Literary Intifada: Arab Women Speak Out

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This thesis represents my own original work.
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This thesis is dedicated to Sophia-Nur.
Abstract

This thesis explores literary activism in the work of a selected group of Arab women authors. It is inspired by the nexus of Edward Said’s call to speak truth to power and the critical question raised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on the subaltern’s ability to speak. The current proliferation of writing by and about Arab women feeds a market whose interest is fuelled by the anxieties raised through the war on terror, heightened awareness of political Islamism, the war in Iraq, the occupation of Palestine and the conflicts in the Middle East. Representations of Arab women are enlisted in the Orientalist project, and have been mobilised to justify Western foreign policy interventions. Some of this writing feeds stereotypes about Arab women. Critical attention on the more nuanced work is scant and tends to be framed within the paradigms offered by postcolonial discourse. This critical material is guilty of eliding pressing issues about structural inequities raised in the work that speak to the problem of alienation and marginalisation in the contemporary context. The work of women authors foregrounds specific issues that serve as points of tension that define the relationship between Arabs and the West and draws attention specifically to the limitations of discursive paradigms used in the West to engage with their work.

The central argument of this thesis is that Eurocentric paradigms used to interpret this work hinder the literary activism that these authors enact. These paradigms continue to assert the hegemony of the West and consequently cannot accommodate different epistemological systems ethically, equally and humanely. As such, they continue to manifest difference in increasingly sophisticated ways. I argue that the literary activism of these authors urges readers to re-evaluate these
paradigms as a way of provincialising them to forge a more ethical, inclusive way to engage with difference. It is in this sense, a form of literary intifada, a “shake up” of prevailing paradigms.

My approach is to query the application of critical paradigms to the selected work by examining how they are used, the political agenda they forward, and the limitations that are revealed when different contextual issues are profiled. The archive draws on a range of genres including testimony from war zones, memoir and fiction and is represented by the work of Suad Amiry, Riverbend, Ahdaf Soueif, Jean Said Makdisi, Diana Abu-Jaber and Leila Aboulela. I will show that each author addresses highly politicised issues to depict how the discourses through which they are read marginalise them from their cultural identity and history. These discourses also emphasise their difference from the West. A worst case manifestation of these discourses is that Arabs are not defined in the same universe as the West and gross atrocities are perpetuated against them.
# Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................ III

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... V

TABLE OF CONTENTS ........................................................................................................ VII

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

THE PROBLEM: THE ORIENTALIST PROJECT ................................................................ 1

LITERARY ACTIVISM ......................................................................................................... 7

IF THE ARAB WOMAN SPEAKS WILL SHE BE HEARD? ....................................................... 14

LIMITATIONS OF EUROCENTRIC INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS ..................................... 18

THE CONCEPT OF ARAB ETHNICITY .............................................................................. 28

LANGUAGE AND FORM ..................................................................................................... 32

STRUCTURE OF THIS THESIS ............................................................................................ 37

CHAPTER 1: RESISTING THE UNRELENTING BLOODLUST OF IMPERIUM: EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY AS WEAPONS OF TRUTH .......... 44

LIFE UNDER OCCUPATION .............................................................................................. 45

THE WORD OF THE WITNESS ......................................................................................... 49

THE MANY USES OF TESTIMONY ................................................................................... 51

RESISTANCE LITERATURE ............................................................................................... 58

SHARON AND MY MOTHER-IN-LAW: PRACTICING SUMOUD IN PALESTINE ..................... 61

Camp Palestine .................................................................................................................. 65

Dehumanising Palestinians ............................................................................................... 68

Practicing sumoud ............................................................................................................ 73

Interpellating the reader as witness .................................................................................. 78

THE TRUTH LIES SOMEWHERE IN BLOGOSPHERE: BAGHDAD BURNING AS RESISTANCE ...................................................... 88

The anonymous, authentic survivor .................................................................................. 91

Conveying the experience of an "ordinary" Iraqi resident .................................................. 99

Witness the price of our war: implicating the reader ....................................................... 105
CHAPTER 2: THE POLITICS IS IN THE WRITING: READING AN EGYPTIAN IN THE TEXT

I AM EGYPTIAN AND A PERSON “IN PLACE”: VALIDATING AN EGYPTIAN IDENTITY IN IN THE EYE OF THE SUN

An Egyptian consciousness

Re-reading the legacy of 1967

The legacy of colonialism

An Egyptian coming of age

BEYOND THE HOLIDAY ROMANCE: RECUPERATING POLITICAL PURPOSE IN THE MAP OF LOVE

A repeat of the past: the delusion of postcolonial equality

The hypocrisy of the New World Order

Restoring the worldliness to historical narrative

Testifying to political purpose

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 3: NAVIGATING AN “UNHOMELY” EXISTENCE:

RECONNECTING REDUNDANT SELVES IN JEAN SAID MAKDISI’S TETA, MOTHER AND ME, AND DIANA ABU-JABER’S THE LANGUAGE OF BAKLAVA

Mirror, mirror on the wall: who’s most modern amongst us all? Unsettling the teleology of modernity in TETA, MOTHER AND ME

The politics of remembering Mother

Pedagogy as a way through which to ingrain epistemological control

Adjusting the frame: appreciating invisible and visible feminisms

Another look at cosmopolitan, urban life

SO YOU COME FROM COOKING? FOOD AND EATING AS A WAY TO PROCESS OTHERNESS IN THE LANGUAGE OF BAKLAVA

“Eating is a form of listening”: Defining Otherness through food and eating
CHAPTER 4: LEILA ABOULELA AND ‘HALAL FICTION’ ............................ 246

ISLAM AND THIS THESIS ................................................................. 249

ISLAM-INFORMED WRITING .......................................................... 252

TESTING THE LIMITS OF TOLERANCE: THE TRANSLATOR REVEALS AN ALTERNATIVE WAY OF LIVING .............. 257

CRITIQUES OF THE NOVEL .............................................................. 261

FOOLED INTO BELIEVING THERE IS EQUALITY: MODALITIES OF EUROCENTRISM PERPETUATE

DIFFERENCE IN THE RHETORIC OF MULTICULTURAL BRITAIN .............................................................. 263

The resilience of Orientalist discourses .................................................. 272

The logic of conversion to Islam: decentring the West as dominant paradigm .............................................. 278

Conclusion ....................................................................................... 285

A MOSQUE ON REGENT STREET: MINARET AND FINDING REFUGE IN ISLAM .................................................. 286

The freedom to choose to be religious .................................................. 290

Rethinking piety and agency ............................................................... 295

Another way to think about identity .................................................... 301

CONCLUSION .................................................................................. 307

CONCLUSION .................................................................................. 311

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................. 319
Introduction

The problem: the Orientalist project

In “The Worst Story Ever Told,” Ahdaf Soueif recounts a joke told to her by a Jordanian friend that reveals the anxiety experienced by many Arabs of being erased from global consciousness:

King Abdullah says to George Bush, ‘You know I watch Star Trek every day and there’s white people and black people, Spanish, Chinese and every sort of people. But there are no Arabs. Why are there no Arabs?

And Bush says, ‘Because it’s set in the future, stupid!’” (106)

An article in Time entitled “How the World will look in 50 Years” published a decade earlier in 1992, expressed similar pessimism. In this article, Arabs are redundant in the new millennium: oil supplies have diminished and the West is disinterested in the countries resistant to its form of modernisation. These anxieties reflect a hardening of Western hostility toward the Arab world discussed by Edward Said in his seminal book Orientalism. In Orientalism, Said argued that the West established its positional superiority over the Orient through a complex and thorough discursive system that pervaded aesthetic, cultural and intellectual scholarly production. This control is exercised through the discursive material that explains the Orient or, more specifically, Arabs and Muslims in expert terms to achieve its goal of controlling, manipulating and incorporating it. In this project, the Orient is the Occident’s Other. As a result it is characterised by its difference from the West and defined by absences and deficiencies such as that of civil society and democracy. These discourses are mustered into the imperial project as justification that certain people “require and beseech domination” (Said, Culture 8).
Control over the Orient is exercised through discourses that perpetuate the West’s ideological and ontological supremacy in its promotion of modernity. For Arabs it seems that there is no alternative to the pillars of civil society such as nationalism and secularism that define Western capitalism (Majid, Unveiling 51). This incessant Othering creates the fear in some Arabs of being irrevocably displaced from their memory, history, identity and culture.

The symbolic and metonymic associations between the Orient and women mean that women and sexuality are easily mobilised in this project. The Orient is described in feminine terms such as fertility, fecundity and sexuality. In Colonial Fantasies Meyda Yeğenoğlu explores the relationship between colonialism and sexuality to show that the Western desire for the Arab Other is mediated by the desire to know, understand and possess its women. The veiled woman is fetishised as the site of desire for sexual, geographical and discursive penetration. She encapsulates sexual and colonial fantasies (Yeğenoğlu 99). The Western fervor in uncovering, unveiling, knowing, modernising, or saving the Oriental woman enacts this project. As I write, representations of Arab and Muslim women are enlisted to support the discourse of the War on Terror, the clash of civilisations, and to cement rather than to deconstruct the opposition between the West and the Arab world. The effect of this is to buttress the narrative of a homogenous Islam and support racial and religious vilification. For example, the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) noted in 1991 after the Gulf War that this kind of media representation “was having the effect of raising tensions in the community and may have been contributing to an increase in acts of violence against Arabs and Muslims” (364-65). Since 9/11 especially, inflammatory images of militant Islamism have been conflated with images of
veiled women. The Muslim woman became the sign of the threat to Western
civilisation and that which also needed to be liberated from an oppressive religion.
This narrative was epitomised by a beautiful unveiled face looking out from a sea
of blue burqas on the front page of Brisbane’s Courier Mail following the US
declaration that Kabul had been “liberated.”

Popular literary production involving Arabs or Islam tends to further the
Orientalist project. Many have a similar look and feel and deploy iconic devices
such as gilded edging, veiled faces or suggestive titles to reinforce the trope of
victimhood. In Western Representations of the Muslim Woman Mohja Kahf
illustrates how stereotypes of victimhood are systematically employed to market
contemporary literature by or relating to Arab and Muslim women. Popular fiction
books such as I Was a Slave or Princess deploy these tropes in predictable fashion.
These features are also used to market books whose content addresses a broader
range of issues. For example, the cover of Fadía Faqir’s novel Nisani depicts a
woman in full hijab even though this bears no relation to its content, the Arab-
Israeli conflict. Leila Aboulela’s third publication Minaret depicts a drawing of a
woman in a headscarf on its cover. The publisher’s endorsement on the back cover
of Hanan al-Shaykh’s Women of Sand and Myrrh claims that the book “lays bare
the unusual and highly charged relations that necessarily exist in a state that denies
women their humanity.” Kahf has also shown how material is edited to fit this
paradigm. Her case study of Margot Badran’s transformation of Egyptian feminist
Huda Sha’arawi’s Mudhakkirat (“My Memoirs”) into its popularised American

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1 The photograph was taken by Reuters photographer Yannis Behrakis and reprinted in newspapers
all over the world. This and similar photographs of unveiling were obsessively reprinted.
translation Harem Years, demonstrated how the memoir was systematically reframed within an Orientalist paradigm. Badran’s edition downplayed Shar’arawi’s class biases, exaggerated the role of Europe and Europeans and misrepresented the harem as the memoir’s primary space and institution (“Packaging” 148-72). Such works alongside titles as Reading Lolita in Tehran, Nine Parts of Desire, Forbidden Love, The Bookseller of Kabul, The Trouble with Islam Today, The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam and Infidel and the plethora of “blue-burqa” memoirs published following the overthrow of the Taliban are to be found among the “Middle East” sections of most bookshops in the West today.

The title of Irshad Manji’s recent book The Trouble with Islam Today reflects more pointedly the kind of knowledge production that feeds the Orientalist project. Together with books like Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam and Infidel, these purport to reveal an insider’s perspective on Islam’s oppression of women. Infidel exposes Ali’s experience of life in Somalia, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, escape to Europe, her role in the making of a controversial film about Islam, the death threats she received following the controversial film maker Theo Van Gogh’s murder and her eventual escape to America. All of this provides the kind of material that feeds Western stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed, and of the intolerance of Islam. Ali and Manji credit the West for enabling them to develop independent thinking, an identity and the opportunity to critically reflect

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2 The controversy arose over his superimposition of Qur’anic script over a naked female body. Van Gogh was murdered in 2004.
on Islam. Their narratives confirm the liberatory potential of the West. Books like these become international bestsellers and capture the public imagination. The value ascribed to such books is perfectly signalled by author Salman Rushdie’s endorsement on the front cover of *The Caged Virgin*: “This is an immensely important book, passionate, challenging and necessary. It should be read as widely as possible because it tells the truth – the unvarnished, uncomfortable truth.”

The truth-value assigned to such books ascribes them significant influence in the public imagination. This was clearly demonstrated by the public uproar that erupted when Norma Khouri’s book *Forbidden Love* (published in the US as *Honor Lost*) was found to be a hoax. Khouri alleged that she was born and raised in Jordan. She alleged that she wrote the book after her best friend Dana was killed in an honour killing because she had fallen in love with a Christian. The book became an overnight sensation: it was listed on United States (US) and Australian best-seller charts and was voted one of Australia’s favourite one hundred books. Khouri toured the book festival circuit in Australia and was hailed as a brave woman on an honourable crusade against a heinous crime perpetrated on women. However, in 2004, the book was exposed as a fake by Sydney Morning Herald journalist Malcolm Knox who worked with Amal Sabbagh, Secretary General of the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW), to expose Khouri. Rana Husseini the only Jordanian journalist covering honour killings in international news reported that the JNCW showed that there were more than seventy factual errors on geography, Arabic language, honour killings, location, history and religion in Khouri’s book, in addition to more than forty erroneous statements about Muslims and Arabs generally. Despite this, publishers refused to accede to the JNCW’s request to reclassify the book as fiction. Random House
responded by saying that they stood by the author’s story and her right to self expression, giving the impression that the JNCW was trying to silence Khouri. Eventually, the book was published as “social science” in the US and “non-fiction” in Australia, classifications that buttressed its claims to discursive authenticity. When the hoax was exposed, Random House withdrew the books in Australia, though in France publishers simply re-labelled it as fiction. Janine Clark argues that the international attention drawn by this book had the inadvertent effect of jeopardising the work of activists within Jordan who had campaigned for legislative change for some time. Opponents to these changes argued that the international pressure was evidence of Western interference.

The overwhelming public response received by the book attests to its resonance with public perceptions about the Middle East and honour crimes. Anna Broinowski, who produced the documentary Forbidden Lies about Khouri’s fraud, acknowledges that Khouri’s initial success derived from the fact that the book resonated with misinformation generated about the Middle East and Muslims. Luke Buckmeister, who reviewed the documentary, quotes Broinowski as suggesting, “there are two Middle Easts […]. There is the real Middle East and there is Middle East Inc, brought to you by Hollywood central casting and American publishers.” Broinowski argues that Khouri’s book was of this latter calibre and “part of the propaganda war that is battling for hearts and minds.” Khouri’s book inadvertently fuelled support for the invasion of Iraq because it confirmed Western suspicions about heinous Arabs and Muslims and reinforced the West’s moral and ideological superiority. The success of these kinds of books rests largely on their ability to harness a value laden epistemological system that already situates Muslim women according to a Western-centric matrix of power.
that codes their Otherness. Perpetuating these representations consolidates the Orientalist project.³

**Literary Activism**

While sensationalist texts that appeal to Orientalist tendencies such as Khouri’s *Forbidden Love* predominate in the Western literary market, texts by Arabs that challenge normative paradigms about Arabs do not enjoy the same access. In an essay entitled “Embargoed Literature,” Said lamented that “first-rate” literary work by Arabs had gone un-reviewed and unnoticed as if an “iron curtain of indifference and prejudice ruled out any attention to texts that did not reiterate the usual clichés about Islam, violence, sensuality and so forth” (374). Said’s use of the term “embargo” to describe the predicament of this literature suggests the political nature of textual production and consumption. To be embargoed is to endure the consequences of a political prohibition, stoppage or suspension. Of course, Said was not referring to a direct political prohibition but to the perceived reluctance of publishers in the West to publish non-Orientalist literature for Western readers. For example, for a long time it was difficult to get material translated from Arabic into English for publication to a Western audience. Even after Egyptian author Naguib Mafouz won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988 publishers continued to claim that Arabic was a difficult language to translate.

³ For example, both Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Irshad Manji have strong connections with conservative American think tanks that have input into American foreign policy. Ali has had a position with the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research and much of Manji’s criticism of Islam derives from research published by the Middle East Research Institute (MEMRI). Orientalist discourse continues to justify European and American imperial interests and ventures in the Middle East, where International law is under the guise of capitulation agreements and UN Security Council sanctions regimes, and the region is maintained as a colonial space, see Allain 391-404 and Said, “America’s” 50.
Though the amount of material translated from Arabic into English has slowly increased since then, the amount of critical and secondary scholarship on this material does not reflect the significance or diversity of this literature (Majaj et al xvii). Furthermore, literature produced by Arabs is also typically relegated to the Middle Eastern studies departments of academia. Said argued that by containing Arab voices, the region and its people could be “conceptually emasculated, reduced to ‘attitudes,’ ‘trends,’ statistics: in short, dehumanized.” The effect of the Arab poet or novelist in depicting experience, values and humanity was to disrupt “the various patterns (images, clichés, abstractions) by which the Orient is represented” (Orientalism 291). Consequently, these narratives are resisted because their humanising elements complicate and trouble the hegemonising discourses of dominant narratives.

A large corpus of literary work has raised social and political consciousness generally. Some slave narratives, immigrant and ethnic, gay and lesbian, socialist, utopian and leftist, abolition and class literature has raised consciousness in relation to race, gender, international politics and class, and have led to direct political action. Literature has also been integral to many of the armed struggles for liberation of colonised peoples in the twentieth century. Some of this work was considered in Barbara Harlow’s Resistance Literature. In this groundbreaking work, Harlow examined a selection of work by authors such as Palestinian Ghassan Kanafani, Amilcar Cabral leader of the Guinea Bissau

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4 For views on the implications of this approach on perpetuating the Orientalist project, see Moallem 1266 and Shohat, “Area Studies, Transnationalism” 1270. At the same time, the distinct avoidance of sustained engagement with Israel in Middle East Studies reflects the colonial logic of Zionism which views Israel as a European state within but not part of the Middle East, see Stein and Swedenburg 11.
liberation movement and Kenyan Ngugi Wa-Thiongo. She contextualised their work against the anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles mounted by resistance movements such as the PLO (Palestine), the FLN (Algeria), the FLN (Vietnam), FREITLIN (East Timor) or the Sandanista FSLN (Nicaragua) because their work participated in the struggle over the historical record and was as fundamental to the control of power in the colonial process. This kind of literary production is a crucial site through which forms of representation, historical narratives, myths or stereotypes are contested and identities asserted. Harlow argued that literary production supplemented the official narrative of history by adding both the nuances and the alternatives that were omitted in its production, and by doing so resisted the hegemonising influence of Western ideological imperialism.

