**Fragmented Mirrors: Repression of Women in the Arab Feminist War Novel**

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This article discusses the manifestation of the repression of women in the contemporary feminist Arab war novel. It seeks to show how social changes resulting from war influence the consciousness of women and how they think by looking at war as an existential struggle. In the aftermath of war, women are constructed as more daring and effective individuals within a male-dominated society. This shift in how women are constructed in literature is highlighted in the hostile behavior of women during wartime and how they use various methods, such as their sexuality, to cope in these difficult circumstances. In contemporary literature war is constructed as awaking women’s femininity and helping them reconcile their sexual and emotional identities, whilst they confront existential dilemmas of life and death.

Keywords:

Subject classification codes:

After the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and America’s Iraq War (2003) the war novel in modern Arabic literature flourished and became a separate literary genre. It exposed the psychological and physical repression of women in Arab societies. This article will examine the physical and mental repression of woman in five Arab feminist war novels and one collection of short stories written by Lebanese, Palestinian and Iraqi women writers, published during the period 1980 and 2014. These short stories include: *Hikayat Zahra* (Zahra’s Tale), published in 1980 by the Lebanese writer; *Hanan al-Sheikh*; *Maryam al-Hakaya* (Maryam’s Tales), published in 2002 by the Lebanese writer *‘Alawieh Suboh*; *Haleeb al-Teen* (Fig Milk), published in 2010 by the Palestinian writer *Samia Issa*; *Baynama; Yanam al-Alam*, (While the World is Sleeping), published in 2010 by the Palestinian writer *Suzan Abu al-Hawa;* *Nusf Lil-Kadifah*, (Half for the Shell), published in 2014 by the Iraqi writer *Sumayah al- Shibani*; and a collection of short stories, *Hawatif al-Liel* (Night Calls), published in 2012, by the Iraqi writer *Bushra al-Bustani.*

**1. The Lebanese Feminist Novel
*1.1. Sex, War and Psychological Fragmentation.***

*Hanan al-Shaykh[[1]](#endnote-1)* is considered one of the first and most daring Arab writers regarding breaking taboos in her novels. She is interested in portraying the suffering of Arab women in male-dominated society, whilst revealing the true character of men who engage in various forms of repression against women. She is well-known for introducing intense sexual themes in her novels, starting with her first novel “*Intihar Rajul Maiet*” (The Suicide of a Dead Man), published in 1970 and “*Hikayat Zahra*”, published in 1980. She explains this by saying: “I think that you cannot be honest by being distant from sex”. She started in her work, “*Intihar Rajul Maiet*”, by addressing the subject of sex by writing about a man who has lost his sexual capacity to perform. In *Hikayat Zahra* for example, sex was constructed as bitter and disgusting, but it reflected intimate characters and relationships, and the writer enjoyed the discretion of Zahra, for example, while she prepares to meet the sniper. The author writes: “Sex is a vital social issue to the extent that it allows me to say that it is the engine that move relations between human beings, even if they thought the opposite or negated that” [[2]](#endnote-2). In *Hikayat Zahra*, the presence of sex is combined with the theme of war, in an attempt to communicate a deeper meaning and construct the man, Shehriar as domesticated. . This serves to reduce the number of his victims in the Lebanese Civil War, one of the goals of the main female character. On the other hand, sex represents a mirror which reflects the ugliness and brutality of these men, in particular how they oppress and exploit women, symbolizing a reflection of the stereotype of man’s power in the male-dominated society. Man prevails in the novel because the sex that Zahra used as a weapon to domesticate the sniper, fails to stop him from killing people, and leads to her rejection after she becomes pregnant with his child.

The repercussions of the Lebanese civil war are demonstrated in this novel in both the lives of men and women. War increases the suffering of women, the brutality of men and their repressive authority toward women. This is reflected in the personality of *Zahra*, the Shiite woman. She saw from her aunt, *Safieh’s* room on the roof of the neighboring building, a sniper carrying a rifle. Standing in fear, she asked herself: “What will make the sniper distract from pointing the gun and opening his mouth of surprise?”[[3]](#endnote-3). *Zahra* used her powers of seduction. She takes off her clothes, draws a towel around her waist, a towel on her head and walks singing across from him half-naked. She seduces him and they have ‘thrilling’ sex on the dirty floor of an abandoned building. She experiences sexual ecstasy for the first time in thirty years and states: “I shouted: What happened to me on the dirty floor in an abundant building full of horror, sadness and death? My body is irritating for the first time in thirty years, pleasure has shaken it, and it seems like it is watching me[[4]](#endnote-4). Strangely enough, *Zahra* was a victim of the war in spirit and body. Not only did this sexual event weaken her resolve, it leads to her struggle with schizophrenia before she dies. On one hand, she hates everything brought on by war, but on she enjoyed being with *Sami,* the sniper who symbolizes both war and sexual desire; something she did not enjoy before the war with other men. This can be seen in the excerpt: “Why I did not feel this pleasure before and did not cling to the back of a man on a normal bed, while I cling to the back of the sniper?”[[5]](#endnote-5). *Zahra* underwent sexual obsession and struggled with schizophrenia. She is constructed as being obsessed with having sex with the sniper, Sami. She considered it as a way to overlook and erase her past. “I was screaming, screaming without letting him hear me: O sniper... sitting on me like a lofty mountain without weight, digging deep trenches in my body; can you dig deeper and deeper until you open another outlet in my body, in order to let away these long fearful moments and the planted images inside me with its colors, forms, effects, which no longer budge[[6]](#endnote-6).

