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GENDERED PLANNING
OF THE ARAB
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REPRESENTATIONS
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MONA BUR 2006

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The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**CONTESTING THE GENDERED FLÂNEUSE
OF THE ARAB METROPOLIS:
LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER,
THE BODY AND URBAN SPACE
IN SELECTED URBAN WRITINGS OF
SALWA BAKR, LEILA ABOULELA AND HANAN AL-SHAYKH**

A Thesis Submitted To
the Department of English and Comparative Literature
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

by
Mona Bur
Bachelor of Arts

Under the supervision of Dr. Ferial J. Ghazoul

February 2007

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ABSTRACT

The American University in Cairo

**Contesting the Gendered Flâneuse of the Arab Metropolis:
Salwa Bakr, Leila Aboulela and Hanan al-Shaykh**

Mona Bur

Advisor: Dr. Ferial J. Ghazoul

The critical rapport occurring between bodies, cities and the literary text offers an extensive understanding of the emerging nexus between modernity, the rise of the novel and the nature of being in cityscapes. However, a minimum of attention exists towards the study of non-Occidental literary figures contesting their relationship to the cities they inhabit. This study attempts to identify salient motifs and critical themes relating to *flânerie* (street strolling) of women in the city as represented in two short stories and a novel by three Arab women—Egyptian, Sudanese, and Lebanese. Salwa Bakr's depicts post-revolutionary Cairo in her short story "Thirty-One Beautiful Green Trees" (1986), Leila Aboulela's protagonist meanders in London while recalling Khartoum in her short story "Coloured Lights" (2001), and Hanan al-Shaykh's besieged city of memory, Beirut, is evoked in her novel *Beirut Blues* (1992). This study is an effort to identify and characterize a specifically feminine Arab urban experience as reflected in these narratives. Bakr's protagonist, Kareema, is preoccupied with beauty and the role of nature within the city. Aboulela's anglophone text depicts the alienation of the protagonist in London streets, as she rides in a bus—and her free association juxtaposing London to Khartoum. Al-Shaykh's protagonist, Asmahan, exhibits rejection of traditional forms and sexual independence in wounded Beirut torn by civil war. Varied as these narratives are in their approach to the life and scenes of the metropolis, they point to Arab women voices and their relation to urbanization.

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Introduction

*This is Babylon, 'dear city of god,' your beloved home!
The length and breadth are yours, possess it, enjoy it, it is your own.*

Sandras 99

An alluring critical rapport occurs among bodies, selves and cities in the literary imagination, whether as the ontological distinction between country and city life, or as the captivating embodiment of modernity. It is oft-perceived by contemporary cultural theorists, such as Raymond Williams, as a “major form in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of society” (75), notably in the shift from country/desert to city life. The study of cities and literature is far from otiose. The city equips the observer with critical faculties by which to reflect utopian realities with an understanding of struggles towards cohabitation, differences and the manifestation of 'otherness'. A highly interdisciplinary terrain, whether transgressing the domain of art history, political theory or feminist philosophy, the city has astounded, silenced and yet liberated voices of the marginalized as a literary canvas for historical consciousness.

The literary history of cities, from the ancient streetscape that witnessed the procession of the Sumerian gods in Babylon, the city at the centre of the world upon the primal map, the 'dear city of God' in praise of Marduk, to the Platonic tradition of organizing the ideal just city for citizens of the Republic, to the industrial revolution, the advent of modernity, an encroaching capitalism and the subsequent production of cultural hegemonies in the development of modern cities, has demonstrated its potential to exhume extreme differences, contrasts and socio-political movements that attempt to fashion the best possible mode of living. This struggle is eloquently captured in the collective

imagination of a corpus of male urban writers, extending from Plutarch's demonization of Rome in his satires, to Cavafy's immortalization of modern Alexandria.

Concerning the treatment of the Arab city in memory, in particular relationship to modern Arabic literary discourse, a minimum of attention has been given to women's literary relationship to cities. Thus, there is an existing literary gap pertaining to scholarship on Arab women in the metropolis. The only exception is, perhaps, criticism on the experience of Lebanese women authors in the aftermath of the 1975 Civil War and the subsequent production of a global diaspora, and on the dislocation of identities within Beirut as a result of urban upheaval. To explore the complexities of contemporary urban life in modern Arabic fiction, as expressed in women's narratives, merits deeper explorations. Several related inquiries would include the study of women writers as they reflect on women characters in the Arab metropolis. My thesis will revolve around literary figures, as they stroll around their cities, in other words, the Arab woman as *flâneuse*.

If the metropolis can be understood as an embodiment of change, or as the struggle of 'man' to overcome nature, then women's struggles within the metropolis may signal efforts towards the marriage between nature (such as parks and trees) and city life. The city may also, as suggested by several literary theorists, be interpreted as the "ultimate metaphor for our changing human condition" (Squier 3). In assuming a lens of theoretical analysis, the city also provides a heightened awareness of critical categories pertaining to society and culture, namely by demonstrating the dynamics of race, class and gender in former imperial Western and world cities. In the literary novels of European modernity, the subject of the city is a dominant facet towards comprehending the meaning of contemporary self in the sea of the urban crowd, whether it be Dostoyevsky's underground man in nineteenth-century St. Petersburg, T.S. Eliot's 'secular hell' of London, or Alexander Durrell's sensual Alexandria

for whom 'Only the City is Real' (Durrell n.pag.). In essence, the image of the city in literature is a public icon, one that has been manufactured, created, imagined, developed and fashioned by the male animus, of which ennui, shock, horror and revulsion (as described by Charles Baudelaire, and later by the post-modernists) may be deemed as universal urban phenomena.

While the literary commentary surveying the role of metropolis in the individual consciousness is multitudinous, the scope of vision is limited to the history of European cities, the archetypal, apocryphal cities in the religious sensibilities, and the socio-political examination of urban planning in the wake of financial-flow systems, neo-colonialism and new 'world' cities. The broad collective of critical theory in the Western paradigm relating to the cities as form of cultural production, or as the animate incarnation of a people's *zeitgeist*, is comprised of the illuminating observations, visions and reflections of modern city life representative of a pantheon of male intellectual thinkers of the twentieth-century. These include Walter Benjamin on Berlin, Michel Foucault (in his reflections on bodies/public/private lives), Raymond Williams on his distinctions between country and city life, and Jürgen Habermas' *Öffentlichkeit* (or 'publicness'). Benjamin's fascination with the metropolis is related to the idea that the modern European culture of cities was both 'beautiful' and 'bestial.'

In present discourse within the Humanities and Social Sciences, the figure of woman in the city, or the flâneuse, is examined from a socio-political perspective, alongside a growing mass of feminist thinkers critically reviewing city life in the Western imagination. These include the influences of technology on women's lives, and the notion of safety in city streets, amongst other themes. For example, one may begin the critical rapport on gender, the body and urban space by comparing and contrasting the commonly repeated duality of

country vs. city life, which may be translated in Arab metropolitan discourses as desert vs. city life. The unique bond between women and cities is a time-honored association, one that may be traced to a quintessential metaphor for two enigmatic cities through the images of the *Bride of Jerusalem* and the *Whore of Babylon* in the Christian exegesis, alluding to visions of virtues and vice in the image of woman. This figure may be further extended into the binary opposition of country or desert/city, heaven/earth, spiritual/temporal, mystical/secular, Madonna/whore and masculine/feminine.

This re-reading of verisimilitudes of city life in contemporary literature by woman writers of the modern Arab metropolis, attempts to define and establish motifs, themes and meanings between women and cities through a variety of urban experiences (e.g. streetwalking the metropolis, absorption within the crowd, the vista in the city, the chance encounter, and other aspects of *flânerie*). For the purposes of this study, the focus shall fall upon the urban figures of a post-Nasserite Egyptian woman writer, a trans-national Sudanese exile in London, and a *flâneuse* amidst Beirut in ruins, as represented in the fiction of Salwa Bakr, Leila Aboulela and Hanan al-Shaykh, respectively.

This study will attempt to identify salient motifs and critical themes relating to bodies and Arab cities across gendered literary imaginations, namely by considering Salwa Bakr's post-revolutionary Cairo in her short story "Thirty-One Beautiful Green Trees," Leila Aboulela's mnemonic correlative (as coined by André Aciman) of London and Khartoum in "Coloured Lights," and Hanan al-Shaykh's besieged city of memory in *Beirut Blues*. The cities in question represent the lives and experiences of essentially urban women, born and raised in their respective post-colonial metropolises of Cairo, Khartoum/London and Beirut.

Male preoccupation with Western urban city life was colored by loss, fear, revulsion, oppression, and hypocrisy. Contrariwise, women's modern urban experiences in the city are

characterized by senses of freedom, unity, love and a near-maternal affinity to land and space. The streetscape, in some respect, could be traversed by the female stroller as a form of emancipation. Yet it also poses oppressive features.