In Culture and Imperialism, Said argued that control over narrative was fundamental to empire building: “the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging” was essential to empire building (xiii). A raw and visceral example of this is provided in the case of Palestine where the Israeli Defense Forces continually target Palestinian research centres and archival and record repositories to ensure that the historical and cultural record is obliterated. For example, during Operation Defensive Shield in 2002 a special military operation targeted the destruction of Palestinian records (Hass “Operation”). Historically, more conventional forms of censorship have operated to suppress narratives of all genres that threaten authority of the dominant perspective. In recent times, the Internet has provided a medium of publication through which oppositional voices bypass controls exerted by dominant regimes. In Palestine and Iraq, Internet bloggers chronicle daily life under occupation. The Internet news site Electronic Intifada was created in response to Israeli media censorship during
the siege of Ramallah in 2002. Its sister site Electronic Lebanon was established within hours of the first Israeli air strikes on Lebanon in 2006. Such sites facilitate real time reporting from people on the ground and the exposure of alternative narratives to that presented by the Israeli military. The threat that these kinds of narratives pose to the dominant regimes was highlighted during the unrest that erupted in Burma in November 1997. During this time, the Burmese military regime imposed a lockdown on access to the Internet to prevent bloggers from documenting confrontations between monks and civilians and presenting an alternative narrative to the official line provided by the junta to a worldwide audience. These accounts challenge the authority of the dominant narrative by revealing the voices suppressed by it. They are visceral examples of the potential for narrative to support or resist structures of power. A corollary of this is that the official recognition of a corpus of literature can raise general awareness of and testify to a group’s cultural and social life. For example, The Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature was published by Columbia University in 1992 and just prior to the signing of the Oslo Agreements. For a readership based in the West, this timely anthology reinforced the Palestinian claim to a rich cultural and social life and raised the Western world’s social and political consciousness of the Palestinian people. These examples show that narratives can be extremely powerful in shaping and altering public perceptions. More specifically, narratives that contest forms of representation can provoke critical engagement with dominant and more accessible narratives. They can raise awareness because they reveal the weaknesses of these other narratives and sow the seeds for counter discourses. Suvendrini Perera reminds us that the existence of these dissenting narratives alongside dominant narratives testifies to the possibility of dissent and
opposition, but more importantly, that the dominant attitudes are not “inescapably bound” by limited paradigms (“A Line” 29-31).

Literary production in English by Arab women authors has steadily emerged to counter dominant forms of Orientalism. Some authors like Ahdaf Soueif have been publishing since the 1980s, though most emerged on the publishing scene in the 1990s. Their work encompasses a diverse range of genres including memoir, fiction, poetry, plays and non-fiction work and is written by authors from a range of locations including the Middle East and the West. Collectively, they address diverse themes such as politics, war, military occupation, history, religion and cultural issues. Their work challenges the perception that Arab women are predominantly concerned with resisting gender oppression arising out of patriarchal or religious frameworks. This perception reflects the Eurocentric bias embedded in Western feminist approaches that situate women’s resistance in terms of gender oppression. In her seminal essay “Under Western Eyes” Chandra Talpade Mohanty argued that Western feminist practices were inattentive to the material realities of third world women’s lives. First world feminists assumed a priority of issues around which all women organised against. These priorities structure relations of dominance simply in terms of gender difference and struggles against the patriarchy. This approach situates women outside of other structures that affect subjectivity such as colonialism, globalisation and class. Recourse to the “third world difference” as a reading practice enables the West to situate these women along a unidirectional power matrix that defines them as illiterate, powerless, religious or even as revolutionary. This means for example that reading practices are encoded to identify oppression through the familiar tropes of religion or patriarchy. As Inderpal Grewal and
Caren Kaplan argue, Islamic fundamentalism appears as the cause of women’s oppression even though women are oppressed within other religious fundamentalisms also (Scattered 19). This kind of reading ignores the material realities of the legacies of colonialism, the impact of globalisation or capitalism and continues to reinforce the West’s ideological and developmental supremacy.

The focus in this thesis is to present a heterogeneous picture of Arab women and of Islam that resists normative and homogenous narratives. Attention to these works situates women as material and historical subjects rather than as objects produced by hegemonic discourse. I maintain that it is this connection to the materiality of their lives and their worldliness that challenges their construction as Other.

The six authors represented in this thesis were selected for their interventions into discursive practices that contain Arab voices and their activism within the West. In this respect they demonstrate their intention to engage in speaking truth to power. In Representations of the Intellectual, Said argued that the public intellectual had a moral and ethical obligation to objectively critique structures of power. The public intellectual was effective only through the interventions made into exposing how power operated discursively through “orthodoxy and dogma” to construct and represent truths (Representations 11).

Though Said challenged public intellectuals to speak truth to power he acknowledged that the challenge lay in being heard. In “Permission to Narrate” he explained that the truth alone was insufficient to resist or reverse the dominant narrative. He argued: “Facts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain, and circulate them” (254). This problem is painfully but symbolically captured through the example of the
Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation and imperialism. Despite the sheer volume of reporting by international and Israeli human rights organisations and the United Nations detailing the effects of occupation arising from the Separation Wall, water allocation and consumption, illegal settlements, human rights abuses, extra-judicial killings, checkpoints and restrictions of movement on Palestinian life these abuses and occupation continue. The facts have proven insufficient to mobilise many in the wider global community or even in Israel to actively engage in stopping these abuses. On the contrary, the Palestinian narrative has to work hard to convince listeners of its validity. For example, since 1948, the Palestinian people have had to convince the rest of the world that they exist because the Zionist narrative has captured the world’s attention. Famously, in 1969, former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir declared to the London Times that the Palestinians “did not exist” (qtd in Makdisi, Palestine 78). Courageous Israeli historians have since corrected the historical record and documented the genocide and ethnic cleansing of Palestine. Though proof of this was found in Israeli government archival material, the dominant Zionist narrative about the founding of the Israeli state continues to perpetuate the myth that Palestine was a land without a people.5

The Zionist narrative is sustained by a long history of propaganda that feeds on Western guilt in relation to the Holocaust and uses the Judeo-Christian tradition to demarcate its difference to Islam and its Arab neighbours. Jews cannot be oppressors in this narrative because it constructs them as victims. The corollary

5 There is a wealth of scholarship that exposes the myths behind the creation of the State of Israel, for a sampling of these, see Finkelstein; Morris; Pappe and Said, The Question of Palestine.
to the normalisation of the Zionist narrative is the silencing of the Palestinian narrative. Critique of Israeli state policies is quickly censured as anti-Semitic. The force of the Zionist narrative underpins the sentiment that Israeli aggression and oppression of Palestinians is an unmentionable taboo topic (Said, “America’s” 47). In this context, legitimate Palestinian resistance to occupation is treated as terrorism and the facts that Palestinians are trying to communicate are always read as questionable and untrue. The immense power of this discourse makes it difficult for anyone in solidarity with the Palestinians to engage in progressive politics. A terrible situation arises where the facts alone cannot speak nor have they been able to erode the “superior force of the ideological consensus” of the Zionist narrative (“Permission” 38). The truth is disabled because the dominant narratives cannot recognise any other. Given the enormous weight of the discursive machinery that is put to work in the Orientalist project, we must ask the question then that if the Arab woman speaks, will she be heard?

If the Arab woman speaks will she be heard?

The rhetorical question posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” points to the problem of enabling the minoritised or Othered to speak. Spivak’s challenge to academia was to reconsider the effect of the discursive traditions that are employed to give the subaltern a voice. She argued that these discursive frameworks inevitably collude with the imperialist

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6 For discussion on the overt silencing of Palestinian and Israeli voices, see Alsultany 51 and Elia 65. For information on self-hating Jews, see <www.masada2000.org> a Website that lists more than 8000 names including Israeli Historian Ilan Pappe and Australian freelance journalist and author Antony Lowenstein.
project. Spivak’s question is a provocative starting point for my argument because it contemplates the effectiveness of the literary activism mounted by those invested in the project of cultural resistance. Interrogating whether or not the subaltern can speak may expose the way forward to more effectively speak truth to power. I develop two aspects to this issue: the subjectivity of the subaltern and the discursive frameworks that shape the way the West hears her.

To speak truth to power assumes a subjectivity that knows where and how to mount its resistance. Said’s call requires knowing what truths to represent, when, where and how to make the intervention (Representations 88). This call is predicated upon self-awareness dissociated from its entanglement with structures of power and the ability to enact self-representation as subjects rather than objects. Put more eloquently, “the starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and in ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an affinity of traces, without leaving an inventory” (Gramsci 324). With this in mind, speaking truth to power requires acknowledging the traces of history that have led to the creation of the self as Other. A chilling example of how the colonised became the Other is rendered in Tayeb Salih’s classic text Season of Migration to the North published in 1968.

This book is regarded as depicting the fate of colonised African men estranged from country, culture and self. The cause of this estrangement is revealed in the library of protagonist Mustaffa Saeed. Saeed maintains a secret library, which is a replica of an Englishman’s library complete with fireplace. Every book on its shelves is in English, including the Qu’ran. The bookshelves show an extensive disciplinary range that explains the Arab, the African and the Muslim through history, religion, culture, anthropology, politics and science. Saeed comes to know
himself, his history, memory, religion and culture through Eurocentric discourses and in the process is displaced from narratives that are more rightly his. The effect of this is to dislocate him from a grounded sense of self.

Frantz Fanon wrote that colonialism had roots that deeply affected the psyche of the colonised and led to cultural estrangement:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s head of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. (Wretched 169)

These distortions result in what Said called “epistemological mutations” (Orientalism xvi). When the authority of the discursive frameworks is internalised a form of self-Orientalising occurs that leads to displacement. Amal Amireh’s analysis of the work of four Arab feminists provides a good example of this. In “Writing the Difference: Feminists’ Invention of the Arab Woman,” she discusses Evelyn Accad, Weded Zenie-Ziegler, Margot Badran and Nayra Atiya, four authors who have each written on various aspects of Arab women’s subjectivity. Amireh’s analysis shows that each of these women exploited the nexus of authority and authenticity afforded them by their position as Arab women residing in the West. The authors emphasised their authenticity as Arab women to legitimise their right to represent their “Arab sisters.” Each also classified themselves as “hybrid” because they lived and worked in the West, to assert their impartiality. Despite these claims, their analysis reinforces the way Arab women are situated by the West. Amireh shows that Badran’s editorial decisions in the translation of the memoir of Egyptian feminist Huda Shaarawi evokes harems and harem stories and diminished Shaarawi’s public and political activities. The
editorial decisions appear to have been motivated by a desire to speak to the Western market rather than offer an accurate translation that captures the spirit of the memoir. Evelyn Accad’s analysis on women and sexuality depicts Arab women as illiterate victims. As a Greek Orthodox Egyptian returning to Egypt, Zenie-Ziegler describes her journey in Orientalist terms and probes the women she interviews in ways that confirm their difference from her. She frames Arab women’s oppression through Islam. Atiya similarly presents Egyptian women’s difference through voyeuristic depictions of female circumcision, and the defloration of girls on their wedding night rather than highlighting their similarities with women from other cultures. Amireh concludes that each of these authors failed to interrogate her own position and to recognise that they were acting as proxy for the West. They internalised the discourses of Western feminism and applied them to other Arab women in an uncritical manner. As a result, they were displaced from the cultural materiality of their Arab sisters.

Another example of this is provided in Desiring Arabs where Joseph Massad shows that Arabs internalised European representations about themselves and reoriented their sexual and civilisational desires accordingly. Massad argues that Arab intellectuals internalised Eurocentric ideas about civilisation and development, and in the process internalised the “epistemology” by which Europe judged them (6). Sex and sexuality provided a means by which the West situated Arabs on a teleology of modernity and progress. Arabs wanting to appear progressive sought to demonstrate their similarity with the West in order to breach this difference. Eventually, Arab cultural production edged towards assimilation and epistemological affinity with Europe. This, Massad suggests, indicated that whether consciously or unconsciously, Arabs were being shamed into assimilation.
and fulfilling a teleological end that accords with the Orientalist project (416).

This kind of dilemma affects the subaltern’s subjectivity and reflects that of minority cultures generally:

On the one hand, there is the desire to define one’s ethnic and cultural uniqueness against the pressures of the majority culture and on the other hand an equally strong, if not stronger, urge to abandon that uniqueness in order to conform to the hegemonic pressures of the [white] liberal humanistic culture. (JanMohamed 289)

Abdul R. JanMohamed suggests that the narcissistic quality of the dominant white culture puts “enormous pressure on Blacks and other minorities to recreate themselves and their culture as approximate versions of the Western humanist tradition, as images that [white] ‘humanism’ will recognise and understand” (290). Arguably, these tensions have the effect of creating what Fanon and Said have suggested are “mutated” persons who, in creating themselves in another’s image, will undoubtedly ask, “In reality, who am I?” (Fanon 200).

This crisis in identity is compounded by discursive practices that name and situate the Other. In seeking to be heard, the Arab woman author must not only know herself and the traces of power that have contributed to her subjectivity, but must also be aware of the assumptions that pervade reading practices that perpetuate the power arrangements between Arabs and the West.

**Limitations of Eurocentric interpretive frameworks**

Otherness is inscribed in the Western metropolis through Eurocentric discourses that encode values that take the West as their point of reference. To begin with, many of the ideas and philosophical systems that arose out of European
enlightenment are naturalised as universal principles and ideals. These pervade our “everyday habits of thought” without being grounded in context. For example, questions of political modernity, concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, human rights, equality before the law, the notion of the individual, distinctions between public and private and social justice are all derived from European enlightenment humanism (Chakrabarty 4). In Provincializing Europe Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that this epistemic hegemony enables the West to situate itself as the ideal embodiment of these universal aspirations. The corollary to this is that the non-Western world is situated on an aspirational trajectory towards enlightenment ideals. The West is seen as the originator of modernity, secularism and freedom that the non-Western world later reproduces (Chakrabarty 7). This developmental trajectory is used to justify the treatment of the Arabs and explain the Arabs themselves. The polemic used to justify American foreign policy in the Middle East demonstrates the ramifications of this paradigm. These policies are purportedly aimed at bringing democracy, Western liberalism and freedom to oppressive religions and regimes.

The epistemological problem that this creates is compounded by the fact that the disciplines in the humanistic traditions draw their philosophical basis from the European intellectual tradition. Aamir Mufti argues that the “culture of theory” is the last bastion of Eurocentrism (486). Discourses deriving from the West are respected for their cultural authority. These theories claim to make all Others known but are severely limited when applied to explicating alterity that derives from a non-Western context. The culture of theory draws on the non-Western world as analytical material that inadvertently supports the idea of Europe, that is, the non-Western world is known only with reference to European history and
structures. Ultimately, this idea of Europe is deployed in global power relations to reflect the “social and cultural force of this idea of Europe in intellectual life” (Mufti 474). The impact of these limitations has been pointedly demonstrated in feminist discourses. Transnational feminists and feminists of colour, including Trinh T. Minh-ha and Chandra Mohanty have shown that the third world woman is a construction of the myopic ethnocentrism of Western feminism. Through various manifestations of ideological tourism, the first world feminist intrigued about the native, third world woman enacts a kind of voyeurism that flattens and ignores any difference between these women, and disregards historical and material contexts.\(^7\) The process contributes to the Othering of the third world woman and consolidates the subject status of the Western feminist. The result is confirmation of the colonialist epistemology where the third world woman is known and unknowing because the centre of scholarship continues to be the West. This woman effectively disappears through the discourse because she is only known through it and cannot represent herself. Spivak suggests that the process of cultural imperialism was itself a process of “worlding” in which this alterity is created:

> If these ‘facts’ were remembered, not only in the study of British literature but in the study of the literatures of the European colonizing cultures of the great age of Imperialism, we would produce a narrative, in literary history, of the ‘worlding’ of what is now called the ‘Third World.’ (“Three Women’s Texts” 262)

Transnational feminists have problematised Western liberal notions of female subjectivity. They demonstrate other ways of conceptualising subjectivity that do

\(^7\) For critical views on this issue, see Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes” 61-82 and Trinh 82-87.
not arise out of the Western liberal tradition. In this respect they demonstrate the need to provincialise Europe to loosen its intellectual hegemony, and the imperative to ground theoretical approaches in their material realities. However, as Mohanty points out, simply taking note of the proliferation of these other narratives will not in itself loosen the hegemony of European thought; attention must be paid in practical terms to how these texts are “read, understood, and located institutionally” (Feminism 76).

The attention to scholarship and theory encouraged by theoretical approaches such as Marxism, deconstructionism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism disengages practitioners from the rich worldliness of the context critiqued. In practice, the codes established by academic practice enable practitioners to easily become “Marxist,” or any of the other “ists.” This trivialises the real world context out of which these theories arose (Culture and Imperialism 387, 389). Eventually, the revolutionary roots at the heart of these approaches are overshadowed by the discursive traditions established when they become academic disciplines. The intellectual allegiance commanded by these discourses often results in their uncritical and inappropriate application. Said pointed out, for example, that European theory and Western Marxism, for instance have not proved particularly useful in their resistance to Western imperialism in the third world. Said’s oeuvre demonstrated a life long concern with the need to be cognizant of the effects of blind allegiance to this kind of power. Using the analogy of a car, he suggested that:

The morality and principles of an intellectual should not constitute a sort of sealed gearbox that drives thought and action in one direction and is powered by an engine with only one fuel source […]. The intellectual
has to walk around, has to have the space in which to stand and talk back to authority. (Representations 120-21)

For Said, the “true intellectual is a secular being” who is able to critically and objectively engage with these authorities, whether they are religious, intellectual, nationalistic or professional rather than offer blind allegiance and faith (Representations 120). This critical secularism is essential to recognise the uniqueness of narratives within their own material contexts. It encourages self-reflexivity that assists rather than hinders the attempt to speak truth to power.

Critical secularity is particularly important when applying approaches to representation because these are mired in Eurocentricity. All forms of representation reflect matrices of power that can only be understood by questioning their ontological basis for construction: who, what and why they are formulated (Said, Culture 341). The significance of this can be illustrated by considering the implications of applying postcolonial theory to literary production by Other women in the Western metropolis. Texts that draw on the tropes of travel, migration and displacement lend themselves to the paradigms offered by postcolonial theory. The concept of the hybrid emerged from the need to talk about ethnicity in a postcolonial context. In an increasingly globalised world characterised by cultural interactions and multiple displacements, the concept offered a dynamic and attractive explanatory paradigm. Demonstrating a marked shift away from essentialist notions of identity, proponents of the concept of hybridity argued that it represented identity in process because it was fluid and situational. Cultural theorists Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, for example, championed the emancipatory possibilities afforded by the concept. Cultural hybridity identified new modes of social, cultural and political affiliations that
eliminated the need to talk and think in terms of cultural essentialism. The hybrid’s unique position was thought to grant it a liberating consciousness that could look past its multiple sites of belonging. The hybrid was believed to enjoy and experience a kind of liminal status that transcended all boundaries. Homi Bhabha’s definition of the hybrid, for instance, is often cited for its emphasis on the premise that this liminality is culturally productive and liberating. In his essay “How Newness Enters the World” he argued that the hybrid was the central agent for the remaking of boundaries in order to arrive at the new and that the migrant’s survival depended on discovering how this newness entered the world (227). Despite the liberatory promises of the concept, however, its application exposes biases and assumptions about implicit encodings of power that continue to reinforce the supremacy of the metropolitan centre.