This sex scene is absurd, shaped with dirtiness and male brutality. It reveals the psychological disorder of *Zahra* and her alienation from her body and community, because of past traumas and nightmares resulting from the oppression of her father. The dirty place where she had sex in the abandoned building and the identity of her partner the sniper, refer to the mania of which *Zahra* was suffering. The deserted and dirty place symbolizes the disruptive relationship between the two and predicts a tragic and unsuccessful end to this seasonal relationship dictated by war.

It is true that *Zahra* became obsessed by sex with *Sami* the sniper and saw in this the advantages of war in her life. However, this feeling overflows in her as a form of revenge against her repressive father who disappeared during the war. Zahra used sex, the biggest taboo in the male-dominated society, as a way of directing strong criticism against it. This is what she reveals in her monologue, while she was having sex in an abandoned building: “The war came... Do you hear me my father? Here I am lying unable to turn my head. Ecstasy is flowing in me again and again without end. War made me expect anything to happen between one moment and the other. This new thing is not so bad”[[7]](#endnote-7). Having sex for *Zahra* was an insurgency against the repression and inferiority complex instigated by her father. In every sex scene, at the top of her sexual ecstasy with the sniper, she addresses her father to provoke him by screaming and asking him to come and see her exposed body resigned to the sniper and etched by his sex organ, in order to shock him, shake the patriarchal society, prove to her father that there is a man who is in love with her and wants to have sex with her despite the ugliness that he used to attribute to her: “Let me shout O sniper of pleasure, so that my father can hear my scream, to come and see my body lying, docked messily on the dirty floor of the death building. Let him see my unfolded thighs resigned totally, see the lower part of my front and its soft hair, my chest with its sleeping nipples and my hands too tired but to relax. Only my eyes are wakeful. The god of war came and took away my lost virginity once, twice and many more, so I can feel that war abolished my virginity. No one can see me now except the walls of this death building and the sniper to whom I am always thankful, because he accepted me despite my ugliness. He is a realistic man.”[[8]](#endnote-8)*.*

This scene suggests “that we are also in face of an oppressor that repeals the female ego and marginalizes it and at the same time in the face of a domesticated female slave begging her virile master to enter her physical paradise”[[9]](#endnote-9).This schizophrenic behavior in her personality is related to the impact of war. The stretched body of *Zahra* was violated by the sniper and she surrendered completely to him, except for her eyes, which can’t do anything according to the popular saying: “The eye has insight but the hand is short”. The body of *Zahra* is a symbol of the Lebanese homeland, which has become incapacitated after it was divided and torn apart by the civil war.

On the other hand, the war played an important role in the liberation of women from the strict and male-domination society and represents the level of awareness and attitudes in the treatment of women in a hypocritical and destabilized society. The war awakened *Zahra* and revived her consciousness, and self-confidence; it made her forget her strained past and personal suffering; but brought her to death at the end. Dr. *Hanadi al-Saman* says in this context: “War novels constitute a new forum to represent the patriarchal violence on the woman’s body”. We see also *Zahra,* the heroine of Al-Shaykh’s *novel* suffering from a series of rapes, abortions and even murder at the end by the sniper of the neighborhood, which represents a tool used by the patriarchal system”[[10]](#endnote-10).

When the war broke out, *Zahra* left her fear, silence and isolation at home in Beirut and turned from being a silent negative person into an active person concerned by the human fears. This is seen in the following excerpts: “The war killed them but it did awaken me up and made me alive”[[11]](#endnote-11). “It is like an insect that crept into a white flour sack and settled there”[[12]](#endnote-12)*.* According to Roger Allen “The story of *Zahra* in the first section of the book is a story of silence; the book begins precisely with complete silence: the mother closed her mouth tightly by her hand.”[[13]](#endnote-13). The war, on the other hand, brought destruction, death, poverty, terror, prostitution, and sectarian and partisan division.

*Zahra* was shocked by the behavior of her brother *Ahmed* who joined the *Shi’ite* Militia. He had taken killing and looting as a job. Zahra failed to bring him back to his non-violent past, convinced that the war changed everything. *Zahra* also failed to humanize the sniper. However*, Zahra,* which represents the voice of the fragmented Lebanese society during the war, has two faces: one conscious face which rejects the war and calls for its end and another real hidden face in harmony with the sniper. She makes love with him in secret and aspires to marry him. The name *Zahra* with its symbolic feminist signification and sexual connotation embodies the life of women in an oppressive patriarchal society, in which women are constructed as disposable, ready to be thrown away after they used. This is what happened with *Zahra* in the novel. Moreover, the names of men who intimidated her, *Malek* (friend of her brother), *Qasim* (her cousin), *Hashim* (her uncle), *Majed* (her husband), *Sami* (the sniper), in addition to their linguistic and symbolic signification are all in the linguistic form of *Ism Fa’il* (actor), which confirms the male authority over the female in the Arab society. From structural point of view, *Zahra* narrates her story by using flashback and monologues, emphasizing her isolation and repression within her family and Lebanese society. She feels alone, like no one listens to her, which is why there is such a heavy emphasis on the use of monologues in the text, as these monologues reiterate her feelings of alienation and isolation in the world.