All three works in question represent a rigorous passion towards a chiefly feminine public urban identity in the writer's imagination. Key themes include madness as an urban response that arises due to transformations in one's cityscape, the pangs of exile and separation from the home city, to the city in ruins that the narrator attempts to re-structure in memory. The protagonists that will be discussed are not revolutionary figures, radicals in their approach to urban life, ushered by a gendered lens in order to serve a feminized sensibility, but are rather calling for a return to memory, remembrance of former cities that have pleased the senses, served the self. Perhaps aside from Leila Aboulela's protagonist in "Coloured Lights," Kareema Fahmi of "Thirty-One Beautiful Green Trees" and Asmahan of *Beirut Blues*, there are Arab urbanites who are powerfully conscious of their bodies, as a form of resistance and a celebration of feminine sexuality in the Arab metropolis. This is illustrated in Fahmi's engagement in 'public action' through her rejection of wearing a brassiere to work, and with Asmahan's nocturnal escapades in various quarters of Beirut and her multiplicity of lovers. Contrariwise, Aboulela's protagonist evokes a muted discourse on feminine sexuality and the body in the occidental city, elaborated by Afis A. Oladosu's understanding that "even though the plot and structure, themes and techniques of Sudanese narrative revolve around such human emotions as love, most of the works, treat sexuality as a forbidden remit" (134). Yet the urban feminine voices inherent in the selected texts, carry the messages of the unity of women's metropolitan experience. These include the conscious struggles to cohabitate in an 'unjust' society, and the struggle towards celebrating women's presence in the public sphere.

"Does the city represent a site of personal autonomy and political possibilities for women? How do women and men map the city differently?" is a fundamental concern (Shehr n.pag.). Similar questions were raised during a 2005 Cairo workshop on "Gendering Urban Space in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa." Critical works related to the issue may offer insights. Elizabeth Grosz, for example, identifies the relationship between bodies and cities as *interface*. This reflects a network of meanings and model of relations that perceive bodies "not as megalithic total entities, but as assemblages or collections of parts, capable of crossing the threshold between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub- or micro groupings" (108). In a similar mode, Michel Foucault's conception of truth within history assists the reader in understanding that, history is not an absolute, warning the critic not to prop oneself up to one monolithic enemy; the city. On the other hand, Foucault's contribution to reading the subject's body in public history, is attributed to the understanding that the body as a social subject is at the mercy of the laws of the city (as could be applied to the archetypal figure of *Antigone*). Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), states that "in every society, the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions or obligation" (136). In the following passage from her short story "The Swan Genie," Syrian novelist Ghada al-Samman eloquently demonstrates the communication occurring between bodies and cities:

The river of humanity that almost sweeps me off as it gushes down through automatic metal doors that open with a slight circular pressure on the handle, which appears like the last thing distinguishing the relation between what is mechanical and what is human, and perhaps it is the last communication between them... Every morning I thank God that in the metro I am not surrounded by a jammed human block in a city of sexually repressed beings. Otherwise, I would be exposed as a woman to the humiliation of being pressed by feverish bodies and burning fingers. (Al-Samman 98)

Of the handful of feminist psycho-geographers on space, culture, bodies and cities, who embarked on literary excavations of the roles and contribution of women in the formation of the modern urban 'city' experience, Janet Wolff, Elizabeth Wilson and Linda McDowell figure prominently. All three have critically examined the meaning of the flâneur. In contrast, the flâneuse- or woman stroller, is a reactionary figure to the flâneur, the primary subject of Charles Baudelaire's urban ruminations and Walter Benjamin's semiotic reading of modern cities through his *Denkbilder* (thought-images of the European metropolis). The flâneuse is a nascent literary figure contesting the invisibility of woman from nineteenth-century European discourse of modernity. She poses a reaction to the flâneur, characterized by solitude, marginality, ennui and monotony.

In her seminal essay "The Invisible Flâneur: Women and the Literature of Modernity," Janet Wolff draws attention to the significantly masculine quality of collected accounts on modernity and public spaces as reflected in the works of social historians and literary critics such as Marshal Berman, and particularly Walter Benjamin's influential reflections on Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life*. Wolff strictly demarcates the activities of the nineteenth-century European woman to the private sphere, neglecting the possibility of partaking in the urban spectacle. She argues that the literature of modernity neglected feminine experiences within the private domain, which in her opinion bear relevant implications on public realities. She adds that "[t]his silence is not only detrimental to any understanding of the lives of the female sex; it obscures a crucial part of the lives of men, too, by abstracting one part of their experience and failing to explore the interrelation of public and private spheres" (Wolff 45). Nevertheless, it may be argued that women's public activities were distinctly visible in the nineteenth-century European city, and this is attributed to the development of consumerism and the "establishment of the department store in the

1850s and 1860s [that] provided an important new arena for the legitimate public appearance of middle-class woman" (Wolff 46). Women here demonstrated activities resembling that of the *flâneur*, characterized by strolling and fleeting encounters past shop-windows.

The Gendered City: The Feminine Interpretation of the Metropolis

The affinity between women and cities is marked by two fundamental hallmarks, namely culture and *citadenship*, as argued by Tovi Fenster (222). Susan Merrill Squier in her introduction to *Women Writers and the City*, argues that "[o]ne reason for the particular significance the city holds for women writers is that, like the novels and poems in which its image appears, the city is a cultural artifice, and women have always had a problematic relationship to culture itself. Traditionally, women have been excluded from cultural realms, by both biologically based and socially enforced stereotypes" (4). This is not to say that women have not previously engaged in the cultural production of city life, but rather that the accessibility to contest, perform and operate has assumed other forms. One may revisit the modern urban experience from a gendered perspective of nineteenth-century European society, where "the 'public' person [the *flâneur*] of the eighteenth century and earlier, whose demise is charted, and who passed the time in coffee houses, paraded in the streets and at the theatre, and addressed strangers freely in public spaces, was clearly male," (Wolff 40) while the position of woman remained distinctly allocated to private domains.

The relationship between women and cities is further elaborated by the notion of *citadenship*, that deals with the conception of power and its allocation within the city/state. Developed by Lefebvre, it entails the dual right of the citizen to appropriate the cityscape to a self's expression of urban life (whereby the 'city should be a work of art'), in addition to the right to participate in the decision-making of the city (Fenster 222). As will be discussed

shortly, the figure of Kareema Fahmi in Salwa Bakr's "Thirty One Beautiful Green Trees," contests the notion of *citadenship* in a Cairo that grows increasingly hostile and alienating to her inner visions of beauty in the city, illustrating the complex relationship emerging between bodies and cities. *Citadenship* is also of high concern to Asmahan of *Beirut Blues*, who questions urban aestheticism.

By reading the city as text, the observer will recognize the struggle to balance "social order with personal disorder to create a humane public realm," as suggested by Daphne Spain in her review of *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (845). In readings of feminine urban fiction, this struggle usually entails the battle towards actualizing certain personal 'public' freedoms that suffer from restrictive social attitudes. Through exporting the figure of the flâneuse to the selected narratives, the reader is allowed to generate "gendered cartographies of viewing" (Parsons 1).

Examples of a particular manner of feminine urban fictional reflections of city life, delivered to the Western literary canon, include the popular poignant poetic eulogies of Anna Akhmatova towards St. Petersburg (notably in "A Poem Without a Hero: A Triptych"), Virginia Woolf's legacy of London life in *Mrs. Dalloway*, H.D. Imagiste, Anais Nin's erotic correspondences with Henry Miller, and numerous others in the early modernist period (paired with the motif of the 'New Woman'). Gesturing towards the approach of the avant-garde, a neoteric generation of feminist critical thinkers on women, bodies and cityscapes have emerged in a post-Cold War atmosphere, and these include the unique vision of women and American cities of Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Elizabeth Grosz (in her discourse on bodies and the fabrication of selves in cities), Elizabeth Wilson (in her significant work *The Sphinx in the City*), and Janet Wolff debating the existence of the flâneuse.

What defines an urban woman writer? Is the city a uniquely masculine phenomenon? Insofar as its authorship is concerned, the image of the city in literature has been for the large part fashioned by the masculine imagination. While it is generally acknowledged by writers on urban literature that the city and the literary text have had "inseparable" histories, seeing "the rise of the city as inseparable from various kinds of literary movements-in particular the development of the novel and subsequent narrative modes: comic realism, romantic realism, naturalism, modernism and postmodernism" (Lehan 1998: 3), their contemporaneous nexus has traditionally been traced through a masculine lens. The mystifying pleasures derived from the experience of urban strolling, of exposing oneself to the chance encounter, are amongst other salient features employed in description of metropolitans. Indicative of an impression where women were excluded from public engagement, the *flâneur* proved to be a problematic figure in gendered discourse of modernity and urban fiction.

Transporting Flânerie to Modern Arabic Urban Literature

"Modern Arabic literature and the rise of the Arabic novel has in many ways been defined by the emergence of the *modern Arab city*," argues M.M. Badawi in his essay *The City in Egyptian Literature* (29). Some may further contend that the project of Islamization and the Arabization of the Middle East was specifically an urban one, with the epicenter being the holy city of Mecca. In its multi-layered approach, the literary study of women in Middle Eastern cities may be characterized by an exchange of an established canon, critical signposts and the juxtaposition of urban figures of the 'flâneuse,' the night-crawler, the stranger in the crowd, the prostitute and numerous others, where walking becomes an 'aesthetic and cultural

practice.' Undoubtedly, multiculturalism bears significant coloring on the soul of a city. If woman was restricted by her corporeality from wandering in the Arab metropolis, then it was a restriction that influenced her increased participation in a collective urban experience. As such, if an Arab sexual revolution is to occur, undoubtedly its playground would be an urban one.

Two exemplary figures of Arab *flânerie* can be detected in the writings of Syro-Lebanese novelist Etel Adnan, and of Suheir Hammad, a Palestinian Brooklynite, whose political prose demonstrates a passionate devotion to both the nation of origin and her adopted city of Brooklyn. It is not easy to navigate a literary terrain across two critical spheres, where on one hand exists urban modernity, art and artifice, and on the other hand exists the historic Middle Eastern city, with local dynamics that some may characterize as an ambiguous and perplexed resistance to modernity, change, calling for a return to an earlier form of living.

