³⁵ By denying any knowledge of them, she asserts her independence of them; she also shows that they are not important to her. Alawiyah asks: “Do I write ... to evict them from my head and relieve myself from their heavy presence?” (313)³⁶ With these words she shows that she is back in business; she is going to use her ability to write and write the characters out of her mind to rid herself of their presence. In this way, she uses the tool that has always served her well: writing. This time, she uses her art to recreate her own world that is free of the fictitious characters she writes. As a result, Alawiyah shows that storytelling is an essential element in self-construction. She demonstrates that the fiction she writes has the ability to change who she is; storytelling is what stops her from writing, and storytelling is what helps her construct her self so that she can exhibit her control over the art of storytelling and resume writing. Alawiyah announces her success in constructing a self that is independent of the characters she creates when she states: “I realize that I am in my room, and I am me; and then I become totally aware that I am me even though my world has changed” (312).³⁷ With these words, she shows how interconnected she is to her art which has become her “world”; in addition, she also shows that she has become the mistress of her art because she has succeeded in wielding her ability to write as she wants. Finally, with these words, Alawiyah’s success in reconstructing her self as a writer reinforces the link between fictionalizing reality and writing. Without these two elements, Alawiyah would not have been able to reaffirm her self as a writer.

Bakhtin writes: “The novel as a whole is an utterance just as rejoinders in everyday dialogue or private letters are” (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 62). The “utterance” Bakhtin speaks of is not the verbal rejoinder people make when talking to each other; it is rather the output a reader makes after reading a novel. I believe that the “utterance” a reader makes of Sobh’s novel *Mariam al-Hakayah* is that fiction is a necessary element in life. The novel reveals how storytelling/ narration and writing lead to self-construction. Mariam succeeds in constructing her self-identity through the stories she tells about her family, friends, and neighbors. Furthermore, she concretizes the construction of her self-identity when she writes her autobiography because, through this exercise, she is able to reaffirm the self she has constructed. In addition, Alawiyah succeeds in reconstructing her self-identity as a writer by creating her self through her writing. With both main characters, Sobh shows that fiction is what enables people to construct the self that suits them. Finally, by choosing to have Mariam write her autobiography and Alawiyah write Mariam’s biography, Sobh reinforces the importance of narration in creating the self which Ruth Robbins sums up when she says: “The *making* of the self, the *construction* of an identity, ..., takes place in language, and there is therefore a close relationship between thinking and being” (3).

Chapter Two: Recursive Self in Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine*

Like *Mariam al-Hakayah*, Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine*, which is written in English, presents a main protagonist who uses writing to construct her self-identity. Unlike the self-construction in *Mariam al-Hakayah* which is the result of language, storytelling, and writing, self-construction in *I, the Divine* is accomplished through recursivity, the act of repeating events but with a difference, shifts in focalization, and the resulting heteroglossia. Again, unlike *Mariam al Hakayah* which is the story of Mariam's search for Alawiyah that results in the self-construction of both Mariam and Alawiyah, *I, the Divine* is the story of Sarah Nour el-Din's journey of self discovery through writing her memoir. Just like Mariam's journey, Sarah's journey of self-construction is anything but straightforward; it is a journey filled with returns to particular junctures in her life. Furthermore, her effort to write her memoir is like a novice trying to weave a rug that has a difficult pattern. The novice weaves the pattern only to unravel it and weave it again in a never ending cycle of repetition until she finally gets it right. In this chapter, I will show how Sarah's weaving is accomplished through the recursivity of events, people, motifs, paintings, and the structure of her memoir. Furthermore, this recursivity, the resulting use of different focalizers, and the ensuing heteroglossia are used effectively to produce the sense of continuous development a self undergoes. Finally, *I, the Divine* depicts a self that is constantly being unraveled only to be woven again, and with each new attempt at being rewoven, new elements appear that encompass the old resulting in a self that has a limitless ability to grow, change, and develop.

I, the Divine takes place in both Lebanon and the United States. It is about Sarah Nour el-Din, a Lebanese woman, who lives in the United States and attempts to

write her memoir. The story extends from the end of the nineteen fifties to the beginning of the millennium and touches upon the ravages of the Lebanese Civil War on Sarah and her family. Sarah, the main protagonist, grows up in Lebanon with her Lebanese father Moustapha and his Lebanese second wife Saniya. She is separated from her American mother Janet who goes back to the United States after Moustapha divorces her. Sarah, who is named by her grandfather Hammoud after the actress Sarah Bernhardt, has two sisters Amal and Lamia, two half-sisters Rana and Majida, and one half-brother Ramzi. In her memoir, Sarah spotlights the important people and junctures in her life. She introduces her first boyfriend Fadi and her longstanding best friend Dina, writes of her two marriages and subsequent divorces from Omar, a Lebanese, and Joe, an American, and exposes her long distance relationship with her son Kamal. Finally, Sarah writes about her affair with another American, David, whom she is unable to forget. The novel ends with Sarah realizing why she cannot go past the first chapter in writing her memoir.

The structure of Alameddine's *I, the Divine* does not conform to the unity of time even though his main protagonist Sarah begins her collection of first chapters by writing about how she gets her name. Furthermore, the novel does not progress along a classical plot line, so there is no stated conflict that develops until it reaches its climax and is resolved. What Alameddine does with the plot is have Sarah ramble seemingly aimlessly about her life through the consecutive first chapters. Then, in the last chapter, he identifies both the problem and its solution thereby presenting an unorthodox plot line. He continues his innovative novel construction by separating the forty-five first chapters through inserting five title pages instead of book parts.

In the first part of this chapter, I will focus on how Sarah remembers the important pivotal points in her life and reflects upon them. With these turning points,

she weaves the pattern of her life and through recursivity, focalization, and heteroglossia points at the changes she experiences in perception as she matures. The important junctures in her life such as how she gets her name, the childish pranks she plays, her fairytale perception of her family, her first day in a mixed school, and finally “January 19, 1995,” comprise the continuous stops and returns she makes on her journey of self discovery which she undertakes when she decides to write her memoir and which finally leads to self-construction.