Critics have found that the concept is generally applied to the colonised culture to articulate how it had been destabilised. As Leela Ghandi astutely observes, “the West remains the privileged meeting ground for all ostensibly cross-cultural conversations” (136). Consequently, the hybrid’s subjectivity is measured as distance from an aspirational centre. This essential bias is suggested through Bhabha’s celebrated definition because his suggestion that the hybrid is a new political object that is “neither one nor the other” essentially defines it in terms of a deficiency (“The Commitment” 25). This new person is depicted in a constant process of searching for an identity that transcends all previously known boundaries. Nonetheless, as readings of hybridity are underpinned by the assumption that the Other is on a trajectory towards the West, it remains that the hybrid has lost its original essence but is never able to attain the status of whiteness that epitomises this deficiency. Such readings depoliticise the subject’s agency.
Critics of the concept of hybridity argue that it conceals the structural differences of social, cultural and political domination evident in local encounters. \(^8\) Aijaz Ahmad argues that as a concept, hybridity is devoid of specificity because it does not “foreground geo-political configurations of power” nor “transcend the inequalities engendered by colonialism itself” (“Politics” 17). As Ahmad argues:

Most individuals are really not free to fashion themselves anew with each passing day, nor do communities arise out of and fade into the thin air of the infinitely contingent. Among migrants themselves, only the privileged can live a life of constant mobility and surplus pleasure [...]. Most migrants tend to be poor and experience displacement not as cultural plenitude but as torment; what they seek is not displacement, but precisely, a place from where they may begin anew. (“Politics” 16)

Ahmad’s position is informed by his critique of postcolonial theory in general. He argues that it represents the privileged circumstances of intellectual elite from the colonies whose circumstances do not reflect the social and economic predicament of most migrants. By privileging mobility and travel to the metropolitan centre, the figure of the hybrid is “free of gender, class, identifiable political location” and resembles a privileged bourgeois male onlooker (“Politics” 13). In contrast, the circumstances of ordinary migrants to the centre are vastly different to that imagined by the privileged elite. Similarly, Arif Dirlik argues in “The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism” that the concerns of

\(^8\) For critiques of the concept of hybridity, see Ahmad “The Politics” 17-18; Ahmed Strange Encounters 12-13; Dirlik “The Postcolonial” 343, and Lo “Beyond Happy hybridity” 152-168.
postcolonial intellectuals do not reflect the “problems of social, political and cultural domination” (33!). Ahmad’s argument draws attention to the incessant Othering that greets the migrant in the metropolis in spite of language that purports to welcome and include. Reading strategies that privilege the concept of hybridity situate the individual as Other both to self and Others. This kind of reading depoliticises the subject and denies it a voice of protest against the processes that maintain its marginalised status or that inappropriately represent it.

Pedagogical strategies continue to reinforce binaries that inscribe self/Other, subject/object and colonised/coloniser. The growing ethnicisation in metropolitan centres is one example. The emphasis in the Western metropolis on the subjectivity of the object, whether this is located in the West or outside, whether it is assimilated, a hybrid, segregated or Westernised, situates it on a trajectory of belonging and becoming to the West but always inscribes it as Other. For example, multiculturalism exoticises and celebrates different ethnicities but whiteness itself is not categorised in these terms. Instead, multiculturalism has the opposite effect of stabilising the hegemony of whiteness (Hall 227). Metropolitan definitions of subjectivity contain the Other by emphasising difference under the guise of Western liberal tolerance, but actually assume that there are core values of the dominant group that the Other groups must assimilate into. Stanley Fish delineates two versions of multiculturalism: boutique and strong. Boutique multiculturalism is represented by superficial interests in the Other through ethnic restaurants and festivals but does not extend to accepting the core values of the other culture seriously. Strong multiculturalism purports to be about tolerance but is a deeper instance of boutique multiculturalism because it is untenable to assume that this position can comfortably encompass all of the Other’s values. Boutique
multiculturalism is more a manifestation of style through food, eating and going “ethnic.” Supported by consumer culture, it becomes another way through which the Western subject can become the stranger, albeit temporarily. Similarly, Sara Ahmed suggests that multiculturalism is a way of living with difference that has its defined limits and exclusions. Differences that can be reduced to style and therefore assimilated are acceptable, but those that cannot, are not. Values of the Other that cannot be assimilable are viewed as a threat to the nation. Clearly, there is a need to be critically attentive to the “camouflaging jargon” used by interpretive communities as what may appear to be inclusive is another way by which strangers are interpellated (Said, Secular Criticism 26). In this context, the implication is that only certain narratives are expected and tolerated with respect to cultural contact with the West: the assimilationist or the resistant one.

These modes of interpellation mean that discursive frameworks contain Arab voices in the West within defined domains. Irrespective of whether the author is located in the Western metropolis already or published in the West but situated in the Arab countries, their voices can be consumed and contained through reading strategies that interpellate Otherness. Identity politics define Otherness with values that situate them in a power matrix that positions them in relation to the West. Therefore, as Ahmad suggests, unless subjects choose their own positions, these will be assigned to them. Concepts such as exile, migrant, cultural hybrid, ethnicity, third world, third world woman, Arab and Muslim, are encoded with specific values that underpin how the West understands the conceptual category of Arab or Muslim woman and the location of that woman in relation to the West. Listening to the voice of the Arab woman author may be a problematic mission because of the discursive constraints through which we as listeners in the West hear her.
I also draw on Kwame Anthony Appiah’s warning to Africans of the dangers of an uncritical application of postcolonial theory to African cultural production. His warning is relevant in relation to reading the work of Arab women authors in the West. Appiah warns against modes of reading that situate Africans in a way that assigns value to their Otherness and of the danger of becoming “otherness-machines”:

For all the while, in Africa’s cultures, there are those who will not see themselves as other. Despite the overwhelming reality of economic decline; despite unimaginable poverty; despite wars, malnutrition, disease, and political instability – African cultural productivity grows apace: popular literatures, oral narrative and poetry, dance, music, and visual art all thrive. The contemporary cultural production of many African societies – and the many traditions whose evidences so vigorously remain – is an antidote to the dark vision of the postcolonial novelist. (440)

This thesis is focused on an archive of literary work by women authors who identify themselves as Arab or Muslim and who write in response to the politicised issues affecting Arabs and Muslims in the current global imagining. Furthermore, each claims an affiliation by birth or present location with a country in the Middle East. The authors include Ahdaf Soueif an Egyptian, Suad Amiry a Palestinian, Jean Said Makdisi who was born in Palestine but lives in exile in Lebanon, an Iraqi known as Riverbend, Leila Aboulela who is of Egyptian and Sudanese extraction and who has lived in Sudan, the United Kingdom and is now living in Indonesia, and Arab-American Diana Abu-Jaber whose father is Jordanian and mother is American. The archive represents a transnational
grouping including those resident in the Middle East such as Amiry, Makdisi and Riverbend, the diasporic like Abu-Jaber or nomadic such as Aboulela and Soueif. The texts include the genres of fiction, testimony and memoir. They all write creatively in English and are published in the West. What unites them is their literary activism in response to displacement experienced as a result of their relationship with the West.

The challenge for this thesis is in finding a way to talk about these Arab women’s voices without turning into “otherness-machines.” Already, the difficulty in defining the archive reflects the discursive challenges that this project raises. The literary archive is bound by the ethnic/cultural category “Arab” that includes diasporic and non-diasporic voices from a number of countries that are collected by the West in a highly politicised group called the Middle East. Their use of English and their location of publication in the West further foreground the imperative to negotiate the interpretive frameworks that continue to situate these voices as Other.

**The concept of Arab ethnicity**

Sociologists have shown that the rise in ethno-political consciousness for Arabs in the Arab world and outside it has a strong ideological and political referent and is more of a political claim than a racial one. The category “Arab” subsumes a myriad of ethnic, religious, national and cultural affiliations including Bedouin,

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9 The Middle East is a highly politicised concept. It is commonly used to define those countries that are of interest to American foreign policy. Media usage includes in this broad grouping Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan. These areas are important for the Arab-Israeli conflict, the security of the Persian Gulf and its oil resources. For information on how the concept was constructed, see Majid, *Unveiling* 181 par 31.
Berbers, Jews, Copts, Phoenicians, Christians, Druze, Muslims, Egyptians, Moroccans, Algerians, Lebanese and Iraqis. Notwithstanding the paradoxes outlined, a person from an Arab country will identity themselves as “Ibn Arab” or “Arabi” while still emphasising their own distinctive identity as say, Lebanese or Egyptian (Bartrouney 37). Sociologists have shown that the emergence of the concept of Arab pan-ethnicity is closely linked with political conflicts in the Arab world since the late 1970s. After World War II many culturally, socially and politically distinct countries such as Egypt and Morocco found a need to unite as Arabs in the face of Western domination. Arab diasporic identity in countries such as the United States (US), Canada and Australia also reflected the way Arabs were situated in relation to the West through the social, economic and political conditions in late Ottoman Syria and later post-World War II periods.\(^\text{10}\) Prior to World War II, immigrants from first the Ottoman Empire and then the Anglo-French Mandate regions were “whitewashed” as honorary Europeans.\(^\text{11}\) The ease with which this occurred depended on factors such as similarities in religion, skin colour, and language. These early immigrants often affiliated along the lines of community or religion rather than race or ethnicity.\(^\text{12}\) Political events in the Arab world since the mid 1960s radically changed the way ethnic Arab communities in the United States, Australia and Canada constituted their identity. In the US and Australia, rising ethno-political consciousness resulted in the emergence of the hyphenated Arab-American and Arab-Australian identities. For Arabs in the US

\(^{10}\) The general characteristics and driving forces behind successive waves of migration are extensively documented, see Aboud 69-89 and Naber 39-40.

\(^{11}\) For more information on the white-washing or making invisible of Arab immigrants to America and Australia, see Bartrouney 42-50 and Naber 50-52.

\(^{12}\) For discussion of the impact of the different historical “push” factors on the religious composition and community affiliations, see Bartrouney 39; Naber 38-40 and Shain 47.
this occurred after the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, while in Australia this occurred after the Gulf War in 1990. Sociologists have shown that Arab immigrants who identify with “Arab causes” do so not out of an attachment to a homeland but because of a concern with the politics of inclusion and anti-discrimination with a view to influencing government policy and public consciousness in the host country (Nagel and Staeheli 19-20).

The authors’ motivation to identify with “Arab causes” and the politicisation of issues in relation to Arabs and Muslims reflects what Michael Humphrey terms “Arab pride.” Humphrey’s work on Arab identity in the diaspora resonates with the political activism that underpins the work of the authors in this study because their work contains a strong undercurrent that addresses the enduring legacy of colonialism in the region. Humphrey suggests that ethnic pride amongst Arab immigrants connects with a deeper historical sense of unresolved cultural injury. Arab identity, he argues, is not merely constructed within the host country, but draws on a longer historical narrative about the cultural legacies of imperial and colonial encounters. Arab cultural and national identity is impacted by the twentieth-century experience of colonialism. The many examples through recent history include British and French colonialism at the turn of the last century, the crushing defeat of the Arab forces by Israel in 1967, Israel’s continued occupation of Palestine and other Arab land, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its continued occupation by coalition forces. Humphrey argues that “injuries to ethnic pride in the context of multiculturalism contain

\[13\] For discussion of the mobilization and politicization of Arab identity in America and Australia, see Aboud 67; Nagel and Staeheli 16-19; Salaita 150 and Shain 47-57. Leila Ahmed discusses the constructed nature of Arab identity, see 243-307.
unacknowledged conversations with Arab injuries which remain as legacies of imperial power" (221). Ultimately, the impact of international events on ethnic pride is to “extend Arab immigrant identity into Arab diasporic identity,” the result of which is that contemporary political and national crisis in Arab states is experienced as injury at a distance in the diaspora, played out in real injuries to self-respect and even physical harm from anti-Arab racism (222). The authors selected here each address the politicisation of Arab issues and Arab identity in their work. That authors from diverse national backgrounds express a diasporic belonging is indicative of their need to make some kind of redress to the politicisation of Arab issues in the West. Their texts, produced in English and published in the West, ostensibly reach a wide audience in order to make this intervention.

The concept of “the West” is a powerful organising principle even though, as Mufti emphasises, “there is no stable and ultimately satisfying way of distinguishing Western from non-Western” (“Global” 476). The concept of the West is conventionally grounded in the history of European colonisation and imperialism. Just as the concept of the Arab encompasses a wide range of ethnic, racial, religious, national and cultural affiliations, the concept of the West also encompasses a diverse range of races and nationalities, and a range of subjectivities that includes the diasporic (including Arab), minority and marginalised. My use of the concept of the West in this thesis includes countries in the English-speaking world, primarily North America, the United Kingdom and Europe. Where I refer to the reader located in the West, I am specifically thinking of those readers within these locations who consciously or unconsciously apply Eurocentric interpretive paradigms that continue to assert the cultural and moral dominance of the West.
Language and form

My initial interest in the reason why the authors I had selected wrote in English turned out to be a red herring. Various anthologies and critical work on “Anglophone” and “Francophone” literature suggested that this was a viable course of enquiry: each author had or continues to experience a relationship with colonialism and English was not in most cases their mother tongue. I could see that the work focused on displacement from cultural roots because of colonialism and that the coloniser’s tools of form and language were used to mount cultural resistance. However, the qualifier “Anglophone” did not resonate with the authors’ explanations for their relationship to the English language and for their reasons to use it for creative expression. They expressed a genuine right to use both languages, and the right to creative expression in English. In an interview published by the Africa Centre, Soueif says that she thinks in both English and Arabic but that writing in English gives her more freedom because she can use English literary terms “better than she can use Arabic.” Reviewing the authors’ motivation to write in English cautioned me against labouring the point because this assignation seemed to deny them legitimacy and was at odds with their sense of ownership over the language.

The qualifier “Anglophone” is often used on literature as a way of delegitimising literary production produced in English by Anglicised subjects created through colonialism and globalisation. It has described the work of authors like Salman Rushdie, Nadine Gordimer, R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Chinua Achebe, Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela and Arundhati Roy. It is associated with concepts like third world, race and culture. It is a term that is used to situate work that is outside the canon of English literature because Anglophone English
literature is written in English but is considered a different kind of English. As Peter Hitchcock puts it this is “someone else’s English, broken English” (755). It is the production of elsewhere, it “locates a culture somewhere, just anywhere but England” (756). The term speaks about contemporary relationships of culture and power politics. In most English Departments in the West and the former colonies, the study of these kinds of literature is marginalised from canonical English literature though it has at the same time problematised it. The study of it is generally divided into periodical epochs that reflect English national history. Some writers from minority communities are allowed into the canon in “postcolonial ghettos” that demonstrate a resistance to the Englishness of the Others (Spivak, A Critique 1). This resistance to the Englishness of the Other problematises issues of borders and movement and evokes through language the tensions of a globalised world.

This vexed term foregrounds English as a global vernacular and forces a more critical rethinking of the contemporary relationships between culture, power and politics. On the one hand, as Sneja Gunew suggests in “Technologies of the Self,” English may be losing its power as a technology of subjectification. As a worldwide lingua franca, English is now a much less effective tool of interpellation. On the other hand, the globalisation of English obscures the material and cultural differences that exist between users of the language. This incorrectly creates an air of familiarity between exchanges conducted in English that conceal structures of power in operation and the material and cultural differences of the speakers. In an interview published in Edebiyat, Ahdaf Soueif explains: “In whatever language you write, you write against a backdrop of that language, of that culture, of the assumptions of the native speakers, of what has
been done before in the literature of that language” (282). Soueif raises critical implications of the epistemological basis for language on authorship and readers’ interpretation. Her comment profiles the difficulty of translating and representing ideas and values from one cultural system into the language of another. The use of English as a medium inadvertently creates certain expectations of the text and the author. The implied reader will assume that the text reflects the values and assumptions of the West. Presumably, the reader of these texts brings their own Eurocentric assumptions to bear on the text also.

This project aims to show that the nexus between form, language and the location of publication of these texts in the West has the political effect of pushing the boundaries of theoretical and discursive formations that are applied to work like theirs. The writing process is not simply a matter of translating material but of rendering an understanding between one system of meaning into another. Each text conveys a specific Arab articulation of experience through the medium of English. Aboulela, for example, explains that her halal fiction is about portraying an Islamic worldview. Soueif has revealed that bilingual readers can detect the Arabic beneath a thin veil of English. She explains that a translation of her book “would have to be a reworking, almost a rewriting” (“An Interview” 282). Her work, like those of the other authors selected here is concerned with the process of cultural interpretation and of cultural dialogue (Massad, “The Politics”). Where the Arab mind and experience was only available to the West in translation, epitomised in Mustaffa Saeed’s library – these kinds of books make it available to the West by authors who can translate their world and present it in English and on their own terms. In this sense, their work operates in a covert manner. It addresses the Western world from within it behaving as “a peripheral, off-centre work that
gradually enters the West and then requires acknowledgment” (Said, Culture and Imperialism 288).

In this project of speaking truth to power, the authors must grapple with reading strategies that occlude their efficacy. At this point, I return to Chakrabarty’s book and an example he cites to illustrate how reading strategies privilege the West. In this example, he critiques a review of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* with reference to the critic’s argument:

> Though Saleem Sinai narrates in English [...] his intertexts for both writing history and writing fiction are doubled: they are, on the one hand, from Indian legends, films and literature and, on the other, from the West — *The Tin Drum*, *Tristram Shandy*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and so on. (Provincializing 28)

Chakrabarty observes that only references that are from “the West” are mentioned and the author does not name any of the Indian allusions that make Rushdie’s intertextuality “doubled.” He argues that this ignorance “shared and unstated, is part of the assumed compact that makes it ‘easy’ to include Rushdie in English Department offerings on postcolonialism” (28). Through this example it is apparent that interpretive strategies continue to reimpose the ideological supremacy of the West. This means that commitments, politics and identities of interest to the West and bolster its hegemony are privileged over others.

Furthermore, life-writing narratives are easily accommodated into the Orientalist project because the third world difference can be emphasised. They also feed the West’s voyeuristic need to glimpse life behind the harem and to understand Arab
Witness and testimony documents are also another burgeoning industry. These narratives feed a kind of necro-capitalism, where Western guilt over the legacies of the imperial project is appeased by a sense of outrage and indignation over injustice that never extends much past discussion. For fiction that is written and produced within the Western metropolis, Otherness and difference can be consumed under the guise of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. The use of English heightens the sense of a common culture and common understanding and glosses over difference.

