

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

THE WRITING OF TRAUMA:
CATHARSIS AND WOMEN'S SUBVERSION OF PATRIARCHY IN
RABIH ALAMEDDINE'S *I, THE DIVINE* AND
ZENA EL KHALIL'S
BEIRUT, I LOVE YOU

by
NAYIRI HAROUTIOUN KALAYJIAN

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submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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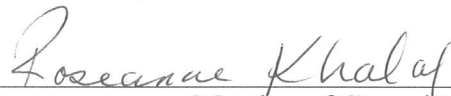
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: The Writing of Trauma: Catharsis and Women's Subversion of Patriarchy in Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine* and Zena el Khalil's *Beirut, I Love You*

This thesis exposes the way in which Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (2001) and Zena el Khalil's *Beirut, I Love You* (2009) intersect through their female characters. In the process of writing their memoirs, Sarah Nour el-Din and Zena el Khalil delineate war-torn Beirut society, the tragic events of 9/11 and their personal experiences of rape and/or sexual assault. By communicating these experiences, both characters allow for venues of articulation of women as marginalized and deprived voices. Through their unconventional rebellious notion of the feminine, they defy societal norms and subvert the paradigm of patriarchy. The traumatic experiences of both characters require a process of catharsis, which although initiated through the writing of their memoirs, testimonies of sexual healing and transcendence, does not lead them to complete reconciliation with either the self or Beirut, as evident through the open endings of their novels. This thesis also attempts to highlight that through their fragmented narratives, rebellion against social conventions, and acceptance of the chaos of life, Sarah and Zena weave tales of identity that portray an internal war that haunts them eternally and obstructs them from being completely healed.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Once war is articulated, it can never be as it was before it had become the subject of discourse. With each new piece written, war is chiseled into life in war.”

Miriam Cooke

Taken together, the contents of Rabih Alameddine’s *I, The Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (2001) and Zena El Khalil’s *Beirut, I Love You: A Memoir* (2009) cover the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the July 2006 war, and the tragic events of September 11, 2001, as delivered by two female first-person narrators in the process of composing their life stories in the form of memoirs.

Despite their creation of two non-traditional female characters, Alameddine and El Khalil differ significantly in their writing sub-genres and techniques. Let me first delineate a major difference between these two heroines, one which does not necessarily insinuate a consequential difference within the context where they exist. While Alameddine is a male author who successfully and effectively creates Sarah Nour El-Din, a woman in the process of writing her memoir in his novel *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters*, El Khalil is writing her own memoir using Zena as the first-person narrator. However, my focus will be on both Sarah and Zena merely as fictionalized characters in their own memoirs.

Rabih Alameddine’s *I, the Divine* portrays the struggle of Sarah in her efforts to write her memoir. However, she cannot get past the first chapter of the memoir, crafting several aborted attempts, different points of beginning, forming a collage which successfully

reveals the complexity of a character that does not seem to finish her own story. Sarah is the Beirut-born daughter of a Lebanese Druze father and an American mother, who was unfortunately not capable of successfully maintaining her marriage. Consequently, Sarah finds herself at home with Saniya, her stepmother, a traditional Lebanese Druze wife who desires to conform to society's manners, even in her attempts to indoctrinate Sarah in the norms of belonging to the realm of the "female", disapproving of her athletic gifts and subjecting her to the strict education of a convent school. Sarah, named after Sarah Bernhardt by her grandfather, spends her early years in war-torn 1970s Beirut, yearning for American freedoms that she cannot experience within the social confines of Beirut. Thus, she leaves Beirut behind for the "luxuries" that New York offers, with her first husband Omar, a marriage which in itself is a rebellion against her Beirut-Druze and his Greek Orthodox parents. She divorces Omar after resisting his attempts to force her to move back to Lebanon, losing custody of her son, Kamal, in the process. She then marries Joe, yet another marriage crowned with divorce. To add spice to her love life, she falls in love with David, only to end up, once again, suffering because of a destructive breakup with a lover who, ironically, has a male lover of his own. Finally, Sarah finds herself emerging through her art, as painting becomes a self-made haven that gradually unveils itself as an opportunity for healing.

Zena el Khalil's *Beirut, I Love You* is the story of Zena, a young Lebanese woman who has been charmed by the magic of Beirut. Zena finds herself falling in love with all that the city entails, war, misery and a series of love affairs. Zena loses herself in Beirut as intensely as she finds herself within its embrace. She escapes the trauma brought upon her

by the complexity of Beirut through the several emotional and sexual relationships she goes through with different partners. In a sphere where militias aggressively claim their territories, and where political instability is a ceaseless threat, Zena finds shelter only in sex, art, and wine. Though bombs could fall at any moment, Zena distances herself through constant physical and mental diversions, as power through sex becomes her rebellion against violence, and her own initiative at subverting the paradigm of male dominance within a patriarchal society. Through her writing, not only does she seek to make sense of her life, but she also affirms art as a power of self-expression amidst chaos.

Art, a war-torn Beirut, sexual abuse, and an unstable emotional and sexual life are some of the common grounds upon which the protagonists Sarah and Zena el Khalil of *Beirut, I Love You* intersect. Shedding light on their episodes of sexual abuse, it can be asserted that both Sarah and Zena undergo an experience of trauma, requiring a healing personal history that becomes evident through their memoirs. Through their fragmented narratives, blurred multiple layers of reality and illusion, self-assertion through art, rebellion against social conventions through sex, and acceptance of the chaos of life, they weave their tales of identities, seeking to reconcile with Beirut of the past and present and with their own personal trauma. The narrators in both *I, The Divine* and *Beirut, I Love You*, portray, through employing a fragmented non-linear narrative structure, an exceptional emotional and sexual instability, similar to the political instability that they have been exposed to, delineating an internal war influenced by the external war that has shaped most aspects of their lives. Both works, renowned for their fragmented form, paralleling the fragmentation of the self, can be considered as post-war documents which represent not only the

experience of women as marginalized and objectified, but also exhibit a space of challenging of power relations and subverting the dominant paradigms of socio-political hegemony and patriarchy. I will reflect on how the experiences of these two women of both collective and personal traumas, abuse, pain, and violence, represented through the incoherent fragments are explorations of their own thoughts and emotions that seek to reach a reconciliation through the process of writing, for in Mark Ledbetter's words, "an ethic of writing is to discover and to make heard silenced voices; an ethic of reading is to hear those voices" (1). Post-war Lebanese literature creates space to register the unheard voices that were silenced during the war years. Roseanne Khalaf states that "making fresh, innovative voices heard in the wider public sphere is crucial in redefining the dominant Lebanese discourse that seeks to silence or subvert them" (50). This would allow the creation of a collective narrative that would, according to Khalaf, transmit and account for "a larger journey through linkages of particular cases as well as the underlying conditions in post-war Lebanon" (51). Post-war Lebanese novels, according to Ken Seigneurie, were written as a reaction to a time which observed a universal paradigm shift starting in the late 1970s (50). The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), with all the violent commotion it caused, "punctured," according to Seigneurie, "the myth of progress and along with it realist literature predicated on a knowable world" (51). Consequently, realism became anachronism and gave birth to the Lebanese war novel with different versions of the truth, despite many political truths being immersed in collective amnesia and controlled by patriarchal ideologies and practices.

Through writing, war becomes a realm inspiring women to write. Cooke affirms that war is a masculine realm. She asks, “What could be more profoundly gendered than a space said to contain nothing but men, than an activity described as performed only by men?” (“Women Retelling the War Myth” 177). Women transform this masculine realm into a kingdom they can conquer through their pens. An immense and fascinating literature exists regarding women and war; moreover, a relationship between war and sexuality has been recognized throughout literature. Nevertheless, this literature has often been left out because it is relatively more trivial in comparison with the more essential aspects of war. Evelyne Accad states in her book *Sexuality and War* that “sexuality and war are indissolubly linked. . . [However], sexuality has often been left out of analysis about social economic and political problems” (Introduction 2). Moreover, it is noteworthy to understand the meaning of sexuality in its actuality, which denotes “not only the physical and psychological relations between men and women, or the sexual act in itself, but also the customs, Mediterranean, Lebanese, and religious- involved in relations between men and women and the feelings of love, power, violence and tenderness” (Introduction 2). One cannot undermine the role that sexuality plays in defining the behavioral patterns of a specific society, even if only through the societal reflections portrayed in literature.

My thesis will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter will delineate the causes of trauma in the lives of Sarah and Zena: the Lebanese Civil War, the July War and 9/11, 2001, in addition to the personal traumas arising from rape and/or sexual abuse. A critical reception of these works in this respect, i.e. memoir, trauma and war writing, is crucial since it sets the mood for a firm argument. I will then discuss my argument in light of both

fragmentation and women writing trauma. Are the fragmentation and multiple layers of the text indications of a postmodern sentiment of a fragmented self exposed to trauma and the chaos of war? Does the fragmentation of the text allow space for differences and diversities? Does the writing produce a master narrative significant for a catharsis? In chapters two and three respectively, I will be analyzing how living as a Lebanese woman becomes a challenge as it generates a need for continuous consciousness of the social norms and double standards of sexuality for the male/female binary. This will be portrayed specifically through their interpersonal relationships, whether with family members or partners in their lives. Through their memoirs, Sarah and Zena allow writing to gain a new function; for their life narratives reflect identity dilemmas, alienation and disconnection, all within the structure of a post-war Lebanon. Respectively, I will analyze their creation of counter-narratives which challenge notions of relationships and sexuality and delineate in the course of their lives a rebellion against a patriarchal system. I will discuss how Sarah and Zena create ways of resistance that do not negate their identities as women, but add a new dimension, shedding light on women's empowerment through sex, as it becomes a female weapon against war and patriarchy. I will link the two novels, in light of trauma, sexuality, war, identity, healing and their subversion of hierarchical form of social and political representations.

What is of specific interest to me, at this point, is the instability that foregrounds both Sarah's and Zena's lives, as I consider this emotional and sexual instability an unconscious response of these characters to the unstable and cruel nature of the war that they contain within their post-memory and the subsequent episodes of violence that they

are periodically exposed to. It has clearly been established that sexuality contains a revolutionary power and potential within any society, especially if it is manipulated correctly by individuals. Accad believes that “[s]exuality is much more fundamental in social and political problems than previously thought, and unless a sexual revolution is incorporated into political revolution, there will be no real transformation of social relations” (12). Thus, female sexual rebellion contains the seeds not only of self-liberation, but also of a recognizable amelioration on the societal level, including relationships between the genders. However, there is a clear difference in the positioning of women in society and their responses to the ideology of war between the war generation (1975-1990) and the post-war generation of the female characters in the aforementioned novels. As Andrea Dworkin puts it, “To transform the world, we must transform the very substance of our erotic sensibilities and we must do as consciously and conscientiously as we do any act which involves our whole lives” (qtd. in Accad 12). Thus emerges the need for a revolution that starts at the personal level, through a “transformation of attitudes towards one’s mate, family, sexuality, and society, and, specifically, a transformation of the traditional relations of domination and subordination that permeate interpersonal relationships, particularly those of sexual and familial intimacy” (Accad 12). Women are expected to stay away, remain safe and not be contaminated by war. They can ultimately be the victims of war, yet not its perpetrators. Nonetheless, women become not only the victims of violence and but also the direct sufferers of the consequences of moral decay brought about by war.

As news of war and terror dominates the headlines, death becomes an immediate threat to human beings. War becomes a time where sex roles, gender expectations and gender

hierarchies within society are challenged. Facing the urgency of death, human beings are doomed to fight the death instinct through the life instinct; thus, images of bombs, bloodshed and violence are highly contrasted with images of sex, ejaculation, and pleasure. Accad, writing about the literature of the 1975-1990 period, believes that “sex for the young men becomes a release of nervous energy, yet it is a perpetuation of the violence they live through war and drugs” (51). In the looming threat of impending death, the only concern becomes living the moment; one can only think of the moment, as he/ she only exists within that moment. With the realization that a future might not exist, all social barriers are broken down; limitations are shattered and pleasure seeks to be fulfilled at all costs. There are no inhibitions, as life does not make sense except through death.

According to Accad,

The element of rebellion suggested by daring, shock-laden acts. . . in the sexually repressive Lebanese society, is not positive. It does not lead to a transformation of sexually repressive values. In the long run, such an attitude reinforces the patriarchal tribal system because it is based on the very same macho behavior it is trying to break. Similarly, in the “sexual revolution” of the 1970’s in the west, women, told that in order to free themselves, men, and society, they had to engage in promiscuous “free” sex, like orgies, multiple partners, and pornography, discovered they had been used and fooled. The expected freedom turned into a diversion from a true, genuine, liberating change in the relationship between men and women. (52)

Lebanese war literature contains female characters that are exposed to the horrid violence of imposed sexual acts. Rape finds a meaningful existence in such periods. Hanan al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* (1986) and Toufic Yusef Awwad's *Death in Beirut* (1972) portray exceptional female characters victimized by men and confined by patriarchal social limits which mar their existence. Similarly, both Sarah and Zena undergo the trauma of rape and/or sexual assault in the war-stricken streets of Beirut. According to Margaret Higonnet in "the Double Helix," "one of the ironies of the war for women is that it loosens social mores and gives them the opportunity to play more of a role, while perverting all cultural systems- most basically by overturning civilization's prohibitions on killing" (43). However, I want to shed light on the modern female characters that manipulate the ideology of sexuality and overturn it essentially to suit their personal needs of rebelling against a patriarchal society that places barriers upon their existence.

CHAPTER TWO

TRAUMA

This chapter will focus on the events that have served as traumatic factors in the lives of Sarah and Zena, mainly the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990, the July 2006 war, the terrorism of the tragic event of 9/11, in addition to Sarah's rape contrasted with Zena's sexual assault.

A- War- Lebanese Civil War/ 2006 War

The Lebanese Civil war did not only divide Beirut into a Christian East and a Muslim West, but it also created chasms within the social, political, emotional, and gendered spaces of Lebanese society. The years of the Lebanese war were marked by constant conflicts and disputes, recourse to arms, continuous violence, injuries and deaths. It was not only a war for and by men, as women have always played a substantial role within their own means. "In Lebanon, where neighborhoods have been on the front line for many years, women on all sides took part mainly by providing food to combatants, sewing hospital sheets, administering first aid, and donating blood" (Vickers 19). Therefore, it can doubtlessly be established that war is a period of social change, specifically for women; however, how effective this change is in initiating progress in women's lives remains the question under study. The war impacts women and their lives, particularly the roles they play in different realms of society. Nonetheless, through my analysis of *Beirut, I Love You* and *I, the Divine*, I seek to examine the indirect consequences of war upon the female characters in literary works of the post-civil war generation. By looking at both novels, I will closely scrutinize the lives of modern Lebanese heroines who still suffer from the

detrimental consequences of a war they have been forced to internalize, their conscious and unconscious reactions to the demands of daily life, and the healing escapist journeys on which they embark.

These two novels carry within their plots the stories of two women, victims of political and social violence, alienated from themselves, their bodies, and their societies for numerous reasons. Through their writings, literature becomes an adequate field to understand political and social realities, even with the distortions that constitute the fantasy of the author. These novels provide us with the complete picture because “they not only include all the various fields- social, political, anthropological, religious, and cultural- but they also allow us to enter into the imaginary and unconscious world of the author. . . also suggest[ing] links to the collective ‘imaginary’” (Accad, Introduction 5). Thus, the multidisciplinary and multidimensional nature of literature allows us to comprehend the complex reality of the existence of the Lebanese woman in the post-war Lebanese context.

It is noteworthy that *I, the Divine* is subtitled “*A Novel in First Chapters*”. According to Accad, a “novel has its own internal logic, which can escape both the novelist and ‘reality’”. The logic of a novel is that of fantasy. It goes from a reality with one or more characters, or from a certain dimension, and follows their logic to the end” (Foreword 5). Considering the metacognitive aspect of Sarah’s writing, her novel develops an internal logic that is unfolded gradually to the reader. Through her memoir, Sarah is pursuing her own inner journey, seeking to establish self-liberation through writing. Similarly, Zena throughout her writing and introspective moods creates the inner climate of a female character, picking up fragments of herself, yet achieving revealing moments of self-discovery.

Sarah's seventh 'Chapter One' proves to be of great significance, as the narration commences with the first day of the war in Beirut, April 13, 1975. What Sarah recalls best from that day is the sound of the opening stanza of Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water" coming from Mazen's apartment, her neighbor on the second floor; she continues to narrate the events of the day with clarity and a vividness of detail. She recalls how her whole family was outside the apartment, gathered on the stairwell which was believed to be the safest place, as it was enclosed on every side. She remembers having seen a flaw in her father's appearance for the first time in her life, as though this flaw foreshadows a breaking away from the illusion of perfection into the newfound horrid reality of the Lebanese war. Sarah further evokes the pungent memory of the smell of cordite, garbage, urine, and decaying flesh, smells that the war would render as "banal and clichéd" (39). From the bitter smell of cordite, Sarah proceeds to remember the three loud explosions that rocked the building, followed by Ramzi's powerful screaming. Description continues as Sarah shifts to give a stunning picture of Rana, her half-sister who was furiously and relentlessly writing in her diary, "considering the world nothing but material for her writing" (40). Sarah affirms Rana as her favorite sister, most certainly because of the reflection of herself that she sees in her. Despite Rana not being her sister from both parents, she was closer in character to her than either to Amal or to Lamia, as she looked at the world with discerning eyes, quite similar to Sarah's perspective. Rana "was writing about this. Everything that's happening. All the noise, where it comes from, how unexpected. Why the stop, start, stop and start again. All the different sounds. Always coming from different places" (40); the tone which Sarah employs in delineating Rana's writing strongly suggests her innermost thoughts at that moment, and her deepest desire to do what Rana was doing: write. This

moment can clearly be regarded as a foreshadowing of how Sarah herself will proceed to write, like her half-sister, “considering the world nothing but material for her writing”, and positioning herself in a journey of healing through writing. The chapter that follows the “war chapter” is a chapter in French titled “Le Commencement,” indicating not merely an interruption of thought, but also an escape from the memory of war by a complete switch to a different language. The eighth ‘Chapter One’ is one of only two chapters that are written in French, designating that the memory of war contains traumatic ramifications for Sarah and a disruptive point for her flow of thoughts. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*, one of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder is “persistent symptoms of increased arousal (not present before the trauma), as indicated by [different factors, such as] difficulty concentrating”. Moreover, post-traumatic stress disorder victims exhibit a “persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness”, which can be apparent through their “[e]fforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma”. Every attempt at completing a chapter becomes one more episode of an interrupted flow of thought, a failed ending to a chapter, difficulty concentrating, and a mere avoidance of the traumatic thought and, consequently, the feelings it induces.

It is generally agreed that there is a need on the national level to address the war and the psychological harm it leaves behind on citizens, especially after the materialization of the now dominant trauma rubric, “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD), as it has been recognized that entire populations are affected by the politics of war and can consequently be understood as war-traumatized. It has been established that “war-torn societies are

traumatized and require therapeutic management if conflict is to be ameliorated” (Moon 71), and that “one of the tasks of the post-conflict state is to attend to the psychiatric health of its citizens and the nation as a whole” (Moon 71). Theorists of the “therapeutic state” assert that the history and political implications of this claim can be witnessed in post-war governance with the establishment of “therapeutic intervention” into the everyday lives of its citizens. Thus, a therapeutic mandate has been found to be necessary to heal individuals and nations as a whole and to bring national trauma to rest (Moon 72). However, when individuals find themselves within a society that has delved into a collective amnesia as part of its “healing process”, and within a state that does not interfere to attend to the psychological damage caused by war, neither for the generation that lived through the war nor for the post-war post-traumatic generation, they tend to create individualistic patterns of self-healing and a personal discourse of therapy. Part of this discourse is a “cathartic” technique where individuals re-experience memories of the traumatic event in a certain manner in order to rid themselves of the negativity and strain created by the event itself.

Throughout her catharsis, Sarah recovers the scenarios of her trauma and integrates the repressed event in order to master her dissociated self. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (182). Caruth’s stress on trauma’s disruption of time or history employs Freud’s notion of *Nachträglichkeit* which is translated as ‘deferred action’ or ‘afterwardness’. *Nachträglichkeit* illustrates a multifaceted and indistinct chronological trajectory and has affirmed itself as a valuable

model for those (like Caruth) reflecting upon the relation between memory and trauma and seeking to “construct models of historical temporality which depart from the strictly linear” (6). Through her writing, Sarah transcends temporality as her traumatic experiences do not allow her to write chronologically; she does not know where to begin. Every single chapter of her life could be her ‘Chapter One’, as the chronological trajectory in her mind is ambiguous and disrupted. Through her 44 chapters, Sarah defies the boundaries of narrative time; although not strictly linear, one can establish an interconnection.