The first stop she makes on her path of self reflection which ultimately leads to self construction is how she gets her name. Recursivity in how she is named liberates Sarah from her unacknowledged feelings of guilt at the role her birth plays in her parents’ divorce. She repeats four times almost word for word the information: “My grandfather named me for the great Sarah Bernhardt” (3, 59, 77, 277). This repetition bespeaks the importance Sarah ascribes her grandfather’s role in naming her. The absence of her name in the section entitled “Around an Empty Grave: A Novel” is significant because it breaks the cycle of mechanical repetition. Furthermore, this interrupted repetition lays the ground for Sarah adding in the last version of this episode that her birth gives her grandfather the grounds to convince Moustapha that he should divorce Janet. This added information changes the mechanical aspect of the repetition into recursivity and indicates Sarah’s ability to voice her feelings of suppressed guilt at the role she unknowingly plays in the divorce. This verbalization allows her to break away from her need to repeat this information and shows she has finally assimilated the role her grandfather plays in the divorce. Repeating how she gets her name helps Sarah put her grandfather in perspective and provides her with the opportunity to construct her self-identity that is free of groundless feelings of guilt.

The lavender prank is the second episode Sarah repeats and which results in self-construction. As a child, Sarah takes the lavender sachets that Saniya uses to perfume the linen and puts them in the cat's litter box. Then, she puts the sachets back in the linen closet. The first time the episode is told, it is focalized by the Sarah writing the memoir who tells us that her father beats her "with the belt of course, in the bathroom" (35). When she identifies the instrument of punishment, she shows that she still remembers the pain it inflicts. The second time the episode is repeated, the event is focalized by the young Sarah who adds other details such as that Lamia is responsible for her punishment because she tells the father: "Sarah did. I saw her do it" (125). In addition, the young Sarah's description of her punishment is more specific: "He took off his belt and whipped me so hard the welts lasted for two weeks" (125). Recursivity here shows that even though the adult Sarah writing the memoir understands in hindsight that she deserves her punishment, she cannot forget either the physical pain or the sense of betrayal she feels as the young Sarah because her sister points the finger at her. Finally, recursivity in this event indicates that even though perceptions might change, remembered emotions are constant; in addition, the lavender event indicates the self's ability to interweave the old with the new thereby changing self perceptions.

The third turning point Sarah stops at and keeps repeating is how her life is similar to fairytales. A psychoanalytic study of fairytales like *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Sleeping Beauty* can provide insight as to why she misbehaves with Saniya; furthermore, these fairytales can also explain her relationship with her father, her relationship with Janet, and finally her awareness of her self. Therefore, drawing parallels between her life and events in fairytales through recursivity offers a rationale

for Sarah's behavior as a child and an adult and points at the changes she undergoes as she reflects upon her past and constructs her self identity.

Drawing parallels between her life and *Cinderella* sheds light on why, as a child, Sarah treats Saniya as she does. Sarah states in two chapters almost word for word that her childhood appears to be a fairytale. The first chapter is in English and has the title "Chapter One—The Beginning" while the second chapter is in French and has the title "PREMIER CHAPITRE: Le commencement." This repetition results in minimizing the relevance of Sarah's words and serves to show that Sarah, the child, sees Saniya as the evil one. The two chapters tell that Sarah perceives her childhood as a fairytale because she sees Saniya as the evil witch who is intent on turning her father against her and convincing him that Sarah is wicked. This perception echoes events in *Cinderella* where the witch/ stepmother is blamed for the father's altered behavior. Moreover, this image of Saniya as the witch/ stepmother is developed when she demands from Sarah, who perceives herself as a princess, *menial tasks* (my italics) such as: to get her a glass of water, her slippers, and her face cream (34). The similar accounts in the English and French chapters reinforce the childish perceptions of the young Sarah; on the other hand, the differences in language medium reflect the voice of the Sarah writing her memoir and indicate that understanding is a skill that needs to be worked on; it is not a state that is easily accessible. The recursiveness of *Cinderella* connotations explains the young Sarah's rejection of Saniya simply because she is the witch/ stepmother.

A study of Bruno Bettelheim's analysis of *Cinderella* reflects oedipal conflicts. He explains how in some *Cinderella* stories "a father rejects his daughter because she does not love him sufficiently" (247). When Sarah says that she is her father's "Cordelia," she is alluding to the king in Shakespeare's *King Lear* who expels

his daughter because she does not tell him how much she loves him. This pairing Moustapha/ King Lear and Sarah/ Cordelia is reinforced when in a later chapter the father calls the adult Sarah “My Princess” (267). According to Bettelheim, “[A] daughter flees from her father because of his sexual desires for her” (247); thus, Sarah’s unresolved oedipal feelings for her father result in her continued *exile* (my italics) as indicated by her residency in the United States. As a result, the parallels Sarah makes regarding herself, Cinderella, and Cordelia, on one hand, and her father, Cinderella’s father, and King Lear, on the other hand, explain her ambivalent relationship with her father.

Another event that is associated with fairytales and bespeaks of Sarah’s changed perceptions is the event in which Ramzi tells her that David is a homosexual. Sarah’s reaction is to sink her head in the hot tub and say: “I’m awake now” (250); her action is symbolic and works on several levels. On the literal level, she means that the shocking news has worn off the effects of the sleeping pills. On another deeper level, her words indicate that she is ready to take responsibility of herself because even though her brother and not a prince is instrumental in *waking her up* (my italics), her words allude to one characteristic of *Sleeping Beauty* which is “the long, quiet concentration on oneself that is [needed]” (Bettelheim, 225). Finally, this self reflection throughout the novel contributes to the self-construction that Sarah needs to undergo in order to successfully write her memoir.

