

Hoda Barakat's *Tiller of the Waters* and *The Stone of Laughter*: A Reflection on Gender and Sexism in Times of Wars

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at examining Hoda Barakat's exploration of the civil war in Lebanon and its effect on the self, the memory, and masculinity of the common man. Unlike War Literature, neither of the two novels at hand examines the sectarian division, or who to blame; it is rather the drama of the individual that shapes the two books. War here is shown to affect man's acceptance and understanding of himself, as much as of his country. Barakat willingly estranges herself and her protagonist to delve deep into the past and scrutinize the marginalized self. The different perspective, the new tone, as well as the wisdom gained through years of exposure to dangers, enable Barakat to probe into the disturbed self of the protagonist where she tries to replicate his suffering and sense of loss. Essentially written in Arabic, the two novels reveal the desolate condition of the protagonist and the city as a microcosm of the devastating state of the Arabs; peoples and countries. The emasculated protagonist stands both as a reflection of the defenseless, powerless, unmotivated Arabs, and an opposition to the over masculinized, enraged and therefore, aggressive Arabs who want a change of the status quo, no matter how destructive, or even how efficient. Hence the paper discusses issues that are "routinely forgotten and swept under the rug", an examination that highlights the Arab intellectuals' apprehension with all the tribulations of their communities.

Keywords: Arabic literature. gender, homosexuality, sexism, war, women authors

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INTRODUCTION

The intellectual's obligation as Edward Said defines it is "to insist on standards of truth about human misery and oppression regardless to party or national background" (1994, xii-xiii). This definition forms

the milestone of Barakat's works where she willingly estranges herself and her protagonist to delve deep into the past and scrutinize the marginalized self. The different perspective, the new tone, as well as the wisdom gained through years of exposure to danger enable Barakat to probe into the disturbed self of her protagonists where she replicates their sufferings and sense of loss. Hoda Barakat's narratives immensely focus on the issues of identity and the land to show great cultural consciousness of identity as residing in and belonging to the land (Ashour, 2003). Her books are woven from the lexicon of the civil war in Lebanon which created a rich and endlessly fertile soil for writers and thinkers of the whole region, but most particularly of Lebanon. Those writers captured the traumatic moment of war and registered all the drastic changes and the psychological damage, illustrating the issue from historical, social, anthropological and biological perspectives. The breaking of the traumatic civil war in Lebanon which started 1975, lasted for fourteen years and claimed the lives of up to 100,000 people, created great changes in the social structure, and people's psychologies. In such an atmosphere of intervening destruction, writing becomes the intellectuals' weapon for resistance. Barakat writes because she has "no power; no arms or soldiers. [I] belong to the dark dampness and the forgetfulness of those making history in the streets. ... under the boots stepping over [my] head, [I] still write as if I am empress or a dictator" (Barakat, 1995, v).

She presents the fate of the individual as an integrated part of the fate of a society built on contradictions and certain notions of masculinity, highly exposed after the war erupted to uncover the ugly reality. Her works reflect war, destruction and the change that overcame people's lives masterfully and inclusively.

Fadia Faqir believes that the seemingly disjointed, trivial scenes which constitute the body of Barakat's writing are purposefully woven to "block out the ugliness of war outside" (Faqir, 1995, vi). Yet, they represent the chaotic disconnections in the once metropolitan city of Beirut. The different, plentiful scenes of fantasies, day dreams, flash backs and hallucinations echo the devastated self of the individual in the middle of a country falling apart. The representation of the war as a nonsensical, farcical action is furthered through the discussions and representations that criticize a country built on divisions and a structure of submission, even on the personal individual level in a patriarchal society. Barakat's narratives are living examples of the Arab female intellectuals' preoccupation with the problems of their society, as opposed to what many male critics in the Arab patriarchal society prefer to believe. The detailed account she gives of people's life is an insider's experience.