The imperative would be to find a way to talk about these texts without falling into the trap of enabling this material to be co-opted into the Orientalist project. The project requires a critical awareness of the impact of the critic’s location in the West on how the material issues raised by the authors are received in light of the sheer weight of the social narrative. The critic located in the West must act as a pane of glass so as not to occlude the author’s voices unnecessarily, and act as a mirror to reflect reading practices and interpretive strategies that situate Otherness and prevent these narratives from more effectively achieving the kind of social activism they might otherwise accomplish.

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14 An illuminating example of this is recounted in Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi’s book *Scheherazade Goes West*. The author writes that while promoting her autobiography *A Harem Girlhood* in the US, she observed that audiences were most interested in the concept of the harem and not the substance of her autobiography. She observed that audience questions reflected Orientalist biases and pre-conceived ideas regardless of how she explained what the word actually meant.
Structure of this thesis

To this end, two chapters in dialogue bracket this thesis. Collectively, the chapters trace the impact of discourses that manifest epistemic violence on Arabs when they inscribe Otherness. Chapter one examines the effectiveness of two witness texts written from under military occupation. Both were selected for the international attention that they received. Suad Amiry’s *Sharon and my Mother-in-Law* was reviewed by major newspapers, the author toured the international book circuit and appeared on radio and television talk shows internationally. Riverbend’s *Baghdad Burning* won a French International prize for literary journalism and the book was also reviewed internationally. Each author writes with an awareness that this kind of testimony is consumed within the West as a kind of necro-capitalism. The West feeds on these narratives to appease guilt or a sense of innate moral superiority by appearing to be concerned and outraged at the injustices. Inevitably, these forms of consumption represent discursive approaches that render these testimonies inert. In this chapter, I show that each author uses the testimonial form to interpellate further witnesses in the West to their cause through techniques that engage their audiences in a way that resists forms of necro-capitalistic consumption. My analysis will draw on Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s theories on the “state of exception” to show that both texts testify to an extreme form of legalised marginalisation whereby some citizens are denied their humanity and basic human rights through a complete inversion of the state of law. The testimony provided by these authors testifies to life within these states of exception, and to the narratives that are suppressed by the discourses that perpetuate the dominant power’s authority over them. They testify to the extreme consequences that can result from marginalisation and Othering. My reading will
discuss the techniques that each author uses to build solidarity with communities outside Palestine or Iraq in order to resist forms of consumption that undermine their call for justice.

The urgency of Amiry and Riverbend’s narratives is complemented by the anxieties conveyed through the fiction of Ahdaf Soueif’s novels, the subject of chapter two. In *In the Eye of the Sun* and *The Map of Love*, Soueif depicts the millennial anxieties of a generation of Arabs who had witnessed the rise and decline of Egypt’s role in pan-Arab nationalism. This generation of postcolonial Egyptians came of age during Gamal ‘Abd el-Nasser’s leadership and witnessed the rise and decline of Egypt’s role in pan-Arab nationalism. In the new millennium, they are disengaged and disenfranchised from Egyptian politics and are anxious about Egypt’s role in the current global arena, and the increasing sense of powerlessness perceived by ordinary Egyptians under their current political regime. In this chapter I restore the worldliness to Soueif’s novels by situating them within their socio-political context. In this context, the novels provide a framework through which the continuities of empire are clearly illuminated and the paralysis of the present political moment is revealed to have its genesis in the gradual displacement of the Egyptian perspective by Eurocentric narratives of colonialism and postcolonialism. This global imagining interprets Egyptian history and situates it in a teleology that is leading further and further away from reconciliation with the West. The novels trace Egypt’s Othering from the global community and also within itself.

Existing criticism of Soueif’s work draws on theoretical frameworks provided by postcolonial discourse. My reading shows that this discursive framework depoliticises the Egyptian subject. I will demonstrate that when read
against these discourses, her work becomes a strong statement of alternative Egyptian possibilities. They present another way to look for hope that is not depicted in the American dream but in their own pasts.

In chapter three, I look at more self-reflexive work that explores how Otherness is internalised. Jean Said Makdisi’s *Teta, Mother and Me* and Diana Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava* narrate the experience of estrangement from self and Others. Their memoirs reveal that this sense of alienation is derived from having internalised specific narratives that position them as Other. Makdisi’s memoir explores this through the lens of modernity by showing that specific teleologies of modernity that underpinned the colonial and neo-colonial projects were inevitably internalised. The memoir traces how subsequent generations of women were gradually alienated from their foremothers. The process of unearthing maternal history reveals the disjoint between her “modern” frame of reference and the material realities of her foremothers’ lives and actions. Abu-Jaber’s memoir traces the necessity of moving beyond racialised modes of categorisation. The self-reflexive journeys undertaken by both authors reveal that their sense of estrangement is the result of having internalised Western and Eurocentric positions about their subjectivity that are underpinned by specific political and power relationships. Here also, the authors are aware of the way their texts can be consumed by a Western audience and work towards engaging readers in a way that forces them to acknowledge that in order to read the memoirs certain ideological positions must be relinquished.

Chapter four concludes the analysis in this thesis by drawing on two novels by Leila Aboulela that demonstrate the limitations of Eurocentric discourses to accommodate difference. Aboulela’s work has worn the title of “halal” fiction
since the 1980s because it provides an Islamic inspired worldview as an alternative way through which to conceive the world. As I will demonstrate, her novels use mundane tropes to provoke the reader to acknowledge the discourses that are normalised in their reading practices, and to prove that these conventional modes of reading recreate Otherness. Her novels demonstrate that Eurocentric and Western-centric assumptions inform the interpretive frameworks that continue to situate the Muslim woman in an inferior position to the West. Her novels open up modes of reading that suggest egalitarian modes of exchange that are more inclusive of difference. In this sense, it speaks to chapter one because it demonstrates the daily praxis of this epistemological violence, and of the imperative to reject it.

The writing process for this thesis has been inspired by the Arab women authors that I met whilst undertaking this research. Meeting them crystallised the urgency and the imperative to their writing: each was charged, astute, politically aware and driven to foster better understanding between Arabs and the West but also by a sense of justice. Their voices and their sense of literary activism has centred me throughout the research process.

My relationship to the Middle East began in 2000 when I backpacked through Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. In the lead up to my departure, I paid more attention to the media reporting on the region. General television news on the suicide bombings in Israel intrigued me as they generally offered poorly nuanced explanations and no context as to why an individual would be driven to such an act. This drove me to do a little of my own basic research to understand the situation. Eventually the rich personal experience and insights into the socio-political fabric of the region gained through my interactions with the people and
the places I visited were life changing. I met many Palestinians living in exile in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon and visited them in their refugee camps. I went to United Nations’ controlled disputed border zones between Lebanon and Israel and Syria and Israel. In Quneitra, a now empty, destroyed town in Syria, I saw the results of the Israeli Defence Force’s destruction and desecration of hospitals, mosques and churches. I took a bus to the newly liberated South Lebanon and at Marjayoun witnessed the outpouring of human emotion at the border with Israel, and, saw freshly vacated cells in the infamous Al-Khiam prison. The public demonstration of pride in Hizbullah and its martyrs were evident everywhere in South Lebanon. Beirut’s scars from the Lebanese civil war were apparent in the juxtaposition of glossy downtown’s reconstruction with gun-shot, pock-marked buildings on the green line. I met and stayed with many ordinary families and gained a more informed, practical understanding of the hijab, veiling, and the interactions between men and women. I socialised with people from all walks of life: nurses, teachers, the ice-cream vendor and university students. My eyes were opened to the amazing archaeological richness of the region: it was one thing to read about this in lessons on ancient History but to see it all in place was indescribable: the birth place of writing at Ugarit in Syria, the pyramids, the magic of the oldest continually inhabited city of the world, Damascus. I was in Athens and a month away from returning to Australia when 9/11 occurred. On my return, I found that all of the magic and the pain that I had encountered was not reflected in the kinds of media reporting about Arabs and the Middle East, but that Islamophobia and the fear of Arabs dominated the way Arabs and Muslims were represented in the media. Then followed the War on Terror and the invasion of Iraq. Like many millions across the world I marched in protest against this
invasion but had to stand back, watch the horror and helplessly declaim that this was “not in my name”. Increasingly, I felt that the explanations used to support the War on Terror did not speak for me, I felt that they elided a sense of shared humanity and represented positions that I could not support. In this context, discovering the work of Amiry, Riverbend, Soueif, Abu-Jaber, Makdisi and Aboulela was refreshing. Reading them gave me access to literary voices that did not confirm the stereotypical representations of Arab and Muslim women discussed earlier in this introduction.

The process of reading drew on a confluence of experiences that both complicated and facilitated my thinking. The critical tools at my disposal are grounded largely in an academic training arising out of European epistemology that does not always resonate with my personal experiences as a member of a minority group both in Singapore (the country of my birth and where I grew up) and Australia, and as a traveler through the Middle East. My readings are not that of an Arab women, but I find it easy to identify with their causes because I also have witnessed and experienced how Eurocentric paradigms continue to perpetuate Otherness. In a similar way, Ghassan Hage emphasises that his reaction to images of “caged ethnics” was not merely because he is an academic but because “[he] was watching them as an ‘ethnic’” (White 114). Hage reflected that “because of the makeup of Australian society we cannot escape the fact that the message of ethnic caging, even if directed primarily at ethnic wills external to Australia becomes also a message directed at ethnic wills inside Australia itself” (White 114). The books that are the subject of this thesis did not interest or affect me on the basis of ethnicity as I am not an Arab woman. However, because I am similarly Othered as a member of a minority group, the manifestations of the
different kinds of discourses used to uphold structural inequalities resonate with me, and in fact, arouse deep anxieties.

To this end, I have thought of the work of the authors chosen as the subject of this thesis as a kind of literary intifada, because they present an attempt to disrupt the paradigms through which they are situated and read. I use the word intifada, albeit heavily laden with its associations with Palestinian resistance in recent history, merely to mean a “shake up” of prevailing approaches through which texts by Arab women authors are read. My methodology aims to highlight the limitations of prevailing paradigms in order to expose alternative narratives that otherwise remain hidden and unheard. In Soueif’s The Map of Love, she writes that “our only hope now – and it is a small one – lies in a unity of conscience between the people of the world (Map 484); my thesis aims to go some way towards participating in this by showing a different way through which to listen to the Arab woman when she speaks.
Chapter 1

Resisting the unrelenting bloodlust of imperium: eyewitness testimony as weapons of truth

Facts do not speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain, and circulate them. (Said, “Permission” 254)

In 1982 Israel invaded Lebanon and committed gross atrocities. These included bombing civilian targets and masterminding the massacres at Shabra and Shatila. The MacBride Commission report into this invasion presented these facts but failed to change American foreign policy on Israel. These atrocities remained unchallenged politically and in the public imagining. In “Permission to Narrate” Said drew on the reception of this report to argue that facts cannot speak for themselves and can be used to support a prevailing position despite those facts challenging or undermining that position. The facts of Israel’s atrocities did not change American foreign policy on Israel because it views it as a “civilized, democratic country constitutively incapable of barbaric practices against Palestinians and non-Jews” (“Permission” 248). The impact of these facts was nullified in the context of a greater narrative that valorises Israeli victimhood. This presumption remains in operation with regards to Israeli action in the Occupied Territories and Gaza, in its 2006 invasion of Lebanon and most recently in its bombardment of Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009. A similar paradigm is

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15 The title of this chapter is inspired by the line “The bloodlust of imperium is unrelenting” in Ahmad’s essay “Empire comes to Lebanon.”
in operation in American hypocrisy over its treatment of Iraqis during and after the 2003 invasion. Facts have little weight when they are on the side of the oppressed even though they represent the truth.

This troubling realisation is the point of departure for this chapter. I begin my analysis for this thesis with two texts that depict life under military occupation. The first, Sharon and my Mother-in-Law (2005) was written by architect Suad Amiry, living in Ramallah, Occupied Palestine. The second, Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq (2005) is a book drawn from the blog “Baghdad Burning” written by Riverbend, the pseudonym of a young Iraqi woman living in Baghdad. For both women, the imperative to speak truth to power is raw and immediate because of the real, mortal danger that they face daily as people under occupation. Readers of these texts are not oblivious to these dangers because this is consistently covered in our daily news. In this chapter I will look at how these texts engage readers to evoke a sense of real empathy but also to interpellate further witnesses who will actively engage to change conditions that perpetuate the occupation of Iraq and Palestine. Their challenge is to speak truth to power through the various discourses and strategies that the West uses to contain such voices. This chapter examines the strategies used by each author to accomplish this.

**Life under occupation**

In Occupied Palestine and Occupied Iraq, the markers of living in a constant state of emergency are evident everywhere in military control through checkpoints, limitations on movement and surveillance. What is left of Palestine after its partition by United Nations Resolution 181 in 1947 has been occupied from June
1967: Palestinian refugee camps are the oldest in the world and the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) is the longest running relief works agency of the United Nations. The Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza has been characterised by a concern with demographics to maintain the Jewish majority, resulting in policies of transfer, exile and deportation in addition to extra-judicial killings and policies to maim and injure the civilian population. In Iraq, ten long years of United Nations-imposed sanctions and the ensuing humanitarian crisis preceded the US-led coalition of 2003. Civil unrest has followed the overthrow of the Iraqi Government and by August 2006, the US military and Iraqi security were preparing to secure Baghdad by a ring of trenches, walls, fences and other barriers in an attempt to fence off insurgents. A similar wall, illegally built on Palestinian land snakes its way deep into Occupied Palestine, ostensibly to secure the State of Israel from Palestinian insurgents.

These walls, encircling all of Gaza, almost all of the Occupied West Bank, and large areas of Baghdad literally create a space which Agamben describes as a state of exception. Ostensibly erected to maintain “national security” (Israel’s in relation to Palestine and that of the coalition forces and resident foreign contractors in Iraq), these walled-off militarised areas are contemporary manifestations of “the camp” that Agamben theorised in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Agamben’s theory about the state of exception derives from his study of the Nazi concentration camps but is applicable to modern day governments. The state of exception is evoked when governments declare a period of “emergency.” Usually associated with war, insurrection and resistance, Agamben suggests that these conditions are created by governments to delineate groups of citizens who have no claim to the nation but are paradoxically brought
into tight control “by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system” (2). The state of exception creates specific categories of people that are denied the rights entitled to others. Contemporary examples of this includes the military orders issued by the President of the United States on November 13, 2001 that authorised “indefinite detention” and trial by military commissions of non-citizens suspected of involvement in terrorist activities (Agamben 3). In Australia, detention camps such as Woomera signify a place that is “not-Australia” (Perera “What” par 36). This is also in operation when Iraqis and Palestinians are treated differently to their occupying forces. Iraqi dead are “collateral damage” while American/coalition dead are victims of terrorism. Palestinians are subject to laws that deny them their rights as an occupied people. The State of Israel does not apply the international conventions governing occupying powers to Palestinians, denying them the rights that are entitled them as occupied peoples. In addition, Palestinians are not protected by or subject to the same laws as Israelis. Palestinians are subject to military justice whereas Israelis are subject to the Israeli justice system. Israelis are granted immunity from prosecution even when they commit violent crimes against Palestinians. In these contexts, the Palestinian and the Iraqi become what Agamben describes as “homo sacer,” bare life denuded of social and political status. Louis Frankethaler quotes Dani File and Hadas Ze’ev, who chillingly explain the implication of this:

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16 For more information on the differential system of law, see Frankethaler and Makdisi, Palestine 148.
The *homo sacer* is included in the community as the excluded one, as he who may be killed and his/her killing will not be considered murder. S/he is included within the law as s/he who is excluded from the protection of the law […]. In certain contexts, such as in the Occupied Territories, people become in fact ‘*homines sacri*.’

Agamben argued that the camp was “the place in which the most absolute *conditio inhumana* that has ever existed on earth was realized” (166). Though these modern day camps are devoid of gas chambers, their dehumanising policies are similar. In the camp, the state of exception is the rule, and there is no distinction between “subjective rights and juridical protection” (168-69). In this context, Iraqi dead are unmournable for Americans as Palestinian dead are unmournable for Israelis. This occurs against the context of greater narratives about Palestinians and Iraqis as dangerous and threatening, narratives that support conditions that make this kind of thinking socially acceptable.

The narratives perpetuated about Iraqis and Palestinians in the West are framed largely within Orientalist stereotypes fed by highly visible, catastrophic and emotive events such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in New York, 7/7 in London and 11/3 in Madrid. These have buttressed the narratives about Islam as misogynistic, fundamentalist and as incompatible with the Judeo-Christian tradition and its values. Islam and Arabs are portrayed as a threat to the national security of Western and Westernised nations. More specifically, the dominant narrative about Palestinians is notoriously one-sided. Palestinians are normally associated with narratives about terrorism against Israelis, of declining the many offers of peace with Israel, of the desire for Israel’s destruction and of Palestinian factional fighting. The Palestinian history of dispossession, their lack of access to
electricity, water or sanitation, the detention of young children, killing of unarmed women and children, house demolitions and other human rights abuses occurring every day in the West Bank and Gaza receive little to no coverage. Similarly, support for the war in Iraq was built on a narrative that depicted Iraqis as terrorised and oppressed under the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. Nowadays, Iraqis are still depicted as terrorised and controlled but by Al-Qaeda operations. It is in this context that witness accounts from within occupied Palestine and occupied Iraq become important because they provide supplementary narratives to the normative depiction of Palestinians and Iraqis.

**The word of the witness**

Witness testimonials in the form of life narratives intervene in the historical record because they document the human response and impact to events in a way that cannot be accommodated in the political dimension. Riverbend and Amiry both wrote about their experiences because their realities were not represented elsewhere. In an interview with Al-Jazeera, Riverbend emphasised that she blogged because the media coverage of the war in Iraq was inadequate, and her lived reality was vastly different to that portrayed. Her posts about raids, the loss of personal freedom, increasingly dangerous situations, civil unrest, electricity and water shortages and an increasingly tired, weary, insomniacal population facing personal and communal humiliation on a daily basis contrasts sharply with the liberatory messages contained in the media. Amiry’s *Sharon and my Mother-in-Law* portrays the hardship endured by Palestinians living under occupation. Media portrayals of Palestinians tend to focus on political analysis, suicide bombing or the humanitarian crisis whereas Amiry portrayed a more nuanced depiction of
Palestinian life and resistance. In both books, the nexus between politics and domesticity is used as the backdrop to demonstrate the tenacity of a population simply working out ways of living despite the dehumanising processes that impose strict restrictions on their lives.