Sarah continues to weave the pattern of her life by focusing on her relationship with her mother which also resonates with Snow White’s relationship with the Queen on several levels. First, Sarah modifies the evil Queen’s words in *Snow White* to “Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall, I am My Mother After All” (138). This change emphasizes the similarity between Sarah and her mother Janet in physical looks as

well as in behavior; moreover, this connection to the fairytale is reinforced when, in a later chapter, the words spoken by the Queen in *Snow White* are heard by Janet, and she responds to herself that she is the fairest just as the Queen does in the fairytale; in addition, this affirmative response is also echoed by Sarah, the child, when the father asks his three daughters the same question: “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?” (138). (I will later make another connection between Janet and the Queen in *Snow White*). Finally, the reverberations of fairytale connotations in Sarah’s life are important because they explain her behavior and the decisions she makes.

Moving away from how fairytales color Sarah’s life, I will focus on the fourth juncture she stops at on her journey of self discovery: the repetition of her first day in a mixed school. In this event just as in the lavender event, recursivity, focalization, as well as heteroglossia point out Sarah’s growth. Rimmon-Kenan says: “The overall language of a text is that of the narrator, but focalization can ‘colour’ it in a way which makes it appear as a transposition of the perceptions of a separate agent” (*Narrative Fiction*, 82). Therefore, even though the narrator is Sarah, when the narrated events are seen through the eyes of the adolescent Sarah, they seem to belong to another character. As a result, this change in focalization and the accompanying heteroglossia reinforces the aspect of interweaving that dominates the novel and that is connected to self-construction.

As a start, Sarah repeats the information about her first day in a mixed school in the first part only because even though the event is not problematic to her, it provides important information. She provides three times the information about switching to a mixed school. In the first version, she says that her father is responsible for the change; in the second, she says “I” (5); in the last, she says “my parents” (7).

This difference in terminology reflects three voices. When she uses “my father” (4), the voice that is heard belongs to the young Sarah who has not accepted the presence of another woman beside her father who is not her mother. The second time she repeats the information, she depicts a change in power. She says: “I left those wacky Carmelite nuns and entered an American-bankrolled school where I was the only girl in the whole class” (5). The voice here belongs to the adolescent Sarah who wants to show that she is in control, so *she* (my italics) makes the decision to leave the school and not her father as she first indicates; moreover, her comment regarding the nuns and the school shows how this shift exposes her to new ideas about religion and status. In the third instance, when she says: “[M]y parents” (7), the voice that is heard is the voice of the mature Sarah who has accepted Saniya’s presence in the family and sees the important role she plays in it. Therefore, recursivity here reflects how the variety of focalizers contributes to concretizing the self-construction that Sarah undergoes and which is the result of her self reflection.

Her first day in a mixed school depicts who has power as well as shows her growing awareness of the world around her. In two instances she says: “At the age of thirteen, the age of discovery, I was moved from an all-girl Catholic school to a boys’ school” (4), and the information is almost exact except that in one she says “all-girl” (4) whereas in the other she says “all-girls” (7). When she uses “all-girl,” she reflects the voice of the innocent young Sarah who thinks that girls are all the same; however, when she says “all-girls,” the voice that is heard belongs to the Sarah writing the memoir who is aware that some girls are heterosexual while others are lesbians; her ability to perceive this difference is the result of her friendship with Dina.

Repeating that she changes schools indicates who has power and the variety of changes Sarah’s perceptions yield to; it also resonates with other indications when she

compares the age of thirteen to “the age of discovery” and couples it with the event of changing schools. In history, the Age of Discovery refers to the period of exploration that takes place at the end of the fifteenth century and results in overwhelming change; in Sarah’s life, it is the time when she meets two people who influence her life. She meets Fadi whom she perceives as her twin because like her, he plays pranks and exhibits a rebellious spirit; furthermore, Fadi is important to her because he introduces her to smoking and becomes her first boyfriend. She also meets Dina who becomes her life long best friend and helps her make the transition from a young girl who wears pants to one who wears dresses and puts on make-up. Finally, “1973” is “the age of discovery” because she discovers her sexuality and she begins to have new experiences. Recursivity here reflects her perception of this juncture as a shift in her life that produces overwhelming change in her self-identity just as the Age of Discovery did for the fifteenth century.

The information regarding changing schools also shows Sarah’s rebellious spirit because she repeats Fadi’s first words to her on her first day twice. In the first episode, the focalizer is the Sarah writing the memoir; consequently, she shows him to be a worldly and informed thirteen year old when she repeats his words: “If you’re a lesbian, I know just the right bar for you” (6); furthermore, her response to his words is not included because as an adult she does not need to prove anything to anybody. The same event is retold in the following chapter with a difference: the focalizer shifts to the thirteen year old Sarah. This change in focalization results in a change of emphasis. The adolescent Sarah wants to illustrate her rebellious spirit and her ability to behave just like the boys; as a result, she downplays Fadi and shows him to be curious rather than worldly and informed, so his words become: “Are you a lesbian?” (7); in addition, because she wants to show that she is not shy and cannot be

pushed around, her response: “Your mother’s cunt, you brother of a whore” (7) is included. Finally, by reflecting four times on how her first day of school affects her, Sarah shows that one event can have several effects on a person; moreover, she indicates how each effect points out a different facet of the self.

The last turning point Sarah stops at on her journey of self discovery is the date “January 19, 1995.” Donald Spense writes: “[A] narrative which depends too strongly on rote repetition very quickly loses its explanatory force” (189). “January 19, 1995” is just such an example of rote repetition. It does not need to be explained because its significance lies in the fact that it is both the date of Sarah’s first New York exhibition and her mother’s suicide. Furthermore, as the date of her first New York exhibition, it shows what type of support she has. We find out that Dina her best friend for nineteen years flies from Boston to San Francisco to accompany her to New York while David, her lover, does not. Moreover, her two ex-husbands call her, but David does not; this date, then, shows who truly supports her. Finally, it is significant that Janet chooses to end her life on Sarah’s important day and in the place that functions as a refuge for Sarah, the bathtub. First, the mother’s death reverberates of *Snow White* because in that fairy tale Bettelheim writes: “*Snow White* tells how a parent – the queen – gets destroyed by jealousy of her child who, in growing up, surpasses her” (195). When Janet commits suicide on the day of the exhibition, she shows how she is destroyed by her jealousy because her daughter has succeeded where she has failed. Sarah has succeeded in holding an exhibition after only two years of painting while Janet has “ten of them [paintings] all of them seemed abandoned after a couple of strokes” (263); in addition, Sarah has also been able to move on with her life and have other relationships after her divorce while Janet lives alone and continues to retain “Nour el-Din” as her family name. Finally, Sarah

maintains a successful relationship with her son Kamal while Janet does not attempt to maintain contact with her children after her divorce.