Barakat's exploration of the civil war in Lebanon has always evoked several queries. Unlike War Literature, the two novels at hand concentrate on the drama of the individual in a war that affects man's masculinity, inducing debates of the

relationship between manhood, nationalism and violence, and highlighting issues like homosexuality as a sign of resistance, and as "one way to escape the draft" in many cases in history as Mike Kelly (2000, p. 1) argues. This in turn brings up issues of sexism and the cultural misconception that women are less patriotic than men.

DISCUSSION

War and Manhood

"Despite the diversity of gender and war separately, gender roles in war are very consistent across all known human society" (Cohn, 1987). The intersection of issues of masculinity and femininity with war came to the fore during the war in Lebanon to start a new "Lebanese novelistic discourse" as Yumna Al-'ID describes it (2003, p. 31) of which Barakat's works constitute a 'well-crafted' fine example. In *Tiller of the Waters* and *The Stone of Laughter*, Hoda Barakat uses war as a background for her narrative to highlight other issues aggravated by the war. She explores civil war in Lebanon and its effect on memory and masculinity of the common man. In a thoroughly comprehensive manner, the author avoids discussing sectarian divisions; instead she presents the drama of the individual. War in her works defines gender traits that associate men and manhood with war, while associating women with domestic works and peace which affects man's acceptance and understanding of himself as much as of his society. The Lebanese war divided the country and created two groups; those who

fight and those who don't. The latter, always thought of as sexually incompetent.

The two novels reflect great consciousness of the loss and disintegration, which hit Beirut and tortured its people during the civil war. Barakat shows great persistence and pre-occupation with the effects of violence on man's identity and mind. The collective sense of despair and alienation divulged explains the war-like behaviour among men in and outside the battlefield. In these two works "the deep ruptures within the self, between the self and others, the self and society, the self and reality at large" crystallize (Amyuni, 1999, p. 37). Sexual abnormalities among men in times of wars, is seen as a by-product of the graver effect of war; they simply need a secure refuge and see manhood, as exemplified for in warriors, void of all meanings and useful for nothing but killing. The protagonists in *Tiller of the Waters* and *The Stone of Laughter* favour solitude and marginalization and turn into gay or abnormal sexual tendencies to avoid violence.

Khalil in *The Stone of Laughter* and Niquila in *Tiller of the Waters* lose essence of their nature, their manhood, and their humanity at large when everything around them collapses and disintegrates. Their confusion and loss of vision echoes the Lebanese War and the collective hysteria that marginalizes them; "Khalil did not understand what the connection was, but he replied that he didn't think he was up to working in journalism since, in all honesty, he didn't understand what was going on

around him” (SOL, p. 29). This emptiness in the protagonist’s mind echoes that of the streets where “even the rats seemed familiar, unconcerned by the sound of footsteps near them. ... The nights on these streets were thick with packs of dogs, so many that one might fear the city was stricken with rabies. ... there were big dogs, a little like wolves in the way they looked, in the tense way they touched each other and worked along the streets, in the way the city ceased moving and seemed to be totally still ...” (SOL, pp. 29-30).

The personal and collective emptiness are inseparable. The parody and the direct relationship between the war and the individual’s drama are illustrated in the de-centred perspective through which Khalil views his life and his country: “Khalil thought a little ... The sea. It all goes to the sea ... all the days that wash over the city flow to the sea. ... over the years, the days have become many. All that the war had left behind it, all that it had burned and broken ... to the sea ... it was clear to him that the sea was: full. Overflowing with things from the city, with its decaying limbs ... then the sea returns them to us as vapors and rains ... then they come back and ... we clean with them and water our plants ... and they ... Khalil looked appalled ...” (SOL, p. 34). It is clear here that Khalil is involuntarily caught up in the vicious circle of the war. He is quite sure that he will never find comfort or be able to overcome the overwhelming feeling of desolation, despair and emptiness. That is why he escapes into the small emptiness of his room where he