The Internet has challenged state-imposed information control.\(^\text{17}\) Online communities transgress the limitations posed by geographical, spatial and conventional strategies of information control. Citizen reporting has proliferated with advancements in information technology and anyone with access to the Internet can post a report in real time. The speed with which information is exchanged encourages cyber activism and all across the world, online communities engage, challenge and build global conversations. Blogging on the Web is a form of citizen or participatory journalism in which individuals actively collect, report, analyse and present information, tasks previously the preserve of news media. In Occupied Palestine, the Internet circumvents Israeli control over information, especially when journalists are prevented from entering towns and villages declared closed military zones. \textit{Electronic Intifada} for instance, was born during the Israeli siege of Ramallah and the complete media blackout that was imposed in this period. According to Stephanie Saldana of the \textit{Lebanese Daily Star}:

What [the Israeli authorities] failed to recognise is that the media is no longer limited to those with press passes. Blogs from within Palestine represent the quickest way to obtain information from sources on the ground. In the age of the Internet, anyone can become a journalist.

\(^{17}\) For a sampling of material that reflects the challenge that the Internet poses to state-control over information, see Beckles 311-24 and Rodan 63-89.
Virtual activism circumvents centres of information control and mobilises communities across borders. Citizen reporting and cyber activism are particularly important in “hot spots” like the Middle East because the sheer volume and range of reports by ordinary citizens problematises the veracity of the dominant narrative carried by pro-Israeli and pro-American news channels.

Sharon and My Mother in-Law and Baghdad Burning witness to life under occupation. Their narratives collide with discourses that perpetuate and justify their state of occupation because they overtly depict realities that challenge the moral authority of these discourses. They explicitly portray the impact of politics, occupation, bombs and state-sanctioned policies to control a population in the most mundane aspects of living. Their stories expose human frailty, tenacity and resistance. They put faces and names to figures that remain anonymous in news reports and testify to their humanity. Collectively, they meet the needs of a historical moment by reflecting aspects of a larger collective resistance to imperialism.

**The many uses of testimony**

Geopolitical and temporal transformations since World War II, such as mass genocide, protracted wars and decolonisation movements have fuelled an interest in life narratives. These cataclysmic events caused mass displacement, suffering and trauma, experiences that have fuelled many impulses including the need to remember, the desire for historical truth, new assertions of identity and belonging and to recognise stories of survival. The conjunction of these factors has made life
narratives extremely saleable commodities. Both of the texts chosen for this chapter have enjoyed commercial and critical success. Sharon and my Mother-in-Law made its appearance on the international book festival circuit and won the prestigious 2004 Viareggio-Versilia prize. It has been translated into eleven languages and adapted for the theatre. Amiry’s book is one of many memoirs written in English that have emerged from Occupied Palestine in the last ten years. Palestinian memoirs that have received wide circulation in the West include Raja Shehadeh’s When the Bulbul Stopped Singing: A diary of Ramallah under Seige and Strangers in the House: Coming of Age in Occupied Palestine, Ghada Karmi’s In Search of Fatima, Muna Hamzeh’s Refugees in our Own Land, Hanan Ashrawi’s This Side of Peace and Mourid Barghouti’s I Saw Ramallah.

Riverbend’s book, Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq was also critically acclaimed and won third prize in the Lettre Ulysses Award for the art of literary reportage in 2005. It was nominated for the Samuel Johnson prize, while the blog from which a year’s postings were taken to comprise the book won the 2006 bloggie award. The book, like Raja Shahadeh’s has been adapted as a play by a New York based theatre company. Her book, like Salam Pax’s The Clandestine Diaries of an Ordinary Iraqi, has enjoyed commercial success. As a result, in 2007

18 Many critical studies have explored the emergence, role and consumption of life narratives, see Felman 17 and Schaffer and Smith 1-15.
19 The book was adapted for theatre by Afaf Shawwa Bibi and premiered at Beirut’s Monnet Theatre on 15 October, 2008.
20 When the Bulbul stopped Singing Raja Shehadeh’s third book received significant publicity. Shehadeh attended International Book Festivals, including in Australia. The book was adapted into a one-man play of the same title, by Scottish playwright David Grieg and won a number of prizes in the United Kingdom in 2004 including the Herald Angel, the Amnesty International Freedom of Expression Award and the Tap Water Best Theatre Award. The play, produced by Traverse Theatre Company also attended the International Fajr Festival in Iran in 2005. The theatrical adaptation of Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq was adapted for the theatre by Six Degrees Theatre Company and played at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2006. It was self titled Baghdad Burning.
Riverbend published her second book *Baghdad Burning II: More Girl Blog from Iraq*. In addition to this body of published work from within Occupied Palestine and Iraq, countless blogs document the human impact of occupation from a range of perspectives. The popularity of the personal testimonial is well illustrated with the example of “Live from Lebanon,” a collection of online diaries hosted on *Electronic Lebanon*, the Website launched in July 2006 during Israel’s bombing of Lebanon. Within minutes of its launch, this site proved to be its most popular link. Testimonials like these are obviously marketable and fill a niche in the West. They also provide a way to understand the impact of the conflict in a manner accessible to ordinary people.

The popularity of witness documents does not attest to their success in bringing about social change because audiences consume life narratives in different ways. Unfortunately, many of the reasons why people are interested in the suffering of the oppressed reflect the self-serving interests of first world culture. This means that though these stories circulate widely in the West, they have contested and unpredictable impact because audiences subject them to different readings and uses (Schaffer and Smith 18). Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith’s comprehensive overview of the economic and cultural forces behind the circulation, marketing and reception of life narratives shows that the interests and

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21 There are too many blogs to list but a sampling includes *Bethlehem Bloggers* comprising a group of bloggers from within Bethlehem at <http://www.bethlehemghetto.blogspot.com/>; Mohammed, a student living in Rafah at <http://rafah.vze.com/>; *Raising Youasuf: Diary of a Mother under Occupation* a blog by Palestinian journalist Leila El-Haddad at <http://www.a-mother-from-gaza.blogspot.com/>. Blogs are not just written by Palestinians, for instance: <http://walkfree.blog.com/> is a blog by a Jewish-American woman opposed to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. There are countless blogs by activists working in Palestine. Likewise, there are too many blogs from Iraq to list here, apart from Riverbend’s *Baghdad Burning* at <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/> these include, *Tell me a Secret* at: <http://secretsinbaghdad.blogspot.com/> and a blog by an independent journalist: <http://dahrjaliraq.com/>.
concerns of the West influence how the text is circulated, marketed and read. They suggest that the triumph of global capitalism and the dominance of the West have valorised the cult of the individual, imbibing those kinds of stories with huge currency, creating an “insatiable” market for personal stories (11-12). Stories of suffering and survival are commodified and marketed to reflect the concerns of the market, including existing insecurities, concerns, aspirations or specific niche interests in suffering. There is also the suggestion that sensational stories of suffering reflect post-traumatic “wound” cultures of postmodernity in a culture desensitised to suffering (Farrell 7). These stories create an opportunity to engage emotionally. More specifically, sensational life narratives in relation to Muslim women, life in Iraq or Palestine sell because of their promise to reveal insight into a highly politicised region through the lives of women. Though these kinds of books promote sympathy and outrage, they also affirm the readers’ status as empowered agents because the text confirms their difference from the oppressed. It validates the reader’s affiliation with an enlightened West whose role as liberator of the oppressed is confirmed through the narrative because these oppressed need the West, its money, aid, expertise or advocacy in order to receive deliverance.

An interest in the suffering of the oppressed may also feed self-interest in maintaining political correctness, being fashionably left or of affirming an empowered, enlightened status. The outrage voiced at injustice may represent only a superficial expression that hardly extends beyond the page. No real empathy is experienced here because the oppressed are used merely as material to demonstrate the strength of strategical thinking in constructing debates to prove points of law, justice or fact. These amount to purely performative exercises
undertaken by the privileged left to prove the power of their advocacy. Winning a
debate on the issue of Palestine or Iraq does not mean that the advocate is moved
by real empathy because the performative nature of such an event is another self-
serving act to prove prowess. Once again, the oppressed are used as fodder for
self-advancement. Similarly, Jean Paul Sartre remonstrated in his preface to Frantz
Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth that the “dialectic of liberal hypocrisy” he
noted in the French people hardly extended beyond a condemnation of the French-
Algerian war to direct support for the Algerian fighters (14). In a contemporary
context, proponents of peace movements today condemn violence but are reticent
in openly supporting Hamas or Hizbullah or any other resistance movement in
Palestine, Syria or Lebanon. This kind of consumption serves as a means of
containment that effectively dispels the fear of the Other while perpetuating that
status. It also serves to differentiate the advocate as different and perhaps “better”
than his or her contemporaries who are not part of such a movement. Furthermore,
peace movement advocates will not align themselves with resistance movements
that are associated with violence. Paradoxically this stance results in their
condoning violence because their neutrality invalidates the oppressed right to
resist and does not uphold justice for them.

Consequently, the kind of critical attention these life narratives receives
can conceal their resistance. Mohanty argued in “Under Western Eyes Revisited”
that pedagogical strategies in the West continue to colonise third world women.
She suggested that the “feminist as tourist” model is essentially a pedagogical
strategy that involves the application of the Eurocentric women’s studies gaze in
brief forays into non-Euro-American cultures (518). This kind of approach
reinforces a clear sense of the third world difference because discursive paradigms
are embedded with assumptions of power relations that confirm the status of the evolved Euro-American feminist. She argued that many pedagogical strategies continue to reinforce the relativist perspective rather than the interconnectedness of domination, struggle and resistance. Publishers, editors, translators and others facilitate many of the testimonials published in the West, a process that paradoxically also reinforces their superiority. As John Beverley notes:

"Behind the good faith of the liberal academic or the committed ethnographer or solidarity activist in allowing or enabling the subaltern to speak lies the trace of the colonial construction of an other – an other who is conveniently available to speak to us [...]. This neutralizes the force of the reality of difference and antagonism our own relatively privileged position in the global system might give rise to. (67-68)

Another impediment to the reception of witness narratives is the larger socio-political canvas into which it is circulated. The values, codes and concerns of this larger canvass influence the interpretation of a text. As indicated in the introduction to this thesis, the Palestinian people have struggled for legitimacy for their narrative whereas Zionism, which draws on other metanarratives including the Judeo-Christian tradition and the legacy of the Holocaust as well as Western structures of guilt, enables it to have the social legitimacy that the Palestinian narrative does not. It is because of this that numerous United Nations resolutions on Palestine have had little to no effect and are largely ignored by Israel and its supporters. These resolutions have certified Palestinians as a legitimate people with "inalienable rights," the right of refugees to return, the necessity of Israel to withdraw to the 1967 borders, the illegitimacy of Israel’s annexation of land acquired through war, its illegal settlements and the illegality of the Separation
Wall. Furthermore, extensive reports, testimonies and eye-witness accounts from Palestinian, Israeli and international sources about the humanitarian disasters, the atrocities on the ground, the daily killing of civilians and the gradual destruction of Palestinian life and society have failed to galvanise the support required to result in sufficient political pressure. A wealth of scholarship has also documented Israel’s systematic policies of deception in relation to the Palestinians and its other Arab neighbours in order to perpetuate wars and its constant state of emergency.\textsuperscript{22} Despite the overwhelming facts, the occupation of the Palestinian peoples, their abuse and oppression continues. Concerning Iraq, Arab news reports on Iraqi deaths are deemed as bias and promoting insurgency and prior to the war Iraqi claims that there were no weapons of mass destruction were thought to be untrue.

The limited moral value attached to voices from Palestine and Iraq that resist normative narratives makes it difficult for them to achieve legitimacy and gather political weight. In \textit{Culture and Imperialism}, Said argued that control over narrative was an integral aspect to imperialism, and that this was effected through a range of strategies to control the shape of the historical record. For Hayden White, narratives derived power through their authority, itself derived from the ability to aesthetically represent a moralising principle (26-27). Blocking the narratives of the repressed prevents them from challenging the moral basis of authority that oppresses them. This is clearly in operation when resistance movements are labelled terrorist organisations, when criticism of Israeli or Zionist state policies is labelled anti-Semitism and critics of the US-led war on terror are

\textsuperscript{22} Israeli academics have written extensively to expose the myths upon which the State of Israel is founded and continues to perpetuate, see Pappe and Reinhart.
believed to be in support of terrorism. The force of authority attached to the
dominant or normative narrative co-opts the silence and complicity of the
majority. Witness narratives from these countries must convincingly challenge the
moral authority of their oppressors in order to gain legitimacy for their causes.

**Resistance literature**

The explicit political agenda in these texts situates them as documents expressing
resistance to a state of military occupation. In this sense, they can be positioned
within a larger body of resistance literature. Harlow’s inspiring and
groundbreaking *Resistance Literature* is a critical study of the literature of third
world resistance movements. Harlow argued that this kind of work was highly
politicised and was as integral to the national struggles for independence as armed
resistance movements. Harlow’s use of the term was inspired by Palestinian
author Ghassan Kanafani’s *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-
1966*. Like him, Harlow was convinced that resistance literature is directly
involved in the struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and
cultural production (Harlow 28-29). While neither Amiry nor Riverbend are
directly linked to armed resistance movements in the same way that Ghassan
Kanafani or Amilcar Cabral were, their work is integral to the liberation of their
countries because it is aimed at galvanising international pressure to compel their
governments to revise their foreign policies. Nonetheless, they join many other
creative artists, including authors, poets, playwrights and sculptors who document

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23 Ghassan Kanafani was assassinated by Israeli Intelligence Mossad by a bomb in his car in 1973. His obituary stated that “his weapon was a ballpoint pen and his arena newspaper pages. And he hurt the enemy more than a column of commandoes,” see Harlow 11.
and represent the occupation under which they live. Amiry and Riverbend’s readership is primarily based in the West because they write in English and are published by major publishers in Britain and America. Their work is aimed at building solidarity with a readership based in the West in order to work towards liberation at home. As I will show in the discussion to follow, their imperative is to raise the consciousness and change the thinking of their readers, not just to evoke sympathy. In this sense, as a form of cultural resistance, their work is, as Said argued, as important as armed, military resistance (Culture 252-53).

Amiry and Riverbend’s texts exemplify many of the characteristics of the “testimonio.” The testimonio is a form of witness document that has an overt political dimension, a focus on collective experience rather than individual subjectivity and an implicit emphasis on raising public consciousness. George Yudice essentially explains it as:

An authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (eg war, oppression, revolution, etc). Emphasising popular oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as representative of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or exorcising and setting aright official history. (qtd in Gugelberger and Kearney 4)

Though a testimonio arises out of a pressing need to address exploitation and oppression, its focus on denouncing and correcting official history emphasises its

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24 For an indication of the breadth of Palestinian literary production, see Elmessiri; Jayusi; and Nassar. For an overview of Iraqi artists on the war, see al-Radi; Farhat and Rousseau.
overtly political and pedagogical dimension. In their article “Voices for the Voiceless,” Georg Gugelberger and Michael Kearney emphasise that the essential difference between the testimonio and other kinds of witness narratives such as those about the Holocaust or the atomic bombs over Nagasaki and Hiroshima is the learning process. The difference between these kinds of Holocaust testimonies and the testimonio is that the former is focused on exposing shocking truths whereas the latter emphasises the future:

Testimonial literature thus makes several corrections in Western discourse about the other: the other speaks back and doing so unmasks not only Western versions of what is true, but even Western notions of truth. […] where in autobiography the aggrandizement of the ego makes significant popular insights impossible, where in comparable ethnographic life histories the objective facts prevail, we find in testimonial literature a learning process which leads to action improving social relations. (9)

Testimonio’s revolutionary aspect thus derives from its project to raise consciousness. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub demonstrate that the imperative to narrate contains both the moral imperative to tell and to commit that narrative to Others: “to take responsibility in speech – for history or for the truth of an occurrence, for something which, by definition, goes beyond the personal, in having general (nonpersonal) validity and consequences” (204). Giving testimony is a “speech act” that conveys the responsibility for witnessing to another entity but also relies on the presence of that Other to become testimony. It must be a living, dynamic process of engagement in order to achieve its design of eliciting the witness’s advocacy.
An event cannot be verified if witnesses do not testify to its occurrence.

The success of the testimonio depends on its ability to interpellate further witnesses. The recipient of this testimony has the potential to become another witness. In his memoir Strangers in the House, Raja Shehadeh reminisces about a friend who encouraged him to write because his experiences were not reflected through media channels: “Why don’t you write down what you told me? Just write it as you said it. It will make great stuff. People here don’t know what you go through. Even I did not and I try to keep up” (Strangers 147). Testimonials fill the gaps left by official media and news but also arm readers with information that enables them to act more effectively as witnesses. The challenge for the authors is to circumvent the discursive challenges placed by issues of commodification, narratives that reinforce the hegemonic power base of their oppressors or interpretive strategies that continue to situate their Otherness in pre-determined relationships of power. In the discussion to follow, I will show how each of these texts draws on different techniques to interpellate witnesses in the course of building solidarity with readers in the West.

Sharon and My Mother-in-Law: practicing sumoud in Palestine

The Palestinians must be hit and it must be painful. We must cause them losses, victims, so that they feel the heavy price. (Sharon qtd in Podur)

The Commission on Human Rights [is] Gravely Concerned at reports of gross, widespread and flagrant violations of human rights in the occupied Palestinian territory, in particular regarding the violation of the right to
life, the arrest and detention of citizens, the restrictions on freedom of movement, the disruption of the delivery of humanitarian and medical assistance, the destruction of infrastructure, the restriction on the freedom of the media, the detention of human rights defenders, as well as the disproportionate and indiscriminate use of Israeli military force against the people of Palestine and its leadership. (United Nations, “Situation”)

2002 was a particularly violent year for Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) re-occupied Palestinian towns in the West Bank entering Ramallah, Bethlehem, Tulkarem, Qalqilya, Jenin and Nablus. Many towns remained under extended curfew and most remained closed military areas. According to a report prepared by the United Nations agencies, 497 Palestinians were killed and 1,447 wounded in the course of the IDF reoccupation between 1 March to 7 May, 2002 and 17,000 Palestinians were left homeless and in need of shelter. “Operation Defensive Shield” which lasted three weeks and “Operation Determined Path” which lasted a few months were characterised by IDF brutality and the gross violation of human rights including the illegitimate imposition of lengthy curfews as a form of collective punishment on an entire population. In addition, millions of dollars worth of damage to civilian and government infrastructure was incurred.25

This particularly violent year inspired the publication in English of a

25 For documentation on the atrocities carried out by the IDF against Palestinians in Occupied Palestine, see Amnesty International; B’Tselem the Israeli Information for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, the International Red Cross; the United Nations; and The United Nations “Illegal Israeli actions.”
number of life narratives. These included *Gaza Blues: Different stories* (translated from Hebrew and Arabic), a collection of short stories by Israeli author Etgar Keret and Palestinian author Samir El-Youssef; *Bethlehem Beseiged* by Mitri Raheb a Palestinian Christian pastor; *When the Bulbul Stopped Singing: Diary of Ramallah Under Siege* by Lawyer Raja Shehadah and *Live from Palestine*, a collection of a diverse range of eyewitness narratives garnered during the Israeli military operations of 2002. The publication of these life narratives indicates not only the urgency to bear witness but also to reiterate the human cost of occupation: the suffering, abuse and terror experienced by a whole population, and its resistance in response to it.

