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FEMALE IDENTITY AND CONFLICT IN THE WRITINGS OF ALICE WALKER AND HANAN AL-SHAYKH

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FEMALE IDENTITY AND CONFLICT IN THE WRITINGS OF ALICE WALKER AND HANAN AL-SHAYKH

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts is the result of my own research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

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I hope that readers of this thesis will join the ranks of those, past and present, who have struggled for the realization of women's rights and equality; and worked to realize progress in the lives of women across the Arab world.

Abstract

Every culture contains a political, social, religious and economic conflict that transforms any woman's life into a quest where she must answer difficult questions. Who am I? What do I want to be? Where do I fit in society? How can I exercise my freedom without finding myself in conflict with my culture and my traditions? This thesis makes a serious attempt to seek answers for such perplexing challenging questions.

This work constitutes a comparative analysis of two novels, namely Alice Walker's *Meridian*, (1976) and Hanan Al Shaykh's *Hikayat Zahra*, (1980, a.k.a. *The Story of Zahra*). The analysis focuses on the interplay of the search for identity in times of strife, social conflict, and war. The work relies on a postmodern analytic approach.

Within the analysis, two dimensions are given particular emphasis. The first dimension discusses the ways in which social conflict and war influence the literature itself. The second dimension examines the writers' usage of the two main characters – Zahra and Meridian - to reflect their experiences and lives.

Both writers write in times of conflict. *Meridian* is set within the context of the American Civil Rights Movement, while *Hikayat Zahra* is narrated at the time of the Lebanese Civil War. External disorder and instability allow the two writers to formulate self-reflecting, archetypal characters that are borne into chaos and conflict. The conflict itself is two-dimensional, involving political conflict (unrest and war) and social conflict (women's struggle against patriarchy and restrictive gender-defined roles). Within this environment, the two heroines – Meridian and Zahra - seek self-realization, independence, and fulfillment based on their needs and their free-will.

ملخص البحث

تحتوي كل ثقافة مجتمعية جوانب صراع مختلفة: منها السياسي, و الديني, و الاجتماعي والاقتصادي. و التي تؤثر تأثيرا مباشرا في حياة المرأة و مسيرتها, حيث تجد نفسها في مركز هذا الصراع التي تواجه فيه أسئلة مختلفة. من هذه الأسئلة: من أنا ؟ ماذا أريد أن أكون؟ ما هو دوري في المجتمع؟ كيف يمكن لي أن أمارس حريتي دون أن أتواجه مع جوانب الصراع الثقافية و الاجتماعية, و خاصة العادات و التقاليد و النظام القيمي الذي يضعني في صراع و مواجهة. يشكل هذا البحث دراسة جادة لمحاولة الإجابة عن هذه الأسئلة المربكة التي تشكل تحديا لأهدافها و لوجودها.

هذا البحث دراسة مقارنة لروايتي أليس والكر (رواية ماريديين , 1976) ورواية حنان الشيخ (حكاية زهرة 1980), و تنهج الدراسة المقارنة في هذا البحث نهجا تحليليا يرتكز على التداخل ما بين الهوية الذاتية للمرأة وعناصر الصراع خلال أوقات الصراع السياسي والاجتماعي.

وقد اعتمد هذا البحث في المقارنة و التحليل محوران رئيسيان:
المحور الأول يعرض تأثير الصراع السياسي والاجتماعي على الأدب في فترة الحرب. و المحور الثاني يتطرق إلى استخدام شخصيتي الرواية (ماريديين و زهرة) باعتبارهما انعكاسا لتجربة الروائيتين فكلتا الكاتبتين عاشتا في زمن صراع, و كتبتا في هذه الفترة؛ إذ إن ماريديين كتبت في فترة التي واكبت حركة التحرر المدني في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية, بينما رواية (حكاية زهرة) ألفت إبان الحرب الأهلية اللبنانية.

تلعب حالة الفوضى وعدم الاستقرار دورا مهما في تكوين شخصية تعكس هذه الظروف.هذا الصراع ثنائي؛ أي أنه صراع سياسي (فترة عدم الاستقرار و الحرب). واجتماعي (نضال المرأة ضد النظام البطريركي الأبوي), و الأدوار الاجتماعية القامعة و الكابتة لحرية المرأة و تحررها.

في خضم هذه البيئة العاصفة تسعى البطلتان- ماريديين وزهرة- إلى البحث عن تحقيق الذات, الاستقلالية, وإشباع الحاجات اعتمادا على الحرية الذاتية والإرادة. ونظرا لتباعد الكاتبتين جغرافيا و اجتماعيا فهذا قد أثر تأثيرا فنيا وأدبيا على اللغة الأدبية التي كتبت بها هذه الروايتان. إن هذا البحث يعتمد أساسا المقارنة الموضوعية للهوية و

الصراع و ليس مقارنة تاريخية ما بين الشعب الأمريكي و الشعب اللبناني. و لكن من الجدير بالذكر أن المقارنة الموضوعية للهوية و الصراع تتأثر و تتفاعل مع البيئة التاريخية التي كتبت بها هذه الروايات. بالتكامل مع هذا النهج البحث يقدم مقارنة ما بين حياة الكاتبات الشخصية, إنتاجهما الأدبي و روايتهما و شخوص روايتهما, يهدف هذا البحث إلى إلقاء الضوء على تجارب نساء يختلفون من حيث المكان و الزمان ولكن يلتقون في الأهداف و الرؤية الواحدة. مواكبة مع هذه الدراسة المقارنة اتبع البحث المنهج ما بعد المعاصرة نظرا لأنه يربط الفرد في بيئته الاجتماعية والدينية و الثقافية و التاريخية بشكل يضع المرأة في تفاعل متواصل و ليس معزول عن عناصر الصراع المختلفة التي تشكل هويتها الأنثوية و هويتها الوطنية.

استند هذا البحث على فرضية أن النساء اللواتي يعشن في بيئات من الصراع السياسي و الاجتماعي يخلق لديهم دافع و إرادة للحياة و لإدراك وجودهم من خلال أولا الصراع ثانيا المواجهة وثالثا التصالح مع الآخر و أخيرا تحقيق الذات والهوية المستقلة المتحررة من القيود المجتمعية و السياسية. من خلال المقارنة و الدراسة التحليلية للروايتان توصل البحث إلى إثبات هذه الفرضية من خلال شخصيتي مرديين و زهرة اللواتي تشكلان نموذجا و انعكاسا لنساء اخريات يعشن في أماكن صراع مختلفة و لكنهم يمتلكون نفس الإرادة لتحقيق ذاتهم وإدراك وجودهم.

Definition of Terms

Asexuality	Without sex
Feminism	A doctrine advocating the granting of the same social, political, and economic rights to women as the ones granted to men
Gender	Roles based upon differences of sex, either male or female
Harem	Comes from the Arabic word "haram" (forbidden, not appropriate) and more widely used in the meaning of "a place where entry denied". Generally it was the section of the house the man of the house lived with his women, female slaves and children, and where no other men were allowed to enter.
Masochism	A condition in which sexual gratification depends on undergoing physical pain or humiliation
Patriarchy	A system of government, or a form of living, in which the father or his choice of male heir, rules
Post Modernism	A movement that opposes traditional modernism, and since the 1960s has practiced a denial of order, and the presentation of highly-fragmented universes, moving away from dichotomist categorization of such universes[1]
Schizophrenia	Psychotic disorders characterized by delusions, withdrawal, conflicting emotions and deterioration of the personality
Womanism	The combination of being African-American and feminist. The word derives from the phrase – you are acting womanish

[1] Hugh Holman and William Harmon, ***A Handbook To Literature***, Sixth Edition. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), page 370.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Problem Statement

Periods of political and social conflict are characterized by the emergence of social and ethnic macro-goals: for example, the American Civil Rights Movement aimed to end segregationist policies against Afro-Americans and realize equality in their status. However, for women writers such as Alice Walker and Hanan Al Shaykh, the primary objective was the realization of their individualistic goals, namely gender equality, and advancing the status of women. Fundamentally, their argument relies on the assumption that a society is the sum of its individuals; consequently the realization of societal goals of freedom and emancipation pre-require the fulfillment of individualistic goals of emancipation within these societies.

Within this thesis, the main topic of analysis is how the atmosphere of chaos and disorder causes women to confront their instability and inferiority, and to fight against it. The analysis focuses on the development of their identities and the process of conflict, both internal and external, that helps them achieve their independence, realize themselves, and arrive at new identities, as chosen by them.

Thesis Objectives

This study aims to compare conflicts within Afro-American society as reflected in Alice Walker's *Meridian*, with conflicts within Arab society, as reflected in Hanan Al Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra*. It looks at how these conflicts, in their cultural contexts, are similar for women from different cultures separated by thousands of miles.

It aims to present a comparative analysis of three central themes to the two novels:

1. Multi-layered dimensions of conflict - burdensome past and confused present; confused relation with mother; and conflict with patriarchal society and male
2. Confronting gender-conflict through temporary asexuality
3. Establishing a new identity through reconciliation between the individual and society

Basic Assumptions

Similarities between the two writers and these two novels are numerous. Both title their works with the names of women; both portray the struggle of women for emancipation and freedom within an environment of social conflict and war; both portray the same form of resistance, namely destroying socially-defined gender roles for women; both conclude that a new independent identity for women is established through a process of reconciliation between the individual and society.

The thesis assumes the existence of multi-layered dimensions of conflict, influencing both characters. First, these dimensions include the burdensome past and confused present that focuses on analyzing conflicts emerging from gender identity. Secondly, the confused relation with the mother identifies conflicts within the family as an institution, and lastly direct confrontation with the patriarchal order discusses conflict with the wider society. Embedded in this analysis are themes of power relations; inferiority and dominance; human emotional development; and female sexual personality.

Methodology

This thesis employs post-modern analytical techniques, focusing on the understanding of the historical, social and psychological implications of events at the time. The

thesis draws upon both the multi-perspective cultural theory, and the theory of inter-sectionality in analyzing the two main characters, Meridian and Zahra.

Fundamentally, the thesis looks at the inter-sectionality of the female's identity and dissect the woman into the smaller micro-identities that form her. The thesis also looks at the role of wider conflict and its interplay with these micro-identities, leading to the emergence of the woman's new macro-identity. Additional attention is given to the uniqueness of war literature written by women, and the role of the historical context in defining the style and imaginative overtones of the literature produced at that time.

The two novels can be best analyzed through utilizing post-modernist conceptions. Post-modern theory involves heterogeneity, and moves away from 'black-and-white' dichotomist ways of thinking, employing more sophisticated themes of diversity and fragmentation that are especially relevant to the social and political environment of Alice and Hanan's times. Finally, post-modern theory is essentially de-constructional, working to "attack universalism, essentialism, foundationalism and dichotomous thinking."[1]

Despite the geographical and cultural differences between the social backgrounds and lives of the two writers, similarities between them merit a comparison of their work, as methodologically they both agree on the cause, course, and consequence of female self-realization and fulfillment of identity, against the backdrop of social unrest and war.

Both writers portray the struggle of the woman within historical conflict, and describe the same sources of subordination for their female characters. Both writers portray the

[1] Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, ***Postmodern Theory, Critical Interrogations*** (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991), page 207.

usage of temporary asexuality as a means for confronting gender conflict and subordination, and through the characters that they portray, illustrate how women fulfill their identities based on their needs, desires, and do not to surrender to society.

The two agree that an essential component of self-realization is the process of reconciliation between the individual and the wider society, leading to the establishment of a new female identity. Finally, for both characters, the process of confrontation and negotiation with wider society leads to the establishment of order and selfhood.

An essential component of the analysis is the interplay between historical fact and imaginative literature, and especially the influence of the former on the latter. The characters that are portrayed in imaginative literature are linked to the fact and truth of the times in which the narrator lives. This is true for Alice Walker and Hanan Al Shaykh, and for the two characters respectively.

Conceptual Framework

The two writers fundamentally complement the post-modern school of thought. Their works de-construct the old; their approach moves away from dichotomy; both are critics of male domination; both destroy the stereotypical representation of women as being inferior and lacking knowledge, truth, and objectivity; and finally both deconstruct social forms of domination, such as church and patriarchy.

Another post-modernist level of analysis is that both writers address identities, not only based on gender, but also the concept of difference and otherness. The

atmosphere of social conflict, or war, gives the marginal 'other' the space to agitate for his, or her, rights. For the two writers, the primary, marginalized 'other' is the woman, and writing creates a forum through which this marginal 'other' assumes a central position.

Alice and Hanan both do not belong to the majority, privileged groups that often have access to universalistic audiences.

Both writers find a space for themselves, their specificities, and their evolving identities, by internalizing their status as the 'other' (third world women, or women of color) and a 'space for difference' based on their identities as represented by the postmodern school of thought. Defining their differences is a process of defining, and realizing, their identities, in which they refuse to be denied, rejected or marginalized.

Consistent with the post-modern mode of analysis, both Al Shaykh and Walker characterize the female as a complicated, interactive identity comprising sex, gender, race, class and ethnicity. All these components (the micros) interact to create roles for women that are not static, but dynamically advance with the development of the female's interaction with her environment. Persuasive literary analysis draws upon the inter-relationship of these components; and their process of conflict and negotiation.[2]

The process of conflict, or negotiation, leads to the emergence of additional identities. Inter-sectionality complements the work of the two authors. Meridian is engaged in a constant process of negotiation with her society, religion, her sex, and the opposite sex. The process of negotiation with the institutions that surround her produce her identity, and helps her to realize what she wants – to be the independent woman who is able to assume a proactive role for the benefit of her society, encouraging African Americans to vote and voice their opinions.

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[2] Valerie Smith, ***Not Just Race, Not Just Gender*** (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), page xvii.

Similarly, Zahra realizes her identity once the process of confrontation with the institutions of family, patriarchy, religion, and Arab culture draws to a close. The emergence of her independent identity at the end of the novel, allows her to assume an active, useful role within the civil war as a volunteer nurse.

Al Shaykh is an integral component of the Islamist feminist movement – Islamist in that the individuals within this school of thought lived in Muslim countries and subscribed to the Islamic faith. An important characteristic of this movement is its internal diversity. For Hanan Al Shaykh, the inter-sectional parameters that define her are uniquely embedded in this Islamic-cum-Arab-cum-secular feminism that is heavily diversified.

Al Shaykh could best be defined as subscribing to the pragmatist and secular feminist schools of thought, within the realm of Islam. She is not the feminist militant that wants to sweep away the Islamic order, but the pragmatist that wants a recalculation of Islam to allow for gender equality and women's emancipation.

For both Hanan Al Shaykh and Alice Walker, the female struggle is one type of struggle, but not the only struggle that merits attention. In relevance to the historical frameworks of the two novels, all forms of struggle are addressed. Therefore, the female is perceived as being within her society, not outside her society, at all levels of confrontation and conflict. As Valerie Smith acknowledges:

> "[There is a] strategic need to claim racial, gendered, sexual, and class identities as meaningful in specific ways in the name of the struggle and resistance to institutional violence and exploitation."[3] [4]

[3]

[4] Ibid., page xvii.

Finally, the thesis looks at women writers' contribution to war literature. The action of writing is a tool for rejecting old norms by women writers, and to become voiced as a woman who is playing her individually chosen role. Furthermore, the narration of humanistic stories of war and conflict, focusing on individual people and not battle-front heroes, increases the credibility of these narrators in the eyes of the readers, and enhances the authenticity of their message.

Ultimately, women make a difference at times of war because women insist on peace, life, equality and non discrimination, without the use of violence. As Hanan Ashrawi asserts:

> "War has traditionally been the domain of men . . . and conversely peace is the domain of women . . . and we know that peace has to be based on justice, not on domination, not on discrimination." [5]

The two writers use the destruction caused by conflict and war in order to construct a new identity, to be "born new," as said by Alice Walker, and to "come back to one's self," according to Al Shaykh. For both, writing is not a means to portray the battlefields of civil rights protests and sit-ins, or the civil war. On the contrary, they keep this at the margins of their stories, and focus instead on portraying humanistic traits, allowing their characters, to develop, grow, and take shape.