Another example of repression and the breakdown of women in the Lebanese feminist war novel is shown in the writings of *Alawieh Suboh*. She is well known for her daring and shocking writings about the daily affairs of women, mainly in issues relating to sex and body. In her novel, *Maryam Hakaya*, the Lebanese women are presented in their diversity, contradictions and divisions, through stories of defeated, distressed women during the civil war and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. These women are *Maryam, Ibtisam, ‘Alawieh* and *Yasmin*. Daring sex is heavily employed in the novel as a way in which to challenge and cope with the war and expose the fragile Lebanese society, detecting it falsity, failure and blights. Sex is present during the war in an erotic and shocking manner as an expression of the trauma of the war and its many tragedies. For example, *Ibtisam* and *Karim* are having sex under the Israeli artillery bombardment of Beirut[[14]](#endnote-14). In this depiction sex represents an existential function and is an element for the defense of life and fight against the blockade during this time of conflict.

The emergence of women having sex during wartimes was an expression of their fear of death, their frustration with the reality, or a reaction to the death of a lover or husband. These circumstances propelled these women to have sex. *Mariam* explains that as a justification for having sex with *Mustapha*: “The fear of death made the fear of all other things worthless and meaningless”[[15]](#endnote-15). This image is frequently represented in the novel. *Mariam*’s character represents the collective voice of the Lebanese women who worked during the war in a law office, which belongs to *Abass.* Her real intention was to have sex with him. She saw the touching of her body by him as a way to escape from death. She narrates erotic details of several scenes between them, describing the movements of his sexual organ while penetrating her genitals, which she described as follows: “He felt the moment he entered me that his sex organ penetrated a well between my thighs, descending into its bottom which is without bottom until he reached his orgasm. But when he pursed and relaxed after his climax, he discovered his fear of the unknown secrets in piercing emptiness and death” [[16]](#endnote-16).  *Abass* presents an image of Arab men in a patriarchal society, who took advantage of the weakness of *Mariam* to satisfy his sexual desires.

Sex represents a mirror, which reveals the characters of the defeated narrators when they resort to narrate stories of men with women as a source of catharsis and escape from the trauma of war, which defeated the society as a whole and claimed many victims. Because of the large number of deaths, *Asmahan* reopened her sewing machine to sew burial shrouds for women[[17]](#endnote-17). Sex in the novel is constructed as the preoccupation of the defeated popular classes. It illustrates the alienation of the body and the defeat of the spirit. It is also a testimony to the repression of women and violation of their body. Sex was practiced in times of social chaos away from affection, love and marriage. This is what happened to *Ibtissam* and *Karim.* He abandoned her after having sex with her. He got married to his relative from Brazil who asked *Mariam:* “Do men differentiate between love and marriage in our country, between the body and the spirit of women? Between the female and love, or even between the female and her body[[18]](#endnote-18).

Sex in this novel has other implications. It represents a code and a way for women to discover their bodies. Moreover, it represents a sign of their alienation, and is evidence of the brutality and bestiality of men in devouring their bodies like a piece of meat. This estrangement and disaffection was felt by the defeated *Mariam* while having sex with *Mustapha* in his house: “*Mustapha* returned the alienation of my body to me while he was taking off my cloth. My body looked like a piece of meat in front of me when he continued biting it by his mouth like a dog when he bits his food”[[19]](#endnote-19) . Men in this society reduced women to their physical bodies. *Mustapha* betrayed *Mariam* with a small younger blond woman in the Gondola Café. She was shocked when she discovered this and admonished him for his unfaithfulness. He said that he will not marry her because she is too old, while she was only 28 years old: “His answer landed like a thunderbolt on my head. Am I old*?”[[20]](#endnote-20).* In the text *Mariam* was the victim of abuse and repression of many men. In addition to *Mustapha*, *Abass* the married man exploited her and had sex with her. Moreover, her repressive father used to beat her and beat her mother. Because of her defeat and social alienation, she was forced marry *Amin,* who she rejected 25 years ago.

We can conclude that the rest of the women were shadows and mirrors of the defeated *Mariam* politically and emotionally, due to the opportunism of men and their repression. In fact, the repression of women in the Lebanese society by men stems from their political defeat. They are replicas of the typical Arab male character since the Abbasid period as it was represented by the Caliphate in *Harun ar-Rashid*.

**2. The Palestinian Feminist Novel
*2.1. Shocking Erotica and Sisyphean Suffering****.*

Palestinian women represent an example of male repression, as a result of the 1948 catastrophe and the successive wars and massacres carried out against their people. They were displaced from their homeland and lived in humiliation and poverty in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and the diaspora. They suffered from the corruption and discrimination of the state institutions, which dealt with them as refugees; as well as the repression and exploitation of the male leadership in the Palestinian camps. They were exposed to sexual abuse and extortion, which resulted in their social deviation from traditional norms in that society. Consequently, Palestinian women writers in exile resorted to breaking the taboos surrounding their society by exposing the suffering of Palestinian women in the diaspora; exposing the hidden, and portraying the relationship of woman and her forgotten femininity and desire for sexual relations. The small and closed place, in which they were forced to live inside the camps changed how they constructed their femininity as they were denied privacy. These harsh conditions forced the Palestinian women to rebel and break their silence by resorting to sex and eventually prostitution as sex became a commodity that they could trade.