The germ of Amiry’s book also began in this period in the form of emails to friends and relatives about life under curfew. Between 17 November, 2001 and 26 September, 2002, writing emails to friends and relatives about life under curfew provided a means of relief from the confinement. These readers encouraged her to publish the material she had written. Eventually the book was translated into Hebrew, Italian and Swedish and published in Israel, Italy and Sweden. Its success encouraged her to write another book about an earlier period from 1981 to 2001. It too was translated and published in several languages.

*Sharon and my Mother-in-Law*, published in 2005, brings together both books and presents an extended coverage of two decades of life in Ramallah beginning from 1981 when she first returned there to live and work and ending in October 2003 as Israel builds its Security Wall.

The result is a publication that provides a sense of life lived under a state of military occupation and of the imminently worsening conditions. Amiry ends her diaries by quoting Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s promise to destroy the
possibility of a viable Palestinian state: “We’ll make a pastrami sandwich of them. We’ll insert a strip of Jewish settlements in between the Palestinians [...] and in 25 years, neither the United Nations, nor the USA, nobody, will be able to tear it apart (194).”

The picture is that the Israeli occupation of Palestine is deepening. The very last entry is a poignant story about Qalqiliah, a town completely encircled by the wall. 45% of the town’s land and nineteen of its wells are on the other side of the wall and villagers must go through the only entry and exit point to their town to access their agricultural fields. The animals in Qalqiliah’s zoo parody the plight of Palestinians. Their confinement does not rob them of dignity as the lioness is not robbed of hers. Notwithstanding this they also perform on cue like monkeys who cannot deny their excitement when the rare visitor throws some fruit their way. Amiry’s book provides a way of “observing” life under occupation but with the aim of engaging readers to act to free Palestine.

What makes Amiry’s narrative different to that of other Palestinian memoirs is the use of humour. Most books about Palestine tend to be political, analytical, lyrical or existential, all of which can make for difficult and overwhelming reading. In contrast, Amiry’s portrayal of life under occupation sometimes had me in stitches. The book is structured as a collection of episodes that deal with mundane domestic or social activities such as vaccinating her dog, meeting her husband, falling in love, shopping or visiting friends, many of which read as absurd comedy skits. For example, Amiry’s husband is questioned because she would not stop staring at a soldier inspecting their car at a roadside checkpoint, shoppers go berserk at shopping centres and fight over food when curfew is lifted, Palestinians buy Israeli yoghurt and use Israeli veterinarians,
Amiry’s dog is issued with a Jerusalem passport, an Israeli man suffering a heart attack is more afraid of being assisted by a Muslim Palestinian than of the heart attack itself, and Amiry, who helps him, becomes distressed because she realises that her act of rescuing him from his car could spark a nation-wide search and the round-up of countless young Palestinian men. As a reader, once I moved past the humour, the reality of the horror represented on the page was intensified because I had already read about the effects of occupation from other political and analytical sources and witnessed some of it myself in Occupied Palestine. It seems somewhat incongruous to connect lightheartedness and humour with the effects of military occupation but I will show that this heightens the pathos of the occupation in a way that realist description cannot. The domestic narratives depict life circumscribed by checkpoints and curfews and show the fear and paranoia that are bred through decades of living under surveillance, threat of eviction, transfer and expulsion, all of which are the human scars that Palestinians bear in the creation of the state of Israel. In the discussion to follow, I will demonstrate that Amiry’s narrative enacts a form of resistance at multiple levels. At one level, the narrative demonstrates the practice of sumoud, the human quality that enables their everyday resistance. I will also show how at another level, Amiry’s narrative interpellates the reader as another witness using strategies that enlist a more critical engagement than a superficial demonstration of sympathy resulting in consumerism.

**Camp Palestine**

In March 2005, I entered Palestine through the West Bank for the first time. At least I thought I was entering Palestinian territory. My initial euphoria at being
smart and savvy for taking the land route through Jordan and so bypassing the State of Israel itself turned out to be ill-informed naivety. Not a single Palestinian flag waved to greet me at the other side of the King Hussein Bridge crossing from Jordan. Instead, countless Israeli flags fluttered in the hot Jordan Valley breezes, pimply-faced IDF soldiers waved huge guns and screamed out orders, and my visa proudly announced in Hebrew, Arabic and English “Welcome to Israel.”

Traversing the West Bank between Jerusalem, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, Hebron and Bethlehem, I got used to checkpoints and automatically reached for my Australian passport each time I was stopped. Armed soldiers with loaded weapons and full combat gear were a common sight on the streets, as were snipers perched atop homes and shops in the cities. It was clearly an occupied territory and a state of emergency.

Occupied Palestine today is reminiscent of a concentration camp with its violence, surveillance, and structures of control. Independent reports from human rights organisations including the International Red Cross, the United Nations and Israeli Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) report human rights atrocities committed by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and Israeli State Policies towards Palestinians. After the Oslo Accords of 1994, the Occupied Palestinian territories were further carved into areas of control and zoned into areas A, B, C, D and H in the West Bank and Yellow, Blue and Green zones in the Gaza Strip. In addition to this, a massive system of controls ensures that the movement of people and

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26 Members of a French NGO working in the West Bank later advised me that this is a game played by the IDF as these checkpoints are not border control. There is no legal imperative to request or produce the passport at these checkpoints as border control at my point of entry into the West Bank had already provided me with a visa. “Come with some other form of ID” they advised, “so you don’t give in to playing their game.” Frequent checks mean that you never know when someone is going to reassess your validity to be there.
resources is severely curtailed. People are sorted into queues: one for West-Bank ID holders, another for Internationals and Israeli ID holders (including Jerusalemites) while cars are sorted according to colour-coded licence plates which determine which roads they are allowed on, which are stopped or searched. The yellow-plated Israeli cars have freedom of movement. Travelling is an arduous process of being stopped, searched or turned back for Palestinian registered cars: the green-plated West Bank cars and white-plated cars from Gaza. Daily life is a series of curfews and checkpoints controlled by the IDF, all of which erode away at one’s sense of humanity. Guilia El Dardiry’s eye-witness account is insightful:

The road to Qalandya is well paved in a few places, pothole ridden in most. Dusty and deserted, it does not hold happy remembrances. It cannot be said to lead to a destination. For no one actually wants to go to a checkpoint. It leads slowly, slowly, to a point in the universe where the essence of your humanness is questioned. It leads to a place where the certainty of your heritage is just a hypothesis; where you are a human only if others decide that you are.

This powerful testimony to the underlying process at a checkpoint, that is, the arbitrary assignation of a status to Palestinians by IDF personnel is evidence of how juridical systems and power are deployed in the camp to deprive humans of their rights (Agamben 171). IDF personnel have the jurisdiction to decide to revoke or instate identity. In this state, “whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law but on the civility and ethical sense of the police who temporarily act as sovereign” (Agamben 174). Amiry’s narrative reveals how everyday life is controlled by the state of Israel and the IDF to devastating effect for Palestinians.
Dehumanising Palestinians

Now you can come out of your houses and run like crazy as we watch you, while pointing our guns at you just in case. (Amiry 130)

Amiry’s book portrays in detail how the Palestinians are controlled and regulated by the State of Israel. Israeli state power regulates all aspects of Palestinian life from birth to death, including travel, employment, education, health, access to food, water, medical supplies, electricity and housing. The book provides many examples of the catastrophic effect of curfews, roadblocks, identity control and surveillance on Palestinians. During 2002, one of the most obvious manifestations of these control mechanisms was in the lengthy curfews imposed on the population. The effect of curfews on mundane life like grocery shopping and visiting friends and relatives indicate that normal life is a luxury denied to Palestinians. The unpredictability around the lifting and imposition of curfew means that social and domestic life occur only at the whim of the Israeli State. Even after curfew is lifted, movement continues to be restricted because roads are blocked with rubble, pitted with big holes, flattened cars, glass or debris or blocked by Israeli tanks (Amiry 132). These conditions further prohibit the resumption of activities that would otherwise occur. The stress that this environment creates is manifested in the frenetic shopping for food when curfew is lifted and when people can reach the shops:

Every time the curfew was lifted, frantic crowds would rush out to shops

27 For a sampling of sources that document these restrictions on movement, see Reinhart 116-28 and Makdisi, Palestine 95-151.
and clear out every supermarket, store and bakery in Ramallah and al-Bireh. The fear of hunger and the fear of endless curfew were compensated for by the scraping clean of every shelf [...]. I was certain that everybody’s house in Ramallah was starting to look like ours: a self-sufficient, shelf-less Mini Market. (Amiry 60-61)

The comedic effect of Amiry’s portrayal of the buying frenzy dissipates to expose underlying psychological distress. The extended curfews experienced by the residents of Ramallah were illegal under international law. During 2002, the Palestinian economy was already in severe recession and thousands of families were unable to stock up enough food to get them through to the next lifting of curfew. Giacamen and Husseini report that 93% of respondents in their study on the effects of the Israeli invasion of Ramallah and al-Bireh reported suffering mental health problems manifested in some form of psychological distress, somatic and behavioural conditions and an exacerbation of existing conditions especially those related to stress. Lengthy and unpredictable curfews heightened the sense of the shrinking physical, geographical and psychological spaces open to Palestinians. Amiry’s lengthy and detailed narrative of Um Salim’s behaviour under curfew, for example, reveals the human response to this denial of control. Um Salim obsesses over stirring the marmalade, the right-sized plate to eat her eggs from, and while being evacuated during a small window of time between curfews, obsesses over what dress to pack despite an armoured tank parked outside her house. These behaviours, coupled with the cycle of curfew, sleep, and, descriptions of the complex manoeuvres around check points are analogous to the shrinking Palestinian landscape itself. Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi describe a similar depiction of “slow time” in the films of Palestinian film maker Elia
Suleiman as a depiction of “life in a ghetto” (187). They suggest that the “narrowed-down place” and the “futile repetition of the same acts” are all connected and depict the “static time of the ghetto” (187). Amiry’s narratives corroborate this depiction and suggest in no uncertain terms that this is the effect of the kind of control that is aimed at dehumanising Palestinians. She writes that at its worst moments, life for them is reduced to “excessive eating, screaming at each other and producing babies” (Amiry 62). This dysfunctionality is bare life denuded of social function, and all attempt seems to be made to deny Palestinians those aspects of humanity that define them as part of a dynamic social community.

This systematic destruction of normal life for Palestinians is underpinned by Israeli refusal to recognise their identity. This strategy is reflected in a number of instances in the book when Israelis rename Palestinians. For example, her husband Salim Edmon Elias Tamari is renamed “Shalom Edi Elion Tamari” during questioning by Israeli Captain Roni (Amiry 74). The Israeli veterinarian that Amiry consults over her dog refuses to call her by her name Suad, and renames her “Suan” instead (Amiry 105). This propensity to rename speaks of a more insidious Israeli refusal to recognise Palestinian existence itself. Renaming Palestinians with Jewish names alludes to the more sinister Israeli project whereby Palestinian villages are obliterated, and in many cases emptied of their populations and renamed with Jewish names (Makdisi, Palestine 230). In addition to the villages that were emptied are others that remain unrecognised in Israel. The Palestinian populations of these villages remain but are not recognised by the State of Israel and so are deprived of access to essential services. Israeli General Moshe Dayan chillingly noted:

We came to this country which was already populated by Arabs, and we
are establishing a Hebrew, that is a Jewish state here. [...] You do not even know the names of these Arab villages [...] and I do not blame you because these geography books no longer exist; not only do the books not exist, the Arab villages aren’t there either. Nahalal arose in the place of Mahalul, Gevat – in the place of Jibta, Sarid – in the place of Haneifs, and Kefar Yehoshua – in the place of Tel Shaman. There is not one place in this country that did not have a former Arab population. (qtd in Makdisi, Palestine 259)

The renaming incidents in the book satirise the systematic erasure of Palestinian identity, history, memory and culture. The horror of this process is heightened through Amiry’s satiric use of humour. For example, the Israeli veterinarian’s seriousness in discussing the dog’s “little problem” of not having Jerusalem identity occurs in the same breath that she renames Suad as Suan. In this example, dogs have more entitlement to live in Jerusalem than Palestinians do. To treat Nura the dog, the Israeli veterinarian registers her as a Jerusalem dog to enable her to access Jerusalem vaccines. In the process, the dog acquires a Jerusalem passport. Jerusalem passports are coveted because it enables the holder greater freedom of movement and the ability to travel into and out of Jerusalem, a right denied Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza. Israeli state policies to limit the number of Palestinians in Jerusalem have separated families and denied many their right to reside there. The speed with which Nura receives her passport exacerbates the pathos of this policy: Amiry’s personal friends have waited years and are at risk of being separated from their families. They live illegally and under threat of deportation while Nura the dog receives her passport within minutes. Amiry’s friends are at the mercy and whim of the State of Israel to decide on the
merits of their case whereas Nura’s entitlement to a vaccine is unquestioned. The juxtaposition of the trite nature of the dog’s identity with the larger issue of Palestinians who cannot retain theirs exposes the insidiousness of this systematic process of dehumanisation.

The Israeli state power that is exercised over Palestinians is depicted as a complete suspension of law affected primarily to demonstrate power over them. A good example of this is the incident at the Muqatta, where Palestinians have gathered to collect gas masks promised to them by the IDF following threats from Iraq of chemical warfare. The scene is chaotic as the IDF struggle to exert control over a swelling crowd. The soldiers’ orders are completely arbitrary: one yells into a loudspeaker even though he is two metres from the crowd, and others order people off a bus only to have them line up to get back on again. The need for a bus is superfluous as the journey is only a few metres, and the exasperated bus driver who has to manoeuvre the bus in the confined spaces of the compound can only futilely complain: “but we’re right there” (Amiry 81). The vignette reveals that the extensive control mechanisms that the IDF impose are not to create a sense of order but merely to reinforce and demonstrate their power. Amiry presents this as a comedy of control, an Israeli fetish in which “they complicate our lives with all sorts of permits, make them unbearably chaotic, then insist we stand in straight lines:”

‘No one will get their tasreekh (permit) unless you stand in a straight line’

‘No one will get their hawiyeh (ID) back unless you stand in a straight line’

‘No one will pass through the checkpoint unless you stand in a straight line’ (Amiry 83)
Paradoxically this demonstration of power reveals the emptiness of Israeli authority over the Palestinians. Despite the soldiers and the threat of force the Palestinians are “fawwdah, ah fawwdah (chaotic, simply chaotic)” and straight lines easily descend into “amorphous screaming crowds” (Amiry 85). The unnatural straight lines imposed by the IDF cannot contain the heaving Palestinian humanity. The Israelis’ moral authority over the Palestinians is questioned as the resilience of Palestinian humanity is demonstrated. This resilience is asserted in spite of the state of exception.

Practicing sumoud

All of Israel is marked by the signs of the incomplete erasure of the Palestinian presence: this absence that stubbornly remains present.

(Makdisi, *Palestine* 234)

Amiry’s narrative shows that Palestinians retain their humanity despite the efforts of the occupying machinery to divest them of it. This reality appears as the palimpsest of that which is revealed in the narrative. Throughout the text are examples of Palestinians striving to maintain the standards of civil society in spite of the systemic forms of control that seek to destroy it. Individuals attempt to maintain social obligations despite the controls exerted by the Israeli occupiers. At George and Lamia’s, for instance, afternoon tea is served with a variety of teas and cake baked specially for the guests. The afternoon tea is surreal in its elegance, with a tilted tea trolley carrying a teapot, matching cups and saucers, Armenian nut bowls and a carrot cake on a silver plate. George and Lamia endeavour to be model hosts and Amiry and her husband, polite guests despite the
tensions that seep through the banal surface of social graces: George and Lamia obsess with the tea and Amiry with the time (Amiry 63-65). The whole scenario represents how social obligations and rituals are fulfilled in rapid time to beat curfew. The standards of civility create a microcosm of a world indoors that starkly contrasts with the reality of the brutal occupation and of individuals’ attempts to maintain this civility and dignity in spite of adversity.

In Amiry’s narrative, Palestinians are depicted as conscious subjects with a strong sense of will and desire. This tenacity has ensured their enduring presence in Occupied Palestine despite Israeli state policies that try to eliminate them. For example, Amiry chooses to shun the “openly sexist and undoubtedly racist” Palestinian vet for an Israeli vet who is “probably racist against Arabs but not dogs” (Amiry 104). Amiry also demonstrates resourcefulness in using the dog’s passport to travel to Jerusalem. Though forbidden from Jerusalem herself, she makes a case for entering it as the dog’s driver: “as you can see” she tells the bemused Israeli soldier willing to go along with the farce, “she is from Jerusalem, and she cannot possibly drive the car or go to Jerusalem all by herself” (Amiry 108). These examples indicate resourcefulness, agency and a refusal to be Othered because she takes control of the situation. They reveal that instead of being objects of the conflict they are subjects with agency.

A poignant demonstration of Palestinian agency is exhibited in the incident at the Mugatta where they assemble to collect gas masks. As previously described, despite the chaos, the Palestinians eventually board the bus as ordered. However, this action does not signal passivity or acquiescence but indicates that they are conscious of the implications of their actions. This conscious intentionality reinstates their status as subjects. Once seated on the bus, they joke that this is the...
“Transfer bus to Jordan: We Palestinians are so stupid. They always manage to fool us. We never learn from our past experiences” (Amiry 84). The joke about the transfer bus alludes specifically to the demographic problem faced by the State of Israel in its creation of the Jewish state. The problem arises because the land that it desires is populated by Palestinians whose numbers threaten the demographic majority of the Jewish state. The policy of transfer is a euphemism for the removal of the non-Jewish population. It has a long history ranging from large-scale expulsion through to compulsory transfers that are openly stated policies of many political parties. So, when the Palestinians on the bus joke that this is the transfer bus they allude to a more sinister policy that has touched all their lives directly. In their desire for gas masks to mitigate against death by chemical warfare from Iraq, they accede with the demand to board the bus, cynically acknowledging that they are probably being transported out of Palestine. This cynicism is well founded as it is based on a long history of deception at the hands of Western and Israeli powers. The many peace accords including Oslo have failed to deliver on the promises of a Palestinian state, the withdrawal of Israel to its 1949-1967 borders and the return of refugees. In the interim, however, the number of Israeli settlements illegally built in Occupied Territory increases exponentially and the genuine viability of a Palestinian state is severely reduced. The pathos is heightened through the use of black humour: a Palestinian who looks exactly like West Bank General Commander Mitzna offers coffee to the waiting Palestinians. The coffee is the

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28 For more information on the Israel’s demographic problem, see Makdisi, Palestine 9-14 and “The Herzliya Conference on the Balance of National Strength and Security in Israel.”
29 The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has reported extensively on the effects of settlements on the viability of a two-state solution, see The Humanitarian Impact of Israeli Settlements.
unsweetened kind served at funerals. The ensuing discussion as to whether the occasion is one for celebration (gas masks will be given to them) or a funeral (some other fate befalls them) reflects the acknowledgement that their fate is arbitrarily determined. Within this context, the simple joke about the transfer bus paradoxically heightens Palestinian agency. The decision to go to the Muqatta to obtain the promised gas masks confirms their ability to hold their cynicism and fear at bay despite a history of betrayal. The desire to mitigate an immediate threat demonstrates their refusal to accept the erasure of their dignity and humanity.