Limitations of the Study

This thesis presents a comparative analysis of the themes of female identity and war in African–American society and in Arab-Islamic society – it does not present a comparison of African–American and Arab Islamic feminism per se. Furthermore,

[5] Hanan Ashrawi, Spokesperson for the Palestinian delegation to the Middle East Peace Talks, quoted in Adel Samara, ***Women vs. Capital: the Socioeconomic Formation in Palestine*** (Ramallah: Al Mashriq, 1996), page 16.

this thesis contrasts the novel *Meridian*, as written by Alice Walker, and *The Story of Zahra*, as written by Hanan Al Shaykh – the comparison between the two authors is restricted to an analysis of these two novels, within the theme of war and women's identity. The thesis does not present a generic comparison of the works of Alice Walker and Hanan Al Shaykh – as such, significant novels by the two authors, such as *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and the *Color Purple* (Walker); and *Barid Beirut* and *Misk El Ghazal* (Al Shaykh) are not part of this analysis. This thesis is not about gender – it is about gender in times of war.

An exhaustive amount of research exists both on women and war; and on post-modern feminism. The thesis reviews literature relevant to women and war; post-modern feminism, and the emergence of Arab and African-American feminism. The thesis does not aim to present a comprehensive review of research that has been undertaken on women and women's literature in times of war and social conflict; or on post-modern feminism. It is designed to present the reader with an optimal amount of theory within the discussion.

It is important to note that Walker is a populist figure with an extensive international audience whose novels have been made to films. Al Shaykh is a lesser-known Arab feminist; known mostly to those that are interested in Arab feminism, but not the general Arab public. Furthermore, her writings touch on sensitive issues that have caused her to be censored and earned her the hostility and suspicion of Arab 'establishment' press houses and literary associations. She is rarely invited to participate in festivals and exhibitions. As such, biographical information is readily available on Alice Walker, but on Hanan Al Shaykh it is difficult to find such information, more-so in English.

Finally, in Palestine, for Hanan Al Shaykh, the majority of biographical information, as well as her novels, are available in Arabic but not in English. For this thesis, they were translated to English by the author.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

This chapter presents an account of the opinions of accredited scholars and researchers on themes relevant to this research. Methodologically, the thesis applies a post-modernist analytical approach. Post-modernism is contrasted to dichotomist modernism, focusing on the application of mutli-perspectival, inter-sectional modes of thought that transcend race, gender, class, and culture.

Subsequently, reviews of post-modernist feminist literature are presented; including an overview of commentator's opinions on Arab-cum-Islamic feminism and African American feminism. The review also looks at the contribution of women to war literature.

Modernists observed a dichotomist world, whereas post-modernist perceived a world that was inter-sectional, based on multiple perspectives. Modernity, as characterized by the works of nineteenth century theorists such as Marx and Weber, opposed traditional societies and concepts of traditionalism. It argued that technological innovation, consumerism and revolutions in communications rendered inefficient and useless the concepts of feudalism, monarchies and social segregation. Within modernist theories, women were largely ignored, and social progress was defined in male-dominated terms.[1]

Simon De Beauvoir (1953) provides a concise interpretation of 'modernism' -

[1] Simon De Beauvoir, ***The Second Sex***, (New York, NY: Knopf, 1953). Quoted in Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, ***Postmodern Theory, Critical Interrogations***, (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991), pages 206 – 207.

> "The humanist discourse of 'Man' [as argued by the modern school of thought] at once occludes important differences between men and women and covertly supports male domination of women. Humanist discourse postulates a universal essence as constituent of human beings which operates to enthrone socially-constructed male traits and activities (such as reason, production, or the will to power) as essentially human. In such modern discourses, men are the paradigm of humanity, while women are the other, the subordinate sex." [2]

Feminists tend to criticize such a modern theory, because they see it as justifying male perceptions of superiority, where social progress is defined in male-terms. Post-modern theory deconstructs the dichotomies between men and women that are evident in modern theories, moving away from assertive-passive; weak-strong characterizations of the two genders, where women are always the subordinate, or the lesser, to men.

> " . . . feminist and post-modern discourses can mutually inform one another. Feminism encourages post-modern theory to articulate the critique of the humanist universal 'Man' as a discourse of male domination . . . the post-modern emphasis on plurality, difference, otherness, marginality, and heterogeneity has immense appeal to those who have found themselves marginalized and excluded by the Voice of Reason, Truth and Objectivity [as advocated by the modern school of thought]." [3]

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[2] Ibid, pages 206 – 207.

[3] Linda Hutcheon, ***The Politics of Postmodernism***, (New York and London: Routledge, 1989). Quoted in Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, ***Postmodern Theory, Critical Interrogations***, (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 1991), page 207.

Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, advocate the utilization of multi-perspective cultural theory in literary analysis.[4] They argue that the central lessons of the last decade, and the radical views postulated by the postmodern school, should take into consideration gender, race, class, and sexual orientation.

> "The postmodern epistemology of Lyotard or Foucault can draw attention to differences between women of color, women of different races or classes, women of different sexual preferences and ethnicity, or from different regions of the world, so as to preserve and articulate the specificities of women, and thus avoid reduction to universalizing conceptual schemes – schemes that, in some versions of feminism, too often privilege the experiences of white, first world, academic women." [5]

One must see all these components as being the major contents of a macro-personal identity, and the practice of criticism must focus on an examination of these micro-components.

> "A multidimensional critical theory is dialectical and non-reductive theory. It conceptualizes the connections between the economic, political, social and cultural dimensions of society and refuses to reduce social phenomena to any one dimension." [6]

Complementing Best and Kellner, De Lauretis argues that:

> "Feminist theory is . . . a developing theory of the female-sexed or female-embodied social subject, whose constitution and whose modes of social and subjective existence include most obviously sex and gender, but also race, class, and any other significant sociocultural

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, ***Postmodern Theory, Critical Interrogations***, (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991), pages 210 – 211.
[6] Ibid. page 263.

> divisions and representations; a developing theory of the female-embodied social subject that is based on its specific, emergent, and conflictual history." [7]

Liana Bader argues that within Arab society, the male is in harmony with the outside world, being emancipated and being the prime definer of the woman's role.[8] The social and political orders serve his interests; as such, the realm of questioning and criticizing is by default the responsibility of women. This includes feminism - the questioning of the position of women within these political and social orders.

> "Within the new overarching background which deals with Islamic laws and traditions, the category of Islamic feminism may stand its ground by the sheer diversity it includes: contributors to the debate have been considered new feminist traditionalists, pragmatists, secular feminists, neo-Islamists and so forth. For all these thinkers, however, there is a common concern with the empowerment of their gender, with a rethought of Islam." [9]

Bader compares Arab feminism to a mosaic – feminist writers can be Arab nationalists, upper-class privileged secularists, or Islamic fundamentalists. This diversity is borne into the individual feminist's perceptions as to the key mode – whether they attribute more relevance to being Arab than to being Moslem or vice

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[7] Teresa De Lauretis, "Upping the Anti (Sic) in Feminist Theory," in Simon During (ed), ***The Cultural Studies Reader***, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), page 89.

[8] Ms. Liana Bader was interviewed by the researcher at her home in Ramallah on November 10, 2004. She is the author of several novels on women and politics in the Arab world. Her most prominent novel, ***Eye of the Mirror*** (London: Garnet Publications, 1996) recounts the Palestinian tragedy of upheaval and exile through the eyes of the women who lived this experience. She currently serves as the Director of the Department for Cinema and Child Development at the Palestinian Ministry of Education. She has directed several documentaries on Palestine, for both child and mature audiences.

[9] Margot Badran, "Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt." Quoted in Mai Yamani, "Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives", posted at www.soas.co.uk/centers/islamiclaw/feminism_intro.html, on September 18, 2004.

versa; or whether they are pro or anti Western. For Hanan Al Shaykh, the inter-sectional parameters that define her are uniquely embedded in this Islamic-cum-Arab-cum-secular feminism that is heavily diversified.

Muslim Women's Choices presents a cross-cultural perspective of Muslim women's experiences and choices in diverse social settings. It focuses on the manner in which Muslim women consciously and unconsciously accommodate religious belief to their social reality, and on gender roles and relationships on Muslim countries.[10]

Women's Rebellion presents a sustained analysis of women in Islamic thought, the construction of femininity in the Muslim unconsciousness, and of some formulations of gender. Mersinni, one of the most important intellectuals of our time, examines a range of issues fundamental to the status of Muslim women. She discusses the effect of state prescriptions about women's roles, activities, and spheres on women's lives.[11]

Michele Wallace traces the rise and origin of an Afro-American feminist 'myth' or 'oral tradition,' that commences with the work of Zora Neale Hurtson, arriving at the "proliferation of black female images on TV, in music videos and, to a lesser extent, in film." [12]

Valerie Smith employs literary criticism to the works of black feminist readings. Influenced by the critic Stuart Hall, she espouses the use of the concept of inter-sectionality in analyzing this form of literature.

> "I resist deploying what feels like a uniform model of black women's lived experiences because, to my mind, such models undermine the goals of black feminism in its own name. If we assume that race, gender, class, and sexuality are mutually

[10] Camilla Fawzi, El Solh and Judy Mabro (Eds), ***Muslim Women's Choices: Religious Belief and Social Reality*** (Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers, 1994)

[11] Fatima Mernissi, ***Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*** (New York: Zed Books, 1996).

[12] Michele Wallace, "Negative Images: Towards a Black Feminist Cultural Criticism". Quoted in: ***The Cultural Studies Reader,*** Simon During (Ed): (London: Routledge, 1993), page 120.

> constitutive, and therefore pre-empt ideas of a homogeneous women's or black experience, then it should only follow that those constructions also act upon each other within the category of black women itself, thus problematizing easy generalizations about black women's lives and texts as well." [13]

Inter-sectionality argues that the woman's macro-identity is formulated through a process of negotiation between the micro-identities of race, sex, gender, and class. These micro-components operate together dynamically.

> "We are always in negotiation, not with a single set of oppositions that place us always in the same relation to others, but with a series of different positionalities." [14]

Miriam Cooke discusses war literature, and argues that war novels written by men portray heroism and manliness.[15] Female writers focus on more humanistic themes, narrating the roles that women played in times of war, that do not involve battlefield heroics and carrying arms.[16] Female writers play the roles of waiting, surviving and hoping, which is in itself a form of resistance.

This complements the main argument of this thesis, that the wider conflict is an essential component leading women to realize new identities. Women's patience, understanding, and efforts to create order in the place of disorder is resistance and reform, and adds a new flavor to an otherwise static literature.

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[13] Valerie Smith***, Not Just Race, Not Just Gender***, (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), page xvii.

[14] Stuart Hall, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" in ed, Gina Dent, ***Black Popular Culture*** (Seattle, USA: Bay Press, 1992). Quoted in Valerie Smith, ***Not Just Race, Not Just Gender,*** (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), page xvi.

[15] Miriam Cooke, "Arab Women Arab Wars***." Cultural Critique***, Winter 1994-5 (1995), page 25.

[16] Within the Arab world, female writers writing war literature include Sahar Khalifa (Palestinian), Ahlam Mustaghanmi (Algerian), and Emilie Nassrallah (Lebanese) as well as Lina Hamadeh. Given the constant state of turmoil in the post-colonial Arab world, this topic is quite popular.

Liana Bader argues that the rise of this movement was fueled by changing social norms such as women's education; women's employment; the adoption of secular, nationalist agendas by Arab countries that eroded crippling gender-defined roles for women (although this was mostly the case in urban locations); and the repetitive state of war and upheaval in the Arab world (war is a state of chaos in which survival is the preoccupation of the majority – an atmosphere that is conducive to questioning traditionalism).

> "Women are inscribing their experiences into the war story . . . The political mother [female] only retains efficacy if she is *written* [author's emphasis] as politically effective. . . . The postcolonial war writer realizes that her writing - the struggle to reclaim language in such a way that it will empower and no longer suppress her – is critical to her understanding of the role she may play in the war theatre. . . . women write to transform themselves, their relationships with others, and, by extension, the social context."[17]

Professor Hisham Sharabi develops in his classic book, ***Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society,*** a theory of social change in which he pinpoints social, economic, political and cultural changes that led the Arab world to neopatriarchy – a modernized form of patriarchy. He concludes that authentic change was blocked and distorted forms and practices subsequently came to dominate all aspects of social existence and activity.[18]

Ellen Fleischmann traces the emergence if Middle Eastern women's movements by looking at shared concerns, causes, methods, ideologies, and self-identifications, but

[17] Miriam Cooke, "Arab Women Arab Wars." ***Cultural Critique***, Winter 1994-5 (1995), page 25.
[18] Hisham Sharabi, ***Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

she does so with the recognition of the diversity and particularities of individual movements. She discusses the thematic stages of development for these movements: (1) the period of debates on women's status and challenges to the status quo; (2) the time when women adopted nationalist discourse and connected it to women's emancipation, with disappointing results; and (3) the stage of state feminism, which came as a result of women's association or conflict with state-building projects. The latter also had negative consequences as feminists were discredited for their association with autocratic states and Westernizing ideologies as well as foe the obvious discrepancy between their situation and that of most non-elite women.[19]

[19] Mervat Hatem, "Gender and the State," in ***A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East***, ed. Margaret L Meriwether and Judith E Tucker (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999)

Chapter Three

Biographies of Hanan Al Shaykh and Alice Walker

This chapter presents a concise biographical background on Alice Walker and Hanan Al Shaykh; their major works and the critical reception that they received. It discusses the contemporary historical background of their writings – the American Civil Rights Movement and the Lebanese Civil War; and their influence on the two writers' work. It overviews Alice Walker's ***Meridian*** and Hanan Al Shaykh's ***Hikayat Zahra*** and makes a comparative structural analysis and semi-autobiographic features of the two novels.

Biographical Background: Hanan Al Shaykh

Hanan was born in Beirut in 1945, in a conservative and unfashionable part of the city. She attended al-'Amiliyyah's traditional Muslim girls' primary school, and then the more sophisticated Christian al-Ahliyyah School. By the age of 16 she had already published several essays in ***Al Nahar*** newspaper. Between the years 1963 and 1966, she studied at the American College for Girls in Cairo. Until 1975 she resided in Beirut, working in television and journalism for ***Al-Hasna'*** -- a women's magazine -- and then for ***Al Nahar*** newspaper, before moving to write fiction. In 1976, the Lebanese civil war obliged Hanan to leave Lebanon, and move to Saudi Arabia. In 1982, she moved to London where she currently lives with her family.

Major Works

Hanan is considered a major force in Arabic literature. Her stories deal with women's role in society, the relationship between the sexes, and the institution of marriage. Her books have achieved significant success in the United States and Europe, and have been translated from Arabic into 9 foreign languages: English French, Dutch, German, Danish, Italian, Korean, Spanish and Polish.

During the four years in which she resided in Egypt, Hanan made her debut as a writer with ***Intihar Rajul Mayyit*** [The Suicide of a Dead Man], published in 1970. It is decidedly not the typical first novel, narrated by a middle-aged man. Through the narrator's obsessive desire for a young girl, al-Shaykh examines power relations between the sexes and patriarchal control. Her next novel, ***Faras a-Shaitan*** (The Devil's Horse, 1971), was written while she lived in Saudi Arabia. It included biographical elements related to her extremely religious father, aspects of her own experiences with love, and her subsequent marriage.

Al-Shaykh first came to international attention with the publication of ***Hikayat Zahra*** (1980 -*The Story of Zahra*). Given that the publisher in Lebanon did not accept the novel, she published it at her own expense. The main character, Zahra, is a bewildered and directionless young woman, who experiences oppression; unwanted pregnancy; exile in Africa; abortion; nervous breakdown; sexual intimidation; love; and devastation. ***The Story of Zahra*** was banned in most Arab countries, and Lebanese readers rejected the book because it gives a wrong impression about Arab culture. ***The Story of Zahra*** attempts to capture the combined effect of war and repression on innocent victims, as characterized by Zahra, who experiences double-victimization by a patriarchal abusive social system compounded with an environment of war.