The Palestinian writer Samia Issa, who lives in Dubai, is considered one of the writers who showed interest in the daily issues of Palestinian women inside the Palestinian refugee camps in the Lebanese diaspora. She portrayed detailed facts about the repression of Palestinian women in a daring and shocking manner, by exposing the sexual abuse they were exposed to at the hands of the supervisors in the camps. She also portrayed the daily suffering of the lives of these women after they lost their husbands and children, as a result of the *Nakba* and the different wars. Her novel “*Haleeb at-Teen*” narrates the story of repression and abuse of a Palestinian woman, an immigrant in Denmark, called *“Sadika*”. She lived through the repercussions of war, defeat, and poverty. She was widowed at a young age. She lost her martyred husband and was subsequently sexually abused by the supervisors of the Palestinian camp in Lebanon. This scandalous shocking novel with its daring sexual and provocative images of political corruption undermines the holiness, which tinted the image of Palestinian camps and the prestige of its leaders. It is a novel of revelation and condemnation. It removes the masks of sexual and political taboos; exposing the suffering of Palestinian women inside the camp; and portrays the repression and abuse of her body by the friends of her martyred husband. The novel refers from the beginning to the shock that was made by Fatima by revealing the “untold story”. The novel goes deep into small delicate details in hidden places, for example, “the women’s bathroom” in the camp, to reveal the deceit and corruption of the leaders in the camp; the changing constructs of Palestinian’s women’s femininity; the neglect of the Palestinian women; the harsh conditions; the lack of privacy and presence of patriarchal society. Women’s courage in making the invisible visible emerged particularly in the feminist literature, which offered a perspective completely different from the one offered by men at that time. The American writer Miriam Cook says: “Women’s literature opens a window on to lives that had been led in the shadows and therefore gives a different perspective on society as whole. Women’s literature plumbs the depths of tensions and confusions that riddle daily life, and is not content to observe their surface”[[21]](#endnote-21).

The novel begins in making the voice of voiceless women heard. The voice of women in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, who lived in alienation and were subjected to harsh and humiliating living conditions and subsequently neglected their bodies. After the loss of their martyred husbands they reconcile their oppressed femininity and ‘delinquent’ bodies. Fatima the widowed grandmother is more than 50 years old. The *Nakba* made her pay the price during her stay in exile through deprivation, loss of femininity and male repression. She looked for a closed room inside the open camp, to reconcile with her forgotten body. She used the public “bathroom”, the only place in the camp, in which women used to masturbate. While she masturbated, and unveiled screams of ecstasy and desire a man from the other side of the public bathroom watched her and masturbated to the rhythm of her screams. This unknown man was *Rakad,* the head of the popular committees in the camp. He was a symbol of political corruption. In fact, after the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon, he collected the arms from the camp and sold it to arms dealers. The camp did not provide a “closed room” or ‘public bathroom’ for privacy and this one ‘closed room’ was the bathroom used by all the inhabitants in the camp. It holds a semiotic connotation, because it represents the grim reality in the camp. The attention of Fatima to her body albeit late, indicates an awakening in the life of a repressed women inside the camp. It is also considered as a revolt and shattering of the thick mirrors that cover their bodies; an uprising against the male-dominated authority that control their life.

There is a second feminist character in the novel, a victim of poverty, sexual abuse and corruption of Palestinian leaders, *Sadika* the wife of *Ahmad* son of *Fatima. She is* a young and beautiful widow, bargained by *“Abu Ali’* the Palestinian official in the camp for sexual favors in exchange for the salary of her martyred husband. This is a tragic punishment and exposes the bitter reality of these Palestinian camps.

*Sadika* experienced successive defeats and disappointments andwas fed up with her life in the camp. She left her three children with her mother-in-lawand ran away from the camp to Dubai. There she worked as hairdresser with *Nawal* who left the camp in Lebanon after the death of her husband and children in the *Sabra* and *Satilla* massacre. In Dubai, *Sadika* changed her name to *Hiyam* and discovered that the saloon of *Nawal* is a place, where women to work as prostitutes*. Sadika* was victimised and opposed by both men and woman, which is represented by her relationship with *Abu Ali and* Nawal. *Nawal* is presented as responsible for the fall of *Sadika* and her work as prostitute. Because of her, *Sadika* suffered physically and psychologically scars. One night *Sadika* ran away from the hotel naked because a sadistic customer whipped her and beat her. When she complained to *Nawal*, he was not sympathetic and rebuked her (*Issa*, 209). This is an example of men in this novel view women. They see women as only bodies that are there to satisfy their instincts and whims. Women however use their bodies as commodities to survive because of the desperate circumstances they are in due to *Nakba*, the wars, the displacement and the death of their husbands.