The second important point the date raises is its association with the place where Janet dies. The bathtub where Janet ends her life is a womb just as it is a womb for Sarah as I will later show. When Janet kills herself in the bathtub, she shows her inability to grow properly; she dies in a pool of blood thus implying she is a deformed embryo that the body expels in a stillbirth. Finally, repeating the date indicates Sarah's ability to move on with her life; she breaks the cycle of recursivity with her mother thus showing she can move on; on the other hand, Janet shows that she is unable to grow when she kills herself. Finally, when Sarah decides to write her memoir, she decides to reflect upon her life. This reflection results in Sarah weaving her life into a pattern that repeats itself until she is satisfied with the self it implies.

Self-construction in *I, the Divine* is not only a condition of self reflection; it is also a condition of recursivity where Sarah shows she has the tendency to repeat the behavior of her mother and Sarah Bernhardt but with a difference. First, Sarah notices that she physically looks like her mother because they both have the same eyes, nose and forehead (138); furthermore, to force the issue of similarity between her and Janet, Sarah dyes her hair red because it is "more brown than red" (138). In addition, Sarah's attempt to copy her mother is not restricted to appearance; it overflows into the decisions she makes. For example, Janet moves to Lebanon because she wants "to feel different from the way she did back there [the United States]" (216), and Sarah moves to the United States because she wants "to walk a path unbeaten by others, to touch the untouched" (227). Sarah also follows Janet's example in choosing her first husband, Omar. She says that meeting Omar "was not the same story [as Janet's], but close enough" (50). Finally, her marriage also ends in a divorce just like her mother's.

Thus, Sarah emulates her mother in her physical appearance, in her decisions, her choice of husband, and finally the failure of that marriage.

Janet is not the only woman Sarah imitates. She also repeats Sarah Bernhardt's actions and behavior. To begin with, Sarah "grew up believing [she] was the Divine Sarah" (78); as a result, like Bernhardt she is very mischievous as a child, chooses the wrong men as an adult, and abandons her child as a mother. For example, because she is convinced she is the "Divine Sarah," she covers herself with butter just as her namesake gets covered with butter. In addition, Sarah plays pranks just like Sarah Bernhardt; she throws her stepmother's shoes "down the garbage chute" (34) one shoe at a time and empties "half of her perfume bottle down the toilet" (34) to mention a few of her childish pranks. Sarah's relationships with men also resonate with the Divine Sarah's disastrous relationships. She first chooses Omar who does not want what she wants; he sees New York as a stopover in his life while she sees it as the place she wants to live in. She also chooses Joe who wants children while she is satisfied with having one child only, Kamal. Furthermore, she chooses David who ends their relationship and turns out to be a homosexual. Sarah also allows Omar to take Kamal with him thereby also abandoning her child. Finally, when Sarah decides to be like Janet and Sarah Bernhardt, it is as if she has borrowed what Bakhtin refers to as "an other's word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other's utterance" (*Speech Genres*, 88).

Even though Sarah imitates both Janet and Sarah Bernhardt, she reaches a point where she breaks away from them and begins to act differently. This modification indicates that she is now able to construct her self without following their pattern and reflects her ability to construct her self in a manner that shows she has successfully separated her self from them. As a result, when Sarah decides to

break the cycle of recursivity with Janet and Bernhardt, her actions become *her words* (my italics) because she has “imbued [her words] with [her] expression” (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 88). Sarah first breaks the cycle of recursivity when she admits that she does not want to “end up like Janet” (52). As a result, she marries and divorces again, tries a relationship with another man, and exhibits her paintings. Furthermore, when she continues to have a successful relationship with her son, she shows she has also deviated from following in the footsteps of Sarah Bernhardt.

Sarah’s self construction is incomplete unless she is able to put her rape in proper perspective. However, because the event itself is traumatic she is only able to recall it in bits and pieces. Recursivity, a narratologic tool, both links episodes which are very sketchy and lack details that clarify the point and “captures both the overall pattern of similarity and the lack of mechanical, dehumanizing repetition” (Spense, 192). This tool is optimally used in conjunction with the bath and black dress motifs. Chapter “1---,” for example, has a passage that is sketchy and confusing because the situation that contextualizes this episode is proleptic, and the focalized is an unnamed young woman taking a bath. The woman

[R]emembers trying to get clean. She scrubbed herself with the loofah, over and over, as if there was some dark stain and she Lady Macbeth. Out, damn spot. She was dirty, all of her. She wanted to rub herself raw, remove any traces of herself. She wanted out of her skin. She wanted to be a different person, a better person, her tears adding salt to the bath. She scrubbed her arms, her legs. (82)

This episode is contextualized in the analeptic episode that tells of Sarah’s rape. Through the bath scene’s repetition of the words “she scrubbed” in both chapters (82, 199) and the modification of “remove any traces of herself” (82) to “erase the marks,

the bruises, any trace” (199), the unnamed woman in the former passage is identified as Sarah.