Misk al-Ghazal (1989 – *Women of Sand and Myrrh*) was chosen as one of the fifty Best Books of 1992 by Publishers Weekly. Similar in structure to Walker's epistolary novel ***The Color Purple***, Hanan's *Barid Beirut* (1992, *Beirut Blues)* is an epistolary novel that allows the narrators to position themselves at the center of events and add value to their lives within the events that victimize them.

Hikayat Zahra

In 1980, the year in which ***Hikayat Zahra*** is set, the Lebanese Civil War is at its pinnacle, where belligerent parties included numerous Lebanese factions and militias (Maronite Christian, Sunni Muslim, Shiite Muslim), Palestinian groups, and the armies of Syria and Israel. Having commenced in 1975, Lebanon split into a Christian North and Muslim South; while Beirut split into a Christian East, and Muslim West. Communications between the two halves involved artillery fire and military raids solely. The war concluded in 1991 with de facto Syrian occupation of Lebanon.

Hanan does not present political discussions and opinions of the war, but focuses on describing individual human lives within the context of violence, anarchy and complete socio-political destruction. She does not give street names and precise locations for the events in her story, emphasizing that the violence and anarchy was to be found everywhere – countless women also found themselves in Zahra's position.

> "The women's writings articulate their transformed consciousness. Whereas they had originally stayed out of selflessness, they were now staying to resist Lebanon's total destruction. Above all, they were staying to achieve for themselves a sense of self, as women and as Lebanese citizens."[1]

[1] Miriam Cooke, "Arab Women Arab Wars*." **Cultural Critique***, Winter 1994-5 (1995). Page 21.

For Zahra, the 'external' conflict, characterized by war and social collapse, complements her 'internal' struggle. Zahra lives within the war, witnessing on a daily basis refugees, death, injury, deformation and grief. The war empowers Zahra, and Lebanese women in general. As the men went to fight, the woman became the main bread-winner (not Zahra though), and assumed responsibilities of caring for the wounded. Zahra volunteers as a nurse caring for the wounded, as she tries to rescue lives in the constant medium of death.

Before the outbreak of the war, Zahra's personality was passive and stagnant. The war helped to wake her up, awakening her survival skills and giving her a role in society – to nurse victims. Hanan does not portray Zahra as being a heroine, but as being a prime example of a Lebanese woman in the Lebanese war. The story of Zahra is that of a normal person trying to "negotiate violence."[2]

> "In Lebanon, the woman wrote of the need to reject the old norms of emigration, and to stay, to adopt responsibility for the chaos, and to work for the survival of the self, of others, and of the country. Their message was stay, and thus stop the war."[3]

Despite a brief stay in Africa, Zahra returns to war-torn Beirut. When her parents move to the 'safer' south, Zahra opts to stay in Beirut, where she finds her 'sense of self.'. She remains there, volunteering as a nurse (her first experience of working) and falls in love, allowing her to realize herself. The war empowers her, and she refuses to leave. Zahra characterizes the role of woman in the war – "staying is resistance," but in a way that is different to the resistance of guns and bullets.

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[2] Miriam Cooke, "Arab Women Arab Wars." ***Cultural Critique***, Winter 1994-5 (1995), page 7.
[3] Ibid., page 24.

Critical Appraisal

Hanan provocatively pioneered a new trait in Arabic fiction as narrated by women - namely an openness about sexual matters. Hanan allows herself and her readers to discuss otherwise taboo issues relating to sexual activities *outside* the marital sphere, adultery, lesbianism, and sexual gratification, in a society which practices the veiling and the segregation of women in 'haramleks.'[4] She writes explicitly on such matters, on subjects that were forbidden and non-existent in Arab writing, particularly as narrated by women.

Hanan's subsequent novel, ***Women of Sand and Myrrh*** was banned from distribution in the Gulf. Arab critics attacked her offensive portrayal of the status of women in Islamic society, while Islamic movements threatened her life. However, the novel received much praise from Western critics.

The third story receiving much criticism in the West was ***Barid Beirut*** written in Arabic in 1992 and translated to English under the title ***Beirut Blues*** in 1995. In this book, Hanan received great praise because it tackled war as an abstract and absurd phenomenon, with a universalistic approach. Salman Rushdie describes ***Beirut Blues*** as "an unforgettable portrait of a broken city."[5]

Within the Arab world, a primary critic of Hanan's work has been Amal Amireh. In her article "Problems and Prospects for Arab Women Writers," Amireh argues that

> "reviewers of Arab women's books seem to take their cues from the titles and covers. Unfailingly, they read these novels as . . . texts that

[4] 'Haramlek' is the female wing of a large Ottoman Palace, housing wives and female servants, under the authority of the Sultan. The main harem of the Ottoman Empire was the harem section of the Topkapi Palace, The Old Seraglio. It was full of hundreds of ladies more beautiful and more attractive than each other who were presented to the Sultan as gifts. Women residing in haramleks must obtain permission to exit and enter the premises. Polygamy, at the hands of the Lord of the Palace, was accepted. The Islam religion allowed a man to take up to four wives on the condition that he should not behave different from one to another and be equal to each of them in granting things.

[5] Salman Rushdie, quoted in Lina Beydoun, "The Sweet Briars Seminars." Posted on www.lebwa.org/life/shaykh.php, on August 2003

> ‘reflect’ the reality of Islam and the Arab world and ‘lift the veil’ from what one reviewer called the unimaginable world of Arab women .. ."[6]

Amireh argues that Hanan was not using sexual imagery to provoke the reader’s intrinsic desires, but rather as a tool to expose the reader to the violent, harsh, and cruel realities of life for Arab women. Hanan's motive was to provoke a thought-process that may ultimately effect attitude change within reactionary Islamic societies.

While Amireh welcomes Hanan's courage in undertaking these writings, she refuses to attach merit to positive Western appraisal of Hanan's work, citing that the Western appraisal is misguided and in its current form, ineffectual:

> ". . . we need to encourage a vigorous critical discussion about Arabic literature and culture in the West - one that does not limit itself to the academy. The debate should go beyond 'appreciative' criticism that condescendingly praises Arab women writers for ‘daring’ to put pen to paper."[7]

As such, Western critics are united in their positive appraisal of Hanan's work, both in terms of its literary value, and in relation to the delicate socio-political issues that it touches upon. However, positive Western appraisal of Hanan's work appears to have backfired, with Arab critics espousing the view that Hanan is no more than a Western ‘stooge.’ Finally, respected Arab critics such as Amireh have taken a divided stand on her work, welcoming her daring and courage in addressing sensitive issues such as

[6] Amal Amireh, " Publishing in the West: Problems and Prospects for Arab Women Writers." ***Al Jadid Magazine,*** volume 2/10 (August 1996, USA). Page 2.
[7] Ibid., page 1.

Islam and its relation of feminine sexual liberty; while expressing lukewarm appreciation of the West's enthusiasm for her work.

Biographical Background: Alice Walker

Walker was born and raised in Georgia, where her father was a share-cropper. When she was eight years old, her brother shot her with his BB gun, leaving her scarred and blind in one eye. This disfigurement made Walker shy and self-conscious, motivating her to find alternative forms of expression, particularly writing. The accident resulted in Walker becoming estranged from her father, since he failed to find proper medical treatment for her. In contrast, Walker respects her mother's strength and perseverance in the face of poverty, often recalling her mother's hard work in the garden, working to create beauty in the shabbiest conditions. Alice Walker is one of the most significant contemporary black American writers, and a pioneering literary figure. In her work she focused on feminist issues that she addressed as womenist issues focusing on black women specifically within the black race.[8]

After graduating from high school in 1961, Alice entered Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia on a scholarship program. Once there, she was invited to Dr. Martin Luther King's home in 1962. She participated in the Youth World Peace Festival in Helsinki, Finland, and traveled extensively within Europe, enjoying full exposure to the predominantly leftist environment in European student politics. Walker was also an active member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the

[8] Demetrice A. Worley and Jessie Perry Jr, ***African American Literature: An Anthology***, 2nd edition (Lincolnwood, Illinois: NTC Publishing Group, 1998). Pages 467-468.

Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), two organizations using non-violence to protest against institutionalized racism in the South. In August 1963 Alice went to Washington DC to participate in the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," where she was able to hear Dr. King's "I Have A Dream" speech.[9]

After two years at Spelman College, Walker became disenchanted with what she considered a puritanical atmosphere, and transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, to complete her education, becoming one of the few young blacks to attend this prestigious school.[10]

By the final year of her studies, Alice Walker was suffering from extreme depression due to her unintended pregnancy, which she later successfully aborted (not the easiest procedure in 1960s America). In an effort to face the force of her emotions, she wrote several volumes of poetry, and a short story entitled ***To Hell With Dying***. The story was published, and Walker received a hand-written note of encouragement from the renowned poet Langston Hughes.[11]

In the summer of 1966, Walker returned to Mississippi, where she married a Jewish civil rights law student named Mel Laventhal. The couple were exposed to threats of violence due to the inter-racial nature of their marriage, and the fact that Laventhal was active on behalf of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). After delivering a daughter, Rebecca; Alice and Laventhal divorced some years later.[12]

While in Mississippi, Walker discovered the writings of Zora Neale Hurston, and found time to write. Her essay *The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?* won her the 1966 American Scholar Magazine Annual Contest. Subsequently, she obtained

[9] Michael E. Muellero, "Alice Walker, (1944 -)." Posted online at Thomson Gale Databases, April 2004
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

a fellowship to the prestigious McDowell Colony in New Hampshire, and accepted a teaching position at Jackson State University, where in 1968 she published her first volume of poetry, entitled *Once*.[13]

Walker edited a collection of Hurston's fiction called ***I Love Myself When I Am Laughing ... and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*** that appeared in 1979. Additional short stories were collected in ***In Love and Trouble*** (1973) and ***You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*** (1981). The novel, ***The Color Purple***, received both the Pulitzer Prize and The American Book Award. Walker, and is also being taught at Tougaloo College. In 1972 she created at Wellesley College one of the first women's studies courses in the nation - a women's literature course.[14]

Major Works

Influenced by Zora Neale Hurston, Walker's work is occupied with the task of what Alma Freeman calls "unveiling the soul of the black woman."[15] Walker's first novel, ***The Third Life of Grange Copeland*** (1970) focuses on themes of racism, poverty, violence in the family, and re-emergence. [16]

In the collection of short stories entitled *In Love and Trouble* Walker discusses issues of fighting against societal constraints. In 1976, Walker published ***Meridian*** which is considered to be her autobiographical work. The main character was born in the rural South and pursues education as a means of escape. Pregnant and married to a high-

[13] Michael E. Muellero, "Alice Walker, (1944 -)." Posted online at Thomson Gale Databases, April 2004

[14] Alma Freeman, "Time Out – About Alice Walker." Posted at www.gradesaver.com/classicnotes/authors/about_alice_walker.html, , January 2004

[15] Demetrice A. Worley and Jessie Perry Jr, ***African American Literature: An Anthology***, 2nd edition (Lincolnwood, Illinois: NTC Publishing Group, 1998), pages 467-468.

[16] Demirturk E Lale, "In Search of a Redeamed Vision: The American Women's Novel, 1880s – 1980s." ***American Studies International***, Volume 30/2 (1992), pages 78 – 87.

school dropout, Meridian struggles with thoughts of suicide; surrenders her child to her mother, and eventually attends college in the North. After graduating, she pursues community activism, helping rural residents overcome oppression and institutionalized ignorance.[17]

In ***The Color Purple*** (1982) Walker uses letters narrated by Celie, a poor southern black woman, to present a woman-centric focus to the novel.[18] Celie is physically and emotionally abused by her stepfather and her husband. In ***The Temple of My Familiar*** (1989), Miss Lissie is a goddess from primitive Africa who befriends Suwelo, a professor whose marriage is characterized by his dominance of his wife. The novel is significant in that it describes the matriarchal social order of primitive African societies – like ***The Color Purple***, cooperation between women is seen as promoting social productivity and order, in contrast to cooperation between men. In ***Possessing the Secret of Joy*** (1992) Walker examines the practice of female genital mutilation, which is further examined in ***Warrior Marks*** (1994). Both works bring to light the negative consequences of this practice. Both ***The Color Purple*** and ***Possessing the Secret of Joy*** were made into films.[19]

Meridian

The 1960s were a period of social unrest in the United States featuring protests against the Vietnam War, the rise of (militant) feminism, a sexual revolution and the rise of the civil rights movement. During that decade, America was to undergo fundamental social changes.

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[17] Demirturk E Lale, "In Search of a Redeamed Vision: The American Women's Novel, 1880s – 1980s." ***American Studies International***, Volume 30/2 (1992). Page 78 – 87.
[18] Demetrice A. Worley and Jessie Perry Jr, ***African American Literature: An Anthology***, 2nd edition (Lincolnwood, Illinois: NTC Publishing Group, 1998). Pages 467-468.
[19] Elena Shakhovtseva, "***The Heart of Darkness in a Multicolored World: The Color Purple by Alice Walker as a Womanist Text***." (Vladivostok, Russia: Far Eastern State University, 1999). Pages 1 – 8.

Using nonviolence, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) used protests and marches as a means to speak out against institutionalized segregation policies. Organizations similar to the NAACP were also active specifically in the South, including the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (founded by Dr. Martin Luther King) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. Using organized demonstrations, marches, boycotts, and sit-ins, these groups protested segregation. Under the charismatic leadership of Dr. King, substantial gains were made in improving the social positioning of African Americans. In 1964, the Civil Rights Bill was passed by Congress, setting the legal precedent for the abolition of segregationist policies in America. However, the movement was not without violence – militant black groups sprung out of the NAACP; and reactionary American groups, especially in the South, resorted to violent forms of expression. Ultimately, the civil rights movement succeeded in obtaining its ultimate objective – the end of institutionalized discrimination against colored Americans.[20]

The 1960s witnessed the start of a country-wide trend to adopt laws of gender equality – and in 1972 the Equal Rights Amendment was approved by Congress. However, ratification by states did not follow – the reality is that even today, the US constitution still lacks the basis for specifying gender equality.[21]

> "In 1963, Betty Friedan published ***The Feminine Mystique***, an explosive critique of middle-class patterns that helped millions of women articulate a pervasive sense of discontent. Arguing that women often had no outlets for expression other than 'finding a

[20] Howard Cincotta, ed, ***An Outline of American History***, (Washington, DC: United States Information Agency; May 1994.), pages 298 - 301

[21] Ibid.

> husband and bearing children,' Friedan encouraged readers to seek new roles and responsibilities, to seek their own personal and professional identities rather than have them defined by the outside, male dominated society." [22]

It was a decade of struggle and gain for African Americans, and for American women generally. Meridian symbolizes the mood of these times, seeking her own personal and professional identity. She voluntarily has her tubes tied so as not to have children; she surrenders her child to her mother and pursues education and works as an activist to encourage black people to vote.

Like Hanan Al Shaykh, Walker does not use her writings to provide a documentary history of those times, and does not present a political discourse, but simply narrates the story of Meridian. Walker's focus is the person and her development. Similar to Zahra, Meridian is exposed to two conflicts – the 'external' conflict characterized by civil rights agitation, and the 'internal' conflict of refusing to accept the socially-imposed traditional female roles of mother and wife. Both Meridian and Zahra represent multitudes of women living in their times and societies. For Meridian and Zahra, their self-fulfillment is a process of stumbling upon a formula for transforming their reality into a better world.