Of the most prominent readers/critics of feminist thought in relationship to public space in the Arab world include Janet Abu-Lughod, Farha Ghannam and Fatima Mernissi. In modern Arabic literature Etel Adnan (who merits an independent in-depth analysis on woman and Arab cities in the literary text) figures prominently in her portraits of the city in ruins (Beirut) and the trans-national experience of *flânerie* notably in *Paris When It's Naked*, and *Of Cities and Women*. If an internal revolt against monitored accessibility to public space and heightened senses of control characterized the urban motion of women in the Arab metropolis, then the processes can be closely studied following the women's liberation movement in Egypt and Middle East, for "most revolutions, religious, political, or combinations of both, are born in cities, as the brainchild of disaffected city dwellers" (Buruma and Margalit 45). Furthermore, it is possible to declare that accelerated

urbanization, accompanied by the transformations from desert/town to city life in the Arab cities, has contributed to the emancipation of women's writings and literary production, as argued by numerous critics. Sabry Hafez in his typology of Arab feminist literary writing contests that "Arab women writers become aware that literary discourse plays a significant part in the social and political life of their nation in the period of the 1930s-1970s" (165), identifying four main socio-political currents that have influenced the literary production of Arab women's writings--the spread of education, the acceleration of social mobility, the rise of the middle class, and most significantly; progressive urbanization.

All three main protagonists of the selected works discussed here represent progressive thought towards the image of the city in ruins, urban aesthetics and the place of memory. The exploration of women's literary representations of cities and urban space allow the reader, as aptly described by Deborah S. Parsons, to "consider the ways in which women writers have imagined the connection of their bodies and their pens with the specific urban territories that they inhabit" (2). If the urban wanderer, the *flâneuse*, may be interpreted as a 'metaphor of emancipation' as she traverses the cityscape, can such liberties be translated to the feminine in the Arab metropolis?

Chapter One

The Flâneuse and the Cairene Metropolis

*sometimes quietly we know the streets
is watching our actions recorded*

*we secret you from those who patrol
our thoughts and study our styles*

*we leave you in
order to see your beauty from a distance*

*back home in instants we drop baggage
and settle into selves ...*

*you got as many stories as streets
as each of us shaped by
your concrete and green*

Suheir Hammad "Brooklyn" 15

The Figure of the City in Modern Egyptian Literature

Cairo's urban landscape is infused within myriad historical contexts that have shaped the identity of its inhabitants. It is in the literary imagination of the modern Egyptian novelist that the most poignant retrospectives of an 'other' city, correlating to another mode of being, can be traced. The context of the city in question with regard to Salwa Bakr's modern Cairo, echoes a disenchanting ethos of modern urbanity, whereby "a textual equivalent of the social conditions in which sexual politics are structured around the oppression of the female voice . . . is written into the very texture of the narrative" (Hafez 170).

"Thirty One Beautiful Green Trees" is essentially a confessional plea for the emergence of 'truth,' written in the form of a letter recounting a series of events that has led a society to judge a feminine sense of urban belonging, fascination and devotion to beauty as

a form of institutional 'madness.' These events include the gradual disappearance of trees from the city, a neglect to adhere to social norms, the daytime appearance of a weasel—traditionally a nocturnal creature—and a confrontation with the city's election committee. The protagonist Kareema Fahmi, an employee at the Water Company, responds physically to de-generative changes in her urban landscape. For the uprooting of trees caused her, to use her own words, to "sense changes taking place inside me: there were slight pains in my insides and I would constantly have frightful headaches. . . the headache changed into ghastly pains in my head, crazy pains that accompanied every breath I took. . . eventually they diagnosed my condition as being chronic inflammation brought about by nervous tension" (Bakr 16: Arabic 74). In an effort to accelerate and influence change, Kareema decides to cast her vote in the city's general elections, but is disillusioned to discover that the 'recovery of beauty' is on none of the candidate's agendas: "Does your party do anything about planting trees in the city instead of concrete? Has it formed a well-equipped army to deal with the weasels? Does it possess some medicine that can restore my good spirits? . . . Where are the women? . . . Why have you not sought out the reasons for the sparrows having fled from our city and why is it so full of flies and mosquitos?" she asks. On her path towards the election committee, the appearance of a weasel acts as an omen, whereby she questions: "What did it mean? What was it all about? A weasel in full light of day?! I could not control my feelings. . . my violent headache had me in its grips. . . I sat down on the edge of the pavement in a state of semi-collapse, crying bitterly" (Bakr 22: Arabic 79).

A zealous feminine focus on the modern Arab city of one's own, characterizes Salwa Bakr's short story "Thirty One Beautiful Green Trees." A native of Cairo, Bakr's writing has often been approached by feminist literary theorists as engaged in a new form of subversion of a social and moral patriarchal order, within which one may argue that the figure of the

Cairene flâneuse emerging out of her writings bears the ability to "express oneself with the eye, spirit and feeling of a woman" (Seymour-John 317). Bakr belongs to a generation of Egyptian women writers who have "broken away from traditional realist modes of expression" (Booth 9) and whose central motif was the magnification of women's enforced silence and its subsequent subversion.

Numerous literary critics of modern Arabic literature contend that the rise of the short story and the novel as a literary genre in the twentieth century are contemporaneous to shifts in country to city lives, and other post-colonial modernization projects in Middle Eastern cities (Badawi 1985; Mehrez 2005). "The development of modern Egyptian literature, which began over a century ago, was closely and inextricably connected with the growth of the modern Egyptian city, Cairo in particular," further argues M.M. Badawi (29). From Naguib Mahfouz's iconoclastic *Cairo Trilogy* that demonstrates the "social and psychological implications of life in the metropolis" (Badawi 41), Waguih Ghali's post-revolutionary existential crisis in *Beer in The Snooker Club*, to Alaa al-Aswany's portrayal of contemporary Cairene societal issues in *The Yacoubian Building*, the literary image of Cairo becomes the yardstick by which changes in socio-political realities are measured. Post-Nasserite Egyptian women's fiction that bears heavy allusions to devotions, vehemence towards crowds and complex ambiguous relationships to the city of Cairo are numerous, and they include Mona Ragab's "The Sleeping City" (1988), or in the case of the Suez town of Port-Said, Ibtihal Salem's "City of Cardboard" (1984), (as quoted in Booth 10). Some may also contest that the modern Egyptian literary narrative is quintessentially urban. Furthermore, monumental moments in the history of modern Egypt were carried out in cityscapes. From Huda al-Shaarawi's oft-cited testament on Egyptian women's rights in 1919

on the streets of Cairo upon her return from Italy, to the student protests against British occupation—all have manipulated the city streets as a form of communication.

Current Trends in Cairene Urban Studies

If the character of the city may be read in the rapport occurring between public/social action and architecture, then Kareema Fahmi's Cairo is polarized between a disquieted self, and a faded mirror of a previous city. The city in question is considered here as a positive space that created a certain freedom for the active, independent and autonomous working woman, where "the very anonymity of the urban crowd may protect women, while at the same time that edge of danger is a lure to explore the city landscape" (McDowell 156).

One of the more recent studies undertaking a closer understanding of transforming urban dynamics with regards to cityscapes is Samia Mehrez's essay "From The Hara to the Imara: Emerging Urban Metaphors in the Literary Production of Contemporary Cairo." In her essay, Mehrez emphasizes that the figure of the city of Cairo, "whether it is the historic city or the modern metropolis, should be the main metaphor for much of the literary production during the twentieth century," (Mehrez n. pag.). She traces the irony behind post-1960s city building development expansion projects, which aimed towards spatial augmentation, and yet has created severe constraint and alienation within four examples of Egyptian fiction. Booth adds: "The City (or a certain part of it) becomes a repository of varying values, experiences and kinds of change, and a sort of transition point between Egypt and political, economic and social intrusions from outside . . . and encounters of different Cairo's, equally telling, come out in a number of stories" (13).

The Deluge of Cairo

A fundamental concern of Salwa Bakr's protagonist Kareema Fahmi is the 'recovery of beauty' during the gradual concrete encroachment on her city's greenery. Replete in powerful symbolic metaphors, namely through the motif of the flood, the narrative exemplifies the coercive nature of individual self interest in confrontation with a common good as acted out upon the cityscape as background. Kareema Fahmi may be identified with hallmark sentiments of the urban other, namely alienation, marginality and fascination. Cairo is transformed in her imagination into a form of a 'secular hell' (Lehan 1998: 130) invocative of Eliot's "Wasteland." Bakr's narrative is highly fertile ground for deconstructing meaning of bodies and public space from a gendered critical perspective in the Cairene experience. Kareema Fahmi portrays a group of subaltern Egyptian feminist social issues and histories in Bakr's feminist writings. The political aspect implied in Kareema Fahmi's symbolic act of attempting to mutilate her tongue, an act which sends her to a mental asylum, from which she begins to re-count her retrospective, is a highly politicized gesture, paradoxically evocative of revolutionary fervor and of submission. This demonstrates the aspects by which marginalized otherness is allegoric of essential silence, of a voice drowning in the urban crowd. Offering a poignant perspective of a failed attempt towards the feminine urban subversion of social and moral order, which is illustrated by her efforts to beautify her office space with a red desk, and towards her rejection of wearing the brassiere, Kareema Fahmi struggles are overcome through the motif/metaphor of the flood. Kareema confronts the moral absolutism of Cairo with astute defense. As Dostoyevsky's Underground Man declares in his torment, amidst the motif of the crowd that "nobody was like me, and I was not like anybody else" (Dostoyevsky 49), Kareema Fahmi confronts the moral absolutism of Cairo

with astute defense. As he "detests empty phrases, and loves truth" (Dostoyevky 76), Kareema demands answers from the city representatives prior to the approach of the "flood." In its dual representation of both power and creation, the flood signals the anger of the gods for the behavior of man.