The passage, moreover, reflects two voices: the voice of the sixteen year old Sarah who is traumatized and feels guilty at being raped, and the voice of the present day Sarah who is depressed and dissatisfied with her life. The one in the past is literally scrubbing herself from the dirt and bloody signs of the rape; the one in the present, on the other hand, is involved in a figurative cleansing that takes the form of the intertextual reference to Lady Macbeth’s feelings of guilt and her efforts to wash her hands from Duncan’s blood. Even though Lady Macbeth does not literally kill Duncan, she manipulates her husband to do so. Therefore, even though she does not have any actual stains on her hands, she is morally responsible for Duncan’s death. The parallel Sarah makes between herself and Lady Macbeth is therefore surprising because Lady Macbeth is guilty whereas Sarah is not. Sarah is not responsible for getting herself raped, yet her body does exhibit the signs of the violence done to her. As a result, the intertextual reference exposes the feelings of subconscious guilt Sarah has at losing her virginity. The second voice is that of the present day Sarah who feels sorry for herself and whose tears add “salt to the bath” thereby linking the Sarah who survives the rape with the Sarah who dislikes the way her life has developed. Finally, admitting that she wants to be “a better person” (82) signals a turning point in her self reflection.

Besides linking episodes and clarifying information, the bath motif in the preceding passage symbolizes a return to the womb; as such, it indicates Sarah’s wish to escape responsibility by regressing to a time when she is encapsulated and isolated from the world; finally, when she immerses herself in the bathtub, she makes a wish to return to a world of peace. Her scrubbing, on the other hand, alludes to the

cleansing of new born babes; therefore, her action reflects a shift from a state of total dependence on another as in the womb state to a state of responsibility because she shows an effort to remove whatever is stubbornly clinging to her. Finally, the bath as a womb is very positive because it reinforces the theme of change and development that dominates the novel.

The black dress like the bath motif links episodes and clarifies points. As a motif, the black dress is always associated with unhappy and distressful events. Sarah lays the ground for this connection when she writes in her memoir that the first time she meets David who caused her such distress she is wearing “a short, fitted black Chanel” (19). The second time Sarah mentions wearing a black dress “covered with tiny colorful flowers” (113) she foreshadows the stressful events by writing: “Merciless. That evening was merciless” (113). The third time she repeats the black dress motif is in the French chapter “Premier Chapitre” where she uses the impersonal third person pronoun by saying: “She is wearing her long black dress with flowers” (192).³⁸ Again, in this chapter, the event is not fully developed; in addition, the unclear repetition and the use of the French language is as tiresome as her wait for a taxi. Finally, the repetition of the dress motif in the following chapter links the previous episode and clarifies the implications the black dress has with unhappy and stressful events because it becomes clear that she is raped. Moreover, in this final recursion, not only more details are provided regarding a “long black dress with a flower motif, tiny yellow-and-white daisies and red poppies” (193), but also the significance of the dress emerges. Finally, the importance of the bath and black dress motif lies in the fact that they indicate Sarah’s ability to come to terms with a horrendous experience which is a necessary condition to self construction.

The art Sarah displays in her home also reflects her journey of self discovery and self construction just as the repetition of her name and the lavender incident point at the changes in her perceptions. Marie-Laure Ryan writes: “[T]he virtual is not that which is deprived of reality, but that which possesses the potential, or force of developing into actual existence” (“Cyberage...,” 116). From this aspect, the art that Sarah surrounds herself with is what Ryan calls “virtual.” She has a photograph that shows Bernhardt in her role in Dumas’s *La Dame aux Camelias*, and a poster that shows the actress in a Medea production “holding a bloody knife, the supine body of a young boy at her feet” (62). The two reproductions reaffirm the influence Sarah Bernhardt has on Sarah’s life. The first choice depicts how she perceives herself in a relationship whereas the second represents an unconscious fear of hurting her son by abandoning him.

Ryan also writes that paintings have more than the ability to capture a moment; they have the ability to capture “frozen gestures [that] may be pregnant with an immediate past and future, and their description can lead to an embryonic narration” (“Allegories...,” 5). Keeping in mind the “embryonic narration” intrinsic to paintings, Sarah’s bathroom which holds postcards of:

The Comtesse D’Haussonville by Ingres from the Frick, the great *Portrait of Cosimo I de Medici* by Pontormo from the Getty Museum, *The Order of Release* by Millais from the Tate, and her favorite painting of all time, *The Toilet of Venus* by Velazquez from the National Gallery in London (81)

tells a lot about her. First, the four postcards are hung in the bathroom, the place where a person gets rid of bodily refuse; the bathroom is also the place where a person takes care of outward appearances; on another level, the bathroom is the place where

Sarah constantly seeks sanctuary in her times of distress and tries to get rid of what disturbs her. Therefore, the postcards represent both her inner and outer self. The first postcard, *The Comtesse D'Haussorville* shows a woman who has her back to the mirror and is thinking; this shows that Sarah is looking at the world around her and assessing her position in that world; it represents the first stage of growth, childhood. *Portrait of Cosimo I de Medici* which represents unswerving authority depicts the figure of authority in a patriarchal society, her father; it also epitomizes the effect her father has on her. The third postcard is *The Order of Release*; it reveals a family's reunion complete with the family dog. In this image, the woman is the one in control; she is the one taking care of business because she hands the officer the note that orders the release of her husband, is carrying her child, and is supporting her husband who is leaning on her because he is wounded. This postcard reveals the hold Sarah wishes she has over her family and which Saniya, her stepmother, enjoys. The fourth poster is the *Toilet of Venus* which shows Venus with her back towards the onlooker looking into a mirror held by a cherub. The poster suggests that Sarah is more interested in her inward rather than her outer world and indicates she has realized that the knowledge she seeks comes from within. The four postcards as well as the two Bernhardt posters form the "embryonic narration" that Ryan speaks of because they are as telling of Sarah as any episode she repeats in her memoir. They exhibit the different stages of self reflection and ensuing self-construction that Sarah passes through.

In the last section of this chapter, I will show that Sarah does not restrict herself to repeating the contents of her memoir in her effort to construct her self; her self- reflection manifests itself into the variety of chapter headings and titles for her memoir as well as omitting end punctuation marks in six chapters. Recursivity in

these elements suggests Sarah's continued effort at finding her self through other means besides her memories of previous events. First, Sarah experiments with more than font and size when introducing chapter headings. Replacing the words "Chapter One" by the number one "1"; using the word "Chapter" and the number "1"; replacing "Chapter One" by a title; or combining both "Chapter One" and a title are some of the varieties she uses. This recursivity in trying out different chapter headings indicates Sarah's effort at finding the self she wants to acknowledge as hers; this effort reflects how a text concretizes a voice that reflects an identity (Knoeller, 5).