*Sadika* wakes up after a series of Sisyphean disappointment. She is no longer able to work as a prostitute to meet the whims of depraved and abusive customers. However, this awakening does not offer her a solution, but an escape and a new experience in loss and dispersion. Furthermore, the sexual cry launched by “*Fatima*” at the beginning of the novel from a public bathroom, symbolized how Palestinian women’s voices must be heard. In chapter nine, the last chapter in the novel, Fatima in front of her neighbor “*Um Faisal*” accuses and condemns the corruption amongst Palestinian leader, highlighting their luxury life and how they traffic children in the camps: “She looked at her neighbor and continued while she was slapping her cheeks: *Um Faisal*, How we can get Palestine back? They send our kids to war; live in apartments and palaces; drive last model cars…send their spouses for shopping in Paris and London and sleep in five star hotels”[[22]](#endnote-22). This outburst breaks many taboos in the Palestinian camps and comes from a woman, who is rediscovering her body.

Despite repression in the camps women fight back. This was demonstrated in the novel by the words of *“Fatima*”. She displays a new awareness and participation in the vital political and intellectual life of her people, by breaking political taboos and daring to express criticism and condemnation against Palestinian institutions and leaders, who are profiting from the repercussions of the *Nakba* and exploiting the children of the camps for their own interests. The Palestinian woman in this novel lost everything. She lost her home, and then she lost her husband and children. She also lost her femininity and then sold her body to men and women alike. She decides after this defeat to live in Denmark together with *Sadika,* who followed her later.

“*Haleeb al-Teen*” is a novel of fear, in which a woman rediscovers her body. The freedom of her body represents the freedom of thinking and the freedom of the land. However, the solution posed by the novel in the words of *“Fatima*” and *“Sadika”* is obscure, defeatist and deserting. This solution does not fit the spirit of revolt, which *Sadika* followed when she left prostitution in Dubai. It does not fit the backgrounds of these two characters presented in the text. They lived in the misery of the camp and are both defeated characters and in crises. For example, those who criticize the corruption in the camp and camp authority, do not pose solutions but instead choose to escape into a new alienation and a mysterious diaspora.

***2.2. Obsession of Extinction, Identity and Sense of Place***

In recent years, the Palestinian women writers living in exile, show their interest in recording the historical facts and tragic events in the lives of the Palestinian people as a way to preserve the Palestinian narrative and highlight the Palestinian attachment to their land from which they were displaced and exiled. Among these women's voices is the Palestinian writer *Suzan Abu al-Hawa*, who lives in Pennsylvania in the United States of America. In her novel which was first published in English under the title “Mornings In Jenin”, published in 2009 and then translated into Arabic under the title “*Bienama Yanam al-‘Alam*”, she displays in a dramatic manner, the bloodbaths in the life of *Abu al-Hija* family throughout four generations, starting with the forced relocation of their Palestinian village “*Ein Hodd*” east of Haifa; the defeat of June 1967; the events of Black September in 1970; the massacre of *Sabra* and *Shatila* in 1982; and finally the massacre at the Jenin refugee camp in 2002. Survival and fear of extinction is the subject treated in this novel. It records the repression and suffering of the Palestinian people since the Nakba and the current tragedies and massacres. The writer narrates from her memory the impact of the *Nakba* on the lives of Palestinians, and it destroyed their homes and erased their identities.

*Amal,* the family granddaughter dramatically narrates the tragedies in the life of her famil*y, “Abu al-Haija*”, which used to live in peace in their village. However, the family ceased to exist except her. The woman in this novel embodies the collective memory of the Palestinian people. *Amal* who was born in the Jenin refugee camp after the displacement of her family, displays the tragedies experienced by her family and shows enough knowledge of the history of her people, a history that is marred with blood. In 1948, the family was displaced from their village, *“Ein Hudd*”: *Dalia* lost her family, except two of her sisters and her child, *Ismail* was kidnapped by a Jewish soldier during their displacement. After the displacement, the family lived in Jenin. *Dalia,* the mother of *Ismael* fell into a coma after the disappearance of her son. Her grandfather, *Yahya Abu al-Haija* was taken one day from his village *“Ein Hodd”* and was killed by a Jewish soldier. During the 1967 war, the Jenin camp was destroyed. *Hasan,* the father disappeared, and the baby *Amal* was put in an orphanage in Jerusalem. When Amal finished her education in the orphanage, she got a scholarship and travelled to America after the death of her mother.