The city awakens her senses, offering a visceral connection to her identity. It is a relationship that is highly intense and rigorous, characterized by a profound sense of belonging. It concludes in a tragic light, whereby Kareema is the perturbed citizen-subject of her city. Kareema Fahmi possesses "at the heart of her identity as an Egyptian the waters of the sea and river: the Nile—Egypt's life-giver as Herotodus declared so long ago—the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea" (Booth 5). She demonstrates a near-bellicose temperament as her impatience leads to her conflicts with her colleagues at the Water Company, with the city election representative, and with her mother. This occurs through her heightened awareness that things may be otherwise, and a lament towards urban retrograde. Kareema recounts the pleasure of city life and streetwalking, describing her urban strolls in the fashion of *flânerie*:

Even at this moment as I sit down and write, a feeling of joy flashes through me and my heart is filled with yearning as I imagine the pictures made by the bright, laughing colours of the shop awnings, bright orange and sparkling blue, and that marvelous awning I used to gaze at so long while the vendor handed me the paper cone of monkey nuts, the awning of the 'Freedom Star' shop that sold chick-peas and all types of salted melon seeds and other things to munch and chew. (Bakr 14: Arabic 73)

Kareema's social disintegration begins as she acknowledges the gradual disappearance of blue gum, Indian fig and other varieties trees that colored the urban vista of her quotidian journey to the Water Company. She declares: "I knew by heart the number of trees along the way; thirty-one green-leafed trees adorning the street and bringing joy to my heart whenever I looked at them" (Bakr 15: Arabic 74). The eventual uprooting of all but

three trees result in the approach of her depression, coupled by weight gain, loss of desire and a decision to withhold child-bearing, for "what misery they would experience when they looked around them and found nothing but a vast jungle planted with concrete and colors of grey and brown!" (Bakr 16: Arabic 75). The transfiguration of Cairo's urban landscape with the erection of concrete buildings, the increase in road traffic and other ills of urban development, has born direct impact on her sense of selfhood. Aglaia Konrad captures the abysmal emptiness of Cairo's standardized building development project initiated by President Anwar Sadat in the late 1970s, evocative of Kareema's destitution, in her 1992 collection *Desert Cities* (1 n. pag.).

Other incidents that indicate the harmonious rapport between the feminine self and city that one inhabits deal with the critical interpretation of public space, to occupy both inner and outer worlds of her feminine reality. During a romantic encounter with a colleague, Kareema is invited for a lemonade at a riverside café, in response to which she refuses and states her preference to "sit right at the river's edge and watch the water as it made its way aimlessly to the sea" (Bakr 17: Arabic 75). She is struck by an instantaneous urge to embrace her partner, an act which infuriates him due to its public nature: "at this he got to his feet angrily, scolding me and asking why I had been so forward as to do such a thing in a public place" (Bakr 17: Arabic 75). Etel Adnan remarks in her urban writings in *Of Cities and Women*, that "men from our country do not accept women who express themselves with their bodies in public" (10). This statement referring to Lebanon is also valid for other Arab countries.

Kareema Fahmi's relationship with the Egyptian metropolis may be characterized as a form of 'participation mystique,' a term utilized by Jungian psychologists to indicate a "psychological condition in which inanimate objects and people participate with each other

in a mystical manner, are connected with each other beneath the level of consciousness" (Fenn n. pag.). Numerous feminist psycho-geographers posit that women's literary urban experiences signify identity, as such, Kareema's *flânerie* is an ardent association between self and city, and between a social reality in conflict with disenchanted individual consciousness. Salwa Bakr punctuates Kareema Fahmi's right to treat her city as a canvas of self. She is the 'artist of her everyday life,' a Cairene Steppenwolf, whose quotidian trajectory is threatened.

Elaborations on the Flâneuse in the Cairene Metropolis

"If cities are human experiments, then this one is a 1,400 year-old model of living together under extreme circumstances. Technique, not technology, is Cairo's speciality" (45), states Maria Golia. If it is possible to re-read the discourse employed in the feminist literary analyses of *flânerie* as discussed above, from the perspective of an Arab feminine urban modern experience, then one may argue that Kareema's mental breakdown in the face of the *parade sauvage* of her obstinate city claims that she has failed to re-invent the concept of public space. Definitions of time, space and gender in relationship to cities and bodies bear a uniquely inter-textual quality in Cairo's urban metropolis. Salwa Bakr's protagonist is evocative of Mona Takieddine Amyuni's description of a 'love unto madness' between the feminine self and the city. In her discussion of Lebanese poet Nadia Tuani's verse on Beirut she states:

Beirut. . . . is more of a city than Antioch or Babylon as it burns with passion and folly. A striking light imagery renders the mad rhythms of Beirut in Part II "Folle Terre" (Mad Land), a city she loves unto madness, as the title suggests:

I love

. . . .

*these ashes that taste of a city which was
more of a city than Antioch or even Babylon;*

a city turned white-hot by words.

.....

I love

*that a segment of light be called a shriek
and nova, the madness of men.*

A nova is a star which shows sudden and great increase of light and energy for short periods. In one compressed image, Nadia Tueni seizes the essence of all cities which consume themselves in ever-recurring outbursts of energy and fire kindled by the madness of men. (Amyuni 60)

Flânerie as a Motif

Flânerie is clearly on the mind of Egyptian city dwellers, as it is represented directly and indirectly in the work of Cairene artists. It is particularly evident in the contemporary Egyptian women's art scene, as demonstrated in the photography of Lara Baladi, Heba Faried, Sabah Naim, the sketches of Anna Boghigian, and the installations of Huda Lutfi. In Baladi's photography series *Um El Donia* (2001) in which 8 x 3 billboards exhibited in the streets of Ramsis, Tahrir and Giza bearing the illusory titles for a film in which the public and passers-by participate as the main actors, Baladi aimed to elaborate on the theme of urban 'friction,' demonstrates "the whole way we live in Cairo. How Cairo is full of detail, colours, full of contradictions, full of people, it's full of complications" (Siddiqui 74). Lutfi's installation piece, *Found in Cairo*, an exploration of Cairo's urban landscape and metropolitan fluidity is another example of Egyptian flânerie;

For around two years I went on a sort of archaeological venture, carefully collecting objects from the city's repositories of the Friday market, book stalls and antique shops, and manipulating them in such a way as to induce on our day to day experiences. Found in Cairo deliberately contests rigid notions of identity by including images or photographs of 'foreign faces' which I have found in old bookstalls or I have seen on Egyptian television, thus Umm Kalthum (Egypt's foremost singer), the Mona Lisa and Marilyn Monroe are integral actors of my imagined city surroundings. In the black and white series of recycled photographs, I expose our obsessive concern with the feminine self image, which though not a particularly Islamic trait, Muslims contributed much to it. (Lutfi, Interview)

Akin to Lutfi's urban travels, a functional relationship is established between an individual 'feminized' body of self (namely Kareema's) and the city of Cairo. Situated in a particular context of Cairo, where notions of public/private spheres are rigidly demarcated, the city offers a plethora of meanings in relationship to politics of the body. Lutfi's excavations are representative of Elizabeth Grosz's corporeality of the city and of the interface between space, images and bodies. One may thus argue that perhaps Lutfi, Baladi and Bakr's Kareema are symbolic of a new form of Egyptian *flânerie*, situated in impressions of hybrid 'otherness', and functioning as active interpreters of contemporary women's urban experience in the Arab city. The solipsism of Kareema Fahmi represents an alienated spirit within Cairo, prophetizing the approach of a "permanent veil of dust and waste" (Ibrahim 9), confronted with intense obduracy of public thought and good, faced primarily in the microcosm of the Water Company.

The metropolis embodies and engages discourse of feminine bodies in various socio-economic contexts. Richard Lehan, an urbanist, argues that the "city tries to impose a grid upon nature, to harness its energies and turn a profit" (Lehan 1986: 104). Quintessential themes characterizing the universal urban experience, such as the alienation of the self, the inevitability of change, loss of innocence and the efficacies of physical movement can be transcribed within the sensibility of Salwa Bakr's protagonist.

The city in feminine literary sensibility may thus be defined by the dynamics of public and private engagements to produce a harmonious rapport amongst all three aspects of public life—reason, rectitude and justice—as identified by the medievalist Christine de Piza (Langdon 55). Kareema's attempt to promote reason in the election booth, to re-install justice, have resulted in her 'silence'. Her failure is associated with the symbolism of the deluge that accompanies the end of the world, ushering new beginnings, whereby:

This was the flood that came and which I saw sweeping over everything, everything of beauty in my beautiful city, so that on the very day they brought me to live in this frightful place, I was smiling tenderly and looking at the tall buildings scattered here and there, with the van passing through the streets at a crazy speed. I was smiling and saying: Farewell, farewell, my beautiful city, the flood has once again swept you away. (Bakr 14: Arabic 72)

Kareema's assiduous self-interest is here sternly in conflict with a 'common good.' The inhabitants of Kareema's city are united not by a common good, welfare and well-being of one another, but as forms of economic relationships. Her pestilential urban outlook is concerned with her public affairs and activities, and her merging of true selves with cityscapes, which has come in confrontation with the codes of her city, and led to her gradual downfall. "There is a need, therefore, to continuously question who is defining what is 'private' and what is 'public' and how the distinctions between them shift over time and are being negotiated by gender and age groups" (91) posits Farha Ghannam while reflecting on the gender dynamics of present-day Cairo.