finds comfort away from everything and everyone. Other times, he resorts to his dead intimate friend’s room where he would “[throw] himself across the bed, on top of Naji’s clothes which were still piled up on it ... took the edges of the bedcover in both hands and tugged them, with the clothes that were on top of them, over himself” (SOL, p. 62). Or, he would resort to the FM radio where he found people like him who escaped the city because they were people like him who escaped the city because they “knew neither how to get into its days nor its streets. They talked without speaking ... they talked to the broadcaster who kept on talking, who said nothing at all ...” (SOL, p. 65). His story is very simple, it does not contain any details; he simply bends over himself and escapes his fear and loneliness. His empty life consists of shadows of bodies that had been once alive, and of people who ceased to be like the destruction that engulfs the city as a whole. His structure of feelings is dramatized through his bent, crouched body and the images of the dislocated, fragmented people in the city of Beirut. Violence broke the chain that had long held the Lebanese society, and changed the meaning and value of things. The eruption of the anarchic violence, as a by-product of war, gave manhood a different dimension largely defined through the activities of the militia groups that “struggled to construct and defend institutional arrangements that would permit them not merely to survive but to manage the organizational, material and human demand of war making” (Picard, 2000, p. 293). It is only through these groups

that manhood could be fulfilled and the over-masculinizing effect of war is revealed. On the other hand, the emasculating or the feminizing effect, elaborately discussed by Barakat, can easily be depicted. The protagonists psychologically withdraw into themselves in search for the opposite part, the peaceful, meek one (the feminine?). The physical manifestation of the emasculating effect of war is shown in the protagonists' appearance; remarkably small, weak, and pale. They both compensate for this physical weakness, psychological loss and disturbed mentality through pervert relations, imagination or hallucination.

Wars, which Abou el Naga maintains, "have often paradoxical results: [as] they both destroy and allow for the appearance of new modes of relations" (2002, p. 87), affect both Khalil and his neighbour, who lost his father at an early age. However, because the latter enjoys all masculine qualities, he has always been wanted in the military groups, since his youth and strength would enrich the solidarity of the army. In times of wars, manhood meant fighting and combat in all the battlefields, social and psychological, rendering Khalil emasculated, inefficient and useless, always referring to himself as 'a widow', 'a wife' or a 'divorced woman' (SOL, 1995). Though Goldstein maintains that "no universal biological essence of 'sex' exists but rather a complex system of potentials that are activated by various internal and external influences" (cited in Prugl, 2003, p. 337), the way Khalil describes himself carries obvious negative and sexist connotations

and is an essential reason for his inner suffering and torment. His inability to fulfil the social criteria of 'manhood' results from being less aggressive, less competitive and physically weaker than his fellow mates. He, like Niqula in *Tiller of the Waters*, suffers reverse casualty of war, where "gender roles adapt individuals for war roles, and war roles provide the context within which individuals are socialized into gender roles" (as cited in Prugl, 2003, p. 338), rendering both victims of the war.

While Khalil suffers homosexual tendencies, Niqula in *Tiller of the Waters* metamorphoses into a hallucinating man due to his inability to identify his collapsing homeland. Images of internal devastation, division, and alienation designate his isolation and rejection from the outer world. The physical presence of barricades and road blocks deepen this feeling even more and create areas of disconnection all over the country and make movement and communication self endangering as much as they amplify the sense of loneliness and isolation. Therefore, he becomes more detached from the external world.

The protagonists' loss of reference is highly emphasized through Barakat's use of the poetic language and the stream of consciousness technique. In *Tiller of the Waters*, a sense of universality dominates the narrative though the protagonist is dislocated and dispersed. Niqula lost all connections with the present when the war broke. It consequently caused his loss of history and the heritage of his ancestors. He turned into a disoriented individual, losing

all sense of direction to echo the 'Waste Land' his city turns into. In his hiding place, the once upon a time, successful flourishing cloth shop, Niqula is caught in a state of desolation and marginalization, having nothing to live on or for, except his long gone, presently cherished past! At moments of great depression and despair, his only means of survival is to summon this past to the present collapsing all time frames and adding to the collective hysteria. His alienation and inner fragmentation turn into interior monologues and hallucinations.