Shedding light on the relationship of memory and trauma, for Freud, this view revolves around the ways in which “some experiences, impressions and memory traces are revised at a later date in order to correspond with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development” (qtd. in Caruth 182), as the association Sarah establishes between the July 4 fireworks and the bombings of Beirut. At the time of its occurrence, the traumatic incident is not fully recognized and it only becomes evident at some later stage of intense emotional crisis. Any connection of the present to the past sudden and catastrophic event brings back the intensity of emotion and distress. While the first direct mention of the Lebanese War is in the seventh ‘Chapter One’; the next “remembered episode” follows after eleven chapters in the eighteenth ‘Chapter One’ with Sarah waking up early in the morning and not wanting to get out of bed, merely realizing that it is July the 4th. “Sarah struggles with her manuscript, much as she does while dodging bullets in recurrent nightmares. Fourth of July fireworks continue to cause her panic attacks” (“The Tears of Trauma”62). The idea that the sun is not up yet aggravates Sarah as though

darkness is a greater reminder of the darkness of the war. The strength of emotions begins with the simple thought that it is July the 4th,

Sarah wakes up, but does not wish to get out of bed. She turns over on her side, closes her eyes, in hopes of catching a little more sleep. . . It is July 4. . . She lifts her head slightly noting the time on the digital clock. Four twenty three. Damn. It is much too early. She closes her eyes again. She must sleep, especially today.

(91)

Sarah's dread of July the 4th because of all that she connects it with is beyond her control; it is somehow an involuntary reflex to an internalization that she simply cannot overcome. The association that has been made between fireworks and gunshots is one that has been imprinted in her memory system. Unlike common and predictable experiences that are mechanically and habitually incorporated into "existing mental structures", fear-provoking and unpredictable experiences discover "no home in existing mental schemes"; thus "split[ting] off from conscious awareness and [becoming] 'forgotten'" (Caruth 182). However, these "forgotten" experiences, though sometimes resistant to deliberate memory retrieval, are re-lived inadvertently as exceptionally "vivid and immediate sensory fragments (e.g. images and sounds) or through obsessional ruminations" like what happens with Sarah beginning with the intense sensory re-experiencing on the morning of July the 4th (Kaminer 485). The fireworks of American independence are a reminder for Sarah of her own emotional confinement within the memory of the Lebanese war,

Sarah looks at the clock again. Four forty-one. She must have dozed a bit. Try again. Closes her eyes. She curses. . . She has survived the Fourth of July before. She goes under the covers, just like she used to do in Beirut when it got too noisy, too violent. . . Should she get up? If she does, it means she is giving up. She lies back down, fetal position, closes her eyes. One sheep, two sheep, three sheep, lamb chops. (91-2)

It is crucial to note that the memories of war throw her into the fetal position, a return to the mother's womb, where it is dark but safe. The mother's womb is before birth; thus Sarah is defying the memory of war and death by regressing to that state preceding birth, as death cannot threaten a state that exists before birth. July the 4th is synonymous with a traumatic memory for Sarah, as it is "experienced as if the traumatic event, and one's psychological and physiological responses to it, were happening all over again" and consequently, it is accompanied by powerful flashbacks and even "emotional, sensory, and physiological effects" as though the horror of the past is being recurrent and the urge to heal the trauma becomes crucial (Moon 82). July the 4th has gained for itself a reputation of being painful and intolerable and Sarah needs to share the intensity with someone. As Sarah cannot handle the misery alone, she finds the urge to call her best friend Dina. Through the phone conversation with Dina, we find out that Sarah has not been to work because it is the Fourth of July; she is calling Dina also because it is the Fourth of July and she is depressed, to which Dina advises her to "[g]o somewhere far from the city where [she] can't hear the fireworks" (93). When questioned by Dina why she does not get depressed like normal people, "turn the lights off, draw the curtains, get under the covers

and not talk to anyone”, she responds by saying that she is “not normal. [And that they had] figured that one out a long time ago” (94), thus ascertaining to herself that the memory of pain she contains has rendered her aberrant, somehow beyond normalcy.

Next, she decides to indulge in the luxury of a bath, hoping that this is not going to be a bad day. The bath gains a further symbolic meaning through her thoughts and pondering prior to the bath itself. Looking at her bath paraphernalia, she is confused whether to use oils or bubbles, as she finally chooses to use both, jasmine oil and some gardenia bubble bath. Sarah submerges herself in the tub as though seeking to be purged from the pain of memory; the bath becomes her salvation from the anguish of that day. Her dunking her head in the water symbolizes her desire of throwing herself into oblivion, forgetfulness and a complete amnesia of the war.

Following that day being over is a chapter titled, “Here and There”, where she begins with a description of the city in November. Through her eyes, the city is dead, “[t]he trees are bare, forcibly divested of honor. Autumn carpets the ground in colors of decay. Ominous clouds dress the solemn pedestrians in grey-colored spectacles” (98). However, it is not only nature that exhibits death and decay for Sarah; it is her inner world of unconscious memories of death and destruction that allow her through “lonely eyes” to see everywhere “the subtle images of death and destruction”, though “she may be the only one with eyes to see” (98). The images of death and destruction drive her to reminisce upon Beirut, where “death’s unremitting light shines bright for all to see, brighter than the Mediterranean sun, brighter than the night’s Russian missiles, brighter than a baby’s smile” (98). In her mind, Beirut is only a memory of death; it is a birthplace of death, as even a

baby's smile is a reminder of how bright death shines. Beirut is where an "interminable war rages. The city is warm, fall still hesitating at the gates. The brutal winter winds are still dormant, but drafts of deadly violence permeate the air. The city braces for the upcoming winter without its heart and blood, no electricity, no water" (98). Beirut is an unfortunate, sad memory for Sarah; where even when there are no winter winds, there are always drafts of deadly violence permeating the air. In Beirut, people breathe death rather than life. Her home is a remembrance that she contains within herself and internalizes to an extent that even her existence in the USA is shaped accordingly. Her state of mind does not allow her to see but images of death and destruction everywhere around her, as her surroundings are a constant reminder of the internal tumult that she holds within her memory and unconsciousness.

The next episode of war is presented through the 38th 'Chapter One', entitled "Faint". Even though this is the final one, it evokes quite intense emotions. Sarah begins describing a typical rainy day in San Francisco where everything seems mortal, "[e]veryone stays home and the color of death is everywhere" (231). However, Sarah is not home; she was at a coffee shop, and the café felt too gloomy. Next, she describes the four people in the café and leaves. There was no one on the street, only a few cars, as there was thunder and lightning. The rain keeps falling. Sarah "look[s] up at the sky, [sees] more lightning. The thunder that followed was deafening. She [feels] herself getting dizzy, realize[s] [she] was dropping slowly before she blacked out" (232). From the image of striking thunder, Sarah wakes up in a "darkened unfamiliar room. [She] recognized the light and panicked. The daylight seeped in from the windows closed with louvered shutters. Only in Beirut" (232).

The strength of the lightning stirs up a memory of violence. Sarah does “not dare move. [She] was lying on the floor sideways, [her] face resting on a pile of newspapers. . . [She] sit[s] up and look[s] around [her] trying to gauge the room. [She] was in an old Beirut house” (232). The sound of lightning provokes “[t]he sound of a shot [ringing] out, shaking [her] out of [her] stupor. . . [She has] to take in everything, figure out if [she] was in danger. [She has] been through this before. Instinct [takes] over” (233). The walls around her were sandstone and would not hamper bullets, as she hears another shot, and another,

[a] staccato burst. The boys were building up. It was going to be fierce. The shots were intermittent, a funny rhythm, a five over four, not a disco beat. . . The thunderstorm from hell erupted. Machine gun fire from every direction. Cannons, rockets, missiles detonated at the same time, enough to wake the dead. [Sarah] used to be able to figure out who was fighting whom by differentiating the sounds of gunfire, [she] used to be able to tell Belgian missiles from Russian rockets.

Where was [she]? [She] must look outside. (233)

Waking up in an old Beirut house after thunder strikes her is possibly a figment of Sarah’s imagination; the strength of the lightning could only be a factor that wakes once again the traumatic memory and experience of war. Sarah does not know where she is, and looking through the broken windows, she knows only that she should move away. As she is attempting to flee, a bullet whizzes by, throwing her into panic. However, Sarah assures herself that she “will survive this. . . [she has] before and will again. Must distract [her] mind. How did [she] get here? Where was [her] family?” (233) Looking around, she sees a bookshelf containing books only in English, all American authors; a bookshelf containing

every book Danielle Steel had written. The description of the setting and specifically the bookshelf is what allows us to question the nature of this incident and confirm it as a dream, an episode of imagination, as the memory of war for Sarah is being “experienced as if the traumatic event, and [her] psychological and physiological responses to it, were happening all over again”, and consequently it is conveyed with dominant flashbacks and even “emotional, sensory, and physiological effects” as though the repulsion of the past is recurring (Moon 83). According to Gerald Prince, the world created through writing is one which is concerned with the creation “of mind: dreams, fantasies, hallucinations, fictions, counterfactual statements, and so on” (273). Sarah amalgams her reality with the world of her fears and dreams to create this episode. After two hours go by peacefully, Sarah walks slowly to the window to peek outside, and she realizes that she might have been in this neighborhood before, yet she was unsure. And then, she hears a shout in Arabic followed by the expression “Allah is great”. Before she knows how to proceed, a bullet comes through right where her arm was to which her body “recall[s] the heat of gunfire and react[s] instantly [standing] still to avoid the ricochet. The bullet hit the floor. Jumped up, went left, hit the wall, bounced back and lodged itself in one of the books in the bookshelf” (235). Rather than being led to a confusion and horror because of the bullets, Sarah reassures herself that there will not be a second bullet, because if the sniper had wanted her dead, she would have been.

Amid the chaos, she observes that a Danielle Steel book was shot and was bleeding, “blood dripped from it slowly. Drip. Drip. [She] fainted” (235). Sarah sees death in every aspect surrounding her, even the Danielle Steel book, an inanimate object, had not merely

been shot, but it had bled and died, nothing is alive except death. After fainting, she wakes up in her ex-husband's car. She looks around and envisions herself in "Never Never Land. The green line of Beirut, not too far from Martyrs' Square. . . Destruction was all around, but so was greenery. Trees and bushes sprouted from unrecognizable buildings. A jungle attempting to reclaim its glorious past from its concrete counterpart" (235). Through her description, Sarah's feelings of penitence and pity for Beirut are evident. Lost within the death and destruction that envelop Beirut, there still exists life through the trees and bushes; nature is resisting death in its own way through sprouts of birth here and there, as though accentuating that Beirut is as much a city of life as it is a city of death. Next, she views the silhouette of a young boy with a machine gun; it is the boy's silhouette that she fears rather than the gun, as it serves as a reminder of her rape—a traumatic event that will be the focus of a later part of this chapter.

Sarah's car does not start, much like her attempts at writing her chapters; she can never reach the destination she wants. The boy offers to look at her car, as his father was a mechanic. Before he can check the car, gunfire is heard and the boy suggests that they go to a shelter. Together, they arrive at a building with a hole at ground level, and enter to find the "smell of burned refuse, decaying flesh, excrement and urine greet[ing] them" (237). These smells are the same smells that have been delineated in Sarah's first recounting of her war experience in the shelter with her family; they are the smells that the war has made "banal and clichéd" (39). In the shelter were "a couple of M16s and three hookahs [. . .] in a corner next to a television set that had been shattered by bullets. A guitar stand, without the instrument, occupied another corner; under it lay a dead rat. An exquisite backgammon

board lay open on the table” (237). Even the shelter, the safe haven that is meant to shield them against the violence of the outside world contains symbols of destruction and reminders of abandonment; all this is too much for Sarah, no matter how familiar and homey this situation is

The young boy reassures her that the “shooting will go on for ten minutes or so and then they’ll stop. Everybody is exhausted” (237). Sarah questions the boy about why they are fighting; to which the boy responds with childhood innocence tainted by the ravages of violence, “[w]ho can remember anymore? Habit, I guess. Nobody knows anything else. They start shooting forgetting why. They stop. They start in a different way. They stop again. Try a different attack. They can’t seem to be able to finish a battle. It’s endless” (237). According to Cooke, “each hit was quickly repaired and almost as quickly forgotten. The survival instinct seemed to require that pain be relegated to oblivion. The cycle, hit-repair-forget-hit-repair-forget, seemed unending, as though that was how things had always been and always would be” (*War’s Other Voices* 21). Sarah proceeds to ask the boy why he is not fighting, to which he responds that his “father did not want [him] to fight at all. . . [and that] he didn’t want to be like [his father]. [He] didn’t want to stand around while they took everything away from [him]” (238). The war does not only result in injuries and deaths, but also damages the innocence of young lives, leaving them shattered and destroyed, unable to make sense out of a world that has lost all sense and meaning and has delved into a collective chaos that has become the norm. A young boy who should only be concerned about his education and the simple joys of childhood is educated through the books of war and destruction to learn truths such as “[a] shell never hits anywhere twice”

(238). Leaving the shelter, the sunlight blinds Sarah; she “[takes] a deep breath. The cleaner air was disorienting. [She] could smell cordite and smoke. [She] tried to breathe again, but felt [herself] blacking out. [She] looked at the boy before [she] lost consciousness” (239). Losing consciousness, she wakes up to the voice of Bernard Shaw delivering the news on CNN. She “had slept slouched at [her] desk. [Her] neck [was] sore. [She] stretch[ed] it backward, then bent it down and rotate[d] her head sideways to release the crick” (239). Sarah had fallen victim to a dream of war, as “[r]ecurrent distressing dreams of the event” is also a symptom of post-traumatic stress according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*.

With lightning flashing outside, the only thought in her mind is that she cannot live with the butter yellow color of the walls. However, it is not the color of the walls that bothers her; it could be one of her own paintings that hangs on the wall. Once again, Sarah faces an internal dilemma of restlessness; after having a flashback of war, an imagination, she opens her eyes to find discomfort in all that is around her. She does not know whether her feeling of unease is caused by the butter yellow color of the wall or the imperfection of her painting; however, the discomfort is an ever-present sentiment that is purely a reflection of a traumatized self in existence. Going back to her computer screen, and after “eliminat[ing] the carnivorous fish. Out pop[s] [her] manuscript. [Her] manuscript. [Hers]. [She] tense[s], feel[s] a knot building in [her] right shoulder. [She] feel[s] about to faint” (240). In a chapter titled “Faint,” Sarah is confronted with the idea of escape by fainting three times. At first, it is the strength of the lightning striking and the deafening thunder that makes her dizzy, as she realizes she “was dropping slowly before [she] black[s] out. Blacking out, she

then finds herself retrieving violent recurrent images of a war-torn Beirut, and at the smell of cordite and smoke, she feels herself “blacking out”(238), and loses consciousness only to wake up to Bernard Shaw’s voice reciting the news on CNN, to see her laptop’s screen and confront her failed attempt of writing her own manuscript, only to feel that she is “about to faint” once again (240). The act of fainting, in these three instances, symbolizes a self-inflicted escape from three phantoms in her life; the thunder and lightning is a strong reminder of a war that she was urged to escape, the smell of cordite and smoke is an actual horrid reality of the war that she has lived and is still internally leading, and her manuscript is a constant reminder of her inability to write her own personal story because of the intensity of her anguish and tumult.

In contrast to Sarah, Zena did not live through the Lebanese Civil War, for during the years of war, she was residing in Nigeria. Zena moves to Lebanon in 1994 to start her undergraduate program in the “Amreekan” University of Beirut. She had lived all her life in Nigeria; however, though not a witness of the war, she comes to live in a post-war Beirut that exhibits all the remnants and ramifications of a war that has left the country shattered and damaged. Throughout the memoir, the war haunts Zena’s existence, even if she has not really lived through it. When asked by her best friend Maya why she “[hold[s] on to the war so much- [even though she wasn’t] even here”, Zena responds that “[she] feel[s] Beirut. . . she is drowning” (94). Beirut for Zena is a complex existence, the life of which depends on death, destruction, war and violence. Despite not living through the civil war, Zena was in Lebanon during the 2006 war. The first mention of the 2006 war is through an e-mail that Zena receives from Marika who writes about having heard that

“Israel dropped bombs in Lebanon” (44). Marika, through her email, wants to inquire whether Zena and her family are doing fine. Interestingly, the e-mail about the 2006 war found at the end of Chapter 4 does not follow the narration of events of the chapter. On the contrary, the chapter narrates the events of Zena’s life while she was still in New York, yet ends with a note of the 2006 war, as though the event of the war itself has created a disruption of Zena’s flow of thoughts while writing her memoir.

The greater mention of the 2006 war comes after our knowledge of Maya’s death in Chapter 13. Interestingly, Chapter 13 begins once again with an e-mail, being the second one after the first e-mail Zena had received from Marika inquiring about Zena’s safety after the 2006 events. Throughout the memoir, the e-mail as a writing genre is used on three occasions. The first e-mail being during the September 11 events, the second discussing the 2006 war, and the third bringing us news of Maya’s death. Significantly, the e-mail always exposes tragic news, as though Zena at these instances of anguish finds an urge to throw the heartbreaking news to her readers through someone else, rather than through her own lines. Her recourse to exposing certain events through e-mail is an indication of her “[e]fforts to avoid thoughts, feelings or conversations associated with the trauma” (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*). The 2006 war is delineated to us as a battle where “they were blowing up [Beirut] to pieces and refus[ing] to let [Zena] sleep” (113). Zena finds it “astonishing how easy it is to start and end something as complicated as war” (113). In her heart, she lived the war for Maya, as she had to keep Maya alive. The memory of the 2006 war is only conveyed to us through its juxtaposition with Maya’s death, as Maya’s death comes about around the same time as the war.

Through Chapter 13, the two traumatic events of Maya's death and the war are interwoven through the narration of a bizarre incident. After Maya's death, Zena goes to her grave, "reache[s] in and grab[s] for [Maya's] arm . . . recogniz[ing] [her] round spectacular thumbs" (113). In the graveyard, Zena unwraps Maya and together with Beirut, they make "a spectacle out of [themselves]" (113). The incident at the graveyard establishes itself as a surreal account which conveys how the traumatic events sometimes recur through "vivid and immediate sensory fragments (e.g. images and sounds) or through obsessional ruminations" or even through imaginary and invented accounts (Kaminer 485). Through the conversation between Maya and Zena, Zena apologizes to Maya for being late to arrive to Maya's "salvation" from death. Zena justifies herself for arriving late and explains that "[t]here was a war going on [which] lasted thirty-four days;" it was a war where "[t]hey were blowing up everything around the graveyard. It was too dangerous. . . [And they] had no idea when it was going to end" (116). It is noteworthy to mention here the intensity of the image of a graveyard around which everything was being blown up; as though even the souls of the dead were not granted the privilege of peace, because in Beirut even after your death, war is still part of your reality. Zena continues to tell Maya about the war, about how they "hit all the roads and bridges. They hit fuel and food supplies. It was really scary. It was so loud. [Zena] had never heard bombs exploding before. They were being dropped from planes [which] sounded like mosquitoes" (116). There was more to the violence of the war than the planes, as "[s]o many people were killed [and Zena] had so much trouble finding [Maya's] grave. This place got so much bigger all of a sudden" (117). The war was so loud that Maya "heard a lot of noise" and believes she might have been alive when the war was happening. Through the words that follow, Maya describes the very sad Lebanese

reality, “[i]t’s as if there has always been war. One war after the other. Which one exactly are you talking about? What did they do?” (117). The war has become part and parcel of the Lebanese existence, “dropp[ing] bombs all over Beirut. Entire neighborhoods disappearing. Entire families gone. . . [Dropping] bombs that burnt people. Their skin melted right off. . . [B]ombs that had hundreds of little bombs in them for little kids to pick up and explode. They didn’t discriminate. Everyone was allowed to pick up a bomb” (117). Although it was a war that lasted only for thirty-four days, it was so horrible that Zena feels glad that Maya was already dead. For Zena, this war was “[w]orse than all the stories we ever heard about;” the vividness of description of the 2006 war serves as a reminder that war should not only be a memory for the Lebanese, but also a constant actuality too intense and too genuine to be disregarded. The war feels so burdensome for Zena that she thinks “[m]aybe it’s better if [Maya] go[es] back down” assuring her that she would accompany her this time “until the world ends” (118). The chapter contains elements of magical realism, conveyed not only through the graveyard scene and the conversation between Maya and Zena, but also through Zena’s explanation of why people are so aggressive in Lebanon. She believes that what is upsetting everybody is

the souls of the dead roaming the streets of Beirut. People who were killed by snipers, bombs, explosions, assassinations and miners. Most of these people died for no reason, didn’t receive proper funerals, and now are really upset and are taking it out on the living. The worst spots are the tunnels. People were killed there in hundreds and their bodies left to rot for ages. (119)

Truth and fantasy intertwine to make the reality of everyday life in Beirut shocking and horrifying. The memory and ache of the civil war remains in the hearts of the Lebanese, and Zena cannot blame Maya “for having never wanted to drive,” as the tunnels are only full of souls that died screaming of pain, and are now vengeful of those alive.

The war does not kill hundreds of people, but its trauma kills Zena’s ability to paint. Zena “couldn’t make art during the war. It was too difficult. [She] wanted to. But [she] couldn’t” (120). What Zena experiences during the war “was more than [a block]. It was absolute despair. . . [She] couldn’t paint death. [She] didn’t want to give the war any more importance than it was already imposing on her. If [she] painted the war, [she] would be giving in” (120). Her refusal to paint was not completely motivated by her strong desire to win the battle against the war and crown herself as victorious, rather a rebellion against the idea of “accept[ing] that [she] could live through a war in some semi-normalcy. [She] would have proven that war could be acceptable. [She] was almost afraid of what the war could produce in [her]” (120). Hundreds had died, Sarah’s art had died, Maya had died, and while Maya was dead, “Beirut had also died with [her]” (122). Life in Beirut was always going to be breathed through fear, as living in Beirut for Zena felt like being raped in a city that is itself perpetually being raped.