Like chapter headings, title pages are also recursive, and Sarah tries five times to write titles for her memoir in her effort to establish her self. The first time she experiments with writing a title, she echoes the title of Alameddine's novel *I, the Divine*. Her choice of title reflects that she thinks she is as special as Sarah Bernhardt; moreover, she denotes her egotism and self-centeredness because the first word in her title is "I." In addition, not including her name on the title page shows her inability to concretize herself as the writer because she has not found her voice. Her second effort at writing a title is completely different from the first. The title she uses is "Half and Half: A Memoir," and it suggests that even though her purpose is to write about her life, what she will include in the memoir will not be the whole sum of her life since she is at its mid point. Finally, using the words "Half and Half" reflects that her memoir may not contain the whole truth. Moreover, from the second effort of writing a title onwards, she includes her name on the title page which is an indicator that she has found the narrating voice she approves of and has constructed at least one aspect of her self through recursivity.

Recursivity is also evident in the two title pages that introduce her third effort at establishing her self. The first title page is a repetition of the first effort's title: "I,

the Divine”; the second title page is more complex because it combines the title page of the first part with the second half of the title page of the second part to result in “I, the Divine: A Memoir.” Furthermore, the second title page echoes the mixes that Sarah uses in the chapter headings. In addition, the two title pages echo the beginning of the novel that also has two title pages: the first indicates Rabih Alameddine as the author of the novel *I, the Divine*, the primary diegesis, whereas the second “I, the Divine” reflects the beginning of the second diegesis, the memoir that Sarah Nour el-Din is writing. As a result, her third attempt demonstrates that a new item does not appear out of nothing but is a development of what precedes it which coincides with what Derrida says about interweaving:

[N]o element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present ... This interweaving, this textile, is the *text* produced only in the transformation of another text. (26)

Furthermore, Derrida’s views on interweaving also support the idea that self construction is a continuous and never ending process.

The fourth effort’s title “Around an Empty Grave: A Novel” is problematic because it implies Sarah’s intention to attend to events that lack body; this implication corroborates her apparent lack of a definitive self since she cannot settle upon a title for her memoir. “The Fall” which is the title of the fifth and last effort alludes to Adam and Eve’s fall; the connotations inherent in the words allude to Sarah’s fall from the image she has of herself as the “I” in “I, the Divine” to the “i” that is a letter in the word “Divine.” As a result, she understands that she is not an entity all by herself, but she is a member of an entity. Therefore, the recursivity of title pages discloses the different stages of self awareness she passes through as a result of writing her memoir. Finally, these title pages exhibit a variety of voices that

contribute to the sense of interweaving that dominates one of the novel's themes which shows that languages "may all be drawn in by the novelist for the orchestration of his themes" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 292). Another element that also contributes to this aspect of the continuous build-up of self construction in the novel is the shifts in focalization from Sarah the child, to the adolescent, to the young woman, and finally to the woman writing her memoir.

Besides chapter headings and titles, Sarah utilizes the continuous insight of retrospect by omitting end punctuation marks from six chapters thus indicating that her analysis of the juncture she is recalling will never be finalized and that self-reflection and the resulting self construction will never come to an end. End punctuation marks are usually used to signify the conclusion of ideas; when Sarah makes such an omission, she conveys that closure is not possible because self analysis is always ongoing. She first omits an end punctuation mark in the first chapter one which ends with the statement: "My grandfather was a simple man" (3); by not finalizing that thought, she discloses her continued need to put her grandfather in perspective, so she can understand how he affects her. Moreover, when she does not use an end punctuation mark, she also points out she is not convinced he is a simple man. Finally, she can neither elaborate her statement and prove he is a simple man, nor can she state that he is a wily old man because that would be an act of disrespect. The result is a statement that lacks the signifier which usually indicates closure. The second first chapter ends with the statement that she has arrived for her "first day of school" (4); the lack of appropriate punctuation indicates every day is like that first day of school; it is a day that teaches her something about herself. "I wanted" (25) are the last words in the fifth first chapter. Her words denote that she does not know what she wants since they lack a direct object; furthermore, the incomplete statement

demonstrates that even after scrutinizing her actions and herself she is still at a loss and does not know what she wants. In the twenty-seventh first chapter, her last words mean that she does not know her mother very well even though she behaves like her (139). The lack of end marks, in this instance, suggests that this state will never be rectified since Janet has died. Another chapter that ends without appropriate end marks is the twenty-ninth first chapter where her last words are “My life story” (144). The lack of an end punctuation mark there connotes that her life story is still in progress. Finally, the forty-fifth first chapter which is also the last chapter ends with “Come meet my pride” (308). Here the lack of an end punctuation mark indicates lack of closure because of a promise of things to come. Finally, if, as Bakhtin writes: “The sentence is a signifying element of the whole utterance, which acquires its final meaning only in this whole” (*Speech Genres*, 83), then when Sarah omits an end punctuation mark, she implies that the meaning of her statement lies in its lack of closure. On one level, this means that meaning is never conclusive, but it is always ongoing because new outcomes always develop. On another level pertinent to self construction, omission of end punctuation marks is indicative of the continuity of self awareness and growth.

Rabih Alameddine’s *I, the Divine* is a novel that takes the reader along a journey of self interweaving and recursivity that depicts the self’s instability in its constant state of development. Furthermore, his main protagonist’s insistent repetition of the same events is her way of constructing her self until she is satisfied which indicates that this state will only reach its conclusion with her death. Finally, Kim Worthington writes: “[I]n thinking myself, I write (and read) a text” (25), and Sarah’s attempt to write her memoir is her way of narrating her life into a text because she can only understand the changes in her self when that self is concretized as a text. Finally,

the novel reinforces the concept that writing is the cornerstone of constructing self-identity.