The narrative shifts between the past and the present connected with the recurring image of cloth. In his hide, Niqula tries to find a substitute for his collapsing home land and lost love. He is too much taken into his memories in a desperate try to relate. Nevertheless, even his memories with Shamsa, his maid and beloved, seem to be unreal. She is more of a shadow that appears and disappears unexpectedly, than of a real human being. The continuous comparison and connection between her and stories about cloth history reflect his inner devastation, distortion and torment. The collision of many memories leaves him with actually no memory of the collapsing city. Even his father – the absent/present character - hangs on the surface of the events and the protagonist's psyche as a symbol of the glorious, integrated, valuable past, in contrast to the disintegrated present.

Barakat focuses on the protagonist's "Structure of feelings" rather than the events. However, both are inseparable. The disintegration and collapse that inflected

the city is reflected on the portrayal of the disintegrated self. Niqula loses all points of reference and all senses of direction when he loses "the history that his father has long been dictating him, all what he knew about valuable cloth, and the winds of the new times bring about new types made of synthetic and Nylon, where everything loses value and meaning. Even his city is not itself anymore; Beirut, a once upon a time heaven on earth, is now a 'Waste Land' suitable for nothing but wolves, wolf-dogs and for people who speak a different language and of course for abnormal, almost hallucinating people or emasculated men. The boundaries between Niqula and the world at large are undefined. He discontinues to be the same, as Beirut. In his hiding place, Niqula is caught in his state of desolation and marginalization. He has nothing to live for or on but his long gone, presently cherished past. His inner monologues, sometimes hallucinations, tell how alienated he feels how fragmented he and the city are due to the chaos created by the war. The highly poetic narration relates the character to his own world while the stream of consciousness where the collapsing of spatiotemporal order relates to the chaos of his reality. It shifts between the present and the past repeating the same obsession with cloth, its lusty meaning, value and nature. The feminizing effect of the war crystallizes here in his inability to face reality with all its ugliness. He tends to withdraw into himself in search for the docile, peaceful part, the feminine.

In Picard's opinion, there has always been this complicated tie between gender and war-like qualities, especially in patriarchal cultures which accentuate and magnify the slight difference between women and men in physical appearance, cognitive abilities and orientations. Such differences have always focused on gender segregation that associate men rather than women with war combat. The eruption of the disorganized, anarchic violence as a by-product of war, gave manhood a different dimension largely defined through the activities of the militia groups that "struggled to construct and defend institutional agreements that would permit them not merely to survive but to manage the organizational, material and human demands of war making" (Picard, 2003, p. 294). It was only through this militia that manhood could be fulfilled, and at the same time, they only included men who enjoyed all the male social constructs of manhood. Therefore, it is Youssef and Naji in *The Stone of Laughter*, who would join in, rather than Khalil, since they would enrich the solidarity of the army and 'the group'. Even their physical description renders Khalil feminized, While Naji and Youssef are tall and thin "in a particular way that suggested hardness and concealed strength, not weakness or shapelessness" (SOL, p. 81) would vomit when he thought that some living creatures once lived in that abandoned place. The detailed events in *The Stone of Laughter* present Khalil as the opposite of everything that his society considers 'male'. The introduction to the narrative reads "Khalil's legs were not long enough,

while Naji tossed his head, scattering the raindrops, Khalil panted behind him ..." (SOL, p. 3). The apparent weak, feminine physical description that associate Khalil with women and Naji with men, clearly prepare the readers for a detailed account of the relationship between Khalil and his patriarchal society, and separates him from the warriors' qualities, which he is not at all eager to acquire. He hates scenes of blood, death as a notion, and is over obsessed with order and cleanliness with great eagerness to be loved. He is reluctant to go to war, is aware of his weakness, though not of their connections and consequences in such a patriarchal society: "Khalil knew that a fear of blood to the extent of faintness, having short legs, a slight build, straight chestnut hair and large eyes, all these qualities do not make a man hermaphrodite or effeminate, or make him any less masculine, or ... queer ..." (SOL, p. 75). Khalil does not want to be dragged to war since he cannot endure trauma or master his fears. The warring forces of signification inside his mind reflect the war outside, and create emptiness around him, similar to that of the abandoned Beirut. His confused self and sexual abnormality is part of the outer chaos and turmoil. In the middle of all that, Khalil stands as a marginalized self, victimized twice; by war and by the inherited cultural assumptions about masculinity and femininity, which entail certain ordeals to show bravery, all of which are strange and irrational to him.