Even though 2006 is the only war that Zena lives through, images of the Lebanese Civil War are pervasive throughout the memoir, accentuating the destructive and traumatic consequences it has had on post-war Beirut. People were rebuilding their lives as of 1991, Zena “did not see the rebirth, however. [She] could only see the scars” (53). Beirut has become an image of filth, corruption, depression, and anxiety. The war had left individuals

broken, seeking to validate their escapist existences. The order of the war has been replaced with an addiction to consumerism, a new added value to a life where authentic value had been absolutely eradicated. Zena continues to describe the horrid reality of the Lebanese war, a time when “violence is manifested in so many ways. A caring uncle could, overnight, turn into a raging beast with an unlimited desire to fuck. His niece. His nephew. Or even his own children. These things and more are difficult to control during times of war. And when war ends, hideous crimes often go unpunished” (55). Zena presents the war as having the power to bring out the malice in human beings.

The war and the Israeli invasion had also stopped Zena from visiting the village of her ancestors: Hasbaya, the village where her father and grandfather grew up. Even her ancestral home serves as breeding ground for memories of the war. In the late 70’s when the “Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) had been fighting their guerilla war on Israel from the south of Lebanon, in hopes of taking back their country. . . [they] settled into [Zena’s ancestral] home [which] [a] few weeks later, Israeli jet planes blew up” (65). Even though Zena’s grandfather was resolute about reconstructing his dream home for his family, in 1982,

[t]he Israeli army officially took control of the entire South Lebanon region and [Zena’s] Grandpa’s building project halted once again. The occupiers believed that [their] quaint little village home was a strategic military point. They moved in and took over. Their blue and white flag was strung up and [their] home was transformed into their main headquarters for that area. . . It would be seven more

years [from Zena's grandfather's death] until the Israeli army would leave their home. (66)

A home is meant to be an individual's sanctuary; it is the haven where one feels safety and security. A home should not be a symbol of death and destruction, an emblem of human greed and malice. However, for Zena both her ancestral home and her Beirut home are stripped of their role as a sanctuary and become homes for broken dreams, shattered existences, and perpetual ever-haunting traumatic memories. Zena's ancestral home, "instead of providing room for a growing family, [now embraced] interrogation booths, holding cells, torture rooms, and of course, bureaucratic offices" (66). Years later, after Liberation Day on May 25, 2000, instead of walking into her home rejoicing, she takes slow and calculated steps "wondering if there were any explosives or traps that may have been left on the stairs" (67). Safety was never something that could be taken for granted for a Lebanese, not even on the stairs of their own home.

B- Terrorism- 9/11

Throughout the novel, images of the war continue invasively, indicating how the strength of its memory does not allow Zena to be oblivious to it. However, I want to shift my focus to another traumatic event that has influenced Zena greatly: September 11, 2001. When the Twin Towers fell, Zena found herself "[c]lose enough to see, but far enough to be safe" (25). She was struck by the horror of disaster, and though she knew that she should not be there, she could not leave, as "there is something grossly disgusting about man's interest in experiencing disaster" (25). Zena strongly believes that

disaster can only happen through an experience. It is never black and white. It is usually hard to define. And for each person, it happens in a unique way. Some participate through the reaction of their emotions, or in some cases retraction. Some run to join the fight, others retreat. Some look when they know they shouldn't. Some are simply voyeurs. Some cannot comprehend the situation and seek to make associations with something they already know. (25)

Looking around, Zena found herself in an action movie; she saw people “faced with their worst nightmare” (25), as death is definitely the greatest fear that a human being could have. In this moment of disaster, Zena comes across the deep-rooted realization that everyone around the world is similar; “we all feel fear, grieve and mourn. How, when faced with a crisis, we often lose everything we’ve spent our lives working to become. . . We all held hands, holding on to strangers who suddenly seemed like our closest relatives. No, we weren’t that different after all” (26). It is tragedy that unites people, rather than life’s joys. When faced with the threat of death, individuals register nothing but the will to survive; Zena was more familiar with this threat than the people of New York. However, at that moment, “[f]ear, betrayal, confusion, guilt, pain, loss, anger,” all these “universal emotions” abound blurring the lines of existence. The significance of the September 11 event lies in the harmful and traumatic echoes it reverberates in Zena’s life. After “the two buildings fell, [Zena] was seen only as Arab. . . [People on the streets feared] that [she] may jinx them with [her] black-and-white checkered *kuffiyeh*. It seemed that the more people hated Arabs, the more [she] wanted to be one” (28). Experiencing the trauma of 9/11, Zena finds herself identifying with the perpetrator of terrorism, Arabs. Dr. Leila

Farhoud states in “War Trauma and Women” that among the many symptoms of “human-induced violence [such as the terrorist attack of September 11] are guilt about victims, blame, hostility, and identification with the aggressor” (261). Identification with the aggressor becomes clearly evident in Zena’s case after the falling of the Twin Towers; rather than abhorring the victim, Zena claims the opportunity to bond with her identity as Arab. Facing the questions and interrogations becomes a space for affirmation of her Arab identity. However, Zena’s trauma does not lie merely in the event of the falling of the Twin Towers; it is extended further through the memory instigated by this event.

Even though the memory of the Lebanese war is a traumatic event without a witness, it does not cease being identified as “trauma”. Zena proceeds to recount how the Amreekans blew up her mother’s house in 1983. She describes her mother who had “once dreamed of making love to Clint Eastwood” and her uncle “who dressed like John Travolta, his room plastered with Hollywood pinups” and moves on to describe how the USS New Jersey blew up their house in 1983, penalizing these two innocent individuals for crimes that they had not even committed. Remembering what the Americans had done to her family becomes her response to the burden of inquisition placed upon her by the mere fact of being Arab. She continues to describe “Big J,” carrying missiles and “find[ing] her way over to [their] Lebanese shores and [blowing] apart her mother’s house” and “crush[ing] [her] mother’s memories” (29). The description of violence is interwoven with morbid images of sexuality and death,

Like an asinine man, enraged, but restricted by his limp dick, you wanted to take out your anger. Banging your head furiously against a concrete wall until it bled.

Imagining that every pretend ejaculation was the birth of a new era. Eyes red and bulging, drunk in furious rage. Missiles hard; penetrating. Saliva; bountiful and smelly. Skin; stiff, coarse, crackling, open sores, pus, blood, excrement. “Big J”, you aging bastard, you shat on my mother’s house. You took away all of her belongings. All of her recollections. (29)

The language employed in the description delineates Zena’s rage, anger, frustration and disgust with the events of the past. It also clearly conveys a sense of urgency for a vengeful desire that is conceived as the only possibility towards forgiveness and healing. For Zena, although the September 11 was a horror, it was not something she was unfamiliar with. “People die every day, this event is nothing new. Buildings fall in Lebanon everyday” (30). Through registering the September 11 event, Zena exhibits a sense of knowledge towards the actuality and universality of what this episode of violence holds, “people die. . . buildings are blown up all the time, all around the world. . . in Palestine, people are killed every day. In Palestine, children die for no reason. In Palestine, children are killed by bulldozers demolishing their homes” (31). Through Zena’s words is an affirmation that violence, as horrid as it may be, has been an essence of the reality she has lived through and perpetually observed around her.

Both Sarah and Zena through their exposure to the Lebanese Civil War, July 2006 War, and the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, albeit selectively, prove to be victims of violence. At the time of happening, these events might only be registered as actualities of disaster. However, their ramifications become evident through the characters’ writings, as the words convey suffering and allow us to understand how tormenting and traumatic

memories are always revisited in order to be processed completely. The writing of these events is also a reconstruction, as these “traumatic event[s] [are] encoded in the brain in a different way from ordinary memory” in the words of Ruth Leys, necessitating a reconstruction in order to be fully understood (67). Both characters affirm themselves as victims of their circumstances, and the violations they are exposed to leave them suffering “physical and psychological events [even] long after the traumatic events” (Danieli 879). A destruction of morale, resulting from these traumatic events, can be observed through the consequent behavior of these characters unfolded through the later pages of the memoirs; as their reactions include “powerful negative feelings, painful physical sensations, or horrific imagery of the events. . . [even] serious, chronic, sometimes life-long, [irrational] fear [of certain events], paranoia, depression, anxiety, and personality changes,” which are the clear-cut symptoms of trauma (Danieli 879). Through experiencing these personal encounters with pain, the already-existing profound sense of isolation and mistrust of society are strengthened for Sarah and Zena, thus transforming the rest of their lives into pilgrimages where they mourn for their losses and seek to integrate themselves into a society which, in fact, they question.

C- Rape/ Sexual Assault

The experience of trauma for both characters is not only on the communal level, as it is not exclusively connected to war within or outside the Lebanese community; on the contrary, they are both victims on the personal level, as they have also been exposed to the traumatic experience of rape and/or sexual assault.

On a hot day, and in her flower motif dress, Sarah finds herself in the car, stopped by the cab driver “at an indistinct plot of land”; the man had a gun, and

was already behind her, holding her firmly by the shoulders, the revolver aimed at the nape of her neck. . . *Slut. Fucking bitch.* . . She came to realize what these men wanted. . . For the first time, she dared look the driver in the eyes. . . A scary mixture of lust and disdain. . . It was a primitive desire, dominance, aggression. For the first time, she wanted to die. . . The younger man threw her on the ground, while the other, holding his injured fingers, kept repeating, *Slut. . . Whore. . . You will pay me for this, bitch.* . . I don’t want to kiss you, bitch! I want to shove the gun in. . . Slut! . . . she heard his breathing accelerate. She heard his groan. Or was it her that groaned? Suddenly, the body of the man stopped moving, and he fell heavily on top of her in a death rattle. . . In only one hour, her life had come to an end. In only one hour, her dreams were shattered. In only one hour, she thought bitterly, she had become a woman. She was no longer a virgin. . . She was a victim. She was soiled. (195-99)

Rape transformed Sarah into a victim; she was a victim of lust, a victim of oppression and the victim of trauma. Insufficiently grasped at the time of its occurrence, trauma acts as a haunting or possessive influence which returns intrusively. It is noteworthy to mention that Sarah is only able to write fully about the traumatic event of the rape after three trials. According to Hout, as difficult as writing about the war is, “[w]hat is infinitely more difficult, however, is verbalizing the personal trauma that [Sarah] suffered, between 6:00 and 7:00 p.m., on one August evening in 1976: the abduction, gang rape, loss of her

virginity, and resulting pregnancy and abortion” (“The Tears of Trauma” 60). Her first trial at writing her chapter about rape appears in her twenty-third ‘Chapter One’, as she describes the hot evening early in August, 1976, when she was wearing a black linen dress, waiting for a taxi, yet no taxies were in sight. She asserts that she was sixteen and that she “should have been invincible,” foreshadowing that she will meet a tragic fate that will force her to desire herself as “invincible”. However, the account ends here as she is unable to continue because of the intensity of the traumatic experience. Sarah abandons the story, only to return to it after ten chapters in her thirty-third ‘Chapter One’, which ironically once again shifts to French, similar to the Chapter after the episode of war; thus being the second and last Chapter written in French. Once again, the switch to French is not merely an indication of an interruption of thought, but also a signal that conveys the difficulty of dealing with the memory of her rape experience, which even though is engraved deep within her, has not yet been accepted, as it is significantly a prompt of the disintegration of the self. According to Cooke, “[t]he break-up of the memory is essential to the break-up of the self in disharmony with the present. Since writing is a process of creating not only a text, but also the world. The disintegration of words signals the ultimate disintegration” (*War’s Other Voices* 117). Though Sarah finds difficulty at continuing any of her chapters, it is only the chapter about rape that has been commenced twice, once in English and the other in French, before it has been fully revealed to us; thus, rape is a disruptive point of her flow of thoughts: being one of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Sexual objectification and violence intertwine within Sarah’s account of her rape. When the “driver land[s] his large brown hand on her arm” and “his grip tighten[s]” as Sarah is

trying to free her arm, the instinct of dominance can already be observed. Sarah, the woman, ultimately realizes that she “[is] at their mercy,” at the mercy of men, at the greater mercy of a confining patriarchal society where the desire to dominate woman is not only acceptable but also justifiable. The “scary mixture of lust and disdain” and the “primitive desire, dominance, [and] aggression” leave Sarah “want[ing] to die. . . not wish[ing] to suffer what these men wanted to inflict” (195). The horror of the rape begins with the “chill of the gun as it touched her vagina [bringing] her back to the cold reality” (196). She was certain she was going to suffer, but unaware that the suffering will entail a “gun moving in and out of her vagina. . . [A] gun [that] was practically in her now” (196). The two men choose to rape Sarah, yet do not deflower her except through a gun. According to Henri Myrntinen, “[t]he connection between men and weapons often takes on highly sexualized characteristics. The notion of a sword, a gun or a nuclear missile being a phallic symbol or a penile extension has become something of a cliché. This has happened to a point where it no longer can be seen as a subversive critique of male obsession with weapons” (39). The men did not choose to have sex with her while robbing her of her “honor”, but rather they chose the gun, a phallic symbol throughout literature, a symbol of masculine power and dominance to effectively crown Sarah’s rape. “With respect to sexualized violence, against both women and men, in which weapons play a role, the weapon loses its *symbolic* phallic quality and is either used to force sexual acts upon the victim and/or is used as a surrogate phallus for penetrating orifices” (Myrntinen 41). Thus, Sarah the “whore” receives the strongest blow of a patriarchal society; the gun, a weapon of destruction, serves here not only to destroy life by putting an end to it, but rather to destroy a life by robbing a girl of her most precious purity and “staining” her forever the way wine spilled on linen stains and

can never come off. According to Hout, Sarah's black linen dress with a flower motif is quite symbolic as it is an allusion to her father's comparison of the "deflowering" of a girl to the irreparable stain of spilled wine on linen. "The torn flesh and blood, signifying her sudden loss of prewar innocence at sixteen, will induce tears for years to come" (61). It is also noteworthy to mention that the title of this chapter is "Spilt Wine," in connection to the aforementioned statement that Sarah's father has made which "stuck in [her] mind,"

'A boy's sexuality is like a plastic tablecloth', he said. 'If a carafe of wine is spilled on it, you can easily wipe it off. A girl's sexuality, on the other hand, is like fine linen, much more valuable. If a carafe of wine is spilled on it, it will never come off. You can wash it and wash it, but it will never be the same'. (127)

The memory and horror of rape is not only traumatic because of the violence in employing the gun, as the image continues with the man "pull[ing] down his pants and throw[ing] himself at her," and "the heat of his erect penis enter[ing] her" (197). The horror does not stop at the "older man tak[ing] the place of the younger man" to continue "penetrate[ing] her savagely [that] she thought he was going to pierce her" (197); however, it continues when the man "holding her down notices" the "frail silhouette in the distance" of an adolescent, "maybe a year or two younger than Sarah" who observes "the scene with a mixture of fascination and disgust" and, to his surprise, is invited to join in the "celebration of rape". "You want to remain a virgin all your life. Come. Come find out the pleasures of being a man," are the words uttered by the old man, "arrogant[ly] in spite of the fact that he was naked from the waist down, his penis covered with blood" (198). The adolescent, though at first hesitant, is soon engulfed with desire that "burn[s] with the same fire which

animated the driver after he hit her” (198). The boy chooses to “jump on her, penetrating her brutally and clumsily”; however, “she [does] not have time to close her eyes [when] already he emitted the strange cry,” for which he is questioned, “Why didn’t you take your time? She is ours” (198). And before she could even be conscious of what was happening, “[o]ne of the others went back inside her. She did not know which one . . . he slapped her. Her tears did not stop, but he did not hit her anymore. Then the man penetrated her again. But she felt nothing other than pain” (198). Sarah is left in so much disbelief that she does not “notice the men dress and leave” (198). “She [finds] herself suddenly alone, filthy, covered in dirt and blood;” in one hour, she had been transformed into a victim of her society, a victim of rape. In a country at war, even the most horrific sexual acts could be committed and passed with impunity. Sex, lust, a gun and war combine to interweave a story for Sarah that she needs to keep all to herself. As Cooke affirms, “The language of military attack- assault, impact, thrust, penetration- has always overlapped with that of sexual importunity . . . for war provokes an almost tropical flowering of sexual activity behind the lines which is the counterpart to the work of carnage which takes place at the front” (*War’s Other Voices*³²). Sarah’s rape is inhumane, as the crime committed against her was not from a single man, but rather three different men, both young and old. Her rape is only a speck of the larger picture of a victimizing patriarchal society where man is born to grow and believe that he is entitled to dominate woman, no matter at what expense. “She is ours,” shouts the old man at the young boy who did not take his time while taking advantage of Sarah, as though Sarah, is an object possessed by them, a personal belonging which can be used and abused, pleasing all of man’s whims, caprices, and desires.

In contrast to Sarah, Zena has not been the victim of rape; however, she has been the victim of sexual assault. Coming home from university, Zena and Maya come across a young boy, “probably a construction worker from a nearby building site,” “eyeing” them. Zena does not give this event much thought; however, what she forgets to remember is that “this [was] Beirut, always full of surprises, always hurting you when you least expect it” (60). As Maya was telling Zena about a recent break-up, and Zena was trying to console her, before she was able to give her a hug, she “[feels] something warm and hard on [her] crotch” (60). To her surprise, “[i]t was a hand. [She] scream[s]” but “[i]t [doesn’t] let go” (61). Though Maya kicks him, the boy manages to “push her away. He was so young. How was it that he was also so strong?” (61). The boy does not stop; rather, he utters a horrid objectifying expression of “Yeslamle hal kess, how sweet is your cunt,” spitting into Zena’s ear, “[smelling] like sweat and dust” (61). Zena “scream[s] and cr[ies], [yet] [h]is hand was still there. His grip was so right. [She] could feel his fingers trying to press inside [her]. It was all happening so quickly. His thumb pushed hard against [her] pubic bone. [She] pushed away; he didn’t let go. It hurt so much” (61). After this violent episode, Zena falls into Maya’s arms, her “shirt was ripped. [Her] artwork strewn all over the street. Taxis were honking. [Her] artwork fell victim to Beirut traffic. Between [her] legs, it stung. It was throbbing painfully. [She] was almost afraid to look down. [She] imagined that he ripped off [her] privates and ran away with them” (61). Once again, a young boy grants himself the privilege of seeking to fulfill his sexual whims at the expense of a woman. Zena was lucky to have Maya protecting her, and though the man was not able to fulfill his desire fully, Zena “felt as if [she] had been raped a thousand times” (61). For the young boy, Zena was not regarded as an individual, rather as a “kess,” she was merely a “sweet

cunt” and the boy had an unquestionable right to place his fingers on her crotch, as though she is an object to be claimed and owned, serving to feed the primitive desire.

Zena’s experience with sexual assault does not end here. In chapter 19, Zena begins by describing the three wars that have happened after the 2006 war, and which have not received any media coverage, “[t]he war in [her] heart. The war on the streets. [And] [t]he war to keep Beirut” (157). Walking down on Hamra street, feeling invincible and still capable of “tak[ing] [Beirut] on”, Zena comes face to face with a cop “carry[ing] [a] semi-automatic machine gun, not [a] pistol” (157). The cop’s gun was “swinging back and forth with every step that he took” (157). Zena moves away from the cop, thinking to herself that “if he was not careful, if his gun was not on safety, it could have easily shot a bullet in [her] direction” (157). However, despite taking her precautions, she “ran into another cop standing on the left” and as “hard as she tried to avoid the first gun, the second one ran right into [her]. Right into her crotch” (158). “Here we go again, Beirut and [Zena’s] crotch. But this time, [she] didn’t have Maya to bail [her] out” (158). Zena once again finds herself at the mercy of Beirut’s cruelty. She is at the mercy of Beirut, Beirut’s guns and Beirut’s perpetual lust. “Since the summer war, there have been so many guns. And people have stopped falling in love. Perverts, cocked rifles, ready to shoot, ready to penetrate their targets with their trajectories, armed, ready, sweaty, smelly, hairy, moldy” (158). Through Zena’s description is a juxtaposition of imagery of male dominance and aggression, a “cocked rifle” stands as an image of male power and control. According to Myrntinen, “the public display, the threat of or actual use of weapons is an intrinsic part of violent, militarized models of masculinity” (37); thus, through using his gun, the cop is merely

establishing and affirming his masculinity in the face of Zena. Myrntinen believes that war is a perfect example “when there is a ‘fear of loss of male power and privilege’ through social transformations leading to a backlash in which traditional gender roles are reinforced” (37). There is a strong connection between men and weapons which is linked to their violent notion of gender-affirmation, as “weapons are part of one notion of masculinity, a militarized view that equates ‘manliness’ with the sanctioned use of aggression, force and violence” (Myrntinen 37). Also, it is an ironic construct that the man “rub[bing] his gun against [Zena’s] crotch is a cop who is meant to be a protector and one safeguarding security, rather than instigating fear. However, “the construct of the male warrior/ protector relies on the suppression of others”(Myrntinen 37) even if suppression of the other sometimes becomes synonymous with oppression of the other, as is the case of the Beirut cop. “ The display of his weapon in public becomes a way in which the man displays his masculinity and defines his role in society” (Myrntinen 38) and it is this strictly-defined role that does not allow Zena to be either offensive for fear of getting into trouble, or polite for fear of “letting him get away with it” (158). However, reflecting upon the situation, Zena seeks to understand the recent construct of her society as the

Amreekans have been sending [the Lebanese] all their used weapons, trucks and tanks. They have been sending the U.S. Special Forces to train [the Lebanese] charming young men. Men who previously would never stop a pretty girl on the street now create blockades for them. Men who previously would bow their heads in respect now swing their guns at them. (158)

Faced by the insurgency of such a situation, there was no reaction that could be the right reaction, for he was a cop, and even if these cops are “perverts”, for “throwing their guns at [her]” and for “blockading [her] street”, they are part of the Lebanese reality, Zena’s reality and her existence in a hegemonic society. As Myrtilinen argues, “Violent models of masculinity often become hegemonic, with the weapon being used as both a symbol and a tool to demonstrate and enforce this hegemony against others, including competing masculinities. This is often the case in conflict and post-conflict situations but also in societies that are more or less openly violent” (44). Considering that “these days when you give directions on how to get from one place to another, you use tanks as references” and “casually mention a left turn, not at the first tank, but the second” (159) classifies Lebanese society not only as a “post-conflict situation”, but also as a society that is more or less openly violent and, in such circumstances, even the most horrid acts of violence against women can be expected, even if perpetrated by those in charge of safety and security.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SELF AND THE OTHER

Through an analysis of the major characters in the lives of Sarah and Zena, we can delve into their secret worlds and understand much of their behavioral patterns and life choices.