Cairo is marked by the river that runs through it. The symbolic value of the river is cornerstone to the urban observer, as one may interpret the city in relationship to water, namely in the cosmogony of the primal city and the struggles between Apsu and Tiamat, the begetters of sweet/masculine and salt/feminine water (Sandras 5). The river in its motion carries, removes, purifies and consumes change. Whether it is Anna Akhmatova's Neva that traverses St. Petersburg which she compares to the Lethe of the Underworld (114), the Thames to T. S. Eliot (qtd. Lehan 1998:132), or the Nile that figures prominently in Salwa Bakr's narrative, the symbolic imagery of water culminates in the vision of a post-deluvian Cairo. Egyptian novelist Sonallah Ibrahim, also employs the trope of natural disaster begetting change in the metropolis, in the image of the hurricane which precedes the flood, in his lament about the concrete encroachment of Cairo;

I followed, with horror, the constant assault on the gardens and the side walks that made way for small commodity stands or parking lots for the increasing number of cars. The ground floors of the distinguished, old, spacious buildings were transformed into all kinds of shops: hairdressers, interior designers, dry cleaners. With trepidation, I watched this uncontrollable hurricane as it slowly approached my immediate neighbourhood. (Ibrahim 14)

By understanding the individual's detritus in the face of a diverging social reality, is to apprehend Kareema Fahmi's convictions of a post-Nasserite Cairene urbanite, of co-existence and the apprehension of differences. Fahmi expresses her sexuality overtly, and she is penalized. By rejecting the brasserie or inviting a kiss by the river, Kareema's body acts as a site for social struggle. Within this process, the self corresponds to the city in ruins. Golia presents the metropolis in these words: "Cairo, with its relics of the past, and moving evidence of a more immediate and monumental survival, is an elaborate memento mori. It is a city of paradox because it lives on its ruins, these days so defiantly that people rebuild not for posterity, but as if to hasten decay, and so to build again" (93).

Critics have proclaimed that Bakr's protagonists represent revolutionary women, agents on the fringes of society, powerfully-critical of the way things are (Booth 1991; Seymour-John 2004). With a keen interest in social realities, the urbanite questions the classical conundrum that posits the self against the process of normalization in society, echoing Foucault's dogma on selves and histories. Here Bakr embodies the loss of a feminine self's voice in the crowd, represented by the act of mutilating the tongue.

In many respects, Kareema Fahmi's psychology could be further illuminated by the concept of *nushuz*. She represents the figure of the *nashiz* in her expression of radicalism, defined by Fatima Mernissi as a particular feminine socio-cultural prototype, whereby "a *nashiz* is a woman who declares herself to be an individual, and no longer just a being who aligns herself with the will of someone else. And *nushuz* is obviously synonymous with *fitna*, disorder" (67).

When Griselda Pollock defined the liberties inherent in the female stroller, who "symbolises the privilege or freedom to move about the public arenas of the city observing but never interacting, consuming the sights through a controlling but rarely acknowledged gaze" (Nord 351), it appears that she described the privileged urban practices bestowed upon the *New Woman* in the international, European and world city. Women came to assume, with the convergence of modernity, an active public role in Western culture. In Bakr's fiction, this public rapport was defined with an incandescent passion. If cities represent best possible worlds, and if they are meant to reflect the celestial heavens, then Kareema Fahmi's Cairo has failed her. For in Bakr's narrative we follow the disintegration of a feminine self in a city, whereby "the city becomes less friendly and more hostile, the inhabitants become more alienated, the landscape more grotesque, and the process itself more absurd" (Lehan 1986: 107).

Chapter Two

Khartoum as the Mnemonic Correlative of Leila Aboulela's London

When the stranger says, what is the meaning of the city? Do you huddle together because you love each other? What will you answer? We all dwell together to make money from each other?

T. S. Eliot (as quoted in Lehan 1998: 150)

Delicately absorbed in a mild maelstrom of memory within an occidental metropolis, the protagonist of Sudanese author Leila Aboulela's short story "Coloured Lights," first published in 2001 as part of a collection bearing the same title, expresses an ubiquitous urban experience of the African immigrant, of a divided self engrossed within a dual reality of presence in an adopted city, and the absence of a former dwelling. The protagonist belongs to a generation of Sudanese immigrants to the United Kingdom to whom "it seemed that the fate of our generation is separation, from our country or our family" (Aboulela 2001:2). Kristeva's sense of cosmopolitanism further punctuates the difference between belonging and alienation in the city: "I am a cosmopolitan . . . Thus when I say that I have chosen cosmopolitanism, this means that I have, against origins and starting from them, chosen a transnational or international position situated at the crossing of boundaries" (16). However, Aboulela's protagonist could not identify with the cosmopolitan—the one who has rejected 'origins.'

Key themes of Aboulela's narrative include the sorrows of alienation, otherness and differences between Eastern and Western cities in modern-day existence, the pangs of exile and the poignancy of elsewhere. Aboulela's narrative is representative of an emerging node of Arab-African women's writings, coined as "halal fiction" due to their filiation to Islamic morals, values and traditions (Ghazoul 3). In an essay discussing the dialectics of the image of woman in Sudanese narrative discourse, Afis A. Oladosu argues that Sudanese women

"either as writers and 'readers' have been excluded from Sudanese literary history," and that up until the 1930s have "not been accorded the privilege either of a "producer of literary artifacts or that of a catalyst of/for literary productivity" (120). This is supported by Sabry Hafez who discusses the development of feminine/female/feminist consciousness in his essay, "Women's Narrative in Modern Arabic Literature: A Typology": "in patriarchal society the literary discourse reflects a social structure whose dynamics are based on a power relationship in which women's interests are subordinated to those of men" (155). Aboulela's literary voice today accompanies the Sudanese canonical patriarchal pantheon of Tayeb Salih in the treatment of East/West relations, surfacing issues of identity, modernity and the influence of Islamization on African culture. Both visions attempt to establish a common understanding of the Arab-African experience in the foreign city, namely the imperial mother, London.

In "Coloured Lights," the narrator treats London's Christmas lights adorning the cityscape as an objective correlative to her elder brother Taha's wedding lights in Khartoum, triggering a mnemonic journey into the past. The city lights, symbolic of festivity and celebration, bore a paradoxical quality of light and death, for it was the same lights that were responsible for the death of Taha on the eve of his wedding: "It was the lights that killed Taha. The haphazard, worn string of lights that had been hired out for years to house after wedding house. A bare live wire carelessly touched. A rushed drive to the hospital. . . ." (Aboulela 6). The retrospective takes place on a London city bus that carries her from Charing Cross Road, and across Regent Street, where Septimus of *Mrs. Dalloway* previously declared his supreme secret on the meaning of the world, saying that the "trees are alive, there is no crime, and universal love" (Woolf 63). Her journey continues to Oxford Street, whereby her memory is stimulated by the appearance of Christmas lights, to return once

again to Khartoum and the recollection of her brother Taha's tragic death on the eve of his wedding. As such, she is not the urban stroller per se, for instead of 'botanizing on the asphalt' as Baudelaire once did, she rather journeys across the city in a London bus. Her visceral connection to the cityscape entails her participation to the 'ebb and flow' of the metropolis atop the city bus.

Evocative of Marcel Proust's visceral journey across reconnaissance, where "to traverse the arteries of the subterranean city, we have embarked upon the dark currents of our own blood as upon an inward Lethe meandering six-fold . . . leaving us in tears" (Proust 206), Aboulela's urban journey is characterized by loss, longing and the acute nature of memory and absence. In comparison to Bakr's protagonist, both characters are Nilotic urbanites that share a longing for the river that runs through the city. If the figure of the flâneuse surrenders to public life to collect experiences in the wake of chance encounters, then Aboulela's protagonist merely traverses the terrains of the interior city within one's psyche and memory. She bears no name, and presents herself as a silent witness amidst a city of "middle-classed people like vanished leaves" (Woolf 73). "I was crying for Taha," she says, "or maybe because I was homesick, not only for my daughters or my family but sick with longing for the heat, the sweat and the water of the Nile" (Aboulela 2001:1).

The point of departure for Leila Aboulela's protagonist may be posited in an elaboration of André Aciman's notion of the mnemonic correlative. In his essay "Shadow Cities," Aciman elaborates on the themes of contemporary exile, uprooting and loss, stating that he "could never understand or appreciate New York unless I could make it the mirror—call it the mnemonic correlative—of other cities I've known or imagined" (20). As Aboulela's narrator remains seated in the London bus in a state of silence and grief while she views the panoramic cityscape of London, her presence is reminiscent of Aciman's urban

image of a Greek nymph-like statue in Straus park, "lost in silent contemplation, looking inward, as it were, to avoid looking at what was around her" (20). In essence, she embodies the figure of 'the stranger' in the city, identifying with the West Indian bus conductor.