It is implied though the narrative that sexuality and sexual ability is relevant to war combat and violence. Naji, and later

on, Youssef, the two young masculine neighbours who dominate Khalil's fantasies, are strong warriors. The feminine physical and psychological description which relates Khalil to women and disqualify him as a man, brings up to mind the diverse theorization of war and gender, highlighting at the same time two major points: first the over masculinising, as well as the emasculating effect of wars, second the sexist suggestion that war and gender produce each other, and as a result the ultimate exclusion of women unless they are comfort givers in the times of wars. There should be a general summary of the novel or at least a description of the characters discussed in this paper so that the discussion is more coherent. Women are always seen as frail individuals who should be protected from violence. The long discussions between different characters in the narrative relate manhood and sexual ability to success at the battlefield. At the same time, when wars need aggression, they render those who do not participate as sexually disabled and feminized. In his constant search for sexual identity, Khalil changes at the end of the narrative, and due to constant pressures – inner and outer - he becomes more conscious of his soul's and body's need for love. He has yet to violate others' privacy to achieve personal glory, when he rapes his neighbour's daughter.

Gender, National Identity, and Over-Masculinity

Identity and land remain imperative in Barakat's narrative. However, the conceptualization of collective identity

through gender roles that affect nationalism is very significant here. The association between manhood and nationalism is quite clear. Gender is a social construct that shapes identity and affects all social perception and activities as much as the individual's socialization. Manhood sounds as a pre-requisite for nationalism and patriotism. Hence, the marginalization and the suffering that the protagonists endure; the masculine performance of other men during times of war disconnects them from society and buries them more into their shell of feelings, since it renders them less patriotic. This, in turn, completes the vicious circle and increases the detachment from their physical and psychological nature into rejecting all that would identify them with violence; including manhood. War violates their sense of self though it illuminates their inner contradictions.

Barakat "fore-grounded the relationship between gender and national identity ... Her words reflect a moment of crisis in national identity, where examining the basis of cultural coherence is of immediate practical concern" (Fayed, p. 152). It is very ironic, yet inevitable to note here, that the social constructions that define a warrior are partly created by women. The social structure and the cultural beliefs which identify gender roles in Lebanon shown in the two novels elaborate why Khalil in *The Stone of Laughter* is considered the opposite of everything that would make the 'male'. The tragedy of Khalil lies in the conflict between his nature and what his mother wanted him to be, on the one side, and the definition of

manhood as society puts it on the other. In his childhood, Khalil suffers and fails in identifying him with the historical heroes of Phoenicia, as his history teacher presents them. When he asks his mother for help, and a clue on how to treat “the enemy who wants to take our independence from us” his mother replies that they “would kill the men, but I would tell their leader that you were a little girl, one of my daughters, and when he saw you, he’d believe it and go away” (SOL, p. 110).

Here the association between manhood and nationalism is quite clear. Women do not take nationalism seriously, they are not required to defend their countries or fight for what they think is right. That is why the mother would willingly sacrifice her son’s masculinity and pretend that he is one of her “daughters”, who by nature would never have to fight for anything, to save his life.

The battlefield is one major realm where manhood could be fulfilled and patriotism could be proven, hence, the over masculinizing effect of war elaborated in the narratives. Youssef, the young chap in *The Stone of Laughter* who does not drive yet, is commanded by the militia to drive a car and bring their needs. A command which he can never refuse, and upon which he acts like a grown up, would take the car and go through roads which he is certain are “booby-trapped and will explode, and as the panting unease of the streets rises, its clamor rises, so Youssef is not able to hear the ticking timer of the bomb. He walks on the side-walk which prickles with cars like the teeth of a comb. He chooses one and

says that’s the one and speeds up so as to get past to it. It does not explode. Another one. No.” (SOL, p. 106). The tension is great, and despite his young age, Youssef is not afraid of death; he goes to the town centre, quite aware that a trapped car might explode. It is implied here that war produces the masculine and manhood which in turn reproduces and affects the continuity of war.