Another theme in the novel was the fragmented Palestinian identity. *Ismael* who was kidnapped from his mother as a child was raised in the Israeli military and was changed in body and spirit. However, a single physical sign on his body indicated his origin; otherwise he would have remained unknown. There was a scar on the face of Ismail which is an injury as a result of falling out of the hands of his brother, *Yusuf*. This scar formed a semiotic sign in the identity of *Ismail* the unaffiliated, and a sign to recognize him by his brother *Yusuf* in Jenin refugee camp, when it was occupied by Israel in 1967. *Ismael* was in an Israeli soldier uniform. This is what *Yusuf* said to Amin: “It was him! I saw the scar! He is alive. He is a Jew and they call him David!!!” My brother saw a Jewish soldier, with an identical scar to the one that characterized the face of our brother *Ismael* who disappeared seven years before I was born” (*Abu al-Hawa* 139). This represents a rupture in his identity and affiliation. *Ismail* was kidnapped by a Jewish officer called Moshe because his wife “*Yulanta*” could not give birth as a result of her suffering during her stay in the Nazi camps during the Holocaust: “In one moment *Ismail*, her six months son who was on her arms, disappeared.”[[23]](#endnote-23). The irony is that the Israeli soldier *David* formerly *Ismail* slapped *Yusuf* in his face, without knowing that he is his brother. He hit him with his rifle until he fainted in the military watchtower in Jenin in 1967[[24]](#endnote-24). The events that surrounded the disappearance of *Ismail* in the novel suggest that the Palestinians paid the price for the Jewish Holocaust.

This novel intersects with the novel of *Ghassan Kanafani*, entitled “Return to Haifa”, published in 1969 in terms of the Jewish education for the infant, *Khaldoun* who was left by his mother in her home in Haifa during its occupation in 1948. She went looking for her husband, *Sa’id* then they both were forced to flee. When they returned to their home in 1967 to look for their infant they found that he had become an Israeli Soldier by the name of Dove. Dove had deep seated Zionist ideals but *Kanafani* was conscious of the Palestinian silence and failure in leaving *“Khaldoun*”. Admitting that the mistake became an issue of complex identity and the recovery of *Khaldoun* by his father, *Sa’id* is useless without the recovery of the homeland. Moreover, the end of the novel was unrealistic because of the shattered reality and the artificial meeting between the non- affiliated *Ismail* or David with his sister *Amal* in Pennsylvania State in America, as opposed to the meeting of *Said* with his son *Khaldoun* 50 years before in “Return from Haifa”. The rift between them is clear, because of the circumstances which fused Ismail in the Zionist military culture in which he was raised and which leads him to reject the ‘other’. He still keeps his previous identity and his Hebrew name in addition to his old Arabic name. Therefore his meeting with his biological sister was half-hearted and without from warmth despite their long separation. The Palestinian writer plunged into the trap of romantic passion, when she wrote about the reconciliation with Ismail, who became an Israeli soldier, without providing a radical solution to the issue of the Palestinian people.

The author in this novel gave a personal and emotional view of a Palestinian woman with dual affiliation. The arrival of *Amal* to Philadelphia in the early 70’s was haunted by nostalgia and longing for her homeland: “Palestine was stemming from my bones to the center of my new life, simply and without prior notice”[[25]](#endnote-25). Her connection to her homeland was interrupted as she now lives in the American diaspora far away from the daily suffering of her people. The disruption in her life represents the diffusion of her identity and her sense of belongin. She suffers from schizophrenia, which further contribute towards her fragmented sense of self. Her affiliation and relation with her homeland is shown through a series of stories and stored memories from her childhood. However, over time and deprived of her previous stressors she is adapting to the new world: “There are no soldiers here! No barbed wire or prohibited areas to Palestinians!”[[26]](#endnote-26). When she got a green card, the United States become her new country and she changed her name to Emmy[[27]](#endnote-27).

This detachment from her homeland is the manifesto of ‘exile literature’, a genre of literature dedicated to those forced into exile, living in the diaspora. Those pulled from their place of birth begun to have a weaker link to it. On one hand, their new country will not accept them and on the other hand they will never be able to fully integrate into it. They will remain living in nowhere, and in conflict between the “ego” and the “other” and between “here” and “there”. This was expressed by the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said (1936-2003) when he wrote a definition for exile: “It is the imposed rift that does not heal between the human being and his original place, between the self and its original home: the sorrow and anxiety that it generates cannot be overcome”[[28]](#endnote-28).

**3- The Iraqi Feminist Novel
*Distortion, Extension and Fragmentation of the Place***

In modern Iraqi feminist narratives there is a clear presence of the tragedy of war, which is carved into the collective memory of the Iraqi people. Women suffer because they are not only exposed to the tragic consequences of war but gender-based violence, which flourishes in wartime. They live haunted with horror, oppression and apparitions. In the novel “*Nusf Lil-Kadifa*” by *Sumaya Shibani*, a woman risks her life for the defense and survival of her country. In this novel, the narrator *Mariam* returns by plane to Iraq, a country full of death and killing. It is through love and hope that she tries to revive her homeland. She raises her voice in the face of the world and says: “Thus we are half a people and I am half a citizen. Wars taught us how to be content with half a meal, drink half a cup, sit in half of a room and leave the other half for the shell... we got used to half dreams, half wishes, half solutions, half children and soon the world will talk about a miracle happening in Iraq; the phenomenon of having half children, because we make half love to have half a baby, who will have only half feed and accept a half mother”[[29]](#endnote-29).