> "Postcolonial wars have transformed the relationship between women's participation in war and its narration . . . the post-colonial war writer – the struggle to reclaim language in such a way that it will no longer suppress her – is critical to her understanding of the role she may play in the war theater . . . these women writers have

[22] Howard Cincotta, ed, ***An Outline of American History***, (United States Information Agency; May 1994). Page 322.

found a space in which to make their voices heard, and their heard voices are changing that space." [23]

For Walker, writing is a form of empowerment and a release of her inner powers. To an extent, she discovers a new societal role through portraying revolutionary characters such as Meridian who rejects the role of mother and wife, and pursues work and education.

Critical Appraisal

Walker earned much praise for ***The Color Purple***, especially for her accurate rendering of black folk idioms and her characterization of Celie. Despite the nearly unanimous praise, criticisms were directed towards the de-humanizing and archetypal portrayal of the black man. More specifically, finger-pointing and name-calling provoked controversy, and raised issues of race loyalty against gender loyalty. [24]

Critics asserted that in presenting flawed characters, Walker is trying to help real people (burdened with these flaws) to recognize these faults and strive to improve. Reviewers also assert the work does contain positive images of black men that are often ignored.

Additionally, reviewers find fault with Walker's style of characterization, opposing her referral to characters with pronouns that encourages readers to attribute

[23] Miriam Cooke, "Arab Women Arab Wars." ***Cultural Critique***, Winter 1994-5 (1995), page 25.
[24] Elena Shakhovtseva, "The Heart of Darkness in a Multicolored World: The Color Purple by Alice Walker as a Womanist Text." (Vladivostok, Russia: Far Eastern State University, 1999), pages 1– 8.

personality traits to black people as a whole, supporting the understanding of characters as stereotypes.[25]

Finally, much of Walker's work is reviewed as political in intent, at times to the detriment of its literary value. In contrast, reviewers praise works such as ***In Love and Trouble*** for balancing the art of storytelling with political concerns. Reviewers often praise Walker in her use of oral story-telling tradition, finding her work most convincing when she employs dialectic anecdotal narrative. Overall, critics commend her ability to incorporate a message within her narratives. In commenting on *Possessing* ***The Secret of Joy***, Alyson R. Buckman states that Walker's text "acts as a revolutionary manifesto for dismantling systems of domination, echoing the sentiments of many reviewers."[26] Critics have also lauded the non-fictional ***Warrior Marks*** for its exposure of the practice of female genital mutilation.

Walker's work consistently reflects her concern with racial, sexual and political issues, particularly with the black woman's struggle for spiritual survival. Addressing detractors who fault her unabashedly feminist viewpoint, Walker explains "The black woman is one of America's greatest heroes ... Not enough credit has been given to the black woman who has been oppressed beyond recognition."[27]

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[25] Alma Freeman, "Time Out – About Alice Walker." Posted at www.gradesaver.com/classicnotes/authors/about_alice_walker.html, , January 2004

[26] Alyson Buckman, "Alice Walker, 1944 –" ***Journal of Contemporary Literary Criticism***, Volume 58 (1989), page 355

[27] Alice Walker, quoted by Alyson Buckman, "Alice Walker, 1944 –" ***Journal of Contemporary Literary Criticism,*** Volume 58 (1989), page 356

Thematic and Structural Analysis

Overview of "Meridian"

Meridian grows-up in the American South, born to a religious, traditional mother, and a thoughtful, sensitive father. After experiencing an unsuccessful marriage with Eddy, she surrenders the upbringing of their child to her mother, and decides to attend college. Once there, she meets Truman Held, a black political activist with whom she becomes pregnant. Meridian fails to understand Truman's political orientation and social loyalties, which leads her into further confusion regarding her political and social role. Truman abandons Meridian, and marries a white, Jewish, civil rights volunteer, Lynne Rabinwitz. Meridian's reaction to this relationship was the denial of her femininity, and her pregnancy with Truman's child. She aborts the baby, and decides to have her tubes tied, refusing to return to Truman.

Through her relation with Truman and his wife Lynn, Meridian realizes a higher level of identity - conflict and ambivalence. In order to assert her identity, Meridian must confront the two other parties in this three-dimensional relationship involving her (a black woman); Truman (a black man) and Lynn (a white woman). This assertion reveals the struggles of race (with Lynn) and gender (with Truman). Once Meridian resolves these racial and gender conflicts, she discovers her new identity.

The driving force for her self-realization, epitomized by the resolution of the two conflicts, is her involvement in political activism in the black community, in which she becomes a leading activist lobbying black Americans to vote.

At the end of the novel, Meridian is not only capable of personal growth, but she also succeeds in passing on the ability to change, to others.

Overview of *Hikayat Zahra*

Zahra grows up in a family that is fathered by a strict, conservative man who terrifies both his wife and daughter. Early on, Zahra internalizes her subordinate status, since she is a girl on one hand, and because she is neither pretty nor clever. As is characteristic of conservative, patriarchal societies, her parents take a bigger interest in their male offspring, her younger brother.

Zahra is not supported emotionally by her family, receiving only emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Her parents ridicule her appearance and abilities, causing Zahra to become unstable, confused and lost. Her father abuses her physically by beating her (and her mother) for trivial reasons; and her grand-father abuses her sexually in her early childhood years. This leads her to hate her femininity, seeing it as the source of her inferiority, abuse and helplessness.

As a teenager, Zahra witnesses her mother's adulterous relations. Her mother does not try to hide this from her, but uses her daughter as a convenient 'cover' for her extra-marital behavior. Zahra accompanies her mother to visit the latter's lover, so that her father would not begin to doubt his wife's intentions. This further confuses Zahra, enhancing her feelings of fear (should her father learn the truth); shame and guilt (towards her mother's behavior); and hatred (towards her own self for being a helpless tool in her mother's activities).

Zahra comes to maturity in an atmosphere of fear, that her father (who already hates and ridicules her) will punish her for her mothers' infidelity. She internalizes the strong hatred of her family, and starts to destroy herself. She enters a relationship with a married man, who deflowers and impregnates her, and experiences several secret abortions. This relationship is an escape from her family in order to live an experience of her own, and satisfy the anger she feels inside by destroying herself.

Driven by fear that her father and brother may learn of her 'illegal' relationship, she suffers a psychological breakdown, especially since Malek (her impregnator) refuses to marry her.

Without learning of her sexual experiences, her family sends her to Africa to visit her uncle Hashem, and be rehabilitated. Once in Africa, her suffering increases, since her uncle, instead of helping her, sexually harasses her. In order to escape from her uncle's abuse she marries one of his friends, Majed, whom she does not love.

The marriage does not lead her to the stability and peace that she was seeking; instead it provokes her anger and hatred towards herself, and men in general. In her marriage, she pursues asexuality, refusing sexual pleasure, as a means of translating her inner frustration and anger. A subsequent breakdown leads to a divorce, and she returns to Beirut at the height of the civil war.

The chaos and destruction in Beirut help Zahra to become socially active - she volunteers as a nurse, and meets Sami, a sniper with whom she falls in love (her only experience of love). She transcends her inner cave and asexuality, living the best days of her life, as a nurse and as a lover. This love affair leads to another pregnancy that requires a marriage to cover it up; however, her lover refuses to marry her. At the end of the novel, she leaves him, and he shoots her. The death of Zahra portrays her double victimization - as a woman victimized by men who misunderstand her needs; and a victim of the war that kills indiscriminately.

Comparative Structural Analysis

Meridian drew attention for its episodic structure, which moves the center back and forth in the lack of linearity of events. Yet, this novel was recognized positively by its morality and aesthetic value underlying the idea of personal growth and the

importance of bringing about social change. This interacts with the feminist approach of the female's role in determining her self-fulfillment and affecting those who surround her to change. To achieve this goal, a multi-narrator approach is used to see events from different perspectives, and relate the main character's conflicts and quests with the conflicts of others. The non-chronological sequence of events enables the reader to move backwards and forwards in order to reevaluate events and relate the main character's conflicts with the historical context of conflict.

The Story of Zahra comprises several narratives talking about the young, directionless woman that is Zahra. The multi-narrator approach is rooted in the spirit of the novel, in which Hanan represents multiple themes in an attempt to bridge voices and visions of both men and women. Al-Shaykh uses multiple narratives, given by various people, to discuss a common theme and portray gender reactions to that theme.

For both writers, the structure follows a non-chronological order of events, moving back and forth in time. This complexity of structure, narrators, and themes complements the times at which the novel was written, as civil war, chaos and conflict are essentially characterized by a multiplicity of role-players, narrators and motives. Both stories exhibit a form of complexity, reflective of their characters, events and settings. Hanan and Alice are regarded as post-modernist in their approach of non-chronological, multi-narrator, and multiple thematic representations of structure. [28]

Meridian is considered as a semi-autobiography of a stage in history which was characterized by ambivalence on historical, religious, political and personal levels. This may be due to the author's own ambivalence at the time of writing. Walker was unable to arrive at her understanding of self and of the black community itself.

[28] C Holman and W Harmon***, A Handbook to Literature***, Sixth Edition (Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1992), page 370.

Walker, at that level, was highly confused with the past and was not yet able to reach reconciliation which she arrives at in her works such as *The Color Purple*. In many ways, Walker uses Meridian to re-write her past – Meridian becomes active in student politics just as Walker had been occupied with demonstrations, sit-ins and non-violent resistance with Southern organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

The portrayal of Zahra reflects the writer herself, who experienced the civil war and was brought up in a similar conservative, closed family in Beirut. Zahra reflects Hanan's confusion and ambivalence at a stage of history which was characterized by conflict and confusion on political, social and personal levels. At this stage of writing, Hanan was incapable of her own fulfillment on the political and personal levels, yet she was at the starting point of the quest. Zahra herself represents the starting point in which deconstruction of one's self gives direction to the construction and reconciliation of a newly-defined self. The new identity should be based on free-will and choice, not obligated or inherited through the patriarchal, dominant society in the Arab world. Yet, this reconstruction of identity was not fully established in this novel as in the later novels of Al-Shaykh such as ***Baird Beirut*** and ***Misk Al-Ghazal***. At this stage, Hanan attempts to confront suppression, which she considers a reality that one should deal with.

For both writers, the characters' confusion and ambivalence reflects the historical contexts in which they lived (civil rights movement and civil war), characterized by conflict and socio- political confusion.

Writing was an opportunity to 're-arrange the facts' as far as women were concerned. Both writers addressed change and rejection of the old norms through a temporary period of asexuality and denial of femininity in which the woman is liberated from her

old identity which enables her to seek a new identity based upon her choice. They aimed to establish newly-defined feminine identities, based on free-will and the choice of the woman herself.

Chapter Four

Multi-Layered Dimensions of Conflict

This chapter examines the reality in which the two major characters, Meridian and Zahra, find themselves at the outset of the novel. Complementing a post-modernist feminist approach, both Walker and Al Shaykh address multiple conflicts, analyzing female characters in relevance to their socio-political backgrounds. An intersectional analytical approach is employed in understanding the effects of various forms of conflict on the individual woman.

The analysis starts with characterizing the past and present forms of social constraint that women are subjected to. Both characters are suppressed by multi-layered sources of conflict, comprising political conflict at the national level (civil rights agitation and civil war); social conflict (women agitating against socially-imposed constraints); and gender conflict (women against men). The perpetuators of suppression are family, religion, and school.

The second analytical component is that of mother-daughter relationships, that are dominated by traditional values, limiting the daughter's aspirations to self-growth and their ability to affirm their identities. Within the family institution, the mother is the medium through which socially-approved modes of behavior are passed to future generations. In addition, this Chapter examines the suppressive social order of male patriarchy, as another primary source of abuse and suppression that women are subjected to; as demonstrated below:

> "The individual now is interpreted not only as a discursive construct,
>
> but as an effect of political technologies through which its very

identity, desires, body, and 'soul' are shaped and constituted." 'Discipline "makes" in individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise.' " [1]

As a whole, the multiple layers of conflict situate the women in a position of conformity to her society, tradition and culture. The woman has to mould into the requirements of the suppressing powers and associated social 'discipline', and adapt her individual identity accordingly. This is what Foucault terms the 'normalization.' "The ultimate effect and goal of discipline is 'normalization', the elimination of all social and psychological irregularities and the production of useful and docile subjects through a refashioning of minds and bodies." [2]

Finally, this chapter examines the concept of normalization to the political technology of suppressive institutions that are active in the past and present. For the characters Meridian and Zahra, the 'past' is a burdensome tale of suppression, repression, and conformity in line with the will of these institutions. The 'present' is the confusing reality of either accepting the status quo and conforming to institutional norms and disciplines; or questioning the status quo without finding a credible alternative to this form of existence.

Complementing Foucault's principle of normalization is Deleuse and Guatari's concept of territorialization, in which individuals conform to institutional rules and norms in a subconscious process that automates their ability to align their desires and identity with those of the larger 'group'. Both paradigms – normalization and

[1] Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, ***Postmodern Theory Critical Interrogations***, (New York, NY: Guilford Press , 1991), page 47. Text within single quotation-marks originates from Michel Foucault, ***Discipline and Punish*** (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1979). The quotation appears exactly as presented by Best and Kellner

[2] Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, ***Postmodern Theory Critical Interrogations***, (New York, NY: Guilford Press , 1991), page 47.

territorialization – agree that the individual's self-knowledge, self-perception and intrinsic desires are not only limited by the social power system, but indeed defined and pre-established by it. Free-will operates within the strict boundaries of institutional approval.

At the outset of the two novels, both Meridian and Zahra normalize to socially-imposed disciplines and roles that cause them to feel conflict and confusion. Both internalize feelings of passivity, dependence, and negativity since they are incapable of resisting their sources of repression; and unable to conjure a credible alternative to their status-quo.

Walker and Al Shaykh portray the same sources of conflict for both their characters – political conflict and social conflict, of which a primary component is gender conflict. Both writers agree to the past and present forms in which the conflict manifests itself; and both attribute added relevance and emphasis to conflict within mother-daughter relationships and the female-male relationship. Such similarities pay evidence to the existence of common feminist themes that transcend geographical and cultural difference.

The Burdensome Past and Confused Present

The novel ***Meridian*** is set within the American Civil Rights movement, and the struggle of African Americans to end segregationist policies against them. Alice Walker identifies multiple dimensions of conflict. The first dimension is the Civil Rights movement (political conflict). The second dimension is conflict between the African woman and African society (social conflict), of which an integral component is conflict between African woman and African man (gender conflict).

For ***Meridian***'s generation of African Americans, the realization of self-hood is an internal process that involves confusion and conflict. Conflict is borne out of their need to detach themselves from past experiences of slavery and associated feelings of shame, humiliation and guilt. Conflict also results from the confusion of the bewildering present reality that centers on racism and segregation, and is characterized by political conflict, violence, and lack of a clear vision for the future.

For African American women, the element of internal conflict is further compounded by their status as women within African American society. Not only are they exposed to the political conflict within the context of the Civil Rights Movement; but also to elements of social conflict – by which they are expected to conform to socially-imposed norms of behavior; and gender conflict with African American men.

The interplay of social and gender conflict impose a life-style on African American women in which they are expected to aspire primarily to being a wife and mother; to go to Church on Sunday and accept the domination and directives of men.

As such, African American women are exposed to two sources of controlling 'power.' By virtue of being African American, they are exposed to political control. By virtue of being women, the 'power' of African American society and the African American man in particular controls them and defines their behavioral limits.

> "Foucault defines power as a 'multiple and mobile field of force relations where far-reaching, but never completely stable effects of domination are produced'." [3]

[3] Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, ***Postmodern Theory Critical Interrogations***, (New York, NY: Guilford Press , 1991), page 51. Text within single quotation-marks originates from Michel Foucault, ***The History of Sexuality***, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1980). The quotation appears exactly as presented by Best and Kellner.

For African-American women such as Meridian, the effects of domination are far-reaching, controlling the woman and placing social and normative restrictions on her in her daily life. However, these sources of power are unstable, since Meridian's generation found the 'voice' to start challenging them. Walker describes the process by which Meridian overcomes these far-reaching sources of control and power, and by the end of the novel, succeeds in overcoming them.