On the other hand, this bloody, violent scene and atmosphere deter many others, like Khalil, who psychologically withdraw into themselves searching for the opposite, the other part of his charter who would never have to join the war combat, and who needs protection and love, namely women. Khalil finds no logic behind the horrendous actions of the war. Here, Barakat provides a fascinating window into her protagonist’s soul aggravated by the war that shapes the human choice: to be or not to be; to be masculine and join the bloody war, or be peaceful and resort the feminine part in their creation and therefore, not BE from the perspective of their patriarchal society. Of these, her protagonists choose the latter. Khalil decides “that he would not understand and that he, Khalil, would return, because he was, in any case, not man enough to walk that path ...” (SOL, p. 102). He chooses to be at the margin of the war, maintaining social constructs which emphasize at the same time the aggression of war and the more competitive nature of men compared to women. He therefore stands as the reverse casualty of war combat. To emphasize Aou EL-Naga’s assumption of the paradoxical results of wars, which both destroys and

allows for the appearance of new moods of relations (2003, p. 87), war in Lebanon renders Khalil emasculated, inefficient and useless. The conceptualization of collective identity through gender roles that affect nationalism is very significant here. Manhood sounds as a pre-requisite for nationalism. The subject or the individual has no importance when compared to the collective or national. Therefore, he has to change himself to what suits the collective desire and what makes him fit into his society. When at the end, Khalil feels the need to redefine his gender, he literally rapes his neighbour. This does not only violate her rights, but his own nature. This incident can be taken as his first step towards defining himself with the pre-set definitions to join the general stream of battles. He wins his first fight to prove his manhood and redefines himself in accordance with the main stream of his gender, yet loses the true essence of his nature and turns into a 'laughing stone'. *The Stone of Laughter* refers to the frustration that the protagonist undergoes. The allegory, as Mona Fayed (1995), explains is between gold that was expected from the philosopher's stone, as medieval scientists saw it, and which failed. This is allegorical to the new Khalil who is far from being 'gold'. Ironically enough it is only when Khalil transforms into a stone capable of laughing at the expense of other's misery and tragedy that he is efficient according to the social measures and is capable of interacting with his surroundings. The old Khalil is wiped out and replaced by a more "belonging" individual from the collective point of view.

The change carries an undertone that only violent, inhumane individuals can survive in such a surrounding, and would be considered masculine. The rest are emasculated men who do not fit in their communities. However, it is worth noting that Khalil reaches this stage at his own expense. His old self that he used to enjoy dies in its try to fit in the society. This denotes that death is the only masculine factor in the city of Beirut. It is even the only fact there; people can choose to die either by adhering to their masculine nature and join the war, or they would choose to kill their natural potentials and transform to fit into their society. The fact that the transformation has to come after the violent action of rape is very crucial in highlighting the relationship between masculinity and violence and in illustrating Barakat's ideological stance of war and violence.

In Barakat's view, women in Beirut have always "enjoyed this sense of blessedness, while men, most of them, had to go through the war to earn a living or fulfill their manhood" (interview with Barakat, reference?). This view emphasizes the fact that war and weapons were male territory, out of which women stayed since they are incompetent according to social constructs. Men had to take sides, take up arms and go to battle for whatever they believe.

CONCLUSION

The subject of homosexuality has been "obscured in Modern Arabic Literature" (Lagrange, 2000, p. 169) since it is related to theological conceptions in relatively strict

societies. Everyone in the Arab society seems to develop “the will not to know”, as Murry and Roscoe call it (quoted in Lagrange, 2000, p. 192). Though many writers, in the process of “modernization” of their societies felt that it is their burden as well as their duty to denounce the defects and corruption of their societies, and to enlighten the minority through their literature, homosexuality is one of the issues long avoided, due to the cultural, religious and social restrictions. Sexual relationship implies the existence of a dominant and a submissive participant and works for a ‘healthier’ family life. Homosexuality, on the other hand, is considered ‘abnormal’ since both participants are presumably dominant! Writers of such societies would rather remain in the comfort zone of discussing the archetypes or social conditions and deliberations rather than homosexuality.