The City of Feminine Exile

"There is no reason why," suggests Proust, "existing outside ourselves, a real place should conform to the picture in our memory rather than those in our dreams. And besides, a fresh reality will perhaps make us forget, detest even, the desire on account of which we set out on our journey" (Proust 206). Similarly Taha's sister cannot envision London's Christmas lights without being transported to Khartoum and to the memory of her brother. In essence, cities here are receptacles of memory, a form of mnemonic evidence to our experiences and being. Alongside the essays and prose of Aciman and Aboulela, other Arab Women urban authors in exile within the Western metropolis include Etel Adnan, Ghada al-Samman, Ahdaf Soueif and to a large degree Hanan al-Shaykh particularly in *Only in London*. Interface may further characterize gendered concepts of urban identity, as applicable both within the canonical cities of Paris and New York, and in the emerging literature of modernity and urbanism in cities such as Cairo and Khartoum. Aboulela's urban experience is punctuated with the notion of the cyclical nature of memory, transience of urban personas and the chance encounter (as Baudelaire previously paid homage in *À Une Femme Passante*), whereby her narrator states: "After dropping me off, the bus would turn around to resume its cycle. My grief for Taha comes in cycles as well, over the years, rising and receding. Like the appearance of the West Indian conductor, it is transient and difficult to predict" (8).

According to Buruma and Margalit, Friedrich Engels saw something 'repulsive' in the city crowds, "something against which human nature rebels," for it is where people of "all

classes and ranks crowded past each other, indiscriminately, promiscuously, and above all, indifferently. What repels Engels was the lack of solidarity in this society of 'atomized' individuals, each going after his own 'selfish' interests" (47). How may Engels' perception of heightened individualism in modern street life within the occidental city, confront the immigrant experience of community, cohabitation and other Islamic values? How can such diverse worlds converge on world cities? This is a contemporaneous debate in world politics that has manipulated Islamic women's dress codes (for example, the debate on the veil in European cities), essentially marginalizing otherness in an attempt to preserve certain cultural histories. Aboulela's protagonist demonstrates a strong alliance to her values, communicated in a romantic sensibility.

To numerous urbanites, the modern city sphere of one's own is one which acts as a safe space of belonging. In comparison to Hanan al-Shaykh's proclamation on the migration from country to city life as a leading factor towards the emancipation of Lebanese women's writing (Interview), Aboulela regards her 'exile' and separation from the home city as the catalyst to her writing. Aboulela also adds that her writing aims to "show the people around me that an African city, in one of the poorest countries in the world, is as atmospheric as London, livelier than Brighton, more beautiful than Edinburgh.... Not to prove, but to express, to show that it is a valid place" (Aboulela 2002: 204)

"New York is my home precisely because it is a place from which I can begin to be elsewhere-an analogue city, a surrogate city, a shadow city that allows me to naturalize and neutralize this terrifying, devastating, unlivable megalopolis by letting me think it is something else, somewhere else," states Aciman (30). In a further example of Arab female immigrant literary impressions of European city life, the protagonist of Syrian author Ghada al-Samman's short story "The Swan Genie" of her collection *The Square Moon*, is faced with

the perplexity of choice; of either returning to Beirut following the aftermath of the Civil War, or remaining in her city of exile, Paris. In the process of her decision-making, she confesses that,

I am sometimes ashamed of myself because I no longer feel I am a stranger in Paris; I feel like one who has betrayed an old lover called Beirut ... A few little things draw me to this city as a woman. I would like to tell my husband about them, but I know he will never understand. One of them is that, here, I am not in need of his permission to obtain a passport. I am an independent person here, bound to a family, yes, but a person having an individual existence, a person accepted for herself, like any man in my country. (Al-Samman 98)

Comfort, belonging and commitment are three elements outlined by Tovi Fenster as those which constitute the finest quality of urban life (242). These three elements certainly translate in the literary interpretation of the metropolis, however Aboulela's protagonist appears to possess opposite traits. Neither does she consider herself comfortable with her surroundings, nor belonging to her adopted community, remaining committed solely to memory. Communicating with otherness, aptly one may describe her experience as embedded within an urban jungle. Yet the sense of division, difference and cultural separation debilitates the protagonists' mellifluous flow within the urban jungle, whereby she identifies with the 'stranger in the crowd,' for she states: "In Arabic my state would have been described as 'yearning for the homeland' or the 'sorrow of alienation' and there is also truth in this. I was alienated from this place where darkness descended unnaturally at 4 pm and people went about their business as if nothing happened" (Aboulela 2001: 1).

Quests for the essence of the self are eloquently communicated in Aboulela's voyage across central London. In her narrative, one does not sense a space for social struggle or resistance of the feminized urbanite. Rather, what emerges is the figure of the exiled city that re-surfaces to validate another in its 'mnemonic correlative.' It is sometimes expressed that the freedoms granted to the flâneuse are 'impossible' when imported to the Arab

metropolis, because such liberties of movement entail drifts and passages within unlimited time and abounding space, a liberty that produces a form of independence to feminine selves, curtailed in the Arab world. Aboulela's narrator is not 'botanizing on the asphalt,' but is witnessing urban life in its formation as a public experience in London. However, there is something artificial and unreal for her. The fashionable dummies signify a city without a soul, for there "in the shop windows dummies posed, aloof strangers in the frenzied life of Oxford Street" (Aboulela 2001:5). What offers Aboulela's protagonist a sense of community in this strange urban metropolis is another immigrant, the friendly West Indian bus conductor, who tells her that she looks "like one of his daughters and that he wants one day to visit the Sudan, to see Africa" (Aboulela 2001:1).

"Colored Lights" emphasizes the role of memory in the preservation of cultural identity within the backdrop of the occidental metropolis as demonstrated by the narrator. Fenster, quoting Sandercock, identifies three aspects of urban experience that create the nexus for feminine belonging, these are the "city of memory, city of desire, and city of spirit. 'Memory locates us, as part of family history, as part of a tribe or community, as part of city building and nation making. Loss of memory is, basically a loss of identity'" (248). "Colored Lights" thus determines the necessity of the visceral pulse of memory, recollection and the past in the formation of the immigrant's urban identity.

Chapter Three

Hanan al-Shaykh's 'Wounded' Beirut

The traveler is invited to visit the city and, at the same time, to examine some old postcards that show it as it used to be..if the traveler does not wish to disappoint the inhabitants, he must praise the postcard city and prefer it to the present one, though he must be careful to contain his regret at the changes within definite limits: admitting that the magnificence and prosperity of the metropolis Maurilia, when compared to the old, provincial Maurilia, cannot compensate for a certain lost grace.

Calvino 30

Beirut has occupied an emphatically prevalent position in Lebanese and pan-Arab writing within the context of Civil War and political events that shaped the formation of the modern Middle East. These include the loss of Palestine, the Israeli invasion of Beirut 1982, and the 1975 Civil War that "spawned extensive literary activity" (Cooke 1). An integral conflict of the citizen's self included the internal war of indecision, as whether or not to leave Lebanon and thus become part of the Lebanese Diaspora. It is this internal ontological struggle to take a decision and carry its weight that forms the central theme of Hanan al-Shaykh's third novel, *Beirut Blues*, structured in episodatory form, whereby the protagonist Asmahan weaves an elaborate yet fragmented torrent of memories and urban reflections in ten letters.

In some respects, Asmahan's letters are evocative of Walter Benjamin's *Denkbilder*, or the thought-image, which is the "general designation for a variety of texts that included a series of short cityscapes" (Gilloch 2) that "may be seen as the point of departure for an enduring preoccupation with the city" (3), chronicling quotidian existence in city life and a search for meaning within a versatile landscape, attempting to reach a resolution or a settlement with the self. Benjamin was known to have "both loved and loathed the city. It is this paradox, this unresolved tension, that lies at the heart of [his] fascination with the

modern metropolis" that later fuelled his social theories on culture and urban space, in establishing a rapport between architecture and social activity (Gilloch 6). The multiplicity of characters (numerous lovers, absent mothers, hostages, virile grandfathers and numerous others) are further superimposed in a broken tapestry of time and space in al-Shaykh's Beirut.

In her essay on the fiction of Hanan al-Shaykh, Ann Marie Adams describes *Beirut Blues* as an "unofficial sequel [to *The Story of Zahra* (1980)] that seeks to recoup the 'imagined community' of the nation" (202). Al-Shaykh, born in 1945 into a strict Muslim Shi'ite family and raised in al-Dahiyya (Accad 1990:43), in the Western sector of Beirut, has established her presence in the pantheon of the first wave of contemporary Arab female novelists with her characteristic approach of challenging social norms that command female behaviour. Al-Shaykh is also part of a pioneering group of Arab women writers "who has contributed much to the unveiling of women's problems" (Accad 1993: 240), whose primary themes include the portrayal of liberal female sexuality and sexual relationships, free from moral absolutism. Evelyne Accad in her study on women writers, sexuality and war, describes al-Shaykh's writing as

[p]robably the most sensual of Arab women writers. With a sensitivity and inner tone so far unequalled, she has managed to bring out a voice that is original, warm and vibrant. The delicacy of her images and the lace-like quality of her descriptions are reminiscent of the French woman writer Chantal Chavaf. Her subject matter brings to light some of the most crucial aspects of sexuality as they relate to social and political problems and, more specifically, to war. (Accad 1990: 45)

A salient factor that occupies the writings of the "Beirut Decentrists" is city life. The "Beirut Decentrists" is a term coined by Miriam Cooke to describe a group of Lebanese women writers who "have shared Beirut as their home and the war as their experience. They have been decentred in a double sense: physically, they were scattered all over a self-destructing city; intellectually they moved in separate spheres, representing a "new reflex in