These examples reveal that Palestinians retain their humanity by consciously denying expression of it in order to survive the occupation: the paradox underpinning Agamben's description of bare life. Agamben suggests that bare life is the "bearer both of the subjection to sovereign power and of individual liberties" (125). Paradoxically, because bare life is deemed void and unimportant, the resistance it mounts is even more powerful. Agamben argued that the most extreme figure in the camp is the Muselman, extreme because they are beyond horror, humiliation and fear. Amiry reveals that Palestinians are not beyond humiliation and fear but choose to suppress expression of these emotions. She writes of acting deaf, behaving blind and pretending to be mute and turning a blind eye to students being beaten while on her way to teach at University (Amiry 69). She reveals that Palestinians refrain from expressing themselves like "normal human beings" in order to get on with daily life under occupation, by teaching themselves "not to hear, not to see, and not to speak up" (Amiry 69). This kind of endurance marks them as human precisely because they have endured the "inhuman" (Mills par. 11). Palestinians reveal that the quality required to live in this state is sumoud, a word that loosely translates as steadfastness. Here, Raja
Shehadeh’s reflections are insightful:

How could I tell them that we were heroic not because of the great risks that we were taking but because of our perseverance in the face of small, daily, persistent harassments and obstructions to our life, none of which on their own amounted to much? Just bureaucratic hassles that everyone, even in the best of democracies encounters sometimes. But in our case they were not random, occasional, or intermittent. They were persistent and constant, part of a policy to make the life of Palestinians so difficult that it would seem better to leave than to stay and suffer. In our determination to stay put lay our heroism, not in our acts of daring or even in military operations taken in resistance to the occupation. These were carried out by the smallest minority. The majority was resisting through staying put. This was the truth about life under occupation and this did not make for very exciting news or a narrative that could hold the attention even of the most ardent listeners. (Strangers 144-45)

Amiry’s narratives reveal heroism in the everyday lived experience of occupation in the state of exception. Normative discourses frame Palestinian resistance in terms of violent, armed resistance that the Israeli state calls terrorism. As the discussion reveals, Amiry maintains that dignity and humanity maintained through daily life under occupation is another form of resistance. In some sense, portraying this rather than exile is a more powerful form of testimony because the imperative to end an enduring state of occupation is pressed. The challenge for the author is how to portray that mundane existence and to engage witnesses to act to free Palestine in the process.
Interpellating the reader as witness

A Palestinian testimony has to combat the moral weight of the Zionist narrative before it gains legitimacy. The Zionist narrative primarily perpetuates the story of Israeli victimhood, a narrative that cannot simultaneously situate them as perpetrators of violence. Political and public discourses have framed Palestinians as the perpetrators of violence and as obstructive to the peace process. Israel is depicted as a peace-loving democracy amidst a sea of rock-throwing barbarians who want nothing more than to push them all into the sea to effect Israel’s destruction. As Said so eloquently put it “terrorism is invariably on the Palestinian, defence on the Israeli, side of the moral ledger” (“America’s” 46).

Amiry’s testimony reverses the narrative of Israeli victimhood to reveal Israelis as the perpetrators of violence against a non-violent and occupied population. The examples cited earlier reveal how this is achieved through parody and satire. At the core of the book, and in the chapter “Ramallah Under Siege,” this is achieved through the immediacy of the first person report. Written while Ramallah was under siege, these passages testify to facts on the ground in this period. The chapter reports the period between 29 March and 1 May, 2002 and reports activity that occurs when curfew is lifted. The arresting eye-witness accounts conveyed exist in medias res in the book, foregrounding the real sense of emergency in this state of conflict. The first two parts of the chapter recount her efforts to rescue her ninety-one year old mother-in-law from her apartment. Um Salim’s apartment building was located at the front line, near the Muqatta in which Palestinian President Yasser Arafat himself was confined. Um Salim was left without electricity or water for twelve days during the siege. Restrictions on movement and lockdown during curfew prevented anyone from reaching her.
Over six pages, Amiry writes of the frustrations of trying to reach her mother-in-law, of which these paragraphs are representative:

Three times, I found myself face to face with the Israeli tanks. I shuddered with fear and turned back, causing traffic jams, as many other cars were doing the same [...]. We drove 100 metres up the road, which was blocked. I took a left but that road was also blocked. I reversed and went right. Blocked again. (Amiry 132-33)

Their helplessness is most vividly portrayed in the scene where they wave to Um Salim and Zakiyeh who are only two hundred metres away from them, but cannot reach because soldiers have ordered them to “go back.” (Amiry 133):

We all started shouting again, ‘Um Salim, Tante Marie, keefek? We got no reply, as Zakiyeh was too busy pointing towards us, trying to explain to Um Salim, who cannot see very far. Um Salim waited outside for a few minutes and then walked back inside. With tears in our eyes we also walked away, not knowing whether we had succeeded in comforting her or only made her more anxious about her siege. (Amiry 134)

The use of first person reporting enhances the sense of pathos. Not only are the women hindered from rescuing the ninety-one year old woman and her elderly friend Zakiyeh by the damaged infrastructure and the traffic conditions but also, when they overcome these difficulties and reach Um Salim’s house, IDF soldiers actually prevent them from rescuing the elderly women. The reader is left to make their own judgment about the actions of the soldiers in preventing the helpless, elderly women from being removed.

In another powerful episode, Amiry reveals Israeli brutality and inhumanity by detailing their treatment of the Palestinian dead during the
invasion. In this episode she recounts the death of Jad, a young policeman, one of the twenty-nine people killed during the first two days of the Israeli invasion of Ramallah. Again, the immediacy of first person reporting in a war zone provides a powerful testimony. The intensity of the narrative is enhanced because Amiry documents this incident by reporting the experience of her friend Islah, the mother of a friend of the deceased. The double testimony of Amiry witnessing to Islah’s testimony combines to provide a rich picture of the collective experience of the moment. Amiry’s report reveals the helplessness of the Palestinians and International community in the face of the IDF. She reports Jad’s frantic calls to Islah for help during which he begged to be rescued, and Islah’s futile efforts beseeching the Red Cross and other International humanitarian organisations for assistance. Islah explains how her son Maher had been on the line “twenty-four hours a day for three days” listening to Jad’s pleas: “please help us. They are going to kill us. Please do something” (Amiry 148). The pathos is heightened because Jad acknowledges the inevitability of his death, and Islah is helpless to avert it. In contrast to the range of emotions demonstrated by the Palestinians such as fear, concern, helplessness and sorrow, the Israeli responses are hard, harsh and display a gross lack of concern for human life. International relief organisations the Red Cross and Red Crescent report: “There is not much we can do, the Israeli Army is not allowing us to move. We have not been able to help the besieged or the wounded, or collect corpses from the streets of Ramallah” (Amiry 148). The result is that the twenty-nine people killed during the first two days of the invasion are denied proper burial. In response, ordinary Palestinians pay their respects to the dead on behalf of the deceased’s families who cannot reach them because of the siege. Amiry witnesses the scene at the hospital and reports:
In a mass grave, in the backyard of the hospital, twenty-nine black plastic bags were lined up with their names written on each. The Israeli Army would neither allow the hospital to deliver the victims to their families, nor have them buried in the town cemetery. (Amiry 147)

This is a powerful testimony to Israeli state brutality because the narrative contrasts IDF callousness and disregard for human life with the range of human emotions demonstrated by Palestinians. Throughout the reporting Amiry maintains her objectivity to leave judgment to the reader. The contrast between IDF brutality and Palestinian humanity is so stark that it urges the reader to take a stance on the side of humanity. To align with the IDF would be to signal support of its brutality and consequently the reader’s own inhumanity and callousness. These powerful narratives collide with normative discourses about Israeli victimhood in circulation, of which the reader would undoubtedly be familiar. The effect of this is that the reader is prompted to question the assumptions that underpin discourses that support the narrative of Israeli victimhood because in Amiry’s eyewitness account it is the IDF who are violent, inhumane and terrorise the Palestinians, not the other way around.

The narrative of Israeli victimhood undermines Palestinian non-violent resistance. A good example of this occurs when Amiry recounts an incident between herself and an Israeli soldier at a checkpoint. In this incident, their car carrying Amiry, her husband and his cousin Vera is stopped at a roadside checkpoint for searching. Amiry remains in the back seat of the car while Salim her husband and Vera are searched outside it. Roused to anger when the young soldier searching the car addresses her as “hajjeh” she decides to stare at him. The scene is vividly described:
I stuck my head out of the back window and stared at the brainless soldier [...] I could not help it. I was so full of anger I decided just to go for it. My head was literally an inch or two away from his [...] My body was twisted, my neck stretched like a giraffe, and my already big eyes wide open with an even bigger stare [...] ‘This is the last time I’m going to tell you to stop looking at me, do you understand?’ came the final command of the soldier. [...] ‘How is she related to you?’ asked the soldier. ‘She is my wife,’ answered Salim, none too proudly. ‘Then ask your wife to stop staring at me.’ (Amiry 68-70)

The imposition of the incongruous act of the overwhelming military response to an innocuous stare parodies the disparity in power between the IDF and the Palestinians to emphasise it. Amiry’s husband is eventually taken in for questioning because she does not stop staring, a disproportionate response to a harmless act that exposes the real perpetrator of violence because the roles of victim and oppressor are undisputable in this narrative. Amiry admits that in reality the confrontation was the result of a build up of frustrations brought on by weeks of curfew, resentment caused by the twenty-four year long occupation and decades of unfulfilled aspirations (Amiry 68). The soldiers are armed and very easily unnerved and the response to her staring confirms the danger of mounting any form of resistance. In this scene Amiry leads the reader to understand that the staring unnerves the soldier because it threatens his authority. It is this fear of exposure that increases IDF vigilance against attempts that undermine their authority. They will therefore strike first in order to prevent this from occurring. In this manner, non-violent resistance is undermined by the discourses that
perpetuate narratives of Israeli victimhood. In this discourse, the victims can never be the oppressors. The press release that Amiry imagines demonstrates Palestinians’ awareness that the discourse to justify this action relies on the enduringly coupled ideas of Palestinian violence and Israeli victimhood: “From past experience, we can tell that this particular type of stare often takes place just minutes before life-threatening situations arise. Six months’ imprisonment is meant as a pre-emptive measure” (Amiry 75).

The absurdity of the incident creates a comedic effect that humanises Palestinians. This effect derives from an innovative connection of otherwise incongruous pieces of information, the effect of which is to strongly suggest a redefinition of these categories: clearly the IDF are the oppressors, and the Palestinians are non-violent and the subject of terrorism. In his study on narrative and comedy in narratives of suffering, Schuyler Henderson writes that “comedy can be the inventive connection of the incongruous, resulting in a surprising, delightful disordering and reordering of categories” (187). In this example, the comedy operates at several levels to humanise the Palestinians. At one level, the dissonance between this innocuous act and the treatment/response that follows dramatically heightens the sense of Israeli culpability in the events that are to follow in the book. Secondly, in this incident itself, Amiry’s ability to maintain her sense of humour contrasts with the soldiers’ inability to do likewise under the circumstances. Even though she describes herself as an animal, the whole incident emphasises her humanity, and the soldiers’ inhumanity because they are unable to laugh at the incident like most ordinary people would. To laugh at Amiry in this instance is to acknowledge that she is an animal rather than accept that this kind of reaction is a human response to the processes of dehumanisation. The distance
created through the humour reflects a deliberate Palestinian coping strategy to “take one step out of the frame and observe the senselessness of the moment” (Amiry xi). This, she explains is a “valuable self-defence mechanism against the Israeli occupation of our lives and souls.” Distance situates them as actors playing a role in a performance, a necessary strategy that ensures that they maintain the integrity of their humanity. As she describes, it was “only through taking ‘one step to the side of life’” that she is able to observe and recount the absurdity of their lives (Amiry xi). Comedy has the added effect of humanising the Palestinians while dehumanising their occupiers. This realisation engenders a transformation in the reader towards greater empathy for Palestinians.

This empathy is heightened because the author does not present herself as a heroic figure but as an ordinary person. At the outset, she relieves the reader of the responsibility of being informed of the Palestinian condition by pronouncing her own ignorance of it full impact. The first two lines of the book see her admit that she did not really understand or forgive her parents and the other thousands of Palestinians for fleeing their homes in 1948 until she and her husband had to flee their home in Ramallah on 18 November, 2001 (ix). This admission immediately captures the reader’s attention because it does not make any assumptions about the reader’s understanding of Palestinian history or the experience of exile.

Furthermore, Amiry admits that she is prone to political incorrectness, biases and fears. For example, as an architect and conservator, she mourns the destruction of the historic centre of Nablus including its soap factories and the Ottoman Caravan Sari but is “ashamed” at having to remind herself of the “thirteen people under the rubble, all from the same family, the al-Shu’bi family” all of whom lay dead.

Furthermore, her admission of guilt that she “should have been thinking about” the
dead family instead of mourning the loss of the historic soap factory and its
“historic stone cubes” yokes her humanity with that of the reader by admitting her
predisposition to self-interest (Amiry 166). Her mission to see the destruction for
herself appears as unnecessary tourism in light of the death of Nabulsi people, and
ironically parodies the kind of perverse interest that the reader may have in a
testimony from a war zone. The effect on the reader of all these confessions is to
humanise Amiry and reinforce a sense of affinity with her.

Amiry engages the reader most specifically through a series of direct
questions to reinforce a sense of their shared humanity. For example, she asks the reader to consider
living in the shoes of a Palestinian and enduring the daily humiliations of occupation:

I wonder what your reaction would have been if you had lived under
occupation for as many years as I had, or if your shopping rights, were
violated day and night, or if the olive trees in your grandfather’s orchards
had been uprooted, or if your village had been bulldozed, or if your
house had been demolished, or if your sister could not reach her school,
or if your mother had given birth at a checkpoint, or if you had stood in
line for days in the hot August summers waiting for your work permit, or
if you could not reach your beloved ones in Arab East Jerusalem?

(Amiry 68-69)

By probing for a response, Amiry insists on obtaining the reader’s empathetic
identification. The persistent questioning urges the reader to acknowledge a shared
humanity with Palestinians. The questions provoke the reader to confront the
biases in their assumptions about Palestinians, and hopefully shatter them.
Concomitantly, this insistent evocation of a shared human response increases the
reader’s understanding of the horror of life under occupation.
On other occasions, Amiry directly addresses the reader’s apathy to provoke action rather than mere sympathy or compassion. For example, the series of questions that directly asks the reader “do you want to know” about various aspects of Palestinian suffering tests the limits of the reader’s tolerance for the details about the occupation. Amiry’s direct engagement with the reader demands a reassessment of the paradigms through which they read Palestinian behaviour: “Do you realise what it would be like if we started acting like normal human beings every day, every hour, every minute or second in which you have violated our rights” (Amiry 69). This direct accusation of ignorance forces the reader to acknowledge that expectations of Palestinian acquiescence demand suppression of normal human responses. Paradoxically, Amiry suggests that the occupation, though untenable in reality, is perpetuated in part because Palestinians must suppress themselves in order to survive it. Amiry sardonically reflects that when Palestinians decide not to suppress their human reactions to suffering and oppression to “see, hear and speak up,” the rest of the world reacts in “surprise” as though these expressions are abnormal, like they did during Palestinian mass mobilisation and resistance in 1929, 1936 and 1987 (Amiry 69). Surviving the occupation requires the suppression of a range of emotions and behaviour because these cannot be accommodated in the narrative of Israeli victimisation and Palestinian terrorism. As questions like these are raised in the narrative, the reader is forced simultaneously to walk in the shoes of the Palestinians and to acknowledge that their apathy implies complicity in the narratives that support the dehumanisation of the Palestinians. This tension creates the call to action by reminding the reader to consider the moral bankruptcy of apathy.

Amiry’s testimony challenges the moral authority of the Zionist narrative
in its project to dehumanise Palestinians. Her testimony evokes the reader’s identification with universal human reactions and in the process urges them to restore the Palestinians’ right to these human responses. Her use of humour is an antidote to the consumption of testimony as consumerism as it forces a more critical engagement with the material than mere guilt or compassion. Humour through satire and parody highlights the humanity of the characters and the untenability of keeping an entire population under occupation. Many Governments in the Western world are complicit in supporting Israel’s continued occupation of Palestine despite acknowledging Palestinian suffering. Amiry’s text is an attempt to breach the superficial acknowledgment of suffering to reach a more constructive alliance that is a call to action to end the occupation. In this respect, her work exemplifies the potential of testimonial to interpellate further witnesses:

When the narrator talks about herself to you, she implies both the existing relationship to the representative selves in the community and potential relationships that extend her community through the text. She calls us in, interpellates us as readers who identify with the narrator’s project and, by extension with the political community to which she belongs […] the testimonial produces complicity […]. (Sommer 118)

In Baghdad Burning, a different process of interpellating the witness is employed. The transition to new media opens new horizons for the power of witnessing. Baghdad Burning provides a good example to draw out how the opportunities provided by the interaction between media offer new ways through which to interpellate witnesses in the West.
The truth lies somewhere in blogosphere: Baghdad Burning as resistance

During the Israeli war on Lebanon between July and August 2006, blogosphere went into overdrive. Christine Pouget of Agence France-Press reported that two days after the Israeli bombing and massacre at Qana, Technocrati, the Internet blog search engine, indicated that the term “Qana” was the second most requested key word. Weeks after the cessation of hostilities, “Hizbullah” remained on Technocrati’s list of popular search terms. Furthermore, the intensity of the Israeli attack on Lebanese infrastructure and communications meant that the Internet provided some of the only remaining links between Lebanese people and the outside world, and also between people within Lebanon as many parts of the country were isolated with the intense bombardment and siege. Photographs, stories, commentary, eye-witness accounts, analysis, discussion and journalism circulated in blogosphere. It was all too easy to succumb to information overload as thousands of us searched desperately for alternatives to the mainstream news and analysis and for voices from within Lebanon. The Internet provided a new source of information about the war: even established news sites such as The Guardian online, Al-Jazeera, and Electronic Intifada provided links to online blogs or means through which readers could access real-time reports and commentary by people on the ground. The war was blogged from both sides, by people on the ground and outside.