This opposes Edward Said aphorism on the obligation of the intellectual to enlighten regardless to social customs and taboos. Not too many literary or documentary works can inform us on male identity and social customs; the whole issue is either avoided or slightly referred to. Sexuality is “under-documented”; topics like sexual tendencies or sexual identity are hushed or strictly attacked in the press according to Lagrange due to the fact that it is a society governed by ‘Fiqh’ which does not acknowledge sexual identity. This, however, does not mean that reference to sexual identity or gender has disappeared; it is rather used for comic relief more than for a serious discussion. The whole matter of homosexuality is essentially

referred to in Arabic as “shoudhouz” or (sexual deviation), which explains the social outlook to the whole matter, and might as well explain the reason why it is avoided and disregarded: it does not represent the normal. The Arabic language and culture do not have an explanation to or an alternative of ‘same-sex attraction’, and therefore, they are not even considered as an identity. This explains the reason why homosexual characters are very scarce in Arabic literature. Their homosexuality has even to be concealed; hinted at rather than discussed. Nevertheless, gender has become a more frequently discussed issue especially in the field of Islamic Studies.

Barakat is one of few Arab writers who does not pretend to be blind about the existence of such relations in Arab societies. She chose to break the silence, refuses to discuss patterns, and moves on to discuss what has long been thought of as ‘moral failure’, a highly sensitive issue, less comfortable and remarkably ignored issue of man confronting his identity. She is even more daring than many Arab writers in discussing such an issue explicitly, and portraying homosexual characters. Yet, her protagonists pass through deep thorough suffering due to their ‘abnormal identity’. They are never ‘happy’ about it or because of it. Khalil suffers loss of self, and loss of self worth as a man in a warring society due to his traumatic same-sex attraction. She presents his homosexuality as longing for femininity or the feminine “blessedness” of not having to participate in the war! Khalil is not a happier being as a homosexual.

His inner suffering and lack of self esteem, as much as his persistent feeling of being excluded as abnormal, make him refuse his status. He therefore tries to prove himself normal by raping his neighbour's daughter. He discovered that neutrality or isolation in such times is impossible; he had to choose between being a victim or a torturer in the times of war, Khalil chose the latter. This rape incident, violent as it is, shows his ability 'to laugh'; and participate more efficiently in his society.

Barakat thus provides a fascinating window into the human soul affected by wars that shape the human choices: "to be or not to be" remains the question. If being implies taking part in a destructive form of wars, some, like Khalil in *The Stone of Laughter* would inevitably find no reason or logic behind the horrifying, devastating experience which the war provides, and would definitely chose 'not to be' though the former guaranteed a prestige based not only on their weapons, but also on their command of economic resources such as 'the water, the bread' and the rest of life necessities.

Both novels are marked by the stream of consciousness technique which is heavily introspective, narrated in the voices of protagonists whose inner lives are disturbed by the outside world, especially the fighting that they do not want to, or cannot participate in. We can point to a pattern in Barakat's novel where she always refers to the theme of isolation and alienation that seem to indicate that she has not yet exhausted the creative possibilities and problems of the

effects of violence, particularly war, on marginality, masculinity and memory. In *The Tiller of Waters*, images of internal division of alienation from himself illustrated through many events reflect his rejection and therefore, isolation from the external social world. This introversion and isolation is furthered by the protagonist's physical and psychological isolation being surrounded by war, death and destruction. Isolation is highly felt due to the physical presence of road blocks and barricades that have created areas of separation all over the country and made movement and communication even more difficult and self endangering. The divided individual in the two novels is as fragmented as the society that he is part of. Their inability to communicate and bridge the gap between each other as much as between themselves and the society reflects the total, more general fragmentation of the society.

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