In ***Hikayat Zahra***, Hanan Al Shaykh mirrors Walker's characterization of sources of conflict which women face. Al Shaykh talks of three levels of conflict – political conflict between factions and armies within the Lebanese Civil War, social conflict between the Arab woman and the socially-imposed patriarchal order, of which a primary component is gender conflict between the Arab woman, and the patriarchal male.

For Arab women born into Zahra's generation, the past and present focus on elements of continuity, involving the continued relegation of women to secondary status; institutionalized patriarchy, and the lack of a mechanism for the protection of the women's rights. The present adds the dimension of political conflict, war, and violence.

Similar to Meridian, for Zahra's generation of Arab women, the realization of self-hood is an internal process that involves confusion and conflict. Conflict is borne out of the need to come to terms with, and survive the chaos and disorder of the war. Confusion is the consequence of the woman trying to come to terms with gender roles that impose on her identity and personality, sometimes accepting, sometimes rejecting, sometimes questioning.

The woman's identity is created by the society that imposes its norms and values for how a woman should talk, walk, dress, and conduct herself. The man 'owns' his women (wife or daughter), and he is the decision-maker in their lives. The woman has no choice but to submit, and continue normalizing to this socially-approved, male-dominated image of what she should be. Arab women such as Zahra have no choice but to adapt to this identity, and embrace it in order to be socially 'approved.'

At the outset of the two novels, both Meridian and Zahra are trying to meet the demands of their family, and to meet social and traditional roles that define who they should be, and what they should aspire to. Their obligations and duties are strictly laid out, and both characters are confused, sometimes accepting this imposition on their lives, sometimes questioning.

For both Meridian and Zahra, the acceptance of their socially-imposed roles is a process of self-denial, as they cannot ignore, or control, their drive to continuously question these impositions.

> "As Foucault understands it, the term 'subject' has a double meaning: one is both 'subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to . . . [their] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge'." [4]

Zahra and Meridian are 'subjects' to their societies and their socially imposed and approved identities. Both are also 'subjects' to their self-conscience, in which they realize that to accept the status quo is to deny themselves, and to accept that they are objects of control and suppression.

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[4] Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, ***Postmodern Theory Critical Interrogations***, (New York, NY: Guilford Press , 1991), page 50. Text within single quotation-marks originates from Michel Foucault, ***Subject and Power***, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1982). The quotation appears exactly as presented by Best and Kellner, including the text in square brackets.

What unites both processes – acceptance or rejection of the status quo - is a continuum of negativity, characterized by feelings of helplessness at being able to realize change. Both women internalize inferiority, partly since their societies see them as being weak and subordinate to men, and partly because they see themselves as being too weak and indecisive to become their own masters.

At the outset of the novels, both Meridian and Zahra are trying to normalize with social powers and orders that control them, and become docile subjects to this order. Social 'disciplines' are too intimidating at this early stage for the young and inexperienced characters – in the case of Zahra, discipline would include physical beating if she were to 'rebel' against social norms.

Family and religion become the masked institutions through which social discipline is imposed. These are the real perpetrators of conflict, through which reward and punishment are defined. For Meridian and Zahra, the past was and the present is a continuum of the work of these institutions. Meridian and Zahra are in continuous conflict over their identity, as it is imposed on them by these institutions, and as they would like to define it for themselves. At the outset of each novel, the future is about questioning these social norms, in which they ultimately become the masters of their will and through which they can arrive at an identity as perceived and defined by themselves. The context of political conflict is the empowering tool, or the medium through which these two characters embark on the process of self-determination, and subsequently self-realization.

Mother – Daughter Relationship for Meridian

Meridian's mother was an educated and working woman who sacrificed her career and further education upon her marriage in order to become a wife and mother. She always reminds Meridian of the sacrifices that she had to make in order for Meridian

to be brought into the world. This leads Meridian to feel guilt, in which she sees herself as cause of her mother's inability to pursue her dreams.

Meridian's mother was also a strong believer, and regularly attended church. She tried to instill in her children a love for Christianity, and a blind acceptance of Christianity as being a 'perfect' faith. This tormented Meridian and confused her, since followers of the same religion were deeply divided along racial and ethnic lines and calls for love and unity among all believers were left unheeded.

As Meridian matures and reaches womanhood, Meridian's mother tries to indoctrinate her with an appreciation for the traditional role of the woman as wife and mother. However, for Meridian, the experience is a disaster – she feels little towards her first illegitimate son, except that he was a burden, and an obstacle to her dreams of independence. She rejects the child and leaves him to her mother's care. Her second pregnancy ends in abortion, and Meridian subsequently has her tubes tied, refusing to experience motherhood.

Meridian's relationship with her mother leads her to feel guilt and confusion, in which she rejects her mother's traditional and religious 'teachings'. Accordingly, she equates motherhood with failure and out-dated traditionalism that prevents the female from realizing her dreams. Her first experience of motherhood is short-lived, her second experience is terminated.

Through the portrayal of Meridian, Walker argues that motherhood is the primary hindering element that prevents women from realizing themselves and fulfilling their identities. Furthermore, Walker uses the motherhood theme to question the logic of bringing children into a hostile world – given racist and segregationist policies that Black or African Africans were subjected to in America, Walker argues that it might be more beneficial for the children not to be born in the first place.

To this effect, Walker employs the character ‘Wile Chile’ (Wild Child) to symbolize the outcast status of African Americans. 'Wile Chile’ is a pregnant girl without a family, or home, or refuge, who is rejected and abused by everyone, until she dies in a car accident before she gives birth. Similarly, Ann of the Tower, a student in Saxon College, is sexually-abused and impregnated while she is on campus. She conceals her pregnancy, and confused and afraid she kills her baby and then hangs herself.

Mother – Daughter Relationship for Zahra

Zahra's mother was a traditional Arab woman who married at an early age to a dominating, abusive husband. She is the stereotypical Arab mother and wife, who never experienced adolescence, and is dominated by a husband who expects her to cook, clean, and raise the children. Her husband is a source of fear, and not a source of support and consolation. Eventually, her frustration at her situation leads her to pursue an adulterous relationship, compensating for the adolescence that she never lived, and finding warmth and fulfillment with another man.

Zahra's relationship with her mother was a complex one. Her mother loved her and cared for her, however, she always saw her son, Zahra's brother, as the primary recipient of love and affection. Being the son, Zahra's brother would receive gifts and special treatment from his mother. This caused Zahra to feel secondary, and inferior to her brother.

Zahra's mother is married to an abusive father, who beats her indiscriminately according to his mood. Failing to see the difference between mother and daughter, the beating is usually extended to include Zahra too. As much as she fears her father, Zahra feels pity for her mother and the treatment that she receives.

The relationship with her mother is destroyed when the latter embarks on her adulterous relationship. Needing a pretext to leave the house without arousing her husband's suspicion, Zahra's mother takes her daughter with her while visiting, and copulating, with her lover. This shatters Zahra's perception of her mother as the innocent, loving woman. She feels that her mother is a traitor, betraying her husband and her family; she feels that her mother is a hypocrite, that pretends to be the well-behaved housewife; she feels jealous of the lengths and risks that her mother is willing to take in order to visit her lover, yet she would never take the same risks. Most of all, she fears the reaction of her father if ever he discovered his wife's infidelity, a reaction that would result in more beatings for Zahra and her mother.

Zahra became addicted to fear at early stages of her childhood, feeling lost, afraid, and alienated from her mother. Zahra clearly states:

> "The gap between my mother and I grew wider and wider. The gap became deeper, it began cracking, even though we are like the orange and its core . . . I always wished to pull myself to her, to bring her face close to my eyes, to hide in her dress, I only wanted to be closer to her than the orange and its core. But the more I thought of this, the more I hated her, because I was left shaking with pain, hatred, and deprivation."[5]

This is significant in that Zahra realizes the growing distance between her and her mother. Zahra states her need to be attached to her mother at this stage of her childhood. Later on, when this need is consistently denied, it dissolves, and is replaced by hatred and confusion. Al Shaykh uses the orange and its core to describe

[5] Hanan Al-Shaykh, ***Hikayat Zahra***, (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Al-Adab, 1998), page 12 (quotations have been translated from Arabic).

the mother and daughter, which is particularly relevant to Arab tradition that considers the daughter to be a reflection and extension of her mother. [6]

Zahra also feels escapism, just as her mother wants to escape from marriage - the institution that suffocates her - Zahra wants to escape from the fear she feels as a consequence of her mother's behavior.

Meridian and Zahra see motherhood as the primary hindering element that prevents women from realizing themselves and fulfilling their identities. Both 'reject' their mothers as failures, and refuse to emulate their mothers in their lives. More-so for Zahra, motherhood is associated with outright negativity, in her short-lived marital experience, she refuses to play the role of traditional wife and mother, choosing asexuality. Meridian abandons her first child, aborts the second and subsequently terminates her ability to reproduce by having her tubes tied.

For both writers, the mother is a primary source of conflict for their characters, evoking feelings of guilt, confusion and betrayal in Zahra and Meridian's formative years. The rejection of the mother's identity also deprives the characters of a role-model, or a point of reference for what they want to achieve in their lives.

Conflict with Male Patriarchy

Walker portrays three male characters in Meridian. These are Meridian's father; Eddy – Meridian's first husband; and Truman – Meridian's intellectual guru.

Meridian's father is romantic and intellectual, yet passive and weak. Eddy is a handsome, strong, sexually-active young man, who is mentally limited and blindly accepts tradition. Truman, by contrast, is politically and intellectually gifted, and active in the civil rights movement. However, he is sexually confused, and is in love

[6] Arab proverbs and idioms persistently refer to the existence of the daughter as an extension of her mother e.g. "like mother like daughter."

with a white woman, seeing them as sophisticated and belonging to a 'superior' order than the one to which he belongs.

Each of the three men plays a unique role in Meridian's life. Her father is weak and cannot protect her or provide for her needs. He does, however, give Meridian the powers to question tradition, and to dream. Eddy sees Meridian as the traditional African woman, who will submit to gender-defined roles as a mother, and wife. For him, sex is a primary motive for marriage. The marriage is short-lived: when Meridian refuses to submit to Eddy's sexual advances, he loses interest in her and leaves her. This relieves her of having to be with him, as she is neither emotionally nor mentally attracted to him.

Meridian meets Truman after her experience with Eddy ends. He encourages her to pursue an education, and arouses her intellectual and mental abilities. He introduces her to the civil rights movement, helping her to become more assertive, mature. She sees him as the window to fulfilling her dreams, and grows attached to him.

However, Truman is in love with Lynne, a sophisticated white woman whom he intends to marry. He does not love Meridian, but he does use her for emotional support and sleeps with her, consequently impregnating her. Truman continues to be in love with Lynne – Meridian's sense of hopelessness at being able to change this leads her to abort the child, and to have to tubes tied, as a means of rejecting her femininity.

Within the African-American social order, Meridian is a subject of the patriarchal system, in which her needs, and her desires are secondary to those of men. Neither with Eddy, nor with Truman, did Meridian find the room to express *her* feelings and needs. Eddy sees her as a wife, mother and an object of gratification. Truman, while helping her grow intellectually, rejected her emotionally. He wanted the white,

sophisticated woman, who would allow him to ascend the social ladder by virtue of being associated with a white woman i.e. equal to whites. Meridian reminded him of his inferiority as a black individual.

The patriarchy to which Meridian was exposed created a network of internal conflicts that she could not reconcile: sexual conflicts with Eddy (in which she refuses to see herself as his sexual object); emotional conflicts with Truman (in which he refuses to unite with her emotionally) and gender conflict with herself (in which she does not want to be a mother and wife and fulfill socially-defined roles) lead her to ultimately reject her femininity once and for all.

Hanan portrays numerous male characters in ***Hikayat Zahra***, all of whom create conflict and confusion for Zahra. The primary male character is Zahra's father. She fears him. Her father is the bread-winner, the decision-maker, as encapsulated in the Arab phrase "Lord of the House." In Foucault's terminology, the powerful (the Lord father) regulates the lives of the powerless (the mother and daughter), as a means of self assertion. The powerless (Zahra) is intimidated and silenced.

Control and dominance are exercised through aggression, violence and abuse. He is beyond the questioning of the inferior. As such, given that the inferior cannot communicate to the superior authority, then the former feels only fear. As Hanan Al Shaykh writes,

> "Fear of this man with the green suit and a huge body . . . my mother was screaming, wailing, as he beats me, slaps me, and pulls my mother by her hair to the kitchen. She began shouting – "Let me die! Let me die!" . . . I wish I can hide her in my body, as an orange hides its core. I began crying, I don't know where I belong? . . . To whom should I feel

emotion? But I knew for sure that I was afraid of him, and his aggression towards both of us." [7]

Zahra's relationship with her father is one of fear, and only fear. As for the other members of her immediate family, she feels jealousy towards her brother, and she does not trust her grandfather:

"I was sleeping next to my grandfather, on the floor, the strong darkness controlled everything. I felt a cold hand crawling under my pants. I stood up, frightened, and the hand disappeared. I remember, it was such a difficult night, as it were unreal." [8]

This experience with her grandfather caused her not to trust men, and to internalize, from an early age, the perception of herself as a sexual object for other men.

Malek, her first sexual partner, takes advantage of Zahra's confusion and passiveness to entice her to a sexual relationship with him. He deflowers her, and abuses her sexually. Her experience with him necessitates her to undertake several abortions, while he pays little attention to the confusion and pain that he was causing her.

Having moved to Africa, Zahra then lives with her uncle, who makes several sexual advances towards her. Not being able to tolerate living with him; she marries Majed, a Lebanese whom she does not love. She chooses him as a form of escape, but refuses to meet his expectations as a wife and potential mother. She chooses to be asexual in her relationship with him, lacking the desire to be with him and refusing to become a reflection of her mother. She leaves Majed, and returns to Beirut.

Her return to Beirut is the start of a self-realization process for Zahra, in which she begins to question her past. She meets Sami, a sniper in the Lebanese civil war, with

[7] Hanan Al-Shaykh, ***Hikayat Zahra*** (Beirut, Lebanon, Dar Al-Adab, 1998), pages 17 - 19 (quotations have been translated from the Arabic).

[8] Ibid. page 25 (quotations have been translated from the Arabic).

whom she falls in love. The relationship with Sami is her first, and only, experience of closeness, warmth and fulfillment.

In the context of the patriarchal system in which she is born and raised, Zahra is exposed to fear, marginalization, and abuse from within her immediate family, and from her first love 'relationship,' with Malek. In all her relationships with men, she was perceived as inferior and weak. From an early age she learns not to trust men,

and finds shame and pain in her femininity, seeing herself as solely an object of sexual desire by men. She grows to hate her body, and finds satisfaction in destroying and abusing it.

Having come of age and experience, Zahra grows into asexuality, refusing to abide by patriarchal norms of wife and mother. The patriarchy to which she is exposed created a network of internal conflicts, and a strong sense of self-hatred, that she could only satisfy by abusing, or denying herself.

Within their works, both Walker and Al Shaykh present different male personalities, some of whom are mentally abusive; others are sexually abusive; others are emotionally abusive. In neither of the two novels is a male character presented that can fulfill the woman's needs – mental, emotional and sexual.

For both Meridian and Zahra, their relationships with men focused on a continuum of these men's perception of them as inferior, objectified women. Their reactions are similar in that – both reject normalization with socially-approved roles of wife and mother; both internalize anger and confusion; both ultimately reject their femininity as a means to rebel against social norms – Meridian aborts her child and chooses to end her reproductive capabilities; Zahra chooses asexuality.

In subsequent chapters, the thesis looks at how political conflict creates the pretext for the woman's rebellion against socially-imposed orders and norms, and the process of de-normalization and de-territorialization, through which women realize new identities based on their free-will.

On the road to self-fulfillment, both characters pass through a process of confrontation with their gender identities, of which a primary component is the practice of asexuality, either temporary or permanent.