Conclusion: Writing and Self Construction in Alawiyah Sobh's *Mariam al-Hakayah* [Mariam the Tales] and Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine*

Self-identity is an entity that evolves with time. It is the development of both inherited and socially acquired accumulated components in a changing environment which reflects the self-identity's versatility in its ability to make the necessary changes for survival. Therefore, self-identity is not a rigid construct incapable of undergoing modifications that are necessary to ensure survival. The process of constructing self-identity is the center of my study of both Alawiyah Sobh's Arabic language novel *Mariam al-Hakayah* [Mariam the Tales] and Rabih Alameddine's English language novel *I, the Divine*. Furthermore, because the self belongs to the psychoanalytic domains, it is necessary to delve into this realm while scrutinizing the two texts using narratologic tools such as heteroglossia, recursivity, focalization, and metadiegesis to show how self-identity is constructed.

The construction of self-identity is never final but is in fact a continuous state as the two novels, *Mariam al-Hakayah* and *I, the Divine*, show. In addition, these novels treat the idea of writing as the means to constructing self-identity. In *Mariam al-Hakayah*, Mariam and Alawiyah, the two main characters, narrate and write their stories thus succeeding in constructing a self that is no longer problematic at that point in time. In narrating her story, Mariam succeeds in constructing a self that is not the shadow she believes she is. Alawiyah, another character who is a writer by profession in *Mariam al-Hakayah*, succeeds in dissociating her self from the characters she creates by rewriting her role as a writer in her novel. In *I, the Divine*, Sarah's problem is her inability to be satisfied with who she is; thus, she is unable to go beyond chapter one in writing her memoir; the self reflection she undergoes as she writes those first chapters help her construct her self-identity, so she believes she is able to write her

memoir. Therefore, the main characters in the two novels succeed in constructing a self that is necessary for their survival.

In *Mariam al-Hakayah* and *I, the Divine*, both writing and storytelling contribute to constructing the self. Since the act of writing a memoir/ autobiography can never be devoid of the imaginative, an element of the fictitious is always present whenever such a project is undertaken. Therefore, when Mariam in the former novel and Sarah in the latter decide to write their memoirs, they become involved in a project that is inherently fictitious. Furthermore, all three characters in my study, Mariam, Alawiyah and Sarah, are involved in acts of storytelling which are also fictitious by nature. When Mariam tells Alawiyah stories about her family members and friends, she becomes caught up in an exercise that makes use of her imagination. In addition, by transferring these stories into her novel, Alawiyah reaffirms the fictionality of the events. Furthermore, these acts of storytelling, like the acts of writing, result in self-construction because in the telling, the narrator constructs the key characters and manipulates the events until they bring forth the required image for the character just as while writing, the writer, constructs the self of the characters until they are satisfactory. In *I, the Divine*, Sarah's recursive efforts at writing her memoir reflect her incessant attempts at constructing the important events in her life in order to reflect her changed perception of them. Thus, the fictitious element of storytelling comes into play as the acts of remembering and writing take place.

By focusing on narrative techniques such as metadiegesis, recursivity, focalization and heteroglossia, I have been able to connect writing and storytelling with constructing the self. Studying metadiegesis is relevant because this element plays a decisive role in the construction of Mariam's self construction in Alawiyah Sobh's novel *Mariam al-Hakayah*. Even though Mariam does not tell stories in which

a character in her story tells another story, the stories she tells of her family and friends function as such because they belong to a different diegetic level. Furthermore, because through her storytelling she gains insight into what she wants for herself, she is able to construct her self when she writes her memoir thus catering to her newly discovered awareness of selfhood. A study of recursivity needs to accompany a study of focalization and heteroglossia because they are linked to each other. Recursivity is repetition with a difference; focalization is the study of who sees; and heteroglossia is the study of the words a character uses. Bakhtin shows that the characters' discourse is not used to develop the storyline only, but it is in fact used as a signifier for that character. I believe that this function of the characters' discourse also applies to focalization. In *I, the Divine*, identifying the shifts in focalization and heteroglossia, isolating their elements, and studying their shifts contribute to clarifying the differences Sarah passes through as she constructs her self. Each time Sarah remembers an event and recounts it she makes slight modifications in the words she uses, and these changes are the signifiers of the development in her self perception.

I believe that studying the two Lebanese novels *Mariam al-Hakayah* and *I, the Divine* leads to an understanding of at least one reason that motivates the construction of self-identity: the need to understand the self. Marisa Bortolussi writes: "When readers are confronted with potentially unreadable narratives, texts that are radically inconsistent, they cast about for ways and means of recuperating these texts as narratives" (Bortolussi, 12). Even though by "readers" and "texts" Bortolussi does not mean "characters" and "self," I believe that her comment parallels my analysis. When the reader is unable to put a text in perspective because it lacks logic, the reader tries to reorder the events of the text until they exhibit a pattern that is more logical. Lack

of logic is not the problem the characters in Alawiyah Sobh's *Mariam al-Hakayah* and Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine* face when they review their individual corresponding life. Their problem is that the self they encounter is a self that no longer suits the respective life each is leading; in other words, Mariam, Alawiyah, and Sarah, the "readers" in the two novels, decide that their self, the "texts," is not suitable; they decide that it is "unreadable." Their solution is to write their life story in an effort to construct the self that is more amenable to their needs. In other words, to them a "readable text" is a self that satisfies the life being led. In this way, the other side of "readers/ texts" is "characters/ self."

I believe that recursivity is the narratological element that links the two novels because narrating the self is writing the self but with a difference while recursivity is the repetition of events but by adding new elements to the repeated event thus exercising a different impact. In the two novels, Mariam and Sarah write their life story, so they can change their self. Alawiyah, on the other hand, does the opposite; she writes, so she can change the self she has become to the self she used to have. Finally, with both narration and recursivity the same information is developed into something new that carries within it something old which is similar to the child who is a new beginning and at the same time a carrier of an old beginning. This latent potential a child has to also produce another child and so on is what ensures the continuity of mankind. Similarly, the act of constructing the self proves to be limitless since it has the potential to continue to evolve. Finally, my study of *Mariam al-Hakayah* and *I, the Divine* argues that the self is constructed through narration/ storytelling and writing, and that self-identity will always have the potential to change and develop, so it will never be an unbreakable mold.