A- Family

1. Female Figures

From the very beginning of the novel, in the third 'Chapter One', Sarah confesses that she "had always been a little odd"; her oddness could in fact be attributed to the fact that her own mother "'went astray' when conceiving [Sarah]" (5). Interestingly, the eighth 'Chapter One' of the memoir titled "Le Commencement", which focuses on the stepmother, precedes the chapter with an extensive mention of Sarah's mother. Sarah's choice of writing a chapter about her stepmother before her chapter about her real mother foreshadows the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship. In a chapter titled "My Mother and I", Sarah begins by recounting her desire for her son to see his grandmother again; however, Janet refuses to see Kamal. Despite Janet's refusal to see Kamal, Sarah insists on waiting for her in the lobby, and when Janet comes down, she receives Kamal, coldly uttering "You're a big boy now" (44). Nevertheless, she turns her back and walks out, not allowing a further possibility of a conversation. At her odd behavior, Kamal tells Sarah that her "mother is crazy"; however, Sarah responds that "[s]he's your grandmother" to which Kamal bluntly answers that Sitto Saniya is his grandmother and not Janet. Sarah asserts that Janet is "[his] blood and [he] can't forget that" (45). When Sarah and Kamal

proceed to sit at a Greek restaurant facing Janet's building, Sarah is surprised to see Janet walk back to her apartment within five minutes. Although a very short chapter, "My Mother and I" is significant through its exposition of Janet's cold-heartedness as a grandmother and the bitter nature of the relationship between Sarah and her mother. Though the chapter's title is "My Mother and I", not much is revealed to us about Sarah and her mother. Despite Janet's refusal to receive her grandson warmly, Sarah insists on the importance of blood in familial ties. Kamal finds that it is not blood that makes family, but rather the warmth of emotions. At her finding out that Janet had purposefully avoided them, Sarah ends the chapter abruptly as though to avoid the confrontation of a sad truth that she is not yet ready to face: the absence of a mother in her life.

The chapter that follows, once again with no title, recounts the story of Janet and Mustapha. Mustapha confesses to Sarah that he "[doesn't] think any man ever loved a woman as [he] loved [her] mother. But it faded, eroded slowly. One day [he] woke up and [he] was not in love" (46). Through his words, Sarah reaches a conclusion that in her family, "love, like religion and politics, was to be avoided, a passion that vanquished reason and caused endless pain and heartache" (46). Through these words, one can understand Sarah's choices concerning relationships in her life. Sarah proceeds to tell how Janet and Mustapha met and fell in love. The Druze community considered Janet a threat, as she had the power to steal "one of its brightest men" (48). However, all their efforts to break up the couple were fruitless. Interestingly, Janet did all she could to transform into an ideal daughter-in-law; the non-conformist Janet converted into a conservative Janet becoming "more Druze than any Druze woman", an ideal "Druze housewife" (48). With

the birth of her first daughter came the first disappointment, as “[e]verybody would have preferred a boy” (49). With the birth of her second daughter, Lamia, came the greater disappointment. Finally, when Sarah “arrived on the scene, it was too much” (49). Mustapha “needed a Druze wife who could provide him with a bushel of boys. Mustapha sent Janet back to New York” (49). Following the divorce, Janet “was never strong again”; Sarah only grew closer to her mother when she moved to New York, “but it was a constant strain to be in her presence for she never forgave. She had been wronged, and lived that wrong for the rest of her life” (49). Sarah believes herself to be the bane of Janet’s life and carries this sense of guilt throughout her life; she was the cause of failure of Janet’s marriage and her transformation from a strong woman to one who would spend the rest of her life in misery. Interestingly, just as her mother had rebelled against her circumstances and had consented to being tamed into a Druze community, Sarah rebels against her Druze community and against the wishes of her parents, marries Omar and becomes pregnant (51). Sarah is a reflection of her mother in the choices she makes; both refuse to conform and remain within the limits of their own immediate circle, rebelling and seeking to belong to territories they are not meant to belong to.

Once again, Sarah mentions her mother in the eleventh ‘Chapter One’, narrating the last time she actually sees her mother. Sarah had tried to talk to her mother a few times asking her for advice about David, thinking that she could be able to help. However, she was disappointed as her mother could only talk about her memoirs. Janet sees “herself as an artist, a painter, having all the neuroses of an artist, but none of the talent” (55). Considering her mother’s “passion” for drawing, one could explain Sarah’s longing herself

to find solace in painting. Sarah's mother continues to tell her "Write, write, write; [a]ll I do is write. It's so liberating" (55); she claims to find liberation from her own personal history through writing, and like her daughter seeks to establish catharsis through writing. However, when Sarah asks to see her writing, "as usual, nothing was ready to be shown" as Janet claims that she has "hired a professional editing firm to clean things up before [she's] ready to publish" (55). When Janet sees Sarah on the day of her "first and last New York opening", she expresses her enthusiasm and assures her that they "have more than one thing to celebrate" as she is "at a great place in her writing" (55). Sarah never sees any of Janet's manuscripts; Janet is a failure at her own writing, somehow similar to how Sarah perceives herself at every failed attempt of writing a memoir. Both mother and daughter seek to crown the path of their lives with a memoir; however, though Janet fails to accomplish her goal, Sarah after many failed attempts succeeds to tell her story.

The chapter ends with the end of Janet's life. Sarah was certain that her mother would not be present at her opening; however, what she was unaware of was that her mother would put an end to her own life on the same night. When Sarah calls her mother the next morning, she finds out that "[t]hat night she cut herself with a razor in the bathtub, not just her wrists, but all over, and bled to death" (56). That being the final line of the chapter, Sarah refrains from making any comments about her mother's suicide. She does not question whether Janet's suicide was an act of frailty and surrender to the anguish of life, or an act of courage and domination over death. Somehow, Sarah does not seek to comprehend her mother's decision to commit suicide. This could partly be because of her own inability to comprehend her personal choices, and even the fear of her own self, as she

believes that she has taken from her mother too many aspects, and she could have possibly inherited her mother's neurosis and maybe weakness in the face of life. Interestingly, the chapter that follows Janet's suicide is a reminiscence of Sarah's early teenage years, as she remembers an afternoon spent on the beach with Fadi, the first boy in Sarah's life. This is the only chapter that Sarah dedicates to Fadi alone, as though the idea of her mother's suicide creates within her an urge to escape the harshness of reality, returning to the childhood innocence, and to the incorruptible world seen through the naive eyes of a child.

Among the many feelings that engulf Sarah at finding out about her mother's suicide, "the predominant one was shock" (261). Sarah's shock sends her into wondering about "who would have dealt with the corpse. How did she kill herself?" (262). However, her flow of thoughts is interrupted at finding out that Janet, even at her death, did not go by the name of Janet Foster, but rather Janet Nour el-Din. Questioning why her mother would have done that, "reminding [herself] of past pains", Dina assures Sarah that Janet "was as much a Nour el-Din as any of [them]. Just because she was ostracized doesn't mean she's not part of the equation" (262). Searching her mother's desk, Sarah wants to find something, even though she does not know what exactly she is looking for. She plans to find her mother's artwork, as she has never seen any of it. However, to her disappointment, she only finds "some brushes and tubes of gouache" (263). Though her mother had "always talked about being a painter, yet no one had seen a single painting" (263). Sarah wondered if Janet even "owned any paints" (263). The awareness that her mother's art and talent could have merely been lies shakes Sarah's existence and makes her realize the sad truth that she does not really know her mother. Sarah ends up taking only some family pictures,

four pictures to be exact, and an old kaleidoscope that her mother had bought at an antique store. The kaleidoscope is significant because of the idea that as the viewer looks into one end, light entering the other creates a colorful pattern, due to the reflection of the mirrors. Despite the horrid reality of Janet's death and the ugly nature of their relationship, what is left for Sarah from Janet is a kaleidoscope, so that no matter how harsh reality becomes, Sarah can escape it through the visualization of colors. After all, Janet did leave a heritage to her daughter, the ability to escape reality at will.

"Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, I Am My Mother After All" is the title of the twenty-seventh 'Chapter One'. With such a powerful title, Sarah in this chapter delves into self-analysis. She believes herself to be a constant reminder of Janet for her father. "[She] was [her] mother's daughter" (138). Being associated with her mother would definitely create a sense of guilt for Sarah, as Janet is not a beautiful memory for Mustapha. As Sarah "grow[s] older, [she] notice[s] how much [she] look[s] like [her] mother. The eyes are the same, the hair is almost the same, [hers] is more brown than red, but she do[es] dye it red every now and then. The nose, the forehead, the same. . . [She] inherited the exotic looks" (138). Remembering her father's telling of "Sleeping Beauty", Sarah reflects upon how during her childhood, the answer to her father's question of "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" was "Me!"; whereas now, the chant has completely changed and become "Mirror, mirror on the wall/ I am my mother after all" (139). At the idea that she is her mother, Sarah cries. It is not the exotic looks that bother her, rather the turn her life has taken. When Sarah "notice[s] how [her] life ended up and realize[s] [she is] her mother, even though [she] hardly knew her", she cannot but feel sadness, fear and

disappointment. After Mustapha left her mother, Janet spent her life throwing herself into her imaginary world of painting and writing; however, she was unable to produce either paintings or writing. It is the fear of the repetition of her mother's mistakes that scares Sarah. She does not want to inherit her mother's failures, nor the ugly ending of her life. Janet was incapable of being a true mother to her daughter; likewise, Sarah feels the same threat and horror of being unfit for motherhood for Kamal. Sarah loves and abhors her mother at the same time; she admires her mother's strength, yet detests her frailty as "[her] Janet was bitter, a defeated woman" (252). "Sarah is fascinated by her mother. Such beauty, such pathos; her life the stuff of novels" (210). However, as fascinated as she is, the idea of ending up like her mother brings her to tears. Though Janet's life is "the stuff of novels", it is a novel with a tragic ending that Sarah does not wish for herself.

After attempting to write and managing to write five untitled chapters, Sarah moves on to begin writing a memoir titled "Half and Half". She introduces us to the characters of the memoir, after dedicating it to the memory of Dina, her best friend. The memoir contains twenty-one characters, beginning with her family: father and mother, grandfather, her sister, two half-sisters, her half-brother, and her son, moving to her personal relationships with no apparent chronological order: her first and second ex-husband, her best friend, her first lover, and the last character being David- her lover. Interestingly, Sarah begins with the idea that her childhood was "a fairy-tale childhood complete with the evil stepmother"; she delineates Saniya as being a "Nazi with [her]" (33). Throughout the chapter, she writes about how she always defied Saniya's wishes. She blames Saniya for having turned her father against her and writes about Saniya with scorn. However, Saniya's chapter precedes

Janet's chapter; moreover, Sarah depicts Saniya with more details than she depicts her own mother. Despite her scornfulness towards Saniya, Sarah through her extensive mentioning of Saniya acknowledges, if unconsciously, the impact she had on her life.

Interestingly, the second chapter that sheds light on Saniya is the eighth 'Chapter One', which once again is called "the beginning"; however, it is in French. The narration is a repetition of the fifth 'Chapter One', as they also hold the same title. The significance of this chapter lies in the fact that it gives too much importance to Saniya. Writing two different chapters about her stepmother conveys the strong influence that Saniya has on Sarah's life.

The next extensive description of Saniya is in the thirty-second 'Chapter One', "Around the Grave", where Sarah returns to Lebanon to be by her father's side, as he is in the hospital. Sarah depicts Saniya as a strong independent woman who would not concede to the natural course of life's stagnation because of age. She portrays Saniya's desire of "re-invent[ing] herself" and "adjust[ing] to a new life" with admiration. Saniya handles her business, the Lebanese International Cable Company, with potency and autonomy. This chapter presents a shift in Sarah's attitude towards Saniya, from scorn to admiration. She is portrayed as a woman who possesses positive characteristics: "[an] ease with which she [makes] decisions, the decisiveness itself, the sheer audacity of her actions, her understanding of the logic of investment and her lack of self-doubt" (181). At this point, Saniya is a woman Sarah would like to resemble, as she lacks the frailty and cowardice of her own mother. Sarah moves on to describe Tariq, Saniya's "partner in crime" (182). She continues to narrate a day in Saniya's life where "[by] four-thirty, Tariq was going down

on her, his Hizballah beard proving to be functional after all” (191). Her stepmother was actually deceiving her husband, yet Sarah does not comment on the issue. “Tariq lay with his arms around her, her back against his chest, their feet touching. He fell asleep nuzzling her neck, a hand holding her breast. She wept, silently, careful not to wake him. Tears dropping into her open mouth, she whimpered softly” (191) Saniya is deceitful to her husband; however, despite the emotionality of the time spent with Tariq, she cannot stop her tears. She appears to be invincible, yet deep down, it is her emptiness and need for affection that push her to surrendering herself to Tariq’s touches. Sarah refrains from writing her personal opinion about Saniya’s cheating; most likely because in this instance, she no longer perceives her as her stepmother, but rather as a woman. Saniya, in her eyes, becomes a vulnerable woman who is in need of love and affection, like Sarah herself.

In addition to her mother and stepmother, Sarah’s sisters and half-sisters have played an important role, in a way or another, in Sarah’s life. Sarah’s “favorite sister was growing up to be a stunner, a heartbreaker in training” (40). It is possible that Sarah prefers Rana to the others because of the closeness of their characters; as they are both dreamy and consider the world stuff for a novel. Sarah’s favorite sister meets a tragic end; in the fourteenth “Chapter One”. Sarah begins by an allusion to Leo Tolstoy’s quote “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” from *Anna Karenina*. However, she believes that Tolstoy lied, as she does not deem that all “happy families resemble each other as [she] do[es] not know any content families” (63). The war in Lebanon made all families unhappy, each in its own way; however “[i]t did not matter why a family was unhappy before; death became the overpowering reason” (63). For Sarah’s

family, “it was the death of Rana” (63). Sarah describes Rana as “sunshine incarnate” who even had to “pin a small turquoise stone inside everything she wore to keep away the evil eye. It did not work” (64). Sarah then proceeds to describe the war, and the thousand of Lebanese civilians that were being killed by the Israelis, to move on to describe the “seventeen-year-old Syrian soldier, by the name of Izzat Ghalayini, [who] laid his eyes on Rana” (64). On July 3, as Rana, Majida and Sarah were walking over to Amal’s house, the soldier approaches them to express his “honorable” intentions. Asking for her hand in marriage and being rejected, four days later, “[h]e shot her from across the street. She died instantly. He placed the butt of his rifle on the ground, put the other end in his mouth, and fired” (66). In the words of Frank Farleigh, “all is fair in love and war”. Rana’s death becomes a token of all being fair in love and war; the soldier loved Rana, yet his desire to possess her would not accept her not being his. It was not only the war that caused trauma in Sarah’s life, but also the loss of her favorite sister, Rana. It is noteworthy to mention that the event of Rana being shot by the soldier is an allusion to Zahra in Hanan al-Shaykh’s *The Story of Zahra*; as Zahra gets shot by her lover the sniper, Rana gets shot by the soldier because of love and desire for possession. There are no rules in the game of love, as all is a fair game. Rana’s death brings the family asunder, as their existence becomes engulfed by denial. Her parents “try to pretend a crisis never happened. If [they] don’t talk about it, it will disappear” (68). Sarah is part of a family where too many things cannot be talked about; denial is the only way to recovery, even though it can never lead to healing or recovery. As denial is a way of existence, Sarah learns to bottle up too many painful sentiments that only surface at later stages of her life in the form of post-traumatic stress,

leading her into depression, a continuous pattern of destructive interpersonal relationships, and a constant struggle to heal herself.

Rana's death is not the only tragedy that the Nour el-Din family goes through, as another tragic episode is exposed to us through Sarah's other half-sister Lamia. We are first exposed to Lamia as a murderess in the twenty-fifth 'Chapter One'. Sarah and Lamia never got along as children; her behavior made Sarah want to "kill her" sometimes (125). Nevertheless, it is Lamia who ended up being the killer "Nurse Killed Patients to Have Quiet Shifts" (126). Lamia killed at least seven patients "by injecting them with lethal drugs stolen from the hospital [merely because she] did not want to be disturbed" (126). Where Rana's death brought the family asunder, Lamia's transformation into a murderess brought the family closer together, as they were all once again in Lebanon, coming together in the name of tragedy. After having killed the patients, Lamia attempts suicide, yet fails. Beyond the shocking truth of Lamia being a murderess is a greater introspection into Lamia's personality through her letters. In the thirtieth 'Chapter One' "A Serial Killer in Our Midst", Lamia is introduced as "an anonymous presence in Sarah's family [as they] sometimes [even] forgot she was there" (145). Lamia has always lived in a world of her own, an introvert who "wove [around herself] an impenetrable cocoon from which she never emerged" (146). After her death, Amal finds a "well-hidden cache of letters" when packing Lamia's things and though Sarah had supposed that Lamia hated their mother, to her surprise, the letters were all addressed to Janet, "spanning thirty-five years beginning the day [Janet] disappeared and lasting long past the day [Janet] committed suicide" (147). Through more than four hundred and fifty letters, we enter Lamia's psyche to discover "all

the pain, all the loneliness, all the insanity” (147). Through mundane epistolary conversations she had with her mother, she discusses details from the most ordinary to the most bizarre. The strangeness of her husband, her feeling of worthlessness, her arguments with her father, her perception of herself as “the rock of Gibraltar” (151), her jealousy of Sarah, Sarah’s arrogance and her being a “sex machine”(154), Sarah’s insensitivity and “chang[ing] men like magic”(155), Sarah’s “open[ing] her legs to any man who will make her rich and better” (155), her driving to Suida to meet her daughter from her previous life, her having killed her old husband in her previous life by cut[ting] his throat and then cut[ting] [her own]” (161), and her killing of the patients are all subjects that Lamia discusses in detail through her letters. The letters are written in “jumbled, nonlinear prose” and clearly convey a disturbed mind. Interestingly, this chapter is the longest throughout the novel. It is the only chapter which exposes us to how Sarah is perceived by someone, strangely, that someone being Lamia. Lamia believes that Sarah is an opportunist who can get her way by having sex with any man who can make her richer. No matter how selfish and immoral Sarah is, she is her father’s favorite and this was always an issue Lamia envied and despised Sarah for.

Next to Lamia’s hospital bed, Amal confesses to Sarah that she is having an affair. Though not much is written about Amal, we are first exposed to her up-close with the news of her affair. Amal feels the urge to tell Sarah about the affair as “[t]here’s no one else [she] can talk to” (131). When Sarah asks Amal if her lover is in love with her, Amal claims it is neither about love, nor about sex. The motive behind the affair is that Amal is “lonely, really lonely” (163). After twenty years of marriage, Amal realized that she does

not love her husband, and at that realization “the first man who flirted with [her] got [her]” (163). At the news, Sarah is “proud” of her sister and only disappointed because she’s “still with the asshole” (163). It is interesting to note that through their conversation, we find out that Amal’s husband has slapped her more than once; however, the last time he slapped Amal, he received a blow on his head with a frying pan. Despite Amal’s scornfulness towards her marriage, she is told by Saniya that “she was lucky her husband was a nice man [and that she] should look at the marriages around her and consider herself fortunate” (134). Moreover, although her father acknowledges that what Amal’s husband did was horrid, “he is [her] husband after all” (134). Throughout the conversation between Amal and Lamia, it is evident that there is a critique of the social institution of marriage. In a patriarchal society, many women are trapped in their marriages, and though some are strong and independent enough to divorce, others remain confined within the limitations of an unhappy marriage. However, not having the audacity to demand a divorce, and having to accept their husbands out of mere conformity to the rules of society and the expectations of their parents, many opt for marital infidelity as an outlet from their unsuccessful and unhappy marital “havens”.

The portrayal of the female figures in Sarah’s family carries significance through its reflection of the social reality. Each of Amal, Lamia and Saniya, in one form or another, are held captive in their marriages. Lamia’s entrapment in a mediocre marriage comes across specifically through the letters addressed to her mother. As for Amal, her affair is her own personal rebellion against her discontented marriage. To our surprise, even Saniya, who is regarded as the ideal wife and after many years of marriage, gives in to her passion

and surrenders in the arms of Tariq. Throughout the novel, none of female characters actually lives marital bliss. Through the creation of such female characters, Alameddine is not only criticizing the social institution of marriage, but also placing the female within a framework of power where passive rebellion becomes the only valid alternative.