Chapter Five

Confronting Gender Conflict and

Arriving at Asexuality

This chapter looks at gender conflict with the male counterpart; and the growth of the two women's internal will to challenge and confront socially-defined roles and norms for female behavior. It examines asexuality as the process for re-defining their gender roles based on their free-will. It characterizes the process through which the two main characters, Meridian and Zahra, confront the multiple sources of conflict that they face and in particular the gender-conflict. Within this process, the two characters pursue temporary asexuality, in order to arrive at a new understanding of their self.

The two main characters, Meridian and Zahra, find themselves subjected to multiple sources of conflict, creating a state of confusion, and internalizing feelings of inferiority and suppression. However, the state of confusion is not permanent – the ultimate goal continues to be the realization of a new self and identity based on the woman's free choice and will.

As such, the woman shifts from an initial state of confusion and helplessness, into a state of direct challenge. This challenge is the act of confronting, and rejecting, socially-imposed roles and norms dictating women's behavior.

For both Walker and Al Shaykh, within the multiple conflicts that the woman faces, gender conflict is the most prominent and the most restrictive in terms of the limits

that it imposes on the woman's behavior. Therefore, the first level of resistance is confrontation with the male counterpart - the primary source of suppression and frustration.

Through rejecting her old socially-imposed identity, the women is not rejecting herself *per se*, but rejecting herself as defined by the male counterpart. In the initial stage of confusion and conflict, the woman's body is 'colonized' by obedience and conformity to the power and directives of the male. As such, for the woman, the first process within act of confrontation is a rejection of their 'old' selves – these same selves that are objects and subjects of male definitions. As Foucault maintains, ". . .the [initial] target . . . is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are." [1]

Therefore, despite the geographic distance and cultural differences between Walker and Al Shaykh, both follow a Foucauldian approach in which both pinpoint that arriving at a new identity, based on free-will pre-requires the rejection of the old identity. An integral component of this approach is the need to experience, and survive, a literal schizophrenic process that tests the endurance of Zahra and Meridian to the limit. Schizophrenia is both mental and physical. Mentally, it focuses on the interplay of the emergence of a new identity and the destruction of the old – two simultaneous processes in which the characters are mentally torn between old and new. Physically, schizophrenia results in physical hardship, illness and pain for both characters.

Moreover, both writers identify the *practice of asexuality* as the means, or tool, through which women *begin* the process of confrontation with the male counterpart. The practice of asexuality helps the women in redefining her desires and needs, and

[1] Michel Foucault, quoted in Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, **Postmodern Theory Critical Interrogations,** (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 1991), page 54.

isolates her from these same powers that subordinate her, especially by the male who perceives her primarily as a sexual tool. The two characters direct their resistance upon their own bodies primarily – they suppress their sexual desires, to the extent that they no longer are capable of feeling pleasure, both refuse to become obedient, docile wives and mothers. These choices mean that they reject what the male perceives to be their *rasion d'etre*. Therefore, for both Meridian and Zahra, the practice of asexuality is the starting point for breaking away from conformity, and refusing to normalize.

For Meridian and Zahra, the ultimate goal is to realize self-transformation, from an old-self to a new-self. The first component within the process of transformation is confrontation, within which asexuality is the primary take-off point.

Asexuality involves three central themes. The first is that the practice of asexuality is a *temporary* phenomenon – it is a process. For Meridian and Zahra, in the process of asexuality, their bodies comprise organs that are unorganized:

> "The body-without-organs is not an organless body, but a body without 'organization', a body that breaks free from its socially articulated, disciplined, semi-oticized, and subjectified state (as an 'organism'), to become disarticulated, dismantled, and deterritorialized, and hence able to be reconstituted in new ways." [2]

The woman subdues her desires (and organs) in order to reorganize herself according to her free-will; consequently, her organs will re-emerge within the frameworks of the new self and identity that she has chosen.

Furthermore, asexuality is a new state-of-being for the women. As such, within this new framework, the woman is free to 'experiment' and explore new values, norms and

[2] Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, ***Postmodern Theory Critical Interrogations***, (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991), pages 90 – 91. This analysis is presented by the authors as an interpretation of the writings of Deleuze and Guattari.

roles. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, ". . . individuals [women] . . . become desiring nomads in a constant process of becoming and transformation." [3]

As such, asexuality allows the woman to undertake a nomadic process of self-discovery, leading to the enrichment of the process of self-realization based on free-will.

Finally, the actual practice of asexuality is schizophrenic in nature; comprising the downgrading of the 'old' self and norms; compounded with the nomadic quest of discovering 'new' norms. Within asexuality, two simultaneous dynamics are at play - the dying of the 'old' self' and the birth and re-emergence of the 'new' self.

> "The schizophrenic process . . . is a decentering process that . . . repressed individuals need to undergo to become revolutionary, but there are limits to the process beyond which one self-destructs, becoming a 'schizophrenic' . . . There must be a 'breakthrough' without a total 'breakdown'." [4]

The schizophrenic process is both psychological and physical. The associated psychic transition from 'old' to 'new' involves physical pain and hardship, as both characters use their bodies as the instruments through which to realize the transition. Furthermore, the failure to resolve the differences and contradictions between the two dynamics could result in permanent schizophrenia.

There is no guarantee that in this process, the two women will succeed. For Meridian and Zahra, the danger of being 'pulled apart' permanently by the process of asexuality (the dying of the 'old' and discovery of the 'new' self) is real. The two characters, Meridian and Zahra, do face 'breakdown' within the process, but ultimately they

[3] Ibid. page 77.
[4] Ibid. page 92. This analysis is presented by the authors as an interpretation of the writings of Michel Foucault, in the preface to Deleuze and Guattari's ***Anti-Oedipus*** (University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

'breakthrough.' For the 'breakthrough' to materialize, the process of discovering a new self has to succeed.

Male – Female Relationships: Confusion and Asexuality

Inter-sectional forces dominate the woman's character and lifestyle, in which the woman is subjected to multiple sources of conflict with men, and mother (the latter serving socially-imposed norms of suppression). Such conflict causes the woman to feel inferior and subordinate.

During the woman's developmental stages and growth, she absorbs and internalizes feelings of inferiority. As she matures, she begins to question the socially-imposed, and socially-accepted roles that she is expected to fulfill in her life – namely, being wife and mother.

Not only did Walker and Shaykh agree on the multiple sources of conflict that women face; they also agreed on the forms and content of the process of confrontation, struggle and resistance that the woman experiences. The process of confrontation calls for the adoption of acute measures – namely, the woman choosing to have her tubes tied (Meridian); to reject motherhood; and an inability to experience sexual pleasure (Zahra).

Essentially, both novels encapsulate the same idea - the choice of asexuality as a primary form of resistance and confrontation. Asexuality, as epitomized by refusing to have sex, and refusing to bear children, is an essential component of confrontation. In essence, the first stage in the process of confrontation is the choice of asexuality, as the means to refuse and reject socially-imposed behavioral norms and roles. The concept of a Foucauldian "body without organs" is at the heart of both novels.

In their quest to assert their self-defined identities, the two characters pass through a progression marked by four distinctive stages. First, while coming to maturity the women are *exposed to multiple layers of conflict*, externally within society; and internally, within the family. These conflicts lead to the emergence of *feelings of confusion and helplessness* as to being able to realize change. In the third stage, the women commence the actual process of change – namely, a *rejection of themselves as they are; and confrontation* with the multiple sources of conflict that restrict them - most importantly gender conflict. An essential component of confronting the other gender is the practice of asexuality. Finally, the process of confrontation concludes, and the women *arrive at a new identity*.

For both characters, the choice of asexuality is a key component in their process of confrontation with the other gender. The analysis provided below explains why these two characters arrived at the *practice* of asexuality as a form of rebelling and confronting against the gender norms attached to them.

Both Meridian and Zahra are involved in social relationships with men from an early age. The relationships coincide with the first and second stage of their development; namely, with exposure to conflict and feelings of confusion in the domain of gender relations. At the start of their conjugal life both characters are in the process of discovering the 'other' (the male) and while their initial inhibitions discourage them from trusting this 'other', they still engage in these relationships. While confusion and feelings of helplessness are the characteristics of these relationships; confrontation and the practice of asexuality are the consequence.

For Meridian and Zahra, relationships with men are characterized by overwhelming confusion; and the absence of a 'framework' in which these relationship operates – as

those of friendship, of love, of emotional support, or else. Both characters experience relationships with men that disappoint them and leave them with feelings of guilt, shame and lack of satisfaction. It further reinforces their drive to rebel and confront the primary source of repression – the male.

In the opening scene of the novel *Meridian*, an adulterous black woman, Marilene O'Shay, stands naked and painted in white, for onlookers to admire and deposit some change. Meridian observes O'Shay 'at work' and is shocked – first at the portrayal of the female's body as a commodity (the prostitute image); and at the amusement of the other gender – the male – to this spectacle. This type of male behavior reinforces Meridian's suspicion that for men the female body is essentially a commodity to fulfill their desires.

Meridian initially marries Eddie, her traditional husband, to whom she looks to for warmth and protection from other men whom she fears. "Being with him did a number of things for her . . . it [saved] her from the strain of responding to other boys, or even the whole category of manhood."[5] (page 61)

The marriage proves to be a short-lived experience. Meridian's inability to sexually satisfy Eddie not only ends the marriage, but also reinforces the transition that Meridian feels inside – from needing to bond with men only for protection, to seeking full emotional reward and fulfillment.

Meridian's next relationship with Truman is even more complicated. In comparison with simple Eddie, who she considers "amounts to nothing," Truman stands as the ideal man for Meridian; he is an artist, a political, liberal activist and an intellectual, who speaks French. He gives Meridian the drive she needs – he motivates her to become politically and economically active and independent; encourages her to

[5] Alice Walker, ***Meridian***, (New York: Pocket Books, 1976). All quotations from this novel will be within the body of the thesis.

pursue education; and provides her with emotional and intellectual support and confides his problems and pains to her. Most significantly, Truman convinces Meridian to surrender custody of her child (the product of her marriage with Eddie) to her mother; so that she may pursue her independent life, free from the shackles and responsibilities of motherhood.

Meridian loves Truman – finding in him the qualities that she needs to give her strength, stability and direction. Yet, this love is unreturned. Truman himself is in love with Lynne, a white woman whom he eventually succeeds in marrying. Meridian finds herself torn between her love for Truman on the one hand; and her realization that in his eyes, she cannot provide him with those qualities that the 'superior' white woman can provide. The multiple sources of conflict resurface in her life – with Truman (gender) and with Lynne (race).

Furthermore, one of the primary motives for Truman's attraction to Lynne is the fact that she is a virgin. Truman has to play the role of the modern American liberal, while he is paralyzed and incapable of freeing himself of unconscious conservative forces that were deeply rooted in his traditional masculine upbringing:

> " He . . . had been raised to expect and demand a virgin; and never once had he questioned this. He had been as predatory as the other young men he ran with, as eager to seduce and deflower as they, where had he expected his virgin to come from?" (page 142)

Meridian reaches the conclusion that all men, whether educated, liberated, or traditional, embody a uniform type of manhood. An additional characteristic of this manhood is the fact that all men, whether traditional and suppressive or educated and 'liberated', continue to exercise direction over her life. The traditional man – Eddie –

by virtue of being her husband, attempted to direct her life. The educated man – Truman – directs her politically and intellectually. Whether negative (in the first case) or positive (in the latter) the exercise of direction and power by the man over her causes Meridian to feel further confused, contradicting her quest to achieve an independent identity.

Internal conflict (denial of child and mother role, in addition to abandoning family) fuel Meridian's confusion, in the different life stages that she passes (as a wife to Eddy; as a mother; as a friend to Truman; as a political activist). The process initially requires self-denial and sexual-denial, as part of the process of confrontation. At the initial stages of confrontation (during her marriage to Eddie), Meridian lacks an overarching goal. She knows what she *does not* want to be (the self-sacrificing Black wife and mother) but has, as yet, no preconception of what *she wants* to be. Towards the conclusion of the process of confrontation (with the end of her relationship with Truman), Meridian's vision for herself becomes clearer and better defined – the independent, self-assertive, black woman, decider of her fate. In order to reach that self-defined identity; asexuality becomes the means with which to obtain it. By choosing a "body without organs," she frees her body from disciplined and organized social restrictions and roles. She is free to be whom she wants to be.

Meridian chooses asexuality as the means for overcoming and for confronting the conflicts that face her and for freeing herself from their restrictions. Being afraid of sex and ashamed of her body, Meridian in consequence shuts up against any kind of sexual pleasure, practicing restraint, self-denial and inhibition:

> "As much as she wanted to, she, her body that is, never had any intention of giving in. She was suspicious of pleasure. She might

> approach it, might gaze on it longing but retreat is inevitable." (page 69)

By rejecting the 'other' gender, she 'rejects' the associated conflict with that gender. Her asexual progression culminates in her decision to have her tubes tied and thus rejecting the possibility of motherhood once and for all.

After this transition, Meridian's physical look and lifestyle both change. Her clothing is that of a revolutionary clad in khakis and caps; she lives alone. She continues her political activism. The transformation is complete – the price she chooses to pay is the surrender of her sexuality.

Being sexually-targeted and abused within her family from an early age, Zahra is cold, passive and unexcited by sexual intercourse. Convinced that she is weak and unattractive, she internalizes her status as victim without ever complaining, assured that no one would believe her even if she did reveal her experiences of sexual abuse.

> "He [Malek] began our relation talking about friendship and its importance between men and women . . . and that he rejected all the traditions that deny friendship between male and female. In our second meeting, he told me that he has found me a job . . . in our third meeting he began quoting Jubran Khalil Jubran about non-sexual love, that transcends possession. And of course he didn't forget cursing marriage and children. In our fourth meeting, he kissed me, I barely felt or said anything, I was only afraid that someone would see me with him" [6] (page 35)

[6] Hanan Al-Shaykh, ***Hikayat Zahra***, (Beirut: Dar Al-Adab, 1998), page 12 (quotations have been translated from Arabic)

Her first relationship with a man outside her family is with Malek (a married man), to whom she loses her virginity. Her relationship with Malek starts under the pretext of friendship. Malek fails to understand Western images of male-female friendships, he is accustomed to associating women with sex only. Eventually, with Zahra's internalized inferiority and inability to fend for herself, he gets his way with her:

> "When I saw my virgin blood seeping down my legs, I said: 'Just say you married me in front of God. This is enough for me.' He objected and explained his rejection in which he considers marriage as a commitment which controls my freedom. Then, he began his lectures about love and freedom . . ." (page 35)

In reality, it is not her freedom but his freedom that he cherishes and wants to keep. Had he said so, he as a Shiite would have been committed to her as a husband.

Zahra is a good example of the female Arab who accepts her inferiority and practices self suppression. The consequence is her masochistic behavior, as opposed to the confrontation of her suppressors. Zahra continues to strive to be the 'role model' Arab repressed girl – quiet, shy, submissive and passive – yet in order to portray this image (that is expected of her) she has no choice but to practice suppression. Zahra effectively kills her 'voice,' confining the negativity within her - "I don't know why I don't refuse, or stop myself."(page 34)

Her overall reaction is to surrender: she continues to practice sexual intercourse even though the outcome for her is only pain. She continues her sexual 'adventures' with Malek, from whom she aborts twice, and then undertakes an operation to regain her virginity. She loses her regained virginity with the same man - this behavior is highly reflective of her internal complexities.

> "Every time I go to the doctor for an abortion, I feel disgusted. I went this time to regain my virginity . . . but this time [Malek] penetrated me in minutes, without any appetite or desire as if he knew its fakeness." (page 36)

This complexity and conflict between two desires pulls her in two directions - her curiosity to experience (by which she proves to herself that her existence is worthy enough to attract a male) and her anger at her mother's past adulterous habits. This internal conflict feeds her masochism, inflicting pain on her body and femininity which unconsciously encompass her pain and suffering.