Middle Eastern Literature" (Cooke 3). The Beirut Decentrists, identified as Ghada al-Saman, Hanan al-Shaykh, Emily Nasrallah, Laila Usairan, Daisy al-Amir, Claire Gebeyli and Etel Adnan, wrote of war, sexuality, alienation and "an emerging feminist consciousness" (Cooke 3). In her study on urban identity in Lebanese women's fiction, Samia Aghacy goes as far as to state that "fiction written by women is peculiarly obsessed with the city" (505), further adding that

as early as the 1960s, the city gave women the prerogative to legitimize themselves by making explicit comments on historical, social, and political issues..whether the aim is to indulge in private or public forms of experience, the city is a place of self-realization offering women the freedom of individual choice. It is in the city that the women's mind is awakened and begins to break the psychological shackles. Culture, traditions, and outworn customs have relegated her to a dark corner, and therefore her life in the city gives her visibility and breathing space. These women search for a way to be in the world, and the city is an indeterminate open space providing the independence, freedom, and mobility necessary for achieving genuine selfhood. (Aghacy 511)

Beirut as Bitch/Goddess

In her essay "Modern Day Shahrayars," Mona M. Mikhail draws an intriguing analogy between the image of the city—in the masculine literary imagination—to the archetypal figure of Shahrazad the storyteller, in such a way that the city represents a replete repository, source or rather a continuum of tales, fantasies and mythologies for the present and historical literary imagination. She says: "Alexandria, the Mediterranean jewel, like Shahrazad is an intriguing, exotic Cosmopolis, a cauldron of emotions . . . 'This capital of memory' [Alexandria] is persistently princess and whore, forever elusive like the many Shahrazads of the *Nights*" (Mikhail 95). Beirut herself has not escaped its gendered representations. To Cooke, Beirut is also represented with the air of the feminine mystique, or the paramount storyteller:

Whether Beirut was flourishing or suffering, to its inhabitants it has always been more than a mere city. It was a vibrant being that excited ambivalent emotions, and never more so than after 1975, when the jewel of the Mediterranean became the 'center for all prostitutions.' It was the Bitch/Goddess upon whose survival the survival of much more depended. Writers often addressed this muse, sometimes as a queen, sometimes as a prostitute, sometimes as an ascetic. (Cooke 16)

The oft-portrayed feminization of Beirut in literary imagination has been prevalent in the writings of the Beirut Decentrists. The metaphor is omnipresent and prominent in the Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose*, where Beirut is portrayed in the image of the battered, raped woman. In discussing al-Shaykh's earlier work *The Story of a Zahra*, Adams argues that the central character is "no mere replicate of the 'Bitch/Goddess' that purportedly was Beirut (a city that synecdochically stood for the country" (204), while Aghacy in her essay on Beirut describes the city as "feminine, enigmatic and inaccessible" (507). Adams notes that al-Shaykh's rejection of the feminization of Beirut is voiced by the character Asmahan who "refuses to fashion her country as a female that must be fought over. Denying the traditional iconography of the nation, as well as the (artificial bifurcation) of the city during the war, Asmahan refuses to 'imagine' her homeland in the ways the war (or competing national ideologies) has represented it" (212). A closer reading of *Beirut Blues* demonstrates that al-Shaykh has consciously steered away from gendered representations of the city, for the narrative does not present Beirut as a feminized subject of adoration and veneration, and avoids employing the metaphor of the feminine, abused victim. Al-Shaykh considers Beirut not as a separate entity, but as an intimate part of the self. "It is not only a city, but an extended family, even the electric poles on the street [are part of this family]" says al-Shaykh (Interview). When asked during an interview on the extent to which she identifies as the flâneuse, al-Shaykh responded that it was the shift from village to city life that has caused Lebanese women's literature to thrive, and emancipated women's fiction, "because it showed them another world" (Interview). This position is supported by M.M. Badawi's viewpoint on

the development of the modern Arabic novel as a direct outcome of urbanization, as has been mentioned earlier.

Al-Shaykh's Asmahan and Flânerie

Beirut Blues deals with the weight of indecision, in which the protagonist Asmahan recounts "fragments and flashes in memory, various peoples, events and places that form a virtual bricolage of Beirut" (Adams 208), as represented in ten letters (addressed to former lovers, hostages, the war, the land, the city and Billie Holiday). Asmahan, a "Lebanese Joan of Arc" (al-Shaykh 296; Arabic 349) represents the sexually independent, career-oriented Arab woman that engages her body and memory in rapport with her city. In essence, she is the flâneuse who has appropriated the city as a 'state of mind,' comprehending and illustrating the relationship between women, sexuality and cityscapes. The notion of the flânerie, urban wandering, remains as problematic in Western culture (Mouton 8) as it would in the Arabized context, for "aimless strolling, 'streetwalking per se,' still conjures up connotations of prostitution. . . it is aimless . . . it involves looking, and the walker strolls alone. When all these qualities are present, the rambling, street-haunting flâneuse is in a position to experience the shock, and distraction, and adventure of the life of the city and to process it in the mind as Denkbilder" (Mouton 8).

The city contains the past. Inviting memories of elsewhere that bear 'tyrannical' and 'burdensome' influences on the lives of its inhabitants, where "memories cripple a person and make progress impossible" (Aghacy 511), akin to the mnemonic correlative discussed earlier in Leila Aboulela's short story "Coloured Lights." Asmahan the flâneuse, an architect who "made designs for buildings from [the village] to Beirut" (al-Shaykh 212: not in Arabic,

translator's addition), states that "an encounter with the past must restore a person's soul" (226: Arabic 244) and finds herself in "constant dialogue with [the past]" (51: Arabic 55). In a letter to Hayat, Asmahan describes a situation where history and memory themselves become tangible, recounting an incident where a family drove by Beyt Mary to collect ancient ruins, walking away with a "part of the fifth century in their trunk" (28: Arabic 26).

"How can someone be so attached to the inanimate?" (al-Shaykh 94: Arabic 110) ponders Asmahan, reflective of Jung's *participation mystique*. Akin to Cairo's Kareema Fahmi, Asmahan demonstrates a keen rapport between the feminine self and the city's landscape, echoing Lewis Mumford argument that one of the city's functions is the "making and re-making of selves" (qtd. in Mouton 10). As such, one may read the city as a text (as previously posited by Lehan 1998: 8), in which "the city's architecture form a secret, unwritten 'text' to be 'read' by the urban physiognomist" (Gilloch 7). In critique of Civil War, Asmahan laments the city in ruins, violence and destruction that transforms her landscape, in which the war deemed her "in a wasteland without a glimpse of the future. You had a part in destroying my ideas about a new kind of architecture ... When I saw ruined buildings hastily reconstructed with wooden siding and sheets of tin, I heard you laughing at my ludicrous ideas" (231: Arabic 275).

The aesthetic experience of street-walking the metropolis, of 'gazing' in engagement with body and time has altered with the outbreak of civil war, whereas "the streets belong to anyone who dares venture into them" (al-Shaykh 230: Arabic 274). Asmahan points to the fact that walking is different during the war, she compares herself to the "bee, discovering the honeycomb city" (al-Shaykh 82: Arabic 87). The body becomes a commodity of war in the city, and she asks: "How can I recognize a city which tolerates fanatics who search for blond hair and light eyes to kidnap as if they inhabit a crude fairy-tale world?" (al-Shaykh 35:

Arabic 32). The city is now populated with bodies, tanks and bullet-ridden buildings that are compared to "fragments of crossword puzzles" (95: Arabic 110) and are "collapsing like dominoes" (266: Arabic 310). They are further described as "pockmarked by bullets, immense leopards with their spotted skins" (63: Arabic 65). Asmahan has "forgotten what it was like to walk" in Beirut (40: Arabic 36), to visit the café's and nightlife, whereas now she walks "as in a big soap bubble" (35: Arabic 32), seeing "Beirut with its soul and guts hanging out" (260: Arabic 303).

Asmahan, assuming the role of the urban aesthete, also takes political action to poignantly commit to memory her cityscape, joining an association to "preserve old buildings of Beirut," whereby her work "consisted of acclimatising to the new and trying to forget the old, accepting what was in front of me even if it was ugly, hoping and then learning to live without hope" (al-Shaykh 233: Arabic 277). During an evening stroll with Jawad, she is angered by the presence of artificial grapes in a Zaitouna downtown nightclub. Expressing frustration towards the décor, she asks: "What was the relationship of taste to the war" (al-Shaykh 310: Arabic 363)? As such, Asmahan relates to Beirut as Calvino related to Maurilia, the post-card city, where memory bears oppressive proportions. If the city represents a cauldron of utopian visions, methods for the best possible ways of being, especially integrated within notions of beauty and the sublime, Asmahan declares that the "street should take you into a different atmosphere" (al-Shaykh 132: Arabic 139) where "something exciting is about to happen" (331: Arabic 379), evocative of Baudelaire's 'chance encounter' in the metropolis as evident in "A Une Passante." She reflects on "a life where there are universities, people jogging on beaches, wide city street walks" (al-Shaykh 198), liberties that call for a 'new architecture' producing "harmony with body and mind" (231: Arabic 275).