Notes

- ¹¹ "جدارية صاخبة، تتلون فيها الحياة بثنائياتها واضدادها تكاملاً وتناقضاً" (١٧).
- ¹² "... فلا تتبع المسار التقليدي الذي ينطلق من نقطة معينة ويبلغ ذروة معينة يليها حلّ ما" (١٣).
- ¹³ "لم أكن سوى بقايا ظل يفصل عن ضوءه" (٢٧٤).
- ¹⁴ "... فأنت الظل، ظل ابطال الرواية كلهم وظل ذكرياتي وذكرياتهم" (١٠).
- ¹⁵ "أنا التي حولتني إلى فم لها وأذان على الآخرين، أسرق قصصهم وحكاياتهم وأهديها إياها" (١١).
- ¹⁶ "حتى حين أشاهد ظلي في العتمة - ولا أراه إلا في العتمة - أقول: أين علوية لترى ظلي معي؟" (١١).
- ¹⁷ "قذبت النار في عروقي هرباً من ظلي البارد الموحش" (٣١).
- ¹⁸ "تعرف طالع على بالي حب! ..." (٣٣).
- ¹⁹ "... مريم أخرى" (٣٤).
- ¹⁰ "... ليتحول العالم في عيني إلى أسرار دافئة، أحسُّ معه أنني امرأة ولست ظلاً لحائط جسدي" (٣٥).
- ¹¹ "أفهم أن ظلي كاد يخنق في عزله وظله" (٤١٧).
- ¹² "أنا مريم" (١١١).
- ¹³ "ظلت لسنوات طويلة ترتجف منه، تتجمد في أرضها حين يدخل البيت وينظر إليها ب'طرف عينه'" (٣٦١).
- ¹⁴ "أعاد مصطفى غربة جسدي إليّ وهو يعرّيه ليصير أمامي مجرد قطعة من لحم ... اختفى ثانياً هذا الجسد، وبقي ينهش في فمه اللحم كما ينهش الكلب طعامه" (٥٦-٥٧).
- ¹⁵ "يا حلو شو بخاف إني ضيّعك"، "شايف البحر شو كبير، كبر البحر بحبك" (٨٦).
- ¹⁶ "... بحبك، بس ما فيني إتجوزك، لازم نترك بعض" (٩٥).
- ¹⁷ "إي، شو عليه، أنا ما بزعل أبداً حسّ إنك فوقي ومسيطر عليّ، هيدا شي بيبسطني" (٩٤).
- ¹⁸ "جرستينا، وطّي صوتك" (٩٥).
- ¹⁹ "أما هدوء أمين فيشبه هدوء بحيرة صغيرة عمقها بلا غضب ولا احتمالات ولا أحلام سوى عدم تجاوز يابستها" (٣١٨).
- ²⁰ "هل كانت امي تخترع الحكايات لتصدقها؟" (٣٠).
- ²¹ "هيك بالضبط صار فيّ أنا وبيكن، يا لطيف شو تعذبنا لأخذنا بعضنا" (١٣٩).
- ²² "يا بهيمة يا حماره" (١٣٩).
- ²³ "لا، إنت مش إمي. أنا إمي هونيك بعيدة. وإخواتي هونيك، بدي روح لعندن، ناظريني" (٢٨).
- ²⁴ "هياها الحقيقة، مثل ما شايفتكن وشايفيني. أنا عرفت إبو اندفست هيّ وطب راسها عالعتبة فقامت ودفشت بنتي وفدغتها، بسم الله العظيم" (٢٩).
- ²⁵ "أصبح يصمت أمامي، ويخاف مما حكاها ومما سمّاه واكتشفه. وصرت لا أريد لقاءه كي لا ألتقي الخوف، وأتعريّ بالصمت أمام الخوف أكثر" (٣٢٣).
- ²⁶ "يحكي لي عن قوته في عمله وفي المكتب ... ويخبرني عن طاعة زوجته له" (٣٢٢).
- ²⁷ "... أن الحب حين يتعريّ من الأوهام لا يصل إلى نقطة اللاعودة في تناغم الجسدين وتآلفهما" (٨٤).
- ²⁸ "كيف مش شايفة إجريها المقوسين وكدومة اسنانها؟" (٥١).
- ²⁹ "مثل القمر" (٥١).
- ³⁰ "... ضحك الضحكة نفسها التي ضحكها كريم عندما اكتشف أن ابتسام عذراء" (٣٠٨).
- ³¹ "بحبك، بحبك، حبيبك. بس ما بقدر إتجوز وحدة من غير طابفة" (٣٠٨).
- ³² "... وأنا أقف لأتطلع في المرأة، لا أرى وجهي. أرى أحياناً وجه ابتسام، وأحياناً أخرى ملامح مريم، وأحياناً أمها، أو أم للال" (٣٠٢).
- ³³ "لا. لن أستطيع أن أكتب وأملأ أي ورقة لأكتشف إذا كنت على قيد الحياة، إلا متى أفرغت الفراغات كلها من صدري. ولكن كيف تخرج يا مريم إن لم أفهمها" (٤٠٦).
- ³⁴ "... أنا متأكدة أنها [علوية] تعيش الحياة وتكتشفها بالكتابة. إن لم تكتب كلمة 'هواء' لا تتنفس. وإن لم تكتب كلمة 'وردة' لن تتذكر أن في الحياة ورداً. تكتب لتتذكر رائحتها وأوراقها" (٢٨٣).
- ³⁵ "لا أعرفهم" (٢٩٩).
- ³⁶ "هل أكتب ... لأطردهم من رأسي وارتاح من ثقل دمهم؟" (٣١٣).
- ³⁷ "أتأكد أنني في غرفتي وأنتي وأنا، ثم أدرك تماماً أنني أنا، بعدما تغيرت دنياي..." (٣١٢).
- ³⁸ "Elle avait porté sa longue robe noire et fleurie." (192)

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