Post-Malek, Zahra moves to Africa, in order to escape from Beirut and to forget her affair with Malek. Her uncle is an important politician, exiled from Lebanon for dissident political activity. In her teens, Zahra sends letters to her uncle, symbolic of her need to find an outlet – a voice to listen to her. Similar to Meridian's need to find non-sexual intimacy and warmth in her relationship with Truman; Zahra's letters were a chance to release the emotions that she felt inside. Her uncle also found a chance to relate to his homeland through his niece. The letters became a bridge between two pen friends that were in same position –both needing emotional support and a vent for their emotions. Emotionally reciprocal, each identified with the other – he is homesick and Zahra takes him to Lebanon emotionally – she is in pain and he provides her with peace and security.

The reciprocity of emotional support is confined to the letters – practice is different. As Zahra arrives in Africa expecting peace and security, it takes her uncle only three days to commence harassing her sexually, himself to satisfy his need for the traditional Arab 'girl' and from the homeland that she symbolizes.

> “He began entering my room every morning. He insists on waking me up. I act as if I am sleeping. . when I hear him drawing the curtains in the morning, I jump from my bed and hide, or stay in the bathroom. In the beginning, I didn’t understand his actions towards me. But now, I understand that he wants to attract my attention to him as a woman.” (pages 23 – 24)

Zahra realizes that she is haunted once more – the sexual abuse has followed her to Africa. This abuse deepens her pain and anger, and is translated to advanced psychological disturbances –hallucinations; hiding from her uncle in the bathroom for hours on end; high fever and dementia. Again Zahra takes out the anger on herself – being unable to confront her uncle, or rebel against his behavior. She cannot transform the monologue inside her to a verbal dialogue with her uncle – due to her instability and lack of self-confidence. In the darkness of the cinema room, her uncle harasses her, but her reaction is muted: "I am annoyed and I hate you. But I hate myself more than anything else, because I am silent.” (page 37)

In order to escape her uncle's advances, Zahra seeks refuge with Majed, a poor blue-collar worker who lives in Africa and comes from a humble, rural background in Lebanon. He proposes, and Zahra, with no alternatives, accepts. Majed's social position is inferior to that of Zahra and her family, according to the Arab caste system. His marriage to a city girl is his gain, her loss. He is the typical traditional young Arab man, blindly accepting Arab social traditions and laws. From Zahra’s point of view, Majed is the perfect escape, because his low class background would help him accept her self-defined ‘defectiveness’ at a late stage (since she is not a virgin), and because of her understanding of his traditional conservative mentality.

Hanan presents three explanations for why the Arab man is firmly attached to the institution of marriage in its traditional form: first, marriage is a solution for sexual deprivation, and the only socially-approved form of intercourse in the Arab world, where prostitution and sexual intercourse out of marriage is strictly forbidden. Also, often marriage in rab society provides upward mobility for either the man or woman, in this case for Majed who sees his marriage to Zahra as an upward social move, because of her uncle's good social status. Majed explains:

> "Although Zahra is not pretty, yet, my happiness is beyond description. Now that I am married, I have a body that I can have sex with whenever I like. From this moment, I won't feel deprivation any longer." (page 98)

Second, Majed's physiological needs are passed to his wife. Thirdly, marriage is an institution that is based on financial transactions – it is the tradition in Arab society that the husband pays the dowry in return for a slave that he employs to satisfy his sexual drive, to bear and raise offspring, and to take care of his home, food, clothing, and other basic needs. However, in Africa, Arab communities do not strictly abide by this custom.

> "I married Zahra because I knew that she is single and a relative of Hashem [her uncle]. I only thought, 'This is the bride you need, and she is here in Africa for you.' For this bride, I won't have to pay that much money. Besides I don't have to pay her travel ticket or dowry in Africa." (page 89)

In Arab traditions, on the first night of marriage the parents of the bride and bridegroom, as well notables from the community, wait until the bride is deflowered

and her virgin blood drips onto a handkerchief that is portrayed proudly by the mother of the bride to surrounding witnesses as evidence of her daughter's virginity. In Arab society, virginity is a virtue that must be retained until the first night of marriage, otherwise the woman will be considered as a social outcast and by Islamic law, penalized with death, as Mai Yamani, an Arab sociologist, demonstrates:

> "[In] societies [where special attention is] given to . . . virginity as the regulatory practice of gender . . . this preoccupation is not limited to the physical virginity of women and the physical hymen, but also with . . . the social hymen . . . which is the symbol of virginity, publicized for the benefit of the social audience. The social hymen delimits borders, and prescribes a whole set of rules and regulations for women. Crimes of honor can occur when any of these borders are crossed." [7]

That is what Majed demands, and expects. On their first marital night together, Zahra with past sexual experience is passive, while Majed is anxious and excited:

> "Now she is sleeping on my bed. She appears annoyed. It's OK, all girls will be annoyed on the first night. They will be penetrated on that night. She is disgusted, it's OK, it's the night of penetration. Now, I am having sex with her. A man and his wife. I don't feel any opposition as I penetrate her. I'm penetrating nothing, I don't see anything, the blanket is still white. Not even one drop of blood . . . I began screaming, cursing, 'You are a daughter of a bitch! Have you slept with anyone before marriage? . . . just don't think that I will have to accept reality, I will have to accept this reality without any

[7] Mai Yamani, "Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives", posted at www.soas.co.uk/centers/islamiclaw/feminism_intro.html, on September 18, 2004.

> questions or answers. Do not think that because you are Hashem's niece, I will forgive you.' . . . Her eyes like glass, her lips silent, she sat and sat without any reaction or word." (page 100)

Zahra remains passive during his whole outburst. Not wanting her family to learn of her past sexual experiences, she lies, claiming that she was previously raped. Majed was not convinced, but needing a woman in his life, he soon accepted the fact that she was not a virgin. To an extent, Hanan is trying here to show that virginity becomes a trivial issue to Arabs themselves in a non-Arab country: societal values become less stringent, and the individual can choose not to abide by them in order not to stir a scandal.

In the marriage, Zahra fails to live up to Majed's expectations. Sexually, he is not satisfied since she is cold and frigid. She is mentally sick, with repetitive nervous breakdowns leading to recurring hospitalization, which distract Majed from his work. The marital roles swap – Majed becomes the cook and cleaner. Zahra's resistance, through her body, forced Majed to exchange roles with her. His friends avoid him, knowing that he is preoccupied with her sickness. She lets herself become dirty, and she persistently embarrasses him in front of his friends. "I think he was ashamed of my appearance. I don't think it's my mistake. It's God who didn't give me the talent and gift of beauty." (page 114)

The marriage becomes a nightmare for him. His intentions to reproduce are dashed – he does not want to continue being with her. She attempts to try to appear as the typical wife, and she purchases suitable clothing to enforce this image. Yet, this makes her appear even stranger to Majed's friends, causing him further embarrassment: "The first time that she changes her character . . . she is insane and rejected." (page 114)

The marriage ends soon after, and Zahra returns to war-torn Beirut, escaping the insanity of her experiences in Africa.

For both Meridian and Zahra, asexuality takes many different forms and shapes. It is not merely a denial of pleasure; it is an embodiment of rebellion; the tool employed to arrive at a new identity.

Both arrive at asexuality as a result of their experiences in relationships with men. For Meridian, both Eddie and Truman strengthen her feelings of confusion, rejection, and conflict; as both fail to fulfill her and meet her needs. She uses asexuality to resist both the traditional and modern forms of masculinity, having been disappointed and hurt by both.

Similarly, Zahra arrives at asexuality as a result of her relationships with Malek and Majed. With Malek, she is seeking friendship, while he is only looking for sex. This causes her to feel hurt and confused, and she ceases to associate pleasure with sex. With Majed, Zahra practices asexuality in order to rebel against the marital institution that she finds herself trapped in – an institution that she hated and rejected, instilling in her a determination not to repeat the experiences of her mother. This reality means that she cannot satisfy her husband – she is not interested in sex, motherhood or marriage. Given her inability to express her rejection of this institution verbally; she expresses this rejection through her body.

For both, asexuality was the primary tool employed to rebel against the system. Their relationships with men were in reality experiments, and both were disappointed and hurt by these experiences. Their asexuality took an almost identical form; both became physically and mentally ill; both felt outright passivity to, and a lack of enjoyment in, sexual intercourse; both refused outright to reproduce or fulfill

traditional roles of wife and mother – Meridian surrendered custody of her child to her mother and then had her tubes tied; Zahra had two abortions from Malek and refused outright to have children with her husband, Majed. Finally, both arrived at asexuality as a primary form of rebellion; a rebellion that was an essential component of their process of transformation.

A schizophrenic process emerged in both characters' psyche, as they were engaged in the nomadic process of moving away from a past identity that they reject; and towards the discovery of a new identity based on their free-will. Without a clear vision or understanding of the new identities that they wanted to arrive at, the nomadic process, which commenced with rebellion against the system (gender and patriarchy) through the practice of asexuality; was compounded with insecurity.

The schizophrenic process is essentially a literal construct, in that it is physically experienced by the two women through their bodies. The schizophrenic process and feelings of insecurity took their toll on both women - the transformation would not happen without sacrifices. For Meridian, it translated to emotional distress, physical pain, hair and weight loss, distortion of vision, and temporary paralysis. For Zahra, it transmuted to a complete physical and mental breakdown.

For both Meridian and Zahra, the process of annihilating their past identities was essentially a form of revolt. For both, the medium for rebellion was their bodies - through refusing their sexual identity and gender roles. For both characters, their bodies become the primary instrument through which they expressed their resistance.

Both characters experience self-destruction, pain, and physical punishment until they were reborn, strong enough to re-face the world.

Chapter Six

Reconciliation, Transformation, and Arrival at a New Identity

This chapter examines how the arrival at a new identity provides women with the space and strength to realize a new role for themselves within the wider political and social context.

Having arrived at the choice of asexuality, the process of rejection of the old identity is complete. Albeit, the process of rejection involved painful compromises for both characters, including self-destruction, pain, and physical punishment. However, the same process also endowed both women with the strengths necessary to realize the process of transformation – namely perseverance, and self control (mastery).

The women are liberated from the sources of familial, societal, and institutional conflict as characterized by rigid definitions of what a woman could, and could not, do in her life. Negative influence, as typified by the mother, male, family and religion cease to be relevant – the women have evolved to the stage where they no longer attach merit, or substance, to such directive – in other words, knowledge is power. As Foucault argues, "knowledge can transform us."[8]

The realization and rationalization of suppressing sources contributes largely to being cured from their negative influences. In looking for a new future, reconciliation with one's suppressive past, and those individuals featured in that past, pre-requires the

[8] Michel Foucault, ***Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*** (New York, NY: Routledge 1988). Quoted in Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, ***Postmodern Theory Critical Interrogations***, (New York, NY: Guilford Press , 1991), page 55.

relegation of the past, its laws, norms and orders to secondary status – the substance of rationalization that allows for the transformation to take place. As Foucault writes,

> " . . . technologies of the self . . . permit individuals to effect by their own means . . . a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness." [9]

An essential component of the transformation process is self-control – a new form of positive control based on free will. Self-control is in itself a form of independence. Transformation is about recreation; about mastering one's self; about detaching oneself from negative external control; and substituting positive self-control. Consequently, the woman is 'born new.'

It is evident that at the end of both novels the two characters are transformed from being passive defeated women into women who are socially and politically active.

The political conflict is the platform that allows the woman to realize her new identity and stimulates the woman to activity. One way for women to change themselves in through merging oneself in social activities such as painting, writing, or involvement in politics and personal activities and welfare that would help them change the environment around them: "Women change themselves through writing and change the space around them." [10]

At the beginning of the novels, both authors present female individuals who are neutral, with little drive to confront others, who just want to realize change for themselves. For them, characters such as Meridian and Zahra, are not portrayed to emphasize their passiveness, but to celebrate their transformation. This is the essential

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[9] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self" in Luther M Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick Hutton , eds, ***Technologies of the Self*** (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), quoted in Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, ***Postmodern Theory Critical Interrogations***, (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 1991), page 61.

[10] Miriam Cooke, "Arab Women Arab Wars." ***Cultural Critique***, Winter 1994-5 (1995), page 25.

message of feminist literature: The act of transforming is in itself the result of numerous gradual progressions.

Women realize self-fulfillment through liberation from the expectations and rules of fathers and mothers – and the rejection of associated restrictions. Both women pass through detachment, self denial, and masochism in order to be born again 'new'. These progressions are clearly painful to woman, but the long term gains include reconciliation between the female and her society; and transformation to a new identity based on free-will. The woman is elevated, arriving at new freedoms, and at a new identity.

During and After the Transformation Process

To free herself from disciplined and organized social restrictions and roles, Meridian's chooses asexuality, or a "body without organs." This pivotal choice allows Meridian to realize a vision for herself that is defined outside the parameters of father, men, family and religion – she chooses to be the independent, self-assertive, black woman, the decider of her fate. Her vision for herself becomes clearer and better defined.

Unlike Meridian, Zahra realizes the transformation after experiencing a complete emotional and physical breakdown. The breakdown destroys the 'old' Zahra; and a new, free Zahra emerges. For her, the intensity of breakdown far outweighs the illnesses and suffering of Meridian. For both characters, the result of breakdown is the transformation; both arrive at new, 'free' definitions of themselves.

In the midst of her emotional breakdown, and in hiding for long hours in the bathroom from her hated husband, Zahra finds the ability to voice her opinion, needs and demand change in her life. She demands divorce and chooses to return to war-torn

Lebanon, to live with her family. Reconciliation is swift – she terms this choice "going back to myself."

> "I want to escape from the grave in which I buried my secrets. I want to go back to myself. I want to regain my body." (page 121)

A divorced woman is viewed in the Arab world as a 'loser,' who may find difficulty in re-marrying. Furthermore, divorce in Islamic society is reserved as part of male dominance over women, it is his choice and not hers; he is the one who has the power to divorce and she has to resign and accept his decision. But for her to ask for divorce is challenging his authority, and undermining his dominance.

Similarly for Meridian, the culmination of pain results in her rebirth. Thomas, who was entrusted with Meridian's care during her period of acute illness, commented:

> "Meridian would return to the world cleansed of sickness . . . The new part has grown out of the old though, and that was reassuring. This part of her, new, sure and ready, even eager for the world, he knew he must meet again and recognize for its value at some future time." (page 219)

Meridian's new found strength is evidenced by her fearless confrontation with Truman after her rebirth:

> "Now, since I already had a son whose existence you frightened me into denying, and since you also wanted to make love to me, and since I had no worldly experience to speak of, marriage between us never reached the point of discussion. In Lynne you captured your ideal: a virgin, who was eager for sex and well-to-do enough to have worldly experiences." (page 141)

Similarly for Zahra, upon her return to Lebanon, she does not hesitate to express her opinion to her mother:

> "When my mother screamed . . . 'Go and change your dress. Go and see the outside world'. I answered sarcastically, 'Why?' I don't think a human being means anything to me now, I am better than the whole outside world. What would I see outside except hypocrisy and lies?" (page 147)

Zahra no longer attaches fear and suspicion to the world around her; simply accepting that the world is fundamentally 'bad'. She does not hesitate to openly criticize the society in which she lives. Her process of reconciliation is swift: - her father no longer horrifies or scares her; her mother is no longer a cause of shame. Socially, her brother's friends were able to form friendships with her - she was no longer the object of their ridicule.

> "I began recognizing the changes in my character. Even my brother's friends began talking to me as a friend, not as a crazy woman." (page 169)

Zahra elevated to a new level of self-confidence; and a new level of political thinking.