City life is quintessentially public, offering alternatives to domestic realities, a domain where the body is arguably released from controlled movement. Sexuality and city life are perhaps inextricably related beneath the latent level of the self's consciousness. In a letter to Conrad Aiken dated 31 December 1914, T.S. Eliot confesses that there is a direct connection between his self and his sexuality in the city of London, whereby he writes:

"How much more self-conscious one is in a big city! Have you noticed it? Just at present this is an inconvenience, for I have been going through one of those nervous sexual attacks which I suffer when alone in a city . . . I never have them in the country . . . this is the worst since Paris" (74). Ann Marie Adams argues that "in Beirut Blues, there is an intensely personal sense of space" (213). Samira Aghacy further describes the expression of sexuality in Lebanese women's urban fiction as highly liberating, whereby

within the nurturing urban space, an articulate, erotic, and individualized self is constructed that is strongly opposed to and in conflict with patriarchal constructions of femininity and peculiarly free of nostalgia for a past order. In order to free themselves of the images and representations imposed on them by the cultural apparatus, women's texts look forward beyond patriarchy into the unknown, and the prohibited. In fact, fiction written by women contains exhilarating celebrations of city life as a potential catalyst for sexual release. (Aghacy 509)

Asmahan's character is representative of the fiercely independent woman in sexual matters, at times "desperate for a man, any man, in this drought" (al-Shaykh 197: Arabic 210), breaking taboos relating to female sexual honour in traditional Arab codes of gender. Her sexual adventures are enacted upon the cityscape amidst its dangers, whereby the elements of war, violence and risk assume erotic proportions. Like her cultural icon Billie Holiday, and Ruhiyya of the village, Asmahan is "created from deep in the earth . . . shaped by the earth's tumult and grief . . . discovered reality there, loving men passionately from an early age" (al-Shaykh 135: Arabic 142). In Saint George's Bay, Asmahan swims with a

stranger, they “wiped the salt out of [their] eyes” (al-Shaykh 228: Arabic 248) and she sleeps with him. With Simon, a war correspondent who “wanted sex, wanted to forget the violence,” (al-Shaykh 268: Arabic 312) she derived her pleasure at all cost, stating “my meetings with Simon gave me a feeling of warmth and excitement, snatching me right out of the city as it surged back and forth between uproar and fragrant calm...the feeling that I wanted to have my pleasure whatever happened. It is only when we got up and dressed that I knew I didn’t love him” (al-Shaykh 39: Arabic 35), she adds.

The war tank, as a sexual symbol, is an objective correlative to her affair with Naser. In a letter addressed to Naser, she writes, “You’re in my mind now because I’m traveling in a tank, and I feel you in my body because I’m sweating slightly and it reminds me of the times we managed to be together, in spite of the fighting all around” (al-Shaykh 67: Arabic 68). In a letter addressed to Jawad, she draws attention to desires enabled by the city, whereby “the need for close physical contact generated by the atmosphere of the city was affecting us both now. We were an island surrounded by heaving waters full of crocodiles” (al-Shaykh 311: Arabic 364), and that “making love isn’t as easy as it used to be” (315: Arabic 367).

Committing the City to Memory

Asmahan envisions Parisian flânerie in a visual snapshot of imagined futures following Jawad’s invitation to leave Lebanon and re-commence a new life in France, “the world of movies, galleries, yoga” (al-Shaykh 323: Arabic 373) thus joining the Lebanese Diaspora;

I began to think about new places, places with horizons. I pictured myself in his apartment..I hurry along in the rain as I used to in Beirut in the old days with my umbrella up, drawn to the lighted cafés, smelling of warmth, coffee and cigarettes. I walk through the streets at night, feeling as if something exciting is about to happen. In the day I stroll the sidewalks and wear a hat or put a purple streak in my hair. I see films I’ve read about, buy magazines, and the rust of years falls away. (al-Shaykh 330: Arabic 379)

Yet at Beirut's airport departure hall, waiting to board the plane to France with Jawad, Asmahan decides to remain in Beirut, resisting the onslaught of homesickness, refusing to "keep [her] country imprisoned in memory" (al-Shaykh 360: Arabic 415). May one perceive the city and its public as a protean subject in the contemporary Arab woman's novel? May it also, as previously demonstrated by the character Kareema Fahmi, be interpreted by the feminine self, (as *écriture féminine*), or as a discursive site where the feminine subject negotiates and contests her traditions, values, ideals and moral absolutisms? The literary contribution of Lebanon's Hanan al-Shaykh to Arabic urban fiction with *Beirut Blues*, alongside the image of Italo Calvino's postcard city Maurilia, one of fifty-five 'invisible cities' that compose "the outrageous utopia: the invisible city. The perfect city caught in the interstices of imperfection" (Pedriali 167), offers a unique feminine psycho-geography that maps the nexus between bodies, selves and cities in the modern Arabic novel. Al-Shaykh's narrative treatment of the appropriation of time and memory in one's viscera, is further propelled by themes of Arab women's sexual independence, freedom of movement within an urban landscape, the formation of national identity, the relationship between sexuality, aesthetics and architecture, and the emerging portrait of the Arab flâneuse, encapsulated by the character Asmahan as the urban stroller.

Conclusion

This time, its Woman whom I've seen in the City; I've spoken to her, and she to me...I went into the endless city. Fatigue!

Rimbaud "The Deserts of Love," 206

Janet Abu-Lughod proclaims in her portrait of Cairo, that "cities are, to paraphrase, all things to all men...cities are processes, not products." As an archive of human experience, the metropolis has represented loci of knowledge, power, fates of the masses, laws that govern bodies, and 'epistemic spaces' for social control. It is understood that the extent to which women have been excluded from city planning is a viable item on the agenda of an emerging Arab feminist mode of urban thought. Since literature is not detached from social reality, "space is where we can see most tangibly that cultural citizenship values exclude women-literally. This is because cultural construction of space has inherent in its symbolism the legitimacy to exclude women from power and influence" (Fenster 245).

As demonstrated by feminist psycho-geographers Elizabeth Wilson and Janet Wolff, there is a narrowing literary gap in the literature of modernity in the experience of feminine 'otherness' and the development of world cities. Recent study groups such as the *Shahr Urban Landscapes Network*, and the recently formed *Cairo Urban School of Urban Studies*, work towards addressing this gap from an inter-disciplinary perspective. The latter group addresses numerous critical issues such as globalization, cosmopolitanism and mass consumerism as an influential threat upon the formation of modern Arab urban identity. The approach applied aims to "move away from the reification of scientific knowledge or episteme and toward practical wisdom (an updated Aristotelan notion of *phronesis*) that is contextual, grounded in experience, and inextricably linked to the world and its concrete relations of power"

(Singerman and Amar 26). Gender relations and the feminine expression of city planning and belonging are pivotal aspects that are questioned in the three selected texts. Therefore, a further lacunae in the study of women and cities, is the formation and development of literary urban experiences within the Arab, African Islamic world. Other feminist literary critics are demonstrating further gendered aspects of flânerie and its urban meanings. Some have studied the gradual increase of female access to the city, to trace the "visibility and experience of the *flâneuse* in the urban landscape . . . as a social phenomenon, [she] gains access to fictional and real urban spaces" (Bauhardht 738). Perhaps there is 'no perfect city' (Grosz 109) to accommodate the body and its various interfaces. Yet cities remain breeding grounds for the literary and visual creation of uniquely feminine urban experiences and 'other/modern' New Women, both in canonical cities of the European self, and the subaltern 'other.'

In post-Romantic and early modern urban literature, cities in masculine literary imagination have been characterized as centers of alienation and loss, symbolizing the decay of morality, and celebration of artifice, as well as representing ontological proximities or distances from utopian realities. At present, one may argue that the post-modern urban experience is, as described by Elizabeth Wilson in her seminal study on urbanity and women,

The Sphinx in the City as

typically described in negative terms, as a form of disorientation, meaninglessness and fragmentation. Postmodernism is more than an aesthetic experience; postmodernism perceives all experience in aesthetic terms. In post-modernism the city becomes a labyrinth or a dream. Its chaos and senselessness mirror a loss of meaning in the world. At the same time, there may be an excess of meaning; the city becomes a split screen flickering with competing beliefs, cultures and stories. (Wilson 135)

The Jouissance of Bint al-Madina

Contrariwise, it is possible to posit that the feminine urban experience in modernist literature portrays city-life as a form of emancipation. More so, perhaps the post-modern city re-defines *jouissance*, interpreted by Roland Barthes as the articulation of a moment of pleasure embodying all of the body and all of physical space. With regards to *jouissance*, which may be defined as a form of rapture, joy and pleasure, Salwa Bakr's Kareema Fahmi, Leila Aboulela's protagonist, and Hanan al-Shayh's Asmahan demonstrate a passionate vein towards their belongings, in essence their cities. This confirms the need to present women's perspective on cities as Elizabeth Wilson pointed out:

Perhaps we should be happier in our cities were we to respond to them as to nature or dreams: as objects of exploration, investigation and interpretation, settings for voyages of discovery. The 'discourse' that has shaped our cities - the utilitarian plans of experts whose goal was social engineering-has limited our vision and almost destroyed our cities. It is time for a new vision, a new ideal of life in the city—and a new, 'feminine' voice in praise of cities. (135)

Does the modern city usher the decay of myth? Cities constitute a hub of tensions and dichotomies, of old and new worlds, pasts and presents, alienations within crowds and promises of liberation, where women's engagement in the literary, cultural and political production has revealed a multiplicity of voices, particularly in modern Arab literature as demonstrated in the three selected texts. The figure of the city is currently a worldly issue that numerous critics may correlate to the global crisis. To characterize a uniquely feminine Arab urban experience, and to discover unique modes of *flânerie* in the modern Arab metropolis, is to exhume 'otherness' and establish a critical rapport between women and sister cities that are deeply characterized by memory, loss, longing and madness, where feminine sensibility is acutely conscious of processes of change, cornerstone to urban life.

This study has attempted to integrate the emerging literature of cities and the gendered subaltern of the Western literary canon, with the contemporary Arab metropolis, while interrogating the birth of the modern-as urban-Arab woman. The three texts raise questions of whether we live for the state, the city or the self as a fundamental rapport enacted in the social struggles within the metropolis. In essence, " 'Only love knows how to marry this space' when cities break up and the land is a train of dust. The city and language, the city and her spokesman, the artist, transcend violence and destruction. Both reconstruct constantly whatever breaks down" (Amyuni 72).

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