2. Male Figures

Contrary to the extensive focus on female figures, Alameddine portrays the male figures murkily. The main male figures in Sarah's family are her grandfather, her father and her brother Ramzi.

Sarah's grandfather is the one who fills "[her] head with stories of the great actress [Sarah Bernardt]" (59). Sarah always saw herself as her grandfather's "favorite granddaughter", as he was the one who had named her after the great Sarah Bernardt. As a child, Sarah "loved to listen" to her grandfather; she considered him a man of wisdom and erudition. His tales of "the Divine Sarah, the goddess of the stage" (77) fascinated her. Sarah Bernardt was "the greatest woman who ever lived. She broke every man's heart" (77). Sarah's grandfather tells her that when he met the Divine Sarah, he was a young boy; he continues to describe her fiery red hair and his fascination by her. He even convinces Sarah that if they were to dye her hair red, she "would look just like her" (78). These fascinating stories instigate Sarah to grow up "believing [she] was the Divine Sarah. [She] could do anything [she] wanted. This gift from her grandfather was the greatest bestowed on [her]" (78). Being the Divine Sarah shaped Sarah's life through fundamental aspects as it made her "oblivious to such pressures as "hop[ing] for nothing more than a good

marriage” (78). However, the stories of the Divine Sarah are also to be blamed for Sarah “becoming a tramp” in the words of her stepmother. The greatest shock for Sarah comes at her discovery that Sarah Bernhardt had performed in *L’Aiglon* “around 1900, or possibly even earlier, not 1900”; thus, making it impossible for her grandfather to have met her. Despite her disappointment at such a revelation, Sarah does not mention anything to her grandfather. Sarah has based her existence on the stories of Sarah Bernhardt; she has believed she was invincible like the Divine Sarah herself, greater than all the pressures of society and far stronger than any woman could be. However, her whole existence is based on a lie; her grandfather had not even met the great Sarah. Sarah was named after a Sarah in whose presence her grandfather had not even been. One of the greatest effects that Sarah’s grandfather has had on her can be recognized through Sarah’s perception “[a]s a young girl, [that her] life was being filmed for posterity. [She] thought of herself as an actress in a documentary or a piece of cinéma vérité” (110). Sarah was an actress who saw herself as the center of the world; the details of her life and every moment of her life were not only the stuff of novels, but also the stuff of film. She “imagined [herself] being the subject of a future episode of *This Is Your Life*. [She] even practiced it. [She] sat in front of the mirror, trying on different facial expressions” (110). Even though “the practice sessions stopped as [she] grew older, but [her] self-focus never allowed [her] to diverge from the belief that [her] life must be recorded” (110). Once again in the forty-third ‘Chapter One’, Sarah admits to having been “shaped and molded” by the stories about Sarah Bernhardt. When she “examine[s] [her] life, [she is] amazed at how much they penetrate every aspect of it” (277). Sarah’s “destiny was written” the moment the name Sarah was bestowed upon her. She feels her grandfather’s presence even years after he has

passed away; in his presence, she is “not [her] habitual self, but the child he taught to love the world” (278). Her grandfather’s words remain with her, echoing at all moments of her life; she still hears “his sonorous tones when [she] take[s] walks” (281). Besides her invincibility, Sarah finds many aspects through which she identifies herself with Sarah Bernhardt, an essential one being the relationship with her mother. “Poor Sarah. All her life she tried and tried to make her mother love her, but she couldn’t” (282). Just like the Divine Sarah, Sarah tried hard to earn her mother’s love; however Janet never offered Sarah the affection she craved; Sarah was never embraced by the warmth of her mother’s love. Through a conversation with Amal years later, Sarah refuses to accept her grandfather as the “Machiavellian asshole, prejudiced as hell, xenophobic and bigoted” (287). She does not want to perceive the reality of her grandfather as a “misogynist [who] hated all girls [and] thought all women were whores. [Neither does she want to believe that her grandfather] beat Grandmother up on a regular basis” (287). Amal affirms to Sarah that her grandfather did not even love Sarah Bernhardt; “[h]e loved the myth, the unattainable myth of what a woman is. He had no clue who Bernhardt was” (288). Sarah’s grandfather also fails to mention Sarah Bernhardt’s weaknesses; her obsession with “the man twelve years her junior, their tumultuous marriage. . . He never mentioned all the men she toyed with. . . He never said anything about her pattern of falling in love only with men who could not love her back” (294). Sarah does not only identify with Bernhardt on the basis of the things she learns about her through her grandfather; it is the further details that she discovers on her own that complete the picture of similarity for her. Sarah’s pattern of relationships does not differ from Bernhardt’s; her relationships have always been tumultuous, just like the greater part of her life. She too has lived her life following a

pattern of only loving men who could not love her back, and who, like David, led to her being skinned alive. The final two shocking revelations come in the form of the truth behind Sarah's namesake, the Druze Sarah, and the genuine reason for her grandfather's love for her. Through Amal, Sarah learns that she was not really named after the Divine Sarah, but the Druze Sarah. Her whole image of herself as the divine invincible woman was based on an illusion. Every time Sarah feels "slightly depressed, [she] dyes her hair red"; the red hair shelters her against weakness as it embellishes her with the cloak of greatness that the Divine Sarah had. However, Sarah was only fighting her depression with an illusion of her divine self. Having incessantly believed that she was her grandfather's favorite, Sarah is disappointed to find out, from her mother, that the reason her grandfather loved her was merely because at Sarah's birth, he finally had a reason "to be able to return [Janet] to [her] fucking] country" (295). For all those years, she had been deceived about the real motives behind her grandfather's love for her. Sarah was merely a tool that her grandfather had used to be able to break his son's marriage to a woman he had disapproved of. At her finding out these sad truths, Sarah does not comment, but rather ends the chapter abruptly. This surprise is only revealed to us in the forty-third chapter, two chapters before the novel's end. Positioning this event toward the end of the novel suggests that Sarah feels as much distress about this truth as she does because of David, her tragic memory of the war, and the horrid reminiscence of her rape.

It is noteworthy to mention that Mustapha Nour el-Din, her father, is the first character in Sarah's novel. However, Sarah dedicates a far smaller proportion of her writing depicting her father as a main male figure in her life than her grandfather. Sarah perceives

herself as her father's "favorite daughter, his cordelia" (35). Sarah's father fell out of love with Janet and could not handle his marriage to her anymore; Sarah "grew up angry with [her] father because he destroyed the fairytale" (46). The story of her parents for Sarah was not one she could take pride in, rather "a didactic fable of the folly of youth, the craziness of love" (46). Sarah could not forgive her father for his wrongdoing towards his mother until she repeated his story herself. Sarah relived her father's scenario and committed the mistake of "falling out of love with [her] husband" (49). It is only then that Sarah understands her father and is capable of reconciling with him. Sarah even believes that her "family's leitmotif is loneliness" because her mother put a curse on their house when Mustapha divorced her. Through the relationship of her parents, we understand Sarah's dilemma. The curse of loneliness resulted in "different forms of loneliness" as "whether [they] were in a relationship, whether [they] were surrounded by close friends, [they] were never separated from it" (121). Through her different relationships, Sarah never experiences the fulfilling feeling of being loved. Despite not forgiving her father for his treatment of her mother, Mustapha remains "the center of [Sarah's] universe" (126). Her father was a "ladies' man [who flourished] [i]n a culture that idolized virile, bed-hopping males" (126). Despite "all his sins [and] all his indiscretions" (126), both his children and his wife forgive him. Through the depiction of her father's contradictory "traditionalism and lascivious womanizing", Sarah criticizes a patriarchal society of double-standards and hypocrisy. The last incident about her father is as he tries to smoke in the hospital room, knowing that he should not. The chapter ends with her father's words "I'm the great deceiver" (277). Sarah refrains from commenting on his words, leaving their interpretation open. Was her father merely a deceiver because of his lighting a cigarette in his hospital

room, or does his deception go beyond to engulf his deceptive nature as a man in a society where deception is a valid option for men?

On a last note about the male figures in Sarah's family is Ramzi's relationship with Peter. It is interesting to note that among all the couples portrayed in the novel, the only "successful" relationship is that between Ramzi and Peter. Despite their "mutual loneliness", they had found solace in each other. Through this relationship, Sarah sheds light on the misconception of a real relationship which is commonly defined as a heterosexual relationship. Contrastingly, the most successful relationship in the book is that between Ramzi and Peter; unlike the heterosexual couples in the novel, they are perceived to have all the characteristics that allow them to maintain a healthy relationship.

B- Partners/ Gender Roles

1. Lovers and Husbands

A common ground upon which Sara and Zena intersect is their unconventional and tumultuous emotional and/or sexual lives. Both Sarah and Zena move from relationship to another, only to crown each with a destructive end; they continue searching for that which would allow them to settle, yet they come out each time defeated.

In *I, the Divine*, Sarah moves from her childhood love for Fadi to a more mature love and marriage with Omar, only to divorce and marry Joe for personal interests until she finally meets David to be "skinned alive". The first real encounter that Sarah has with a boy is Fadi. Leaving the crazy Carmelite nuns behind, Sarah enrolls in an American school in 1973. Being "the only girl in class" and among a group of boys, Sarah meets Fadi "who

change[s] [her] life forever” (5). At first sight, Sarah falls for the “combination of mischief and innocence” Fadi embraces, and despite the fact that the war distorted Fadi’s image as the “gendarmes beat him senseless, [and] an eye patch cover[ed] one of [his eyes]”, in Sarah’s reminiscences, Fadi is still that fourteen-year old who “turned [her] world upside down” (6). Sarah and Fadi quickly become friends and even “partners in crime” (7) and even “soulmate[s]” (8). Fadi allows Sarah early on to shatter the gender stereotypes of being feminine, breaking boundaries set by gender and opening a world of equality in front of her eyes. With Fadi, everything becomes possible for Sarah; her sense of invincibility could be associated to Fadi’s indoctrination starting at an early age. With Fadi, Sarah smokes her first cigarette, and has her first French kiss. Even though Sarah “wanted to swallow his tongue”, the innocence of sexuality is evident. Interestingly, in the memoir’s cast, Fadi appears right before David, the last character of the memoir. Based on the events of the novel, we can conclude that David who is the most climactic point in Sarah’s life is placed as the last character. Thus, Fadi’s effect in Sarah’s life is not of a much lesser value than that of David’s. The most crucial event with Fadi which Sarah delineates is in the twelfth ‘Chapter One’, “On a Beach”. Sarah recalls a childhood memory of hiding with Fadi in a secluded area over a hill, kissing and caressing. However, when Fadi desires more than Sarah’s innocent kisses and caresses, Sarah refuses and affirms “[n]ot till we’re married”, after which “[h]e kisse[s] her and ejaculate[s] silently” (58). In Fadi, Sarah finds a reminiscence of her childhood purity, the memory of which protects her at different points of her life as an adult.

After Fadi, Sarah meets Omar. Omar and Sarah's story resembles the story of Sarah's parents. Meeting at the American university of Beirut; "[e]verything about [Omar] was intriguing to [Sarah]"; thus, "they [go] out twice before [they make] love" (50). However, all throughout their being together, their lovemaking remains dull and though "Omar loved it", Sarah "never achieved an orgasm with him" (50). Despite the disapproval of Omar's parents, they elope to New York, as Omar was to continue his education there; they "marr[y] within a month [and] she finds out she [is] pregnant" (51). Sarah's marriage in itself is a rebellion against her Beirut-Druze and his Greek Orthodox parents. Sarah loves Omar; however, the turning point in their relationship comes when Omar wants to return to Lebanon and Sarah refuses. At that point, Sarah had already fallen out of love with Omar, and "[her] own fairy tale had ended" (52). Sarah "underestimate[s] [Omar's] sense of property"; she fails to recognize that being Omar's wife also means being adherent to all his desires. They divorce and Sarah abandons her son Kamal. At her husband and son's leaving, Sarah has "one of her lowest times in [her] life" (54). Despite their divorce, Sarah and Omar continue to have an excellent friendship, and Omar never fails to be supportive of Sarah, at all her times of need. Observing Sarah's relationship with Omar, it becomes evident that Sarah is unable to love and lead a healthy relationship that requires compromise as a wife. Sarah gives up on her motherhood in the name of her freedom and comfort; she is not willing to compromise her own happiness even for the sake of her own son. Interestingly, at the initial knowledge of her pregnancy, Sarah feels as though the "real her is being slowly consumed, ingested, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute. It starts in her belly and emanates outwards, spiraling insidiously, overpowering her mind, vanquishing all her defenses. She must stop thinking these thoughts. This is her baby and

she loves it” (212). Sarah does not feel like a typical mother would feel with a baby in her tummy; she feels that this baby is consuming her individuality and draining a greater part of her. However, her abandonment of Kamal always compels Sarah to feel an incessant sense of guilt, and she is always compelled to think of her “inadequac[y] as a mother” (22). Throughout the novel, Sarah constantly seeks to fulfill her motherly duties with Kamal; moreover, she always puts effort to keep Kamal’s bond with his real grandmother strong.

At the realization that she might not be able to stay in the United States after her graduation as her student visa would be expiring, Sarah needs to find a way to be able to stay. Luckily, she comes across Joe, who is “the spitting image of Omar” (54). Once again, Sarah marries a man whose parents do not approve of her. Interestingly, not much is written about Joe. We only learn at a later point that Sarah and Joe have already divorced when Sarah confirms her attendance to Joe’s promotion party to Charlene, Joe’s new wife. Joe’s wife, Charlene, somehow still feels threatened by Sarah’s presence around her husband, and “[w]henever [she] was alone with Joe during the two days [she was in Dallas], Charlene would send her son into the room with [them]” (18). As a woman, Sarah has an indefinable charm that gives her a halo of power and a constant placement as the center of attention; thus, she does pose a threat to any woman who could easily feel intimidated by her presence. Sarah and Joe, despite their divorce maintain a friendship; thus, once again, Sarah fails to keep her second marriage, and ends up with her ex-husband as another friend. Questioning the motives behind Sarah’s marriage to Joe, it should be noted that unlike a traditional woman, she finds no hesitation in marrying a man for

personal gain. It is not love that drives her to marry Joe; it is mere personal gain, manipulating a relationship in order to reach her ultimate goal of staying in the USA.

Even though Joe does not play such a great role in Sarah's personal life, he is the reason behind her greatest encounter: David. The first mention of David comes at a very early point in the novel, in the fifth 'Chapter One'; Sarah acknowledges that in her choice of men, she did not choose "the beautiful or the correct. [She] chose David" (16). Sarah met David at Joe's reception; ignoring the first warning that David is not friends with his ex, Sarah continues to delve into David. Introducing herself as a "[p]rofessional divorcée" (21), Sarah is surprised to bump once again into David at the airport lounge as she is waiting for her flight back. Spending the whole flight talking, Sarah pours out her heart to David. Following an intimate conversation, they hold hands, "kiss[ing] in the cab [and] ma[king] love on the stairs in [her] flat" (23). The relationship quickly moves to bed, "where [they] were to spend the next three years, [where they] talked and explored each other" (22). She finds David to be "more mature than any of the other men [she] had loved" (23); however, she fails to acknowledge any of the warnings that she was on a self-destructive path. In an unconventional relationship that lasts for years only in bed, Sarah finds herself seeking to escape, knowing that she was falling further into a pit. Once again, in the twentieth 'Chapter One', Sarah mumbles about an imagining of David; David's effect upon her is so immense that he haunts her being, "[she] can almost see [him] everywhere [she] go[es]. He has been an indecent obsession" (101). Even time cannot heal the pain she feels because of David, as there "are certain things that transcend time. Nothing seems to have changed with regard to [her] feelings for him. [She is] stuck in

quicksand” (101). Their relationship was carried out in bed, rather than an ordinary healthy relationship between two people which bonds them beyond the bond forged in bed. The only public appearance David and Sarah make together is their visit to the Museum of Modern Art, which interestingly, and with an encouragement from David himself, drives Sarah to begin painting. Her initiation into painting by David is symbolic in a sense; it is as though David is aware of his destructive potential on Sarah and consequently drives her to find a cathartic outlet before her complete destruction. Sarah believes David to be the “cruellest man in the world”; however, what she fails to acknowledge is that it is his cruelty that lured her into his trap and caught her even if at the expense of her being shattered. Even though Omar and Joe were nowhere near cruelty, Sarah is able to walk away; however, it is David’s cruelty that impedes her from walking away, even long after he himself has walked away, leaving Sarah “skinn[ed] alive” (111). Interestingly, the chapter following “Marsyas Flayed” and Sarah’s self-perception as being “skinned alive” is an attempt at writing her rape story; it is as though the pain from David instigates all her painful memories to surface, the most painful of which is the excruciating memory of her rape. However, Sarah is unable to continue the story. Sarah’s abandonment by David “triggers [the] traumatic memory [of rape]” because of the “intense emotional crisis” that she is left with (Hout 61). Out of all the men she has been with, I believe that David was the only one who served as a double-edged sword. With David, Sarah sought to escape the drama of trauma that she had constantly been exposed to; however, David, rather than being a source of comfort and reassurance, drove her into greater unease and caused nothing but her heartache. The chapter following her attempt at unveiling the rape story is once again a chapter about David; thus, the memory of her rape is situated in the center of

two chapters about David. By writing yet another chapter about David, Sarah seeks “to finally get completion for that part of [her] life”, even though “he has already forgotten” (115). He has forgotten everything about Sarah; her memory has been completely obliterated” (115). Sarah feels incapable of moving on, as she has not received a proper closure. She cannot accept the idea of not being loved by David. In the 39th ‘Chapter One’ is the greatest shock for Sarah; Ramzi and Peter met David’s lover. The first concern Sarah has is whether she is beautiful; however, she is shocked to find out that “[he]. He is beautiful”(249). For three years, Sarah had been fooled by David who has been openly gay for the past ten years. David “has lied to [her] from the start, about everything” (249). This is the last mention of David in the novel. The chapter ends with Sarah still questioning, “Tell it to me again. You saw David?” (250). Sarah does not proceed to comment, nor analyze, nor reminisce further about David. The pain of having found out the truth does not allow her to express her feelings of dismay and frustration. However, David does not appear again in the novel, as though the revelation of this truth establishes the closure that Sarah had long been awaiting: a closure forced upon Sarah no matter how unpleasing.

As for Zena, it all begins in the city of Beirut. She loses herself in Beirut as intensely as she finds herself within its embrace, escaping the trauma brought upon her by the complexity of Beirut through the several emotional and sexual relationships she goes through with different partners. However, her bond with Beirut is of an uncertain nature; a connection of both love and hatred at the same time. The city of war and miseries comes alive through the series of love affairs that she experiences, which, whether inside or outside Beirut, are always delineations of the meaning that Beirut carries for her. Zena uses

relationships and sex as means to cope with the trauma Beirut has caused her.

Consequently, the different men in her life represent the different phases of her love/hate relationship with Beirut. In Beirut, Zena found the men; in these men, Zena found Beirut, “[b]ecause as long as there are men who need to be loved, Beirut will open her arms to [her] and present [her] with the next victim”, as there is no Lebanese who is not a victim of his circumstances. Zena “will love each and every one of [them]. Because [they] all brought [her] Beirut” (86). Through analyzing how the men are portrayed, questions of Zena’s identity, and belonging can be raised and somehow answered simultaneously.

Iyad represents the main question of belonging; the struggle to belong to a war-torn Beirut as opposed to the haven of New York. Zena’s dilemma between New York and Beirut can be understood through the traits of Iyad, as his directness “was a wonderful mix of Arab masculinity and Amreekan assertiveness” (35). They meet in a second-hand New York bookstore, and engage in a conversation about Iyad’s search for a book about Ziad Rahbani, marking “the beginning of a beautiful friendship” between them. This strange encounter illuminates New York for Zena and allows her, for once, to feel home, as she “suddenly [. . .] found [her]self wrapping [her] arms around New York wanting to give everyone a big hug. [She] had made a connection with the city and did not feel alone anymore” (36). Iyad, a piece of home transformed himself into a momentum of inclusion in this strange city.

The bond of consolation is mutual between Zena and Iyad for when Iyad is homesick; he turns to her, for she is “the closest thing [he] has seen to Lebanon in over a decade and a half” (37). Through their journey, Iyad reminds Zena that he is not the only Arab in New

York City “who lives in an alter reality [and] that there are many of [them] there” including Zena herself. “By nightfall, the pain and burden of being away from home is too great. [They] cannot sleep. [Their] guilt takes over and [they] have to find any way that [they] can help to pass the night away. With those words, Iyad leads Zena to a different reality. On Atlantic Avenue, the city comes to life again as “[c]afés lining the streets bustled with customers. Men in long galabiyas sat smoking nargilehs. . . There were Algerians and Yemenites. There were Syrians and Sudanese” (41). Zena finds herself wondering if she was still in New York because Iyad creates an alter-reality in a microcosmic world where Beirut and its culture merge with the geography of New York to become an outlet. Zena admits that “this is how we survive” by creating little homes of the original home, and she does that through Iyad. With Iyad, Zena finds a piece of Lebanon in New York, creating for herself a haven that alleviates her seclusion. Zena was a stranger to New York, “but at some point [she] become[s] family and when that transition happens it is a beautiful rebirth. To feel like [a] part of the greatest city on Earth” (43). Zena loves Iyad, for he empowers her and allows her to find reconciliation with her own self.