> "Only when the militias were burning with fire, only then did I realize that I am resting with myself. Only then am I no longer lost. I don't ask what will happen to me, because I am confident that I am in the house, where all the people are hiding, all people from all classes and ideologies, even the beautiful women who appear on the magazine covers are all in my same situation – 'in the house.' Even those who are hiding in their homes hear the same noises of shooting and bombing that I am hearing, thinking the same thoughts as mine . . . with the noise of missiles and the lightening of bombs, only then do I feel comfortable

> with myself, war is the source of my relief. This atmosphere makes me feel secure, this was my sick logic." (page 145)

The war preoccupied Zahra: she devoured the newspapers, and volunteered as a nurse. War It created an intellectual interest for her, as she began to read magazines and newspapers, focusing on gaining an understanding of the perspectives of both camps, Muslim and Christian. War transformed her to an active and aware member of society.

> "War made them die and made me live. It woke me up . . . The frustration that I lived before the war was trivial; the pain that I thought was pain turned to be nothing. It was all an illusion. Perhaps because my pain was personal . . . The real pain is the pain of you with the others . . ." (page 155 – 157)

Ironically, the atmosphere of war was conducive to Zahra's healing - people of all classes were focused on survival - social considerations and associated patriarchal traditions; became secondary. In a war-torn society such as Lebanon introducing new values and norms, such as female employment, became a necessity for survival. Zahra benefited from this.

Similarly, politics and social activism are the forums in which Meridian invests her new-found strength. Initially haunted by negative emotions of shame towards her community; she could not conceive or define the enemy – she primarily felt anger and hatred to her inferior, ugly self; and the black community of whom she was a member. She expressed her readiness to die for the revolution, but not to kill for it.

> "'You are a coward,' one of the girls said . . . 'A masochist,' sniffed another .. 'you hate yourself instead of hating them,' someone said.

> ‘Why don’t you say something?’ said another jabbing her . ." (page 27-28)

After the transformation, the feelings of guilt and shame are not longer evident, and Meridian returns to the South[11] as a political and social activist. Upon attending a funeral for a young black militant, Meridian position on violence changes:

> "Meridian makes the promise for the first time to kill, before she allows anyone to kill an old man’s son again . . . she understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it, without the fight to the death, preferably *not* her own . . ." (page 200)

An integral component of Meridian's transformation is that she breaks free from the 'white' Church, and conceives a black church, symbolized by a black Christ instead of the white Christ, carrying the guitar in one hand, and a sword in the other. The Church no longer symbolizes the White other, but her Black self. Furthermore, the themes of crucifixion and rebirth are at the center of the Christian faith; and complements Meridian's life experiences, herself having realized the pain and strength to be reborn.

Unlike Meridian, after the transformation Zahra does not 'take sides.' Fundamentally, Zahra refused to classify Lebanese as "us" and "them" – she saw Muslims and Christians as the same people of Lebanon.

> “I must read the journals – our [Muslim] and theirs [Christian]. But no, I am not with you, nor with them. I am not with anybody. I didn’t carry a gun on my shoulder, nor in my brain. I am neutral. That is why I can see the fire on both sides, and the cries of both sides.” (page 198)

[11] This agrees with an incident from the author’s life. Walker herself returns to the South with her husband after her active years in the civil rights movement.

Structurally, both writers describe the backgrounds (cause); breakdown (course); and transformation (consequence) of their two characters – Meridian and Zahra. However, Hanan Al Shaykh moves further ahead with its characterization of the 'after the transformation' phase.

Zahra meets Sami, a sniper, and falls in love with him. He arouses her curiosity. She desires him. Most importantly, she understands that he needs her – the fact that dras her the most to him. His personality is the complete opposite of Zahra's new persona - he kills while she nurses. The relationship develops, and they usually meet at the roof[12] of his building – his 'place of work.' Being stressed, he needs the sexual relief that she provides him. The sexual relationship is symbolic of the need to let go, to find an outlet.

> "Sami waits for me everyday at this hour. He becomes aware of nothing, save my arrival. He smiles to me, approaches me, then he has sex with me. The only thing I feel is penetration, something entering the last wall in my body, touching the first point to arouse my pleasure, the pleasure that I felt for the first time in my life. I wish he didn't leave my body . . . I felt security, safety and pleasure together in one moment. We made love on the floor day after day, and the pleasure induced more desire." (page 176)

The realization of sexual pleasure epitomizes Zahra's reconciliation with her body. Her psyche unites with the pleasures of her body; her previously self-denied sexuality re-emerges:

[12] Zahra's first affair, with Malek, was set in a garage (symbolizing suffocation, darkness, and solitude). Zahra's final relationship with Sami is set on the roof (symbolizing freedom, openness, and light).

> "Now I can pull Sami towards my body. We united as one. I wanted to feel his weight over me. I reached my orgasm. He knew I wanted more. He gave me until I screamed as an erupting volcano, exploding and getting rid of the internal dust and fear of the past." (page 179)

Zahra becomes pregnant, wants to keep the baby; and wants to be with Sami. Her transformation is further evidenced by her acceptance of Sami as a murderer; and her love for him. She no longer denies her femininity. The relationship is not forced upon her – she accepts it by her free will, and pursues it.

> "All I dream of now is marrying this sniper. . . I can't live with anyone except him. I want to be alone with him. I want to dress, cook, prepare myself for him." (page 204 – 205)

When she confronts him with her pregnancy, he immediately asks her to abort. Knowing that it is too late, he proposes the solution – marriage, since an illegitimate child will destroy the reputation and image of both the mother and father in question. For Zahra, this step towards marriage symbolized the end of her personal war and the closing of her pain. It crowned the process of self-realization.

> "The war ended when he said that he is willing to marry to me, everything is back to normal, I will announce my marriage to all those soldiers on the front so that they cease fire." (page 245)

The story ends with a shocking and tragic scene. After promising to marry Zahra; Sami waits for her to descend the stairs and walk out of the building; and then shoots and kills her. Ultimately, she returns to her status of victim:

> "Now I can't walk anymore, I fall to the ground. Fear is mingling with pain. I put my hands on the source of pain - I touch blood, despite the darkness I knew it was blood. I've been shot by a sniper's bullet. Its

raining . . . I scream, ‘help,’ is my scream voiceless? The pain is spreading everywhere, in my stomach, with the baby. It is you Sami who put this child in me and you who caused this pain . . . where is my mother now? Is she warm in our house? . . . I’m lonely now. I close my eyes. I see the white sky .. .” (page 247)

Arriving at a New Identity

Meridian's rebirth is based on a gradual transition from blindly adopting traditional directives; to trusting her own intuition and abilities. She learns to live, albeit the hard way. Her arrival at a new identity it is the culmination of several years of perseverance through failed relationships and bitter experiences. After her failed relationship with Truman; she simply fails to see the tragedy of lesser events – she becomes immune to emotional distress. Her freedom comes at a price – her permanent struggle with paralysis; and loneliness associated with her individual choice of celibacy. Through the civil rights movement, she becomes empowered and active. Positive change at the communal level allows for positive developments in her life. At the end of the novel, she writes:

“There is water in the world for us
brought by our friends
though the rock of mother and God
vanishes into the sand
and we, cast out alone
to heal and
recreate
ourselves.” (page 213)

Zahra's rebirth is also a gradual process; yet more apex-prone. It involved enforced sexual exposure from an early age for Zahra; brutal scenes of violence as her father beat her mother; escapades to foreign countries; and nervous breakdowns. Yet, Zahra's new identity is more vivid in its characterization of freedom. Unlike Meridian, Zahra realizes euphoric levels of happiness and freedom. Unlike Meridian, she does not adopt asexuality as a way of life; but rediscovers her body in her relationship with Sami. Seconds before Sami mercilessly executes her; Zahra is at the summit: she is free; socially active; liberated from her family; in love and had just been promised marriage by the person she loves. She willingly carries his child.

Unlike Meridian, Zahra does not survive her novel. In sum, the liberation that she experiences is limited to the last couple of years in her life, years that mark a stark discontinuity from the pain and suffering of the previous years. Zahra ultimately dies a victim of the war. Whereas Meridian epitomizes the success of the civil rights movement, Zahra reflects the cruelty and tragedy of the Lebanese Civil War. For Meridian, freedom is based on permanent sacrifice. For Zahra, freedom is fully attainable, but short-lived.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

The creativity of fiction and literature is the ability to raise questions that do not have absolute and definite answers. Literature attempts to provide answers to open-ended questions that cannot be answered by science. Feminist literature, in particular, raises questions that address women's issues, and provides solutions in the form of models allowing for the emancipation of women, and the realization of gender equality. The works of Walker and Al Shaykh are examples of such feminist literature.

This thesis focuses on cataloguing and analyzing the similarities between Walker's ***Meridian*** and Al Shaykh's ***The Story of Zahra***. Both novels are set in times of social upheaval; both novels employ the names of the heroines in the title, both characterize the process of emancipation and the realization of an identity based on free-will for the two characters Meridian and Zahra.

From a theoretical perspective, both writers employ a post-modernist approach. This approach deconstructs the dichotomies between men and women that are evident in modern theories, moving away from assertive-passive; weak-strong portrayal of the two genders, where women are always the subordinate to men. Both novels rely heavily on concepts of inter-sectionalism, depicting characters that are the product of an interactive identity comprising numerous sections - sex, gender, race, class and ethnicity. The stories of the two characters are the stories of the inter-play of these different sections that negotiate, conflict, normalize, rebel, and reconcile vis-à-vis each other, and the environment around them. They are dynamic sections of the characters' identities, and their dynamism and inter-play are the processes that lead to

the re-emergence of the two characters as independent, assertive individuals at the end of the novels.

The two characters' progression is markedly similar. At the outset of the two novels, both are emotionally burdened with a painful past; and subjected to multiple layers of conflict, with the mother, with societal institutions, and most significantly, with the opposite gender. Multiple sources of conflict are not restricted to the women's immediate environment, but include political conflict at the national level (civil rights agitation and civil war); social conflict (women agitating against socially-imposed constraints); and gender conflict (women against men).

For both Walker and Al Shaykh, gender conflict is the most prominent and the most restrictive in terms of the limits that it imposes on the woman's behavior. Therefore, the first level of resistance is confrontation with the male counterpart - the primary source of suppression and frustration. The characters shift from an initial state of confusion and helplessness, into a state of direct challenge involving the confrontation and rejection of socially-imposed roles and norms dictating women's behavior.

Both writers identify the practice of asexuality as the means, or tools, through which women begin the process of confrontation with the male counterpart. Both arrive at asexuality as a result of a series of failed, troubled relationships with men. Embedded in the practice of asexuality is a schizophrenic process in which two simultaneous dynamics are at play - the dying of the 'old' self' and the birth and re-emergence of the 'new' self.

The two characters suppress their sexual desires, to extent that they were no longer capable of feeling pleasure; and refuse to become obedient, docile wives and mothers. The process of annihilating their past identities was essentially a form of revolt; and the medium for rebellion was their bodies. As a consequence, both characters

experience self-destruction, pain, and physical punishment until they were reborn, strong enough to re-face the world.

The choice of asexuality endowed both women with the strengths necessary to realize the process of transformation – namely perseverance, self-control (mastery); and an emergent knowledge of the suppressing forces that they are subjected – the realization and rationalization of suppression and its sources is a large component of being cured from their influences.

By the end of both novels, the two characters are transformed from being passive defeated women, into woman who are socially and politically active. Their arrival at a new identity it is the culmination of several years of perseverance through failed relationships and bitter experiences. The transformation is painful, but the long-term gains include reconciliation and the discovery of a new identity based on free-will.

Both novels are influenced by the times and atmosphere in which the two novelists live, times that are fundamentally turbulent, involving social conflict, war and upheaval. For both writers "discourse is resistance."[1] Writing was a chance to move against the existing norms in war literature, of attributing heroism and bravery to the men at the 'front-line' that were fighting the war. Indeed, these men became a subject of ridicule as their testosterone-driven conflicts were the output of a social system that they had instigated and approved of – a system that was in essence a failure.

For Walker, it was a means through which to resist against the dominant male patriarchal order within the African-American community. An underlying argument in her work was that the liberation of the African American community pre-required the liberation of women within that community, after all, was it not the male-dictated

[1] Michel Foucault, quoted in Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, ***Postmodern Theory Critical Interrogations***, (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), page 57.

social system within this community that rendered it weak and reactive vis-à-vis the white community?

For Al Shaykh, writing was a chance to counteract the propagandist war literature that attributed blame to one belligerent side as opposed to another. In her writing, there were no political judgments or blame-portioning. Through portraying female characters, a message of normality and continuity was emphasized, in which the norms were survival, hope and attempting to live a normal life in abnormal times:

> "In Lebanon, the woman wrote of the need to reject the old norms of emigration and to stay, to adopt responsibility for the chaos, and to work for the survival of the self, of the others, and of the country. Their message was stay and thus stop the war."[2]

Furthermore, writing is a tool to place order in the place of disorder. For both writers, writing is not a means to portray the battlefields of civil rights protests and sit-ins, or the civil war. On the contrary, this is at the margin of their stories, and the focus is on portraying humanistic characters, allowing these characters, and through these characters themselves, the space to become voiced.

Both writers portray characters that closely reflect their lives and experiences. Just as Walker lived at the time of the American Civil Rights Movement, so too did her character Meridian; the latter replicated the confusion of Walker herself in her earlier writing career. Similarly for Al Shaykh, Zahra lived at the time of Lebanese civil war, and she used Zahra as the voice to provide epic descriptions of the Lebanese civil war and the struggle of the people caught in it and their attempts to survive.

A strong analogy exists between the literal schizophrenic process experienced by the two characters; and a symbolic schizophrenia embedded in the nationalist struggles of

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[2] Miriam Cooke, "Arab Women Arab Wars*." **Cultural Critique***, Winter 1994-5 (1995), page 24.

the American Civil Rights Movement and the Lebanese Civil War. Like the two characters, the process of re-emergence of the two communities involved the dying of the old (discrimination against the African American Community; polarization of the Lebanese community into ethnic enclaves) and the emergence of the new (equality and civil rights for African Americans; the emergence of a pluralist Lebanon). Ironically, external destruction (war, revolution, and social conflict) is the realm in which the two characters discover their 'internal' regeneration – Meridian becomes a black community activist; while Zahra volunteers as a nurse.

Both writers employ a stylistic approach that is markedly similar. Their two novels can be divided into two halves: the first related to collapse and constraint; the second focusing on rejuvenation and liberation. For Zahra, the period of constraint is symbolized by her sexual experiences with Malek that are set in a closed-in, dark, garage; and by locking herself in the bathroom to escape her abusive uncle in Africa. By contrast, her period of liberation, as epitomized by her relationship with Sami, is set on the roof of a building – symbolizing open space, sunlight and freedom.

Similarly, for Meridian, the setting for her conflict is her parents' home; the marital bed that she shares with Eddie (her first husband) and the church in which she cannot conceal her suspicion of the White Christ. By contrast, her experiences of liberation are set within the American South overall as she shuttles from one black community to the other, encouraging its members to vote.

Clearly therefore, the stylistic, literary, and theoretical similarities between Alice Walker and Hanan Al Shaykh in their two respective novels *Meridian* and *The Story of Zahra*, merit a comparison of their work. Yet, the question remains as to why these similarities exist. It is not sufficient to say that the similarities arise because the two

writers happen to be women; or because of their feminist convictions – as feminism is in itself an umbrella of numerous schools of thought.

Fundamentally, the significant similarities that exist between the two writers are rooted in their personal backgrounds, despite the geographic and cultural differences between them. Both writers were raised in communities that were impoverished; in which the social institutions of family and church applied rigid definitions of gender roles that limited the ability of women to aspire to anything more than being a wife and mother, or risk being a social outcast. Both lived and wrote at times of social and political upheaval in their communities – the two novels were written during the early stages of their writing careers, reflecting their own internal confusion and the need to create order where they individually felt disorder (writing was the process through which the two authors could refine their thoughts). Both used the characters that they portrayed to reflect their own life experiences up to and including the time of writing. Most importantly, both sought to communicate the same message, namely that a regeneration of a woman's identity pre-required the destruction of the old identity; and that the atmosphere of war and social upheaval was conducive to this regeneration.

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