The woman in this novel is looking for love and joy despite the war, destruction and psychological distress in her life. This is what *Mariam* experienced in the plane while she was returning from Amman to Iraq, after she met Adam the Iraqi-American before the US invasion of Iraq: “Was earth under my feet? Or a carpet of silk slips with me and fly like a butterfly in my very quiet house? Am I that girl who went down the stair yesterday in the house of her sister, eager to return to her crazy country and loaded with all the world concerns? Or, am I the other woman who became suddenly the happiest in the world? Does true love come suddenly, invade us, pull us and throw us into the unknown?”[[30]](#endnote-30). Iraqi women through the words of *Mariam* ultimately look for the love, kindness and freedom of their country. *Mariam* is in constant search for joy inside her defeated self. Mariam, the female protagonist in this novel is well educated and well informed, however she lives in permanent escape from the war and prioritizes her own survival despite the defeat she has faced.

However, *Mariam* like her homeland lives in permanent panic and suffering. Her failure and fear faded into half and she became half a woman, like the half body of her brother Ibrahim. Metaphorically, she lives in half of her homeland and in half a life. This is what she expresses in her monologue:” Do I close one eye and open the other in order to see what is left of Ibrahim? What should I do? I looked at my brother -ashamed and in fear- with half of my eyes and I felt at that moment that I live in half of my country and that I am now half a woman living half a life. We’re only halves roaming in search of our other halves. The entire people are running around looking for a half or running away from a half. Half of the sky is above our heads. We sleep with half an eye. Our children go in the morning to their schools with half a shoe and learn half of the language and we read half of the news in the newspaper. Between our rips there are half hearts which give half love. We are half human beings. We are only halves. Why I pick on *Ahmad* to beg me to be half sweat heart? “Saddam is a half president and we’re half of the people…”[[31]](#endnote-31). *Mariam* is experiencing nightmares because of the impact of the war in Iraq. Her monologue, highlighted above shows how her thoughts are spilling over in a claustrophobic panic. For her, this is the only way to narrate and spill out ideas and existential questions in Iraq, away from the detective, the censor and the thug.

*Mariam*, the Iraqi woman in the novel has an effective and daring presence during the war. She lives in terror and sorrow and both hates death and searches for life. She is an Iraqi school teacher and facing the cameras of journalists and she screams in front of them; “Let the world see me in my worn figure. Let the world portray my worn mantle. Is the world listening to what I say? Since I opened my eyes in the world, I am running away from death. I contradict myself when I stand in front of the students to teach them about life. Where is life? Since thirty years I am running away from death! I do not remember when I washed my face last time…”[[32]](#endnote-32). After grief, destruction and the loss of parent, she was persuaded to abandon her homeland Iraq and escape. But then again the shell tore her and tattered her husband *Adam* inside her homeland during the American occupation of Iraq. From her perspective, the physical homeland is fragmented by the shells, its identity is fading, and the sense of belonging she once felt towards her homeland is disappearing. Mariam is constructed as shouting and condemning the terrible silence, which hangs over the world while Iraq is screaming and destroyed. The novel is overladen with the misery of war. This is the meaning of the cry of Scheherazade at the end of the novel after her assassination: “I scream loudly and no one hears me. Iraq is slaying me and filling my lungs with dirty water. My fate is to die blue like ink, rubbed by earth and turned into an old worthless rag”[[33]](#endnote-33). In her last words, Mariam refuses her homeland and constructs it as her murderer. Mariam’s character in the novel echoes the character by the same name, *Mariam* in the novel “O Mariam” by the Iraqi writer and scholar *Sanan Anton,* when she realizes that home is no longer home and can never be again.

Another image of the oppression of Iraqi women and their psychological suffering during the American war on Iraq in 1991 is heavily reflected in the writings of the Iraqi poet and novelist, *Bushra al-Bustani* in her collection “*Hawatif al-Liel*” “Night Calls”, published in 2012. In this depressive short story collection, men are presented as the victims of war on the battlefronts as they are slo the martyrs, prisoners and the dead. Women suffer from the trauma of war and live in anxiety and constant fear of death. The author thinks that the American occupation first, and the Iraqi regime second is responsible for the war and the worst of its consequences. In the story of “*Al-Jidar al-Hajari*” (The Stone Wall) the mother is crying after her ninth son emigrates to Denmark. The other eight sons fled earlier from Iraq. Her son justified his emigration by saying that his brothers also live in exile in the diaspora[[34]](#endnote-34)*.* Exotic scenes became familiar and daily in Iraqi women's lives. The bride in the story of “Al-Arouse” (The Bride) gives birth to a disabled child, who has only one hand and one leg. It is hypothesized that this is because of the radiation in the mother’s environment and the stressors of war. The mother becomes shocked and falls into a coma[[35]](#endnote-35). In *Hawatif al-Liel*, the son was killed in his home while watching a sport match on TV[[36]](#endnote-36). In “*Tawabeet*” (The Coffins), the husband returns from captivity and finds out that his wife got married to his brother because she was told that he was killed in the war. She was prevented from seeing his coffin on the pretext that opening coffins of martyrs is forbidden. However, when she saw him she rushed to him, soaking her tearful face with his hands, as she did when he returned from vacation, without thinking of those around her. The most important thing for her is that he is still alive[[37]](#endnote-37). In “*Al-Yawm al-Sadiss*” (The Sixth Day) the groom is forced to go to war, only six days after of his marriage. After nine months, his wife gives birth to a child and she calls him “War”. She refuses to marry again because she sees men as belonging to the war and are therefore destined to death. Therefore, why should she venture with another husband that will be missed again[[38]](#endnote-38). Her rejection of marriage, as long as the war continues may symbolism women’s submission to extinction.