Nevertheless, despite his role in establishing this strong sense of belonging, he also provokes the identity dilemma: are they “Arab, Arab-Amreekan, Amreekan, Earthling?” This question of identity is highlighted specifically after the events of 9/11, which evidently cause an estrangement for Zena, as when “the buildings fell, [she] put up a wall between [her]self and the city” (38). Iyad, on the other hand, responded differently: he was “[l]ooking for survivors. Looking for his people that he loved so much. . . His two worlds collided. . . Violence, it seemed, was becoming universal” (38). Violence becomes an

apocalypse, as it diminishes the lines of identity, not exactly merging Arab and American, but blurring them. Being an Arab was not so easy after September 11, because suddenly “all Arabs were expected to explain themselves” even if they had nothing to do with it; being an Arab became a threat. No matter how strong the idea of Iyad is and even though it eradicates Zena’s sense of alienation, she does not feel strong enough to face the reality of being an Arab in New York after 9/11, so she “pack[s] up [her] bags, and thr[ows] away [her] art. . . [She leaves] New York. [She leaves] Iyad. [She comes] to Beirut. It [is] suicide and bliss” (44). Beirut, her own home, is an amalgam of emotions for her; it is a combination of safety and danger, for she feels equally secure and threatened.

Another aspect of Beirut is delineated through Zena’s relationship with Bilal, the first boy Zena sleeps with. When Zena moves to Lebanon in 1995, she comes face to face with the notions of masculinity and femininity in Lebanese culture, different than what she had previously perceived. Thus, she finds herself unable to “assimilate into the culture when it came to the expectations of being a woman” (74). She is in front of a dilemma: she has to look feminine, for with her present attire of only wearing jeans and white baggy t-shirts, no one would marry her: marriage being the ultimate goal in a Lebanese woman’s life. However, Sarah is strongly convinced that “it would be much easier to skip past all the manicuring sessions, hairdresser experiences, and miniskirt indulgences which were destined to fail with [her] anyway”; instead, she believes, “having sex would instantly make her a woman” (75). Against all odds, Zena loses her virginity, yet their “sleeping together [is] kept a secret from Beirut, because it was such a taboo at the time” (77). Another secret is their living together, as “[i]n Lebanon, it is illegal for two unmarried

people to live together” (77). All that mattered to Zena was “break[ing] all the rules” (77). Through Bilal, Zena seeks to establish her rebellion against a society where being a female defines one’s existence and places boundaries upon one’s choices.

Through Firas, Zena discovers within herself a nurturing power; she finds in herself the need to act as a mother figure for “distraught Beirut men” (84). In a letter to Firas, Zena recalls the “time when [he] almost jumped out of [his] window [as he felt that] life no longer had any meaning” (83); at the threat of suicide, Zena feels that she needs to fulfill the role of the savior; Zena is “a Mother Theresa”. Zena’s relationship with Firas is portrayed as an idealistic coexistence of two characters living a dream. They “made love during the holy month. [They] drank wine. They recited Rumi and al-Mutannabi. [She] pretended to be Scheherazade” (85). The bond that they have is meant to be stronger than any force, “neither war, nor bombs, nor unfriendly neighbors would ever break [their] spirit” (85). It is with Firas that Zena’s Beirut is at peace, as “life could be what [they] wanted it to be. That there would be no more planes breaking the sound barrier. That there would be no more assassinations. That there would be no restrictions. No restrictions to love. No religion, but love” (85). In Firas, Zena finds a temporary immortality as they “would live forever, like the stencils of martyred militiamen on tattered Beirut walls. . . Like war... that will never end” (85). And even though Firas represents peace for Zena’s Beirut, they themselves “were at war. It was [them] against reality. It was [their] madness against black veiled nights. It was [their] hearts against bullet-riddled walls. . . It was love when there should have been death” (85). What they own is so intense that she “never thought she could live it without [him]. [She] never thought she could find Beirut again

after [he] left [her]" (86). Through him, she finds not only solace, but also Beirut at the peak of its beauty, glory and love; his loss means her loss.

One of the men who really "killed" Zena was Haidar, whose love for Zena was "intense and straightforward. But it was also enslaving" (97). Zena finds in Haidar the true meaning of Beirut with all its elevation and destruction; and their bond kills her because he is the closest to the destructive notion of Beirut. Haidar was "just so Arabian"; he was an ideal "hallucination of a grand Arabian prince [resembling] the ones in the stories that always carried swords and had extravagant and luxuriant mustaches"(97). He was "[s]trong, proud and desirable" (97). Their bond was not that of love, they were not "feverishly in love" but beyond a shadow of doubt "in lust" (97). Haidar is Beirut at the epitome of war; he is destruction and self-annihilation for Zena, but that is comfort in itself. It is noteworthy to mention that Zena would "ask him to call [her] Zahra like the girl who was shot by her lover who was a sniper" (97) in reference to Hanan al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra*. It is interesting to mention that "[t]he death of Zahra in *The Story of Zahra* can be interpreted as a kind of suicide, since she goes to the sniper with the fear and exaltation that she might be killed" (Cooke 41). Zena's desire to be called Zahra by her lover signifies a certain urge to die within the act of sex, not a literal death, rather a metaphorical death which is symbolic of her desire to escape the threats of an actual or potential death in Beirut. In a perfect representation of a war-torn Beirut, with constant reminders of death around, they battle death through the union of their bodies. Together, they are able to escape the harshness of reality; they "would drink and drink until [they] were blind with desire. With him, [Zena] felt alive because [she] was always so close to death" (97). Together, they build a

microcosmic Beirut with all its passion, lust, deterioration, and the reality of death lurking. “He [is] just like Beirut” because throughout the beauty there was always the higher realization that “[i]n one moment, [they] could fall. In one moment, [Zena] could realize the dream she was living, decide to wake up and ruin everything. But he kept [her] going until he decided it was over. Until he let [her] go. Until he let [her] fall. And crash. And burn” (97). He was like Beirut: “suicide and bliss” (44); he was a blessing and a curse; he was life and death.

In Zena’s heart there is always a longing for an ideal Beirut, a heavenly Beirut that serves as a haven embracing its children. Every time Zena “came home drunk,” she would write to Makram, as though being intoxicated was the precondition for her genuine emotions and for her longing for a dreamy Beirut to surface. Their relationship was of a strange nature; “[i]n reality, [they] were uncomfortable around each other. In altered states, it was bliss” (166). Makram was an unrealistic dream of Beirut, as he was put “on a pedestal. He represented a Beirut [she] always wanted, but could never have. He lived through the war, the civil war, and with so much pain” (167). Makram is Zena’s longing for settling down, as she “often wondered what it would be like to be married to him” (168), and her feelings towards Makram are different from anything she has experienced before. Even though they could never be together, he is the only man Zena wants to have a second chance with, “Makram, if you are reading this, I want you to know that I have found the right words to say to you. . . If you give me a chance, I have so much to give” (168). Makram is not only Zena’s longing for tranquility, but he is also the Beirut that is mature, that is beyond physicality and lust, a Beirut that has essence reflected through his

playing the oud, creating an ideal space even for his neighbors; Um Khaled “grew a jasmine bush in his honor. . . to provide the scent to his melodies. It was a small paradise” (169). Being with Makram is as much of a delight as it is agony. With all her soul, Zena craves to kiss Makram; she has a clear perfect image of Makram and in her wishful thinking, she imagines them “sitting on the tip of the moon. Looking down at Beirut. Feeling safe” (171). Despite the intensity of all these daydreams and cravings, Zena and Makram do not kiss, nor do they have sex; “[b]ut, Makram and [Zena], [their] story is different. By not having sex, [they] were different and [they] continue to be different” (171). Zena embraces Makram as an ideal daydream that will never blemish; the platonic bond forged between them transcends the physicality of all her experiences, as he remains an untouched beautiful Beirut in its full glory.

Finally, Mazen represents not only Zena’s frustration with Beirut, but also with the memories that Beirut contains for her. When Mazen and Zena get married, they chose Ashrafieh as their home “specifically to prove a point [that] the Lebanese should once again live as one people, and not be divided by religion. [They] believ[ed] that [their] love could change the world” (127). However, when their idealism collides with reality, there is the painful discovery of the disappointment that despite the passage of time, “we still refer to Beirut as East and West” (127). According to Saune Haugbolle, “[t]he unfinished nature of the end of the civil war has had an overwhelmingly negative effect on the capacity of the nation to deal with the memory of the conflict” (192); Zena and Mazen realize that the remnants of the civil war are too deep to be eradicated. Mazen is also Zena’s frustration; he is the embodiment of Zena’s disappointment with what Beirut has become and with

Maya's death. Even though happily married and in love, their marriage ends because Zena seems to love Maya, even after her death, more than her husband. Throughout the memoir, Zena's experiences with Beirut merge with Maya; consequently, Maya comes to represent Beirut and Zena consciously chooses Maya and Beirut over Mazen, putting an end to their marriage. Mazen also represents Maya's fear of having children and her defiance of the conventional expectations of a woman. Zena does not have children because she is "afraid to have children. [She] is afraid of dying and leaving them here alone. . . [She] is afraid of yet more war and disaster" (129). With Mazen, Zena ends one more Beirut chapter. She asks Beirut to "give her strength" to handle yet another loss. She blames Beirut and hates Beirut (152). Zena is left distraught again; too many relationships, yet none lead her to the ultimate goal she desires for herself: none brings her the happiness she deserves in Beirut.

2- Sexual Healing and Transcending Patriarchy

Although political instability has been one of the highlights of Lebanese history since the mid 70's, there are certainly other underlying factors that partake in molding the lives of individuals, specifically women. Lebanese society, throughout history, has had a dominant patriarchal social structure. The male sphere is demarcated by lines that women should not challenge to cross; this is also supported by a patriarchal apparatus that functions within society in a larger context, pertaining to all aspects of life, from marriage and relationships, to personal freedom and individual choices. As discussed by Ghada Khuri, Lebanese-born journalist based in Washington D.C., the Lebanese patriarchal social fabric sustains inequalities between the sexes. There are certainly legal hindrances to women's advancement which are multifaceted through a patriarchal system of family hierarchy in

which the father is the chief of the family unit. This system of patriarchy has far-reaching consequences entailing fundamental issues; according to the Lebanese Constitution, a Lebanese woman married to a foreigner cannot transfer her nationality to her children (Khuri 15).

Part of the totality of war is portrayed in Zena's and Sarah's creation of a counter-narrative which challenges notions of relationships and sexuality. Sarah self-consciously ventures into an exploration of her body, an exploration of David and all that goes beyond, for even "the first few times they were together, [they] did nothing but spend time in bed, exploring each other, literally and figuratively. . . the minute he showed up at [her] doorstep, [she] dragged him into bed . . . [where] with [herself] naked, irrespective of whether he was nude or not, he felt the least threatened" (102). David is not merely a man that Sarah engages in a relationship with. Sarah and David do have a relationship, yet one of extreme unconventionality. To deal with the trauma of her past, comfort was an abode she sought in different shelters, one of these being David's arms, "[c]uddling. He didn't say let's make love, let's have sex. He'd say let's cuddle" as they would "zip to [her] room, undress, [their] clothes flying apart, jump in bed, and cuddle" (119). In bed with David, Sarah found stability and safety, even though "[h]e wasn't a great lover [and she] was never fulfilled with him. . . In any case, [she] didn't mind the sex" (119). Sarah finds herself seeking reconciliation with her body and the marks of trauma that have left her scarred, through the false sense of safety that being in David's arms provides her with. The comfort he would feel with her being naked around him would give her power that would unconsciously allow her to accept and love her body. Through David, Sarah reconciles with her female

identity; through him, she appreciates the safety/danger binary, she grasps the undercurrent of the passion/reason binary and comprehends the effects of the social expectation/reality binary have on her life.

In post-war Beirut, Zena finds herself in a society where “love and sex and drugs and alcohol were [the] new law and order” (79). Making love becomes a holy thing to do, as love replaces the years of sectarian violence, death and destruction that had taken over life in Beirut. Zena has sex for the first time with Bilal, establishing her womanhood, yet keeping the loss of virginity a secret (77). Sex establishes her defiance of the gender structure within Lebanese society. Unlike men, who have unrestrained freedom to engage in as many sexual escapades as they wish, women are expected to remain virgins until marriage, as there even exist laws in relation to "honor" crimes, which justify men for murdering a female relative at finding out that she has engaged in premarital sex (Khuri 16). By choosing sex, Zena makes a conscious choice of defying Beirut.

She then engages in an amorous relationship with Haidar, a Shiite, as “Shiite men make the best lovers because they are passionate” (96). What Zena experiences with Haidar trespasses boundaries of a traditional relationship, for what they had was lust in the midst of decay, as sex becomes a weapon that affirms life in opposition to the war that is an affirmation of death. Meeting in an apartment “with bullet holes from the civil war” is symbolic as to how it pertains to the rebellion against violence and animosity of a civil war, the traces of which haunt their unconsciousness. Their relationship was a Beirut with deterioration, and the reality of death.

After Haidar, Zena finds herself having intense feelings for Makram, with whom she imagines “feeling safe” (171). What Zena shares with Makram is a special bond, and even though she imagines “their bodies entwined in an embrace that was bare and honest [,] legs wrapped around arms around hands and hair and cracks and cum” and believes that “[l]iving in Beirut compels [them] to opt-out for instant gratification, [because] through sex [they] beat death. Through sex, [they could] exist” (171); however, their bond remains sacred because they do not have sex. She proceeds to have a change of feelings, and realizes that Beirut by compelling its inhabitants to affirm life through sex “has a fucking point. Because one night with Makram would have been worth all those endless Sufi nights” (171). With an honest confession, Zena writes unconventionally about the Lebanese post-war period; she glorifies life in a world of shifting standards and courageously unveils the experiences of being a woman. She portrays the reality of a life bound to the political horror of cultural and warring practices which despite their devastating influence on women, beautifully give rise to resistance and rebellion.

During the 2006 war, Zena is faced with the gravity of the dichotomy of sex and death, as she asks herself, “[i]s it right to make love when others are dying. Is it right to make love when children are being killed by bombs” (128). Despite the validity of Zena’s question, death and sex cohabitated strongly during the Lebanese war. According to Accad, “[t]he disintegration of the Lebanese society comes about not only through violence, war, and destruction, but also through what war carries with it: weapons, drugs, a loosening of morality, especially as far as sex is concerned” (51). It is remarkable how Zena rebels against the violence and death in Beirut by conferring a new meaning to sex, especially

within a Lebanese context, breaking through conventional mentalities and asserting that “what [they] didn’t do with guns, [they] were doing with sex” (90). In a conversation with Maya, Zena presents an interesting view about why it is different to have sex with a Lebanese man, compared to a foreigner, as she says

For example, when you make a Lebanese man come, you know that he really really feels it. Because of all the stress we live under, you know that it was totally worth it. Like, it wasn’t sex for the sake of sex. It was sex that affirms our existence. When we come, we are alive. We are real. We are not dead. For every ejaculation, there is a celebration of life. Nothing is taken for granted. . .[We do not need sex in order to survive]. We need sex in order to know we are alive. Being alive and surviving are two different things. I don’t want to survive, I want to be alive. (163)

The significance of this realization lies in its conveyance of an ideology of sex as a response to war. As Accad affirms, the Lebanese youth use the war “to revolt against tradition and authority, to break the rules of the fathers and mothers. They want to destroy the old order that oppresses them” (62). Thus, sexual liberation asserts itself as a firm ground that allows the overturning of tradition, specifically for women, as the sexually-liberated independent woman is an assertion of power in the face of a patriarchal society.

Life through sex gains a greater meaning; sex allows Zena to conquer, for she believes that “[b]y owning their bodies, we were taking ours back. . . Our bodies were alive and the only way to verify it was to glorify it. Sex became an addiction” (89). Sex becomes a defense mechanism. Sex is similar to war in context of the power-play that it creates

between the two partners. To elucidate the parallelism between sex and war, one can use Michel Foucault's question: "Isn't power simply a form of warlike domination? Shouldn't one therefore conceive all problems of power in terms of relations of war?" (123). This moment of power through sex is evident when Zena overpowers Mazen when they have sex for the last time, as she seeks to take charge and create an image of a powerful Zena that will always haunt Mazen. Despite the frustration he represents, Mazen creates potential space for Zena to subdue him specifically when they have sex for the last time. Zena wants her strength and existence to haunt Mazen as Beirut haunts her. While having sex, Zena seeks to become the woman he could only dream of sleeping with, becoming "almost another woman," for on that night she

loved him with [her] whole body. . . [and] wanted to leave him with something he would never forget. . . And for the future, every time he would sleep with a new woman, [she] wanted to make sure he would remember [her]. . . [She] gave him [her] best. With [her] body that night, [she] gave him a woman he would never be able to forget. (151)

A construction of gender in a new light: Zena establishes her dominion in bed.

Psychologist Carol Cohn describes gender as being "not only about words or language but about a system of meanings, of ways of thinking, images and words that first shape how we experience, understand and represent ourselves as men and women, but that also do more than that; they shape many other aspects of our lives and culture. In this symbolic system, human characteristics are dichotomized" (Cohn 228-29). War, gender, and

sexuality powerfully organize our world; thus, it is through their construction of images and words that they become the instrument for reconstructing meaning in our world.

CHAPTER FOUR

COPING STRATEGIES AND RECONCILIATION

A- Modes of Escapism

After discussing the different traumatic episodes that both Sarah and Zena undergo, it can be concluded that different responses and coping strategies will be used by these two characters. According to Ahmad Oweini, “Coping encompasses two responses: (a) external efforts focused on problem-solving techniques and direct action, and (b) internal efforts focused on emotions” (407). Both female characters find themselves using diverse coping strategies that enable them to carry on with their daily lives. Although writing is the primary response to their personal stories of trauma, my focus in this section will be on the other modes of escapism employed throughout their lives; these two characters utilize modes of escapism, mainly, art, alcohol and tranquilizers.

In art, Sarah finds solace and answers to some of the questions of life. On her first outing with David to the Modern Museum of Art, Sarah finds herself “spellbound” in front of a “medium-sized painting, thirty-two inches wide and thirty-eight inches tall . . . with a yellow rectangle slightly off-center. Eight horizontal and four vertical black lines of varying lengths and thicknesses intersected at various points in the painting” (102). Sarah finds herself lost inside this painting, as she was not merely looking at a painting, but rather “a three-dimensional mobile object, a live sculpture”; she could see the [c]olors burst[ing] through in unexpected places. [This] was her introduction to John McLaughlin, the painter who opened [her] eyes” (102). Sarah finds herself incapable of “elucidate[ing]

the spiritual and emotional aspects of the painting”; however, at her desire to take the painting home, she is surprised by David’s response who suggests that anybody can copy [the painting]” (103). It is David’s idea that sparks Sarah’s imagination and desire; she finds herself determined to create that life-changing painting, and it takes her “seventeen paintings to achieve an adequate copy of the McLaughlin. . . [S]he tries different kinds of paints . . . but it was only on the seventeenth. . . that the painting worked” (104). Thus, Sarah finds consolation and a sanctuary within art. “From the moment [she] put paint on canvas, [she] realized a pleasure so primitive, so intrinsic to [her] nature, it is hard to fathom how [she] could have gone so long without it” (104). However, Sarah’s thirst for art does not end here, as she takes an art class at the San Francisco Art Institute where the teacher tells them that there were two ways they were not allowed to paint in his class: diagonally and black (205). Sarah finds her teacher’s words incomprehensible and though her first instinct was to leave the class, she stays and for the whole semester paints only black diagonals, and at the end of the term she was the “only student to receive an A for the class” (105). Sarah’s rebellion in her art course signifies the meaning art carries for Sarah; it was not merely a desire to learn the techniques, rather an epitome of self-expression that serves as an escape from both the mundane and the traumatic.

However, Sarah’s experimentation with art does not end here, as she proceeds “reaching [her] apex with the emergence of Baba Blakshi. Baba was [her] response to the hypocrisy of the art world. She was never meant to grow, burgeon, and mature” (107). With her creation of two pieces, “Jesus-on-a-Tortilla” and “Jesse-in-My-Toilet”, which David thought “could be the end of [her] serious artistic career; [as] no respectable curator would

take [her] paintings seriously if [she] presented toilet as art”, Sarah came up with a “joke name: [Baba Blakshi]”(108). However, Sarah’s audacity in her path to art was not appreciated greatly, as “Baba ridiculed the hypocrisy of the art world and the perfidious art world swallowed Baba up” (108). Baba permeated every facet of Sarah’s life, as she found herself no longer having control of Baba, “nor did [Baba] remunerate [her] efforts” (109). The creation of Baba signifies Sarah’s strong assertion that art for her was not merely a passion, but a strong medium of self-affirmation where creation could become an escape from her own tumultuous unconscious.

Throughout her memoir, Sarah admits that she extensively uses tranquilizers and antidepressants. According to Farhoud, “[s]ymptoms of anxiety and depression motivate women to seek medical and psychiatric care and are a leading cause for the consumption of minor tranquilizers by women” (262). In her eighteenth ‘Chapter One’, the July 4 episode, Sarah exhibits symptoms of insomnia, as she wakes up very early in the morning and finds it difficult to fall back asleep. At her inability to sleep, she realizes that “[s]he should have taken Restoril. Too late now. She should have taken melatonin even though it makes her feel bad. Should she take a Xanax?” (91). During the phone conversation with her best friend Dina, Sarah is asked whether the drugs are not working, to which she responds that “[s]he changed. Paxil was knocking [her] out. [Her] doctor prescribed Zoloft” (91). Sarah is incapable of dealing with the stress of the day without her antidepressants. Interestingly, in her thirty-eighth ‘Chapter One’ titled “Faint,” when the young boy asks Sarah whether she would be willing to play backgammon, she responds that she does not have “[her] Xanax” and she is already “too anxious” asserting once again that she cannot deal with the

anxiety without the aid of her tranquilizers. Another more interesting episode is when in a hardware store Sarah cries at her sight of the “bright plastic fuchsias dangling from dusty synthetic leaves in a tattered woven pot”, as they remind her of David, and is spotted by a stranger. The stranger seeks to comfort her by telling her that “[she’s] better off without him” and that “this too shall pass” (243). However, he mutters to himself that “sometimes it doesn’t pass, which is why [he’s] on Paxil”, to which Sarah surprisingly answers “Paxil? Doesn’t it make you sleepy? I couldn’t deal with it. I was sleeping all day. I prefer Zoloft” (243), indicating that her relationship with tranquilizers is one based on much experience. Also, on the morning after her “first, and probably last, New York exhibit”, Sarah wakes up feeling and looking awful, at which she “open[s] her pillbox, [takes] out two Tylenols and one Xanax, pop[s] them in her mouth” before entering her shower “wishing [she] could cleanse herself” (254). The different traumatic experiences have left Sarah unable to survive without her tranquilizers, as her anguish is too intense to be dealt with without somehow numbing her emotions.

As for Zena, she felt that the people of Beirut were drowning in “la vie en rose” (55). It appeared to her that “[p]eople were so humiliated and broken from the war, the only thing they could do was to forget. . . And there were at least a million and one ways to be able to forget in Lebanon” (55). According to Haugbolle, “the amnesia covers a generational divide between those who lived the war and have memories of guilt to couple with memories of suffering, and those who were too young to remember or who emigrated and came back only after the war”; however, the nature of this amnesia differs from one group to the other; “[f]or the first group, amnesia is a way to keep traumatic experiences at a

distance; for the latter group, it is a reaction to an amnesiac society which does not let them know the war and has little to offer in terms of visions for the future” (194). Plunging into a collective amnesia was the most painless solution to the ramifications of the war. And in Lebanon, forgetting was not difficult, as [t]here were prescription drugs, there were over-the-counter drugs, and there were just plain-old-drugs. There was Lexotanil and Xanax. Dewars and White Horse. Lebanese Blond and Lebanese Red. Thai massages and Romanian prostitutes. There were nightclubs and super-nightclubs” (55). Amid the numerous ways of forgetting, Zena finds herself at the mercy of art, alcohol and sex.

Similarly to Sarah, Zena has her own coping strategies which allow her to deal with the difficulty of living in a post-war Beirut. To begin with, like Sarah, Zena finds solace in art. After the 9/11 tragic event, and after “the first building fell down, [Zena] painted what was going on in [her] head. [She] painted her lover, who was not gracious enough to call and ask about her. Who could not even be bothered to write. [She] painted the panic in [her] heart. [She] painted the fear of being Arab” (30). When questioned by Tim how she could paint when people were dying, Zena asserts that she “need[s] to express [herself]” (30). She responds strongly stating that “People die every day. Buildings fall in Lebanon every day. If we stopped painting whenever there was a crisis, we would no longer have art. Lebanese painted during the Civil War, and [she] is painting now” (30). Though she could not understand how she could be painting, “it seemed [her] only escape” (31). Through painting, Zena does not merely find an escape, but also a reaffirmation of her identity as Arab, as she “paint[s] men with guns. [she] paint[s] women with guns. [She] paint[s] children with guns . . . [She] paint[s] in purple and gold. [She] paint[s] all day and all

night” (33). Through painting these images, Zena explores the stereotype of being Arab and grants it an image of grandeur. Maya and Zena believed that they “[could] use art to change life” (49). In addition to these paintings, at her art exhibition, Zena has an installation of “a shrine dedicated to the Lebanese Civil War. It consisted of colored lights, pink, purple, and gold fabric, glitter and incense. Like a life-size Day of the Dead altar. In the center of the room hung a sculpture [she] made of God. . . It was a giant godly disco ball” (148). Once again, through her work is a space of reflection and self-expression that serves to allow Zena to escape the trauma of the memory of war and epitomize the anguish into a piece of art.

Zena is not only an artist, but also a woman who “[can] drink a bottle of wine all by [herself]” (15). Drinking has become a way of life not only for Zena, but for all the Lebanese, as “[p]eople had just come out of decades of civil war and all they wanted to do was party. . . They smoke and drank and snorted everything they could find” (79). With the following description, it becomes more evident that the Lebanese people are plunging themselves into the comfort of a collective amnesia. When writing about the list of things she loves about being in Beirut, Zena mentions “drinking vodka sec, anywhere”, “wine, alone, with a lover, on the beach, on [her] roof, on the Corniche” (81), “the morning after binge drinking, feeling like [she’s] been reborn, like [she’s] been given another chance to live” (82). Alcohol becomes not only a solace, but also a salvation. “Alcohol, which was readily available, assumed a new role in the lives of the Lebanese: to bring a welcome soothing to the pain and suffering that occurred during this never ending strategy” (Yabroudi, Karam, Chami et al. 309). The reality of “[l]ife in Beirut demanded that you

live an altered reality. Some chose pills. Some alcohol. Some heroin. Some denial” (93). At the end, what mattered most was the essentiality of forgetting. Amid this chaos, Zena finds herself confused that “all [she] do[es] is drink. [She] want[s] to forget, but [she] [doesn’t] know what [she] is forgetting” (94). When talking about her relationship with Haidar, Zena explains how “[They] drank all the time. [They] drank wine. [They] drank whiskey. [They] drank vodka. [They] would drink and drink until they were blind with desire” (97). To a certain extent, life for Zena revolves around alcohol. “It is variously reported that because of the Lebanon wars, Lebanese, especially females, have increased their consumption of drugs, including alcohol” (Yabroudi et al. 310). Drinking was not only an escape for Zena, but also a desire to “purge [herself]”, as though through alcohol, she would not only forget what would happen after her intoxication, but also the whole history of pain and trauma. After her divorce with Mazen, Zena finds comfort at living alone in her apartment, as she “know[s] that [she] can drink alone with no one to judge [her] but the angel on [her] shoulder” (172). At wondering about what her neighbors think of her, Zena perceives an image of herself as “[t]he divorced woman . . . who is seen drinking on her balcony every night. It must be wine because she drinks it out of a wine glass. Or maybe it’s vodka because sometimes the sound of ice clinking can be heard all the way down the street” (181). According to Cooke, “War had left little space for humanity. And when the human aspect disappeared altogether, drugs and alcohol were sought in growing quantities. And miraculously the Lebanese survived. . . faith in the individual ability to survive was strengthened by faith in the indestructibility of the city, of the symbol of collectivity” (*War’s Other Voices*125). Zena does not find her drinking a problem; it is rather her

personal rebellion towards a Beirut that is contaminated by too many polluted memories of war and pain that forgetting seems the only sane thing to do.

Located within the larger context of the socio-political reality of war, these two female characters find their experiences of both collective and personal trauma, abuse, pain, and violence throwing them into an escapist abyss of art, alcohol, sex, and an unconventional rebellious notion of the feminine that consequently serves to mold their experiences into meaningful journeys.

B- Writing as Subversion of Paradigms of Socio-Political Hegemony and of Patriarchy

Throughout *I, the Divine* Sarah challenges the cultural notions of femininity and masculinity. Beginning with her wish to play soccer at school, Sarah desires to be “treated exactly like the boys [and not] be traumatized by unfair exclusionary policies” (12). The incident indicates that gender in the Lebanese culture is a construct that begins to define the roles of individuals at an early age. As a girl, Sarah should be more interested in delicate activities, rather than playing soccer. However, Sarah is determined to defy such beliefs and assert herself as capable of taking on a role outside her gender limitations. After being accepted into PE class Sarah “became one of the boys” (13). Soccer is what allows Sarah to become admitted into a new gendered category and a wider space that overpowers the boundaries drawn by being a girl. She does not merely venture into the escapade of soccer to assert herself, but rather “[i]t was apparent to any bystander that [Sarah] was special [at soccer]. And that she was a girl” (36); she affirms her excellence and mastery of what is commonly known to be a male activity. Sarah could never find herself enjoying

what girls are meant to enjoy; on the contrary, at Saniya's wish to teach her the feminine chores, Sarah refuses as she cannot stand "household duties, such as cooking, sewing, or embroider[ing]" (35). Sarah also writes with contempt about how "[a]ccording to tradition, getting married is what [girls] live for. . . Hope your wedding day is soon, they say. To young girls, even, barely ten years old" (167). The sacred duty of a woman is to marry and bear children; the ideology of motherhood subjugates woman and perpetuates motherhood, also determining the conditions of her motherhood. These conditions forge feminine and masculine characteristics and strengthen the divide between the male and female realms, as they limit women's mobility and reinforce male dominion. "While sex differences are linked to biological differences between male and female, gender differences are imposed socially or even politically by constructed contrasting stereotypes of masculinity and femininity" (de Beauvoir 258). Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* affirms that women are made and not born. Sarah does not believe that marriage is her ultimate aim in life, and although she marries twice, both marriages indicate that for Sarah, her independence, personal space and self-actualization were more important than merely being married. Unlike a traditional female who would deem marriage as her most crucial ambition, and would compromise all that she has in order to allow her marriage to succeed, Sarah does not seek to find the middle ground and refuses to move to Lebanon to save her marriage with Omar. Moreover, her conscious choice to be separated from her son Kamal renders itself as Sarah's defiance of patriarchy which essentially propagates the ideology of motherhood restricting a woman's mobility and burdening her with the responsibilities to nurture and rear children. Furthermore, Sarah's marriage to Joe is out of sheer personal gain, rather than love or a desire for settling down.

Zena in *Beirut, I Love You* reconstructs the meanings of the gender-related binarisms; she defies the notion of gender as the “dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviors” (qtd. in Cooke 14). Zena goes beyond the conventional stereotypical Arab woman and establishes an identity for herself that is not based upon the traditional feminine ideals. She affirms,

To hell with romance and nostalgia. To hell with grandma’s secret recipes. This Arab woman hates cooking. This Arab woman scorns Arab women who express themselves through food. . . [She doesn’t] have the need to discuss feminine hygiene with the village women. [She] can go for weeks without showering. [She] can drink a bottle of wine all by [herself]. [She doesn’t] have time to roast eggplants and crush garlic. [She] can’t be bothered to pick a fight with Israelis when they claim that hummus and falafel are their inventions. (15)

Zena does not only rebel against feminine expectations; rather, she goes on further to explore moments of women’s empowerment through gaining control over the masculine domain of sex, as it becomes a woman’s battlefield where she gains the power to subvert gender roles. Though confined in a society where sex is a man’s realm, Zena uses sex to her advantage as she usurps power through the act. Through sex, a man becomes subordinate to a woman. Through her narration of the encounters she has had with the many men in her life, Zena gives rise to a new notion of the modern woman. Unlike the traditional woman who does not have the luxury of experimenting with her emotional and sexual life, as she is expected to marry at a moderately early age; Zena asserts herself as a liberal woman who falls in and out of love too many times, marries only to divorce, and

continues to remain unsettled yet content. Miriam Cooke asserts in the *Women and the War Story* that

[l]ike war and peace, gender is thought of in binary terms that are said to be natural. But gender, far from being natural, is a cultural code that describes, prescribes and thus shapes social expectations for sexed bodies: men and women grow up differently and most act in consonant with their culture's prevalent images and values. The literary critic Eve Sedgwick defines gender as the 'dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviors. . . in a culture for which 'male/female' functions as a primary and perhaps model binarism affecting the structure and meaning of many, many other binarisms. . . the meaning of gender is seen as culturally mutable and variable, highly relational. . . and inextricable from a history of power differentials between genders'. (14)

Through the choices and decisions she makes, Zena defies social expectations and functions outside the cultural code defined for her sex. She refuses to act in parallel with her culture's prevalent images and values. According to the Druze reformer, in order for a woman to be considered righteous, she has to be "soft-spoken and mostly silent; bashful, untainted and above obscenity"; a righteous woman has to make sure she "never confront[s] [her] husband with any ailments"; she should "be poised and self-possessed, yielding when reprimanded and obedient when ordered"; she should also "be compliant with [her husband's] opinions and love him with ultimate sincerity, favor him over [her] parents, forgive him when he wrongs her and receive his anger with compassion" (*Beirut, I Love You* 21). However, looking back at both Sarah and Zena, what strikes us is the image

of the strong woman who is not soft-spoken, who does not always rise above obscenity, who does not yield when reprimanded, and does not love with ultimate sincerity. Both Sarah and Zena cannot make the necessary compromises to sustain their marriages; on the contrary, they choose their personal sovereignty as the priority which creates the framework for them to lead their lives. By the end of their memoirs, Sarah has divorced twice and Zena has divorced once; both are unmarried and in a state of happy limbo.

Comparing Sarah and Zena, one goes beyond to note that both characters find solace in writing; through writing, they establish a space where they can delineate their experiences in light of subverting the prominent paradigms. Through their memoirs, Sarah and Zena allow writing to gain a new function; their scattered life narratives reflect identity dilemmas, alienation and disconnection, echoing the fabric of a post-war Lebanon. When women write war, their works can be taken as “a reading of society, one that reveals hidden dimensions in gender power and hierarchy. And what we learn from looking at sexuality and war in the Middle East through their expressions in novels is how men and women look at the same war, see its effects, experience its ravages, sustain hopes for the future through entirely different gendered lenses” (Accad vii). It is noteworthy to mention that for both characters, Beirut has offered the traumatic experience of rape and/or sexual assault. This aggressive experience of the female body being subject to male oppression and dominance greatly shapes the characters’ own understanding of their bodies and their behavior throughout both works. For both women, rape/sexual assault has been an intense experience of trauma, embedded within the greater context of the trauma of the Lebanese war itself; this experience has led them towards a continuous struggle to establish an

identity that can reconcile with the horror of their past; this reconciliation is attempted through their writing, as writing transforms the experiences into stories that create space for these characters to distance themselves from the reality of the experience itself.

In this light, Sarah in *I, the Divine* and Zena in *Beirut, I Love You* exhibit “an awareness that as women they are systematically placed in a disadvantaged position; some form of rejection of enforced behaviors and thoughts; and attempts to interpret their own experiences” (Badran and Cooke xviii). Not desiring to suppress the painful events and their own experiences, Sarah and Zena seek to resolve the conflicting thoughts by processing them. They believe that “[t]o write is to assert responsibility, for in their expression despair and pessimism are mitigated. To write is also to shape one’s life, and to render it relevant as a myth whose reality transcends the particularity of the war and of the new reality it had spawned. . . [B]eyond spiritual and emotional therapy, [writing becomes] a tool for rallying a new consciousness (*War’s Other Voices* 38). Being female, they demand to assert their existences even if from the margins of Lebanese patriarchal society. It becomes fundamental for them to account for their stories of personal trauma, in their own tongues, and to create the necessary space, according to Mark Ledbetter, for “the telling of a different story, the story of the excluded, which delves into historical context to counteract the exclusion of an object-narrative as a demonstration that the apparently autonomous world of that narrative depends vitally on what it leaves out” (Ledbetter 85). Through recollecting these fragments, they link together bits and pieces that are essential for a reconciliatory healing. As Miriam Cooke believes in *Women and the War Story*, “It is not merely whim that drives women everywhere to claim their war experiences as combat. It is the growing understanding of the ways in which patriarchy seizes and then

articulates women's experiences so that they will be seen to be marginal and apolitical that now drives women as creative artists and as critics to remember their pasts and then to write them" (5). Consequently, in an atmosphere of chaos, where communication becomes a challenge, how can these women reconcile their language with their experiences? Miriam Cooke in *Women Write War* questions the capability of women to write in an atmosphere where "compromise and communication [are] no longer possible" (9). The questions she poses can be answered in Zena's and Sarah's writings,

[In an atmosphere of] loss of dialogue [,] . . . how was the writer to react? In a society of individuals who refused to listen, of what use was language? Did universal deafness mean that the writer no longer had a role to play as public conscience, analyst and guide? Or did the new situation impose a new role on the writer? A new function for writing? (6)

Sarah's rape makes her a victim and the rapist is not only aggressive, but also animalistic in his thirst for power and dominance over the female body. As Lisa S. Price explains in her article "Finding the Man in the Soldier Rapist,"

When perpetrators are depicted as either mad or bad (crazy or demonic), the effect [on the victim] is at once dismissal and alienation. Dismissal means that the [victim] need not struggle to understand either the act or the actor. Alienation represents the perpetrator as a monster, inhuman. . . [reflecting] on the social origins of abusive male sexuality. (211)

Sarah's rapist is represented as a monster, and in no circumstances can his act be understood, but as an act of hunger for male superiority and control over the female subject. In *Beirut, I love you*, Zena and her best friend Maya, tragically, also become victims of this "primitive desire, dominance [and] aggression" (Alameddine 199). As heartbreaking as this incident of assault is, Zena's and Maya's experience differs from Sarah's by a greater amount of resistance. Zena's body is objectified and fallen victim; she is left tattered. This moment of tragedy is in itself a moment of intense emotions as "the reality of what just happened was settling [, she] felt pathetic" (61) And even running through Hamra street screaming, "[e]veryone stared. No one asked. [For] [m]aybe such scenes have become common here. . . This is Beirut. A mad hatter's party" (62). Beirut becomes a space that poses constant challenges to women, confronting them ceaselessly with questions of their gendered identities within the web of a patriarchal society.

Both Sarah and Zena successfully create ways of resistance that do not negate their identities as women, but rather add a new dimension. Through their exilic sentiments, blurred national identities, and unconventional female attitudes, they fashion a self-consciously feminine resistance by empowering themselves and subverting the dominant paradigm of male/female dichotomy and all the binaries which that notion involves. Further, Cooke believes that women write to "undermine and expose assumptions so that their experiences were not only accommodated along with that of the men but in some cases came to supplant it. Their works were no longer passively reflective, they became aggressively extroverted" (*War's Other Voices* 11). Having now the authority to articulate their silences, women, although new to what Cooke calls the collective experience of war,

are able to free themselves of “accepted notions and form a new myth” (25). War, according to Accad “creates such conditions of despair that writing becomes a necessity, an outlet and catharsis... It offers an alternative to fighting and destruction. It can become one form of the active nonviolent struggles” (*War’s Other Voices* 6-7). Also, having a cathartic result, writing permits its subjects to assemble a new construct of an alternate reality by carrying the “logical dimensions of this society to the limit; therefore, leaving ‘reality’” (*War’s Other Voices* 5). Sarah and Zena create through their writing a representation of a war, not only in a collective account, but through their words, they successfully delineate some of the experiences of Lebanese women. Cooke in *Women and the War Story* suggests that

there is no one history, no one story about war, that has greater claim to truth but that history is made up of multiple stories, many of them her stories, which emanate from and then reconstruct events. Each story told by someone who experienced a war, or by someone who saw someone who experienced a war, or by someone who read about someone who experienced a war, becomes part of a mosaic the many colors and shapes of which make up the totality of that war. (4)

War, although traditionally regarded as a male activity, both experientially and literally, shapes women’s consciousness. Cooke states that, “the war facilitated not just a liberation from the constricting trivia of parlors and petticoats but an unprecedented transcendence of the profounder constraints imposed by traditional sex roles” (Introduction 2). Through recounting their stories, even if in a fragmented form, Sarah and Zena make public the private accounts of their daily lives, for as readers we are exposed to details that range

from the most mundane to the most traumatic. Cooke believes that the aim behind recounting dailiness is that it breaks all illusions of permanence (*War's Other Voices* 46). Through shattering the notion of permanence, change and subversion become new possibilities for these women; in a society “paralyzed by the masculine suppression of emotion” (Accad 1) defiance of the patriarchal governing system becomes essential.

Through Sarah's and Zena's subversion of the dominant binary and their redefining of gendered spaces, their memoirs become semi-revolutionary. According to Jean-Pierre Durix, art cannot be taken in separation from its social context. Durix emphasizes the fact that a literary text cannot be written outside a specific structure; it cannot “stand outside the framework of the social reality which he describes as class struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed” (64). Considering women as the oppressed and men as oppressors, both Sarah and Zena shatter gender boundaries and emerge as atypical women, reversing gender roles and forcing men to become “that other that women had been” (*War's Other Voices* 49). Moreover, Cooke adds, “feminist writing and reading add a dimension to the male canon because they unfold meaning in what Showalter calls ‘previously ...empty space. The orthodox plot recedes, and another plot, hitherto submerged in the anonymity of the background, stands out in bold relief’” (85). Thus emerges the plot of personal traumas of women situated in a post-war Lebanese context; their unnarrated silences of pain gain their meaning through their articulation. Accad, who strongly encourages women to make their silences heard especially in a masculinized society, praises writing especially because of its expressive, cathartic and subversive role; the memoir becomes a tool of empowerment.