The Iraqi women suffer from the repression of male dominated society and the tragic repercussions of war. In the short story “*As-Sadmah*” (The Shock), the husband decided to marry a second woman, because his wife gave birth to four girls respectively. He justified his decision by saying that their country is in a state of war and we need men for battle. As his first wife was giving birth for the fifth time, he was accompanied by his aunt in the house of his new promised wife. However, his first wife gave birth to two male twins, and when she returned home she suffered a heart attack from shock, which was caused by her husband”.

**4. Conclusion**

The Arab feminist war novel portrays the repression and oppression of women in male-dominated Arab societies during wartimes. The men in these societies refuse to deal with women as equals who may enjoy the same rights and dignity. These novels expose the violation of women’s bodies and highlights the use of intensive, daring and shocking sex for several reasons: to show the upsurge in the abuse of women’s bodies and their repression by men; to express their revolt on the patriarchal society by revealing its falsity and failure; to stress their opposition to war by showing the trauma of war and its tragedies; and to emphasize their attachment to life and escape from death. The novel of *Samia Issa,* *Haleeb al-Teen* features the scandalous erotic images inside a Palestinian camp in Lebanon as one of the consequences of the different wars and the *Nakba*. It shows the corruption of the Palestinian officials and the exploitation of women’s bodies and reveals the awakening of Palestinian women and their reconciliation with their forgotten femininity and bodies. In *Baynama Yanamu al-‘Alam*; Nusf *Lil-Kadifa* and *Hawatif al-Leil*, the sex is absent and attention is concentrated on the tragedies of wars; the demise of the human being; the destruction of the land; and the distortion of identity and belonging.

The Arab feminist war novels portrays the psychological and physical abuse of women in male-dominated societies to satisfy the sexual instincts of men and restore their fragmented manhood due to their weakness, defeat, and failure in war. This repression is expressed by rape and exotic and blatant sex without passion or any feelings of love. War distorts the way of thinking of men; reveals their retrograded views of women; their sexual incapacity and political failure. This is exemplified in the novels by shifting their leftist and national views into religious pianism and resorting to prostitution and alcohol addiction.

1. Al-Shaykh, *Hikayat Zahra*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Saydawi, *Al-Katibah wa Khitab al-That,* 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Al-Shaykh, *Hikayat Zahra*, 185. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Al-Shaykh, *Hikayat Zahra*, 182. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Al-Shaykh, *Hikayat Zahra*, 189. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Al-Shaykh, *Hikayat Zahra*, 190. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Al-Shaykh, *Hikayat Zahra,* 193. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Al-Shaykh, *Hikayat Zahra,* 192. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *Sayegh, Shahrazade wa Ghiwayat as-Sard,* 200. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Al-Saman, 87.- this in text citation is not included in the bibliography. The author needs to add this to their bibliography.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Al-Shaykh, *Hikayat Zahra,* 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Al-Shaykh, *Hikayat Zahra,* 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Allen, 300-301. - *this in text citation is not included in the bibliography. The author needs to add this to their bibliography.* [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Suboh, 92-93. - *this in text citation is not included in the bibliography. The author needs to add this to their bibliography.* [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Suboh, 57. *this in text citation is not included in the bibliography. The author needs to add this to their bibliography.* [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Suboh*,* 35. *this in text citation is not included in the bibliography. The author needs to add this to their bibliography.* [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Suboh, 118. *this in text citation is not included in the bibliography. The author needs to add this to their bibliography.* [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Suboh, 101. *this in text citation is not included in the bibliography. The author needs to add this to their bibliography.* [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Suboh, 55. *this in text citation is not included in the bibliography. The author needs to add this to their bibliography.* [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Suboh, 60. *this in text citation is not included in the bibliography. The author needs to add this to their bibliography.* [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Cooke, *War’s Other Voices*, 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Issa, *Haleeb Al-Teen*, 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. *Abu al-Hawa*, *Baynama Yanamu al-‘Alam*, 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. *Abu al-Hawa*, *Baynama Yanamu al-‘Alam*, 158. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. *Abu al- Hawa*, *Baynama Yanamu al-‘Alam*, 250. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. *Abu al- Hawa*, *Baynama Yanamu al-‘Alam*, 266. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. *Abu al-Hawa*, *Baynama Yanamu al-‘Alam*, 267. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. *Said*, Reflections on Exile, 217. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Shibani, *Nusf Lil-Kadifa*. 128. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Shibani, *Nusf Lil-Kadifa*. 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Shibani, *Nusf Lil-Kadifa,* 127-128 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Shibani, *Nusf Lil-Kadifa,* 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Shibani, *Nusf Lil-Kadifa,* 300. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Bustani, *Hawatif al-Liel*. 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Bustani, *Hawatif al-Liel*. 68 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Bustani, *Hawatif al-Liel*. 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Bustani, *Hawatif al-Liel*. 13 [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Bustani, *Hawatif al-Liel*. 55.

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Sinan, Anton. *Ya Mariam*. Bagdad: Al-Jamal Publications, 2012 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)