As masculinity involves “aggressiveness and violence, which are directly linked with political and personal exploitation of nature and women” (*War’s Other Voices* 160), both Sarah and Zena through their experiences of rape/ sexual assault can be considered victims of masculinity. For both these characters, these incidents happened at times when the country was at turbulence and political instability; thus, the framework that the war creates can be the fertile ground for women’s victimization. “The war that was won on the battlefield [becomes a war to] be won in discourse [for women]” (*War’s Other Voices* 38). The emergence and capability of recounting their victimization stories allows them to challenge the dominant culture where violence and aggression are permissible for men; it is their choice of rebellion that creates room for subversion through their newly established discursive spaces which glorify their individuation as women. According to Cooke, “[Those] who [can] submit[. . .] to the power of the dominant discourse, which tended to distort their experiences, are making their voices heard and their faces seen. They thus expose the mechanism of power consolidation. Their counter discourses disrupt the order of the body politic, in such a way that they decenter and fragment hegemonic discourse” (180). Through the creation of a linguistic representation of their narratives, they create personal accounts of a war which they lived on both individual and collective levels.

According to Cooke,

Although it is war that gives rise to the story of war, war would not properly exist without its recitation: ‘war imitates the account of war which imitates the war. This mimetic process is transformative. . .As war continues, as story-telling about the

war continues, life in war is continually changed for the writer and the reader, so that the new signifier is no longer distinguishable from the signified. (27)

Throughout the narratives of Sarah and Zena, we come across experiences where women are not treated merely as subordinate to men but are also subject to discriminations, exploitations, oppressions, control and violence, mainly because of their gender which is a social construct. Although gender differences are man-made, patriarchal society legitimizes them and forces both sexes to function within this framework.

Both Sarah and Zena exist within a patriarchal system in which power relations are hierarchal and unequal and where men control women's sexuality. Their reality within this system imposes their subjugation to gendered stereotypes of femininity which strengthens the iniquitous power relations between the sexes. However, their ultimate aim becomes the establishment of a radical breakthrough in redefining gender, and individual identity and freeing their social milieu from the clutches of masculinity by re-establishing the power of womanhood. Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* defines politics as power structured relationships and proposes that patriarchy must be challenged through a process that requires raising awareness about women's mechanisms for women's empowerment; she also asserts that women's liberation requires a revolutionary change that overthrows the psychological and sexual oppression of women (8). By challenging traditional values and transforming their traditional sexual identity through individual sexual revolutions, Sarah and Zena reconstruct their sexuality, breaking free from subordination to men. Throughout history, the East has been believed to encompass a superiority of values compared to the West, resulting always inexorably in a "suffocating rigidity of family structures and civil

codes” (Accad 8). Eastern women have always been cautioned against becoming like Western women, imitating the degenerate society of the West. Nevertheless, the war has certainly had the imprint of a partial disintegration of values, if not a complete collapse in certain instances. By disintegration of values, I do not hint at women’s sexual liberation, as that is believed to be essential, despite the firm belief that “sexuality and sex role socialization are intimately connected to national and international conflicts” (Accad 19). To delineate more clearly the relationship between sexuality, revolution, and social values, Ghita El Khayat Benai writes, “[w]omen’s liberation necessarily goes through their sexual fulfillment, and, if psychoanalysis has been one of the sources of feminism, in spite of all its insufficiencies in terms of women, it is because it allowed the right to desire and pleasure” (258), as in the cases of Zena and Sarah. Although patriarchal constructions perpetuate patriarchal ideology and reflect it through the different societal institutions that reinforce it, it is through their writing that these female characters challenge the very notion of femininity and masculinity as mutually exclusive and biologically determined categories. The double standards contained within the notion of sexuality are what Sarah and Zena seek to satirize and defy, for both the East and the West. Throughout the choices they make, they internalize the values of the West, defying the values of the conservative milieu that they have been indoctrinated with.

C- Reconciliation and Healing

Reconciliation with Beirut becomes a challenge that is impeded by the collective amnesia of the society. Saree Makdisi defines amnesia as the result of the “unconscious overriding the conscious attempt or desire to remember; it is a sign of the unconscious

intervening to protect consciousness from itself and from its memories of the trauma” (204). Collective amnesia, according to him, arises from a collective desire and urge to forget; it is “partly a matter of public policy and partly a matter of a widespread popularity to deny” (204). As trauma is sought to be eradicated from both personal and collective memory, articulating its depth renders itself an ultimatum that these characters have to tackle. Beirut becomes a token of pain, a constant reminder of violence, aggression and agony, as there is a “conjunction of memory and place” (Whitehead 10); Beirut cannot be separated from the memory of the war, as “Beirut is a bitch and everyone wants his share” (*Beirut, I Love You* 146). Sarah and Zena are forced to find meaning only in chaos, as “Beirut,[to them is] immune to death”; however, despite the immortality of Beirut, “at the individual level the endless series of failure and losses can bring only pain and finally hopelessness” (*War’s Other Voices* 65). The difficulty lies in breaking away the limitations drawn by place and detaching from the memory of pain; according to Anne Whitehead, “[a]lthough memory is strongly attached to place, the effect of trauma, it seems, has been to destroy the symbolic function of place (10). In her memoir, Zena questions, “But what is it that defines a place? The way it looks... the way it acts... or the time and space it falls into? Maybe it’s the stories we will remember later” (180). Thus, their trauma allows them to destroy the significance of place and to articulate their pain within their writings. When the memory of trauma does “not necessarily find an outlet, or a voice, which is able to transform the abstract forms of personal or intercommunal memory into articulate forms of public expression” and when much is forgotten and individual memories are not articulated, be this because of social, political, or emotional constraints, the need arises to articulate these silences through writing. Thus, literature asserts itself as a space for

reconciliation from the intensity of trauma, allowing unheard voices to become public. The articulation of the wound culture is the first step towards the possibility of reconciliation and healing; however, it does not prove to be enough. In a conversation with Zena, Maya asserts that “Beirut is not real. You can create your own reality and live the way you want. It is all a game. There are bigger players who control everything. There is no point trying to change anything because it will not work” (107). A sense of despair takes over as Beirut becomes immutable to all efforts of reconstruction and reformation. Maya advises Zena not to bother and try to “change anything. This is it. This is life. There is nothing more than here” (108). Through the conversation between the best friends, it becomes evident that there is no possibility of reconciling with Beirut. Zena asserts that she “became the very person she scorned. And just like everyone else. [She] blamed Beirut. A Beirut who could not even defend herself” (93). Despite the difficulty of the challenge of feeling at peace with Beirut, Zena claims to be able to forgive Beirut after experiencing “the burden of humiliation”; it is only then that she forgives “Beirut for wanting to forget” (101). However, the desire to forget does not safeguard forgetting, for there is no remedy for memory, and the haunting intensity of memory can bring about an individual’s destruction. Zena is aware that “[i]n order to fully reconcile, you have to dig down to the very core of life in Beirut. You have to be willing to see things for what they really are. . . You cannot blind yourself with false ideals. They will all come back to haunt you” (102). Although denial is a way of life for the Lebanese, it cannot be consequential to recovery and healing.

It is this dilemma of trauma and incapability to reconcile that places both Sarah and Zena in undefined spaces where belonging renders itself impossible. The notion of home becomes blurred, as home becomes nowhere. Sarah asserts herself as the “transnational

diasporic subject that cuts across Lebanese and American cultures but is nevertheless displaced in both and belongs completely in neither”. The possibility of “articulat[ing] dual and in-between identities . . . [as Sarah is] able to view and assess her multiple national and cultural backgrounds more critically [is] due to her detached transnational perspective (Fadda-Conrey 98). At some points, Sarah feels the urge to overlook her Lebanese heritage; she “hate[s] Umm Kalthoum. [She] wanted to identify with only [her] American half. [She] wanted to be special. [She] could not envision how to be Lebanese and keep any sense of individuality. Lebanese culture was all consuming” (229). However, avoidance and denial do not allow her to reconcile with her individuality, nor establish a sense of identity; “[t]hese days [she] avoid[s] Umm Kalthoum, but not because [she] hate[s] her. [She] avoid[s] her because every time [she] hear[s] the Egyptian bitch, [she] cr[ies] hysterically” (229). Her identity dilemma and her memory of Beirut hinder her reconciliation with Beirut of the present; she finds herself in an unuttered space, as the “contradictory parts [of being half Lebanese and half American] battled endlessly, clashed, never coming to a satisfactory conclusion” (229). Sarah looks at Beirut as a site that beholds an overpowering destructive energy, as “Beirut opened herself up to the evil in the world and did not stop until she was sickened by it and became a victim. But because she is a woman, and her victimization, her rape brought shame on the family, she was not healed but hidden. Her hurt was repressed, it was bound to return” (*War’s Other Voices* 17). Thus, escaping Beirut becomes a necessity. On the other hand, there was always the need to assert her individuality; however, this need was always opposed by a strong “need to belong to [her] clan, being terrified of loneliness and terrorized of losing [herself] in relationships” (229). Beirut can be held responsible for Sarah’s constant struggle to find

herself, and her failure every time to establish a personal identity. Sarah wants to belong to her clan; however, she does not want to belong to the wound culture that Beirut represents,

Beirut herself committed the violence. Beirut has become a scapegoat. It is easier to blame Beirut of promiscuity than to confront personal responsibility. After throwing her arms wide to the West, what else could Beirut expect but a savage rape, followed by internal sores? This avoiding of blame, this assumed innocence in the face of obvious guilt was the attitude of many during the early stage of the war. As long as the finger of blame was not directly pointed, culpability could be denied. . . Beirut the victim is reinstated as muse. Beirut has the power to rise up again; she must rise up again so that the world may survive. (*War's Other Voices* 17)

Sarah and Zena did not actively participate in the war; they are not advocates of the destruction of Beirut; however, they are part of this war culture. Miriam Cooke believes that “[a]ll who have lived through a war, even if on the margins, have participated, and nowhere more so than in Lebanon” (*War's other Voices* 2). What makes women considerably significant is that “the women writers transformed what had begun in catharsis into a creative discovery. . . Breaking out of their silence, women were finally writing their own stories. As they saw the shape of their lives develop and grow under their pens, they came to understand who they had been and what they had become (*War's other Voices* 2-3). Life gains a new meaning through writing, for purification becomes a possibility as writing allows them to fill the emotional gap they had experienced.

Sarah and Zena share an open ending that leaves them within a chaos greater than their own existences. Gary Saul Morson writes: “how can a writer create a novel without structure, plan and closure? Surely the very fact that the author has created the character gives him knowledge of the character’s destiny and the very fact that the work requires an ending gives it closure? (1079)”. Despite their multifaceted endeavors to ascertain a resolution, their narratives remain with no explicit ending; consequently, the whole structure in its form and content remains perplexing and open-ended. Anne Whitehead suggests that when trauma is exposed to attempts of narrative representation, it demands a literary form which moves away from the traditional linear sequence (4). Their writings render themselves as the writing of a “history in which the present is overshadowed and haunted by the unresolved effects of the past. Trauma is transmitted across the generations and the novel questions whether there can be an end to this process” (Whitehead 16). Throughout her memoir, Zena questions her choices and reflects upon what should be done to heal; she is aware that “[she] had to face [her] reality and take responsibility for [her] failures. Maybe if [she] stopped drinking so much. Maybe if [she] got a job at a bank. Maybe if [she] wore nail polish and inflated [her] lips. Maybe if [she] tried to fit in” (93). Being in Beirut was a daily challenge, as the desire to belong to Beirut was not enough to really belong.

At the end of both accounts, the characters remain incapable of answering the great questions of their lives, so they embrace the chaos in which they exist and abandoning the notions of certainty and finality. As readers, Morson, invites us to “form a *relative* closure at several points, each of which could be a sort of ending, or, at least, as much of an ending

as we are ever going to get. But there will be no 'final' ending, only a potentially infinite series of visions and revisions. The end of the work will simply be the last installment [the writer] happens to write, but more *could* always be written" (1079). Do Sarah and Zena accomplish a forgetting of their painful memories? Whitehead believes that "[t]here is wisdom in forgetting and [allowing] the past [to] finally be laid to rest[;however], the conclusion rests uneasily alongside what has gone before"; it is the overpowering character of the traumatic past, which "cannot be contained by memory but always and necessarily leaks into the future" (16). The war ended years ago, but trauma entraps the Lebanese within the intensity of its memory. When Zena approaches the section on Lebanese writers in a bookstore, her discovery that the books "were all about the civil war" startles and upsets her. "The war ended fifteen years ago, and we're still writing about it. Will we always only write about war?" (109). This overpowering nature of the traumatic events that leaves them unable to escape the past, as they seem doomed to an endless and interminable replay of events, even if only through their memories.

According to Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, catharsis refers to a process where individuals articulate intense sentiments while mentally re-living an early traumatic experience leading to a reduction of the traumatic symptoms. Through their writings, Sarah and Zena re-live their traumatic experiences seeking to reduce the intensity of the symptoms. However, the question of their reconciliation remains unanswered. Traditionally, "we assume that narrative's goal, whether fictive or lived, is to create a coherent world, that at least in hindsight, is predictable and therefore safe, if not comfortable. In some sense, then, the 'masterplot' of all narratives is rather romantic and is

always longing for what Frank Kermode calls ‘a sense of ending’” (Ledbetter 3). Despite their creation of linguistic representations that articulate their personal stories of trauma, their open endings assert that a complete healing and recovery has not been achieved. Through the transparency of their personal accounts, blame is the predominant sentiment rather than justification. Their traumatic experiences do not find explanatory accounts, nor do they establish an identification or purpose. Their victimization remains incomprehensible. Their lives remain somehow fragmented, as do their stories. According to Cooke, “[t]he only continuity in the fragmentation/ reconstruction cycle is consciousness: the narrator who holds together the narration, and who is created by the process. To be aware of this process is to have some degree of control over the dynamic interplay of responsibility to self and others” (*War’s Other Voices* 115). Both characters exhibit consciousness of the self; however, this consciousness does not allow them to go beyond writing, or at most, being cognitively aware of their own writing. In creating for their memories a linguistic representation, Sarah and Zena allow their past experiences and the circumstances that shape them to gain a different meaning. Writing becomes a medium of meditation that rids its practitioners of the anxious thoughts that surface in their daily lives; in compressing their life narratives into novels, the complete and absolute obliteration of the concept of time becomes possible, for at the moment of writing, one is only aware of the singular essence of which all duality is comprised, to an extent that even the idea of future or past becomes absurd. This experience allows them to feel purged, for the articulation of weaknesses and anxieties makes it possible to feel in perfect control, balance and strength.

Zena reconciles with Beirut in a moment of epiphany; as she is “[i]n the middle of the dance floor”, she feels “[his] body is grinding up against her” and “[her] body responds to his;” as “[they] are making love with [their] clothes on, . . . surrounded by five thousand people. [They] are making love” (215). Making love becomes not only an escape, but a sanctuary that serves as a reaffirmation of existence amid the chaos of Beirut’s concrete jungle. Sex gains a greater meaning not only for Zena, but for the Lebanese as a population, “[i]t was in these uncontrolled spaces that we gave into our innermost desires and realized that sex was only a cover for a much bigger need. We learned to reconcile with ourselves and the only way to do that was to sleep with as many people as possible” (89). As Accad affirms, “[i]t is also evident that sexuality often works together with what may appear as more tangible factors- political, economic, social and religious choices. It is part of the psychological, physical, and spiritual levels of human existence because these aspects are all mixed with sexuality” (25). The Lebanese were not having sex merely to achieve an orgasm; the motivations they had were far more deep-rooted than that. Sex was a domain of reconciliation; it was a response to the social and political milieu. However, the recourse to sex does not guarantee a healthy outlet, as the superficiality of this solution entails deeper psychological problems, even though “[w]omen may feel a certain freedom in the excitement of sexual pleasure. But like drugs, these actions create only a temporary, artificial nirvana” (Cooke 62). Sex was a weapon that guaranteed safety and security, even if only temporarily; it was “a diversion from hurt: pain fought with pain, violence attacked with violence, authority questioned with authority, power challenged with power” (Cooke 62). Sex, a double-edged sword, could offer a temporary relief, yet could also prove to be destructive in the long run. It is only in this moment of intimacy that Zena acknowledges

that she “love[s] Beirut” and only through this final act does she assert that she is “so far away from death” (215). On the dance floor, and surrendering to the passion of a kiss, Zena finds herself once again believing in Beirut. It is only through the rush which that moment brings her that she once again believes to be far away from death, as though reborn. By the end of her memoir, Zena asserts that “[she is] hallucinating. It is an incredible rush. [She is] sick, but [she doesn’t] feel sick. [She has] beat death so many times. This is really starting to become a piece of cake” (214). Life in Beirut becomes a constant rebirth, for despite all the danger, there is always beauty and glory lurking.

On a different note, Sarah does not find her reconciliation on the dance floor; however, she asserts herself within the interwoven greater web for she believes in her significance and divinity, “Who am I if not where I fit in the world, where I fit in the lives of the people near to me? I have to explain how the individual participated in the larger organism, to show how I fit into this larger whole;” thus, an invitation for the reader to “[go] and meet [Sarah’s] pride” (308). Her pride does not only signify her dignity in the self, as it should be noted that Sarah could have in mind the meaning of pride as a family of lions.

According to Cooke, “[i]ndividual fragmentation [can be used] as a model for reconstruction. When the self was seen to be integral to the whole, the reconstruction of the individual could be seen to be integral to collective reconstruction. Self and others were shown to be dynamically linked (*War’s Other Voices* 114). Sarah invites the reader to meet her family, as she cannot but acknowledge that each and every member has had significance in molding her into the person she is now. Sexuality, feminism, love and power through an interwoven web allow women to glorify their existence in a rebellion

against violence, war and patriarchal oppression, crowning their revolution with a successful subversion of the dominant paradigms, where being a woman gains a new meaning in a world of shifting standards.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Sarah is a fictitious character created by Rabih Alameddine in his novel *I, the Divine*, as opposed to Zena, a real character writing her own memoir, a creative auto-biography, *Beirut, I Love You*. Both characters can be seen as victims of “traumas resulting from both the particularity of the collective Lebanese war experience and the generality of personal human suffering”, being affected immensely, since, according to Syrine Hout, “war engenders collective trauma whose psychological effects may continue to warp the lives of survivors long after the guns have fallen silent (*Post-war Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*77). The commonality is that Sarah, although a fictional character, is attempting to write an auto-biography, where she recapitulates her own life story in an essentially socio-realistic style; thus existing on a firm common ground with Zena, writing also from the raw stuff of her own life. It can be asserted that both characters have the urge to build a peaceful existence within themselves, an existence which is related to and is rooted in “the grammar of trauma, suffering, repression, denial, closure, truth-revelation, and catharsis” (Moon 76). Each character functions within this therapeutic framework differently. Sarah and Zena successfully achieve a state of being cleansed from the marks of suffering, creating a ground to release the tension in the different aspects of the self. By the end of their memoirs, although not completely reconciled, both characters are restored with reverence and respect once again to the chaos that is life. Their life stories have served as their muses, providing them with inspiration and strength, as their conscious experiencing

of deep emotions that were previously repressed allows them to fulfill the emotional cleansing or clearing that they were seeking all along.

Through their writings, they become oppositional forces, challenging the patriarchal authorities that seek to silence them. Cooke states that when wars (political as well as representational ones) are fought, battles are fought to determine “whose story will be embraced by posterity” (*War’s Other Voices* 12). She believes that “it is at a crucial point of ‘making society’ that ‘canon formation [is] particularly aggressive’” (*War’s Other Voices* 12). Through their narratives, Sarah and Zena assert that gender relations are not natural or immutable, but rather historical and socio-cultural productions, constantly subject to reconstitution. According to Cooke, “Only feminine literature documents details that seem to be trivial and personal to note. Yet these same details suggest transformation of feeling that finally weave, for each individual, the fabric of war experience. . . it is myth-making so that others can finally recognize themselves as protagonists and thus cease to be alone” (*War’s Other Voices* 27). By molding their individual narratives into literature that can serve a collective purpose, these women allow literature to become transformative and revolutionary. “Writing defines and shapes the consciousness of an individual, but also of a culture. . . in deconstructing literature and life, we ourselves become novelists, making fictions out of the texts, and lives, other women have left us” (*War’s Other Voices* 85). Through their writing experiences, these female characters create for themselves a new arena of expression, empowering them with a newly-emerged voice in what had always been a male-dominated society.

Living as a Lebanese woman becomes a challenge as it gives rise to a need for continuous self-consciousness and awareness of the social norms and double standards of sexuality for the male/female binary. Despite their construction of liberating works, both characters are still confined within a sort of fragmentation discussed by postmodernist theorists. Both Sarah and Zena indulge in many empowering experiences and submerge themselves in a recovery process; they accept the fragmentation of the world and their own fragmentation. Moreover, they learn to cope with the emotional triggers of their personal traumas creatively and find some deeper meaning to their experiences. Both women find meaning in chaos and embrace their existences within that chaos; they accept the inevitability of loss and damage and emerge as independent, defiant survivors.

Through their endurance, Sarah and Zena assert how the human psyche has a tremendous capacity for recovery and growth. Despite their catharsis through writing, I believe that both characters are incapable of achieving a complete recovery and healing, as neither of them forgive Beirut for its cruelty; in spite of that, it is their love for Beirut that has given them courage and strength to survive and a desire to continue as independent defiant women whose voices have been heard and whose lives have served as a beacon of inspiration for many Lebanese women.

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