In many countries, the online blogging community enables the voice of dissent and opposition. Blogs, a Web-based form of communication, evolved from online diaries and reflect a range of genres and object oriented activities such as updating others on personal activities, to sharing information, expressing opinions...
to influence others or to release emotional tension.\textsuperscript{30} Their ability to bypass more traditional forms of information control means that virtually anyone with access to the Internet can publish a view. In this respect blogs enable many ordinary people to speak truth to power. This is a concern for governments who tightly control information and the media. In Egypt and Iran for instance, bloggers have been arrested, beaten and detained. To control information published online, the Peoples Republic of China Government invested in sophisticated Internet filter systems to restrict access to some sites and prevent postings that contain proscribed words such as “human rights.”\textsuperscript{31} Despite these efforts at control, blogs continue to proliferate and operate as a powerful medium of information exchange. War blogging from a war zone commenced with the 2003 war in Iraq when journalist Kevin Sites, reporting at the time for CNN, started blogging from Northern Iraq without his editor’s permission. His blog included extra stories, images and information that could not be incorporated into the television report. In an effort to maintain control over the information released from Iraq, CNN eventually asked Sites to cease blogging (MacKinnon, “The World” 35).

Blogging from within Iraq during the invasion in 2003 propelled two Iraqi bloggers onto the international spotlight. Salam Pax’s Blog “Where is Raed?” maintained initially to keep in touch with friends gained an international following as his reputation for reporting on the invasion of Iraq spread. A guest blogger on his site, known only as Riverbend, soon started her own blog called “Baghdad

\textsuperscript{30} For a sampling of critical discussion that has emerged on the Blog as a form of life writing and self-representation, see Nardi et al 222-28; Sorapure 1-18 and Zuern xi-xv.

\textsuperscript{31} For information on government scrutiny of Web publications and blogging activity, see Levinson “Egypt’s,” MacKinnon “China’s Internet,” MacKinnon “Global,” “On Blogging” and Tynes “Arab Blogging.”
Burning.” Pax’s success encouraged many other Iraqi bloggers, though he and Riverbend have received the most international attention. Pax toured the international book festival circuit and appeared on radio and television talk shows following the publication of his book. Riverbend maintains her anonymity, though major news sites such as The Guardian and Al-Jazeera have published interviews with her. The international attention to their work commenced before they made the transition into print media and undoubtedly increased readership to their blog sites. It also exposed readers to alternative sources of information on the war in Iraq and a wide range of Iraqi voices through bloggers who blogged from both within and outside the war zone.

In the analysis to follow I draw on the book Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq.32 The book is the published version of posts from 17 August, 2003 to 15 September, 2004. The publication of the print version of the blog creates an interesting creative charge resulting from the nexus between print and Web narratives. I will argue that this nexus operates dialogically to interpellate a wide range of further witnesses. The print version enables its readers to witness to the Web community’s engagement with Riverbend, a process that fosters a strong sense of identification with the author. Cumulatively, this enables a wide community to question its biases and assumptions about narratives of the war and media representation. My reading will first show how Riverbend’s testimony is appealing because it represents the anonymous, authentic survivor. I will also show how the strategies deployed in the narrative urge the reader to move beyond guilt and empathetic consumerism to political action.

32 Riverbend won the third prize in the 2005 Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Literary Reportage for Baghdad Burning. This prize commenced in 2003 by the cultural journal Lettre International in association with the Aventis Foundation. The aim of the award is to bring the art of literary reportage to worldwide attention, and to reward authors materially and symbolically. It is the only world prize for literary reportage and provides international and formal recognition of the aspect of reporting and commentary that characterizes her work.
The anonymous, authentic survivor

“Riverbend’s tale comes right at us, fresh, furious, and demanding […]. You’ll never watch the news the same way again.” Printed on the back cover of the book, this endorsement by Laura Flanders from Air America Radio promises that the book will profoundly affect the reader. This power derives from the author’s authenticity as a credible witness and is enhanced by the specific context created by the nexus of print and Web. The book Baghdad Burning operates dialogically with the Web version because it enables the reader to reflect on the interactions that occurred on the Web. One of these is the process of authentication. In the book, Riverbend’s authority is confirmed through publishing conventions such as the foreword and introduction. Prize-winning novelist and activist Ahdaf Soueif wrote the foreword and American investigative journalist James Ridgeway provides the introduction to the book and to each chapter. These personalities provide the reader of the print version with a sense of confidence in the text. To further emphasise the authenticity of the material itself, the editor’s note stipulates that the entries appear as they do online without editorial intervention. These introductions replace those that are available in the Web version. On the blog site, Riverbend promotes her authenticity through links to news and commentary Websites such as the BBC, Al-Jazeera in English, and Juan Cole’s “Informed Comment,” to suggest alternative, credible sources to confirm the material she blogs about. She provides links to other blogs including those by Iraqis such as “Dear Raed” and “Raed in the Middle” and blogs by non-Iraqis and is similarly referenced on other blog sites. These reciprocal links serve as “introductions” that advance the testimonial quality, authenticate the blogger and act as “endorsements” that verify the authenticity of the author (McNeill 8). These links
provide the reader on the Web with real time contextual information that they can access independently. In the book, this context is provided by James Ridgeway’s introductions. His introductions authenticate Riverbend’s voice because her narratives support and align with his overview.

Readers of the print version also witness how the community on the Web authenticated her identity as a genuine Iraqi witness, making this process a powerful supplement to the conventions offered by the print media. Although blogs are a new media phenomenon, their format predates the Internet and readers continue to bring expectations of “truth” from the print and diary form. These expectations suggest readers’ belief in these online diarists as real people, “despite the possibilities for total identity deception on the Internet” (McNeill 37). As a result, bloggers must find alternative ways to prove their authenticity. The need to authenticate identity is evident from the challenges that Riverbend faced in maintaining her anonymity online. The book opens with Riverbend’s first post in which she identifies herself simply as the eponymous war survivor: “I’m female, Iraqi and 24. I survived the war. That’s all you need to know. It’s all that matters these days anyway” (Baghdad 5). This anonymity grants her the freedom to write that she wouldn’t have “otherwise” (Baghdad 21): “you know me as Riverbend, you share a very small part of my daily reality – I hope that will suffice” (Baghdad 21). This anonymity is unnerving for some readers who accused her of “lying,” and of not being Iraqi (Baghdad 6). In an interview with Andrew Denton, Salam Pax revealed how his authenticity was challenged: “Most were kind of not believing that someone in Baghdad would be writing this. There was so much doubt and thinking, ‘No, no, no.’ Then came the period when everybody was saying, ‘He’s definitely either CIA or the secret police.’”
Ultimately, a community of interest validated the quality and integrity of
the information on Riverbend’s blog and attested to her authenticity, as they did
Pax’s. The reader of the book witnesses how this community authenticated
Riverbend’s identity in a series of online entries. In an entry dated 29 October,
2003, Riverbend reports how the Web community had dealt with a case of identity
fraud. She writes that many readers had alerted her to a “fake” blog that purported
to write in her name but that her complaint with “Blogger,” the host site, about the
identity fraud had been futile (Baghdad 118). For the benefit of the uninformed
reader she writes that the contents on this other blog “are almost completely
opposite to what I write – and most of the posts are just copied and pasted from
different sources (mostly USA government sources)” (Baghdad 118). She then
cites two bloggers who had independently monitored the fraud prior to her
reporting it to her readers in the post of 29 October. She pastes a post from a
blogger called Brian dated 22 October and includes his Website address
<http://suzeraintv.blogspot.com> so that readers can look up the reference
themselves. Brian writes:

This blog [at riverSbendblog.blogspot.com] is a shabby, poorly cobbled
together collection of material plagiarised from various foreign sources.
It is not a blog by any definition […]. In all likelihood it is the work of an
embittered American who does not like what Riverbend writes. (Baghdad 119)
An excerpt from a second blogger dated 27 October follows, as does a reference to
the Website <http://gorenfeld.net>:

A lot of people over at Atrio’s blog – including me – have been
wondering what’s up with a blog called Riversbend that supposedly
posts from Iraq. There was already a very similar site called Riverbend,
run by a woman from Iraq, but it didn’t have the “S” in the middle, and it tended to attack Halliburton bidding practices rather than copy optimistic passages from Thomas Friedman. (Baghdad 119)

By copying these other posts directly into her blog, Riverbend testifies that readers like Brian and others had independently researched the identity of the blogger writing at RiverSbend. This technique enables her to demonstrate that it is the community of readers who had determined the value of information contained in both blogs to glean the lies from the truth. The blogger at RiverSbend was revealed by this community to be a retired US Army Korean war veteran named Troy. Vindication for Riverbend is more powerful because a wider community had exposed the identity fraud and confirmed her authenticity in the process. These posts indicate that a community interested in ascertaining the integrity of the information published shares her opinion. In this sense it is the community to which this blog belongs that authenticates the author and its content.

Rebecca MacKinnon, former CNN journalist for Asia, argues that in many respects the information in the site maintains bloggers’ honesty and accuracy (“The World” 22). The narrative that reports all of this enables the reader to witness to the authentication process. Paradoxically it also enables the reader to witness the strategies such as sabotage, misrepresentation and fraud that are utilised to prevent narratives from emerging. Riverbend’s blog clearly represented information that threatened the narrative of the American invaders: reality for Iraqis was vastly different to that presented by the propaganda machine. The dialogism that this creates prompts the reader to critically evaluate their sources of information, their assumptions and biases. The reader of the print version witnesses how the blog derives much of its power from its egalitarian platform as
authentication is provided by a wider community and its politics rather than by association with particular individuals on the basis of their power.

The inclusion of multiple voices and sources of information in the blog enables readers of the book to observe Riverbend’s transparency. This process also enables them to find affinities with a community that has galvanised around the issue of Iraq’s occupation. The pages of Baghdad Burning document the participatory aspect of the blog where Riverbend is seen to actively engage with readers and contributors. She includes or makes reference to information sent to her by readers. For example, she provides links to other sources of information. In a post dated 31 January, 2004 titled “A Whole Bunch of Links” she provides links to new Iraqi bloggers, Iraqi music and also to a Website by Physicians for Human Rights on cluster bombs and minefields set by the coalition forces in Iraq (Baghdad 201). Commentary by other bloggers and news sites is also frequently included, for example in the posts of 13 November and 16 November, 2003, she copied paragraphs from different sources on political commentary on Paul Bremmer’s role in Iraq through and the Iraqi body count into her entry (Baghdad 135-144). These other voices reinforce her commentary because they provide supporting evidence. As a result of this conglomeration of information her blog becomes a trusted resource because much of this information is not easily found elsewhere.

The effect of including these sources of information also verifies and testifies to a community with shared goals. Every resource is referenced and acknowledged with the corresponding Web address, for example, she shares a satirical joke titled “these weapons of mass destruction cannot be displayed” with her readers, acknowledges the source and thanks the informant: “one of the
readers of this blog (you know who you are) led me to this page” (Baghdad 41). For example, when she writes that the reader B. from Ireland alerted her to the Website about minefields and cluster bombs, she testifies to B. and other communities’ shared outrage at the atrocities committed in Iraq. B.’s “insistence” that she investigate this site enables B. to state solidarity with her and for her to acknowledge this online (Baghdad 201). Information of this nature urges recognition of the people and communities in solidarity with Iraqis who are galvanised to speak out for the truth and to demand justice.

Furthermore, readers of the book observe that the blog attracts active participants who comprise a community in solidarity that shares and participates in the construction of the narrative, a process that increases Riverbend’s credibility. MacKinnon argues that the blog attracts an “information community” rather than a readership. She suggests that the term “community” better reflects the interactivity engendered and fostered through the blog because it implies a “Web of multidirectional relationships and exchanges” (“The World” 10). In this sense, the blog differs from traditional media sources because information flow is multidirectional, whereas it is unidirectional in traditional media (MacKinnon, “The World” 10). A good example of this can be seen in the post of 30 November, 2003 that she entitles “Two sides to the story.” This post effectively serves as an “addendum” to the previous day’s post where she reported that two girls had been shot by troops while gathering wood. In this post, she acknowledges that readers’ responses had revealed that her initial report lacked nuance: “it has been brought to my attention that there are two different sides of the incident I mentioned in my previous blog – about the 12 and 15 year old girls who were shot in the field while gathering wood” (Baghdad 153). To correct herself she then includes excerpts
from Al-Jazeera and News Interactive to reflect both perspectives: the one from Al-Jazeera confirms the girls’ brother’s account that troops had shot his sisters, and the other from News Interactive presenting the coalition perspective in which they claim that they had simply found the girls’ bodies in the fields. The different perspectives indicate the truth wars in which Iraqis are mired and the main motivations that underpin the attraction of a blog for its community of interest. Riverbend’s willingness to present differing perspectives to readers strengthens the integrity of her blog because it demonstrates a commitment to a critical readership similarly hungry for the truth. Riverbend concludes her post by simply reflecting that the only reality that can be confirmed is that two young girls have been murdered: “I hope whoever did this is caught and punished” (Baghdad 154).

Demonstrating her commitment to openness with the information sharing community increases Riverbend’s credibility and the value of her blog. This way, the blog posts become a site where a community can adjudicate truths. The reader of the book witnesses this process and can reflect on the value of collective information over individual information, and similarly on the paradigm shift in which information is presented and shared in the world today.

Riverbend’s credibility as a witness is also heightened because her reports and commentary often precede that carried by conventional news sources. Her on-the-go quality of reporting has an eerily prophetic quality because events are reported in her blog before they are reported in mainstream journalism. The impact of this is even more profound for the reader who reads this material with the foreknowledge of these events. Ridgeway’s introductions similarly set the context. For instance, on 29 March, 2004, she posts a harrowing story of abuse experienced by M who had been incarcerated at Abu Ghraib prison. A month later,
the actual pictures of the abuse in Abu Ghraib are published in mainstream media substantiating her story and also the murmurings within Iraqi society. Her posts about highly inflated contracts being awarded to the Halliburton company were also well in advance of the public exposition of the scandals associated with Iraq’s “reconstruction.” As I redrafted this chapter in 2008 in the context of almost daily suicide bombings in Iraq coupled with the threat of rising Islamic fundamentalism and proliferation of Al-Qaeda cells, my thoughts are drawn to her post of 23 August, 2003, in which she comments: “So concerning the anxiety over terror and fundamentalism – I would like to quote the Carpenters – worry? ‘We’ve only just begun … we’ve only just begun’” (Baghdad 20). The unnervingly prophetic nature of her posts strengthens her credibility as a witness with reliable information.

The blog enables her to speak truth to power because it allows her to bypass more conventional forms of control over information. Her posts can reveal the actual facts on the ground without the need for permission. M’s narrative confirmed murmurings in Iraqi society already in circulation but that were not recognised as real because in the context of the occupation, truths like this struggle to gain legitimacy through the liberatory rhetoric promulgated by Americans. For readers of the book, M’s personal story, reported by Riverbend, corroborates and more importantly personalises the infamous stories of abuse at Abu Ghraib. The tension that this creates suggests the need to be attentive to alternative narratives that compete for recognition with dominant narratives. As Riverbend’s status as a source of verifiable information grows, it becomes less possible to treat her as a witness to be pitied but more as a voice that needs to be heard. Blogs like hers become essential daily reading for many of her readers who want an honest depiction from
an ordinary Iraqi. Always modest, “daily reading” was a quality that she had
ascribed to Salam Pax in a post dated 6 December, 2003 (Baghdad 161). The
effect on readers of the print version is to galvanise a further set of witnesses to be
cautious and critical about dismissing stories that are not given the stamp of
authority by being reported in mainstream news.

Conveying the experience of an “ordinary” Iraqi resident

I wish every person who emails me supporting the war, safe behind their
computer, secure in their narrow mind and fixed views, could actually
come and experience the war live. (Baghdad 254)

Riverbend’s posts reveal how daily life in post war Iraq is circumscribed by the
whims of the occupying forces intent on denying them their humanity and dignity.
She reveals that the everyday experience represents the normalisation of the state
of exception: “no electricity, water at a trickle, planes, helicopters and explosions”
(Baghdad 145). Coalition control over essential services means that Iraqis cannot
have power over even the most domestic of functions. A good example of this is
the post dated 26 January, 2004, where she describes the impact of electricity
shortages on the family rhythms: the washing piles up, the fridges do not work,
there is no access to the Internet or television. When people can wash their
clothes, cook, sleep or work is controlled by the electricity schedule. This means a
complete upheaval of domestic life. So, when the electricity resumes at 2 o’clock
in the morning, the whole household awakes to commence what they would
ordinarily have done in daylight. Reality for Iraqis, she explains, is “the washer,
clanging away at 2.30 am, because you don’t know when there’ll be electricity
again” (Baghdad 197). Frequently she will apologise for a short post because she does not know when the electricity supply will be cut. She advises readers that they receive “30 minutes for every two hours of no electricity” (Baghdad 136). This kind of frequent interjection enables the reader to share in the family’s strange rhythms and accompanying anxieties. It reflects Iraqi dependence on the goodwill of the coalition forces that control this supply and as a result also their lives. The pathos of the situation is heightened by the fact that Iraqis suspect that these electricity shortages are a form of collective punishment: “for what happened in Nassiryah this morning and the bombings in Baghdad this week” (Baghdad 136). Coalition control over essential services effectively impacts on the domestic sphere. Individuals are denied the ability to control the most basic of domestic and physical processes like sleeping and eating. The thought of sleep brings “imaginary sheep” that mock her in the dark “night after night” (Baghdad 197). Iraqis are made vulnerable to the occupying forces because the inability to control basic desires and everyday life is humiliating and demeaning.

To convey the physiological and behavioural consequences of living in this state of exception, Riverbend reveals that mundane activities become sites of physical and mental trauma. Generally, daily life is fraught with uncertainty and fear for their lives. Chaos is normalised as Riverbend learns to distinguish the types of guns from the sounds of gunfire alone and she can discuss bombardment as a matter of fact: “the last few days have been tense – gunshots, helicopters, and […] 23 explosions” (Baghdad 140). The lived experience of this is that daily life occurs under duress. For example, the journey by car to her aunt’s house is described as like “being caught in a tornado” (Baghdad 40). A journey that would take twenty minutes before the war now takes forty-five minutes. The journey is
fraught with anxiety as the occupants of the car keep their eyes peeled for signs of danger: “I held my breath nervously every time the cousin slowed down the car because of traffic, willing the cars in front of us to get a move on” (Baghdad 40). Her description brings to life the physicality of the trauma caused by the fear of being attacked enroute: “Every muscle in my body was aching. My eyes were burning with the heat and the strain. E’s brow was furrowed with the scenes we had left behind us on the street and the cousin’s hands were shaking almost imperceptibly — knuckles still white with tension” (Baghdad 41). On another occasion she writes of her cousin’s fear of letting her children resume school at the beginning of the school year in 2004: “S. says she doesn’t know how she’s going to spend the day without the girls ‘in front of her eyes’… ‘It felt like they took my lungs with them – I couldn’t breathe until they got home’” (Baghdad 97). The simple acts of sending children to school and visiting family across town require tremendous acts of stoicism. Elsewhere, Riverbend’s technique relies strongly on evoking the reader’s empathy by providing a scenario that promises to evoke a similar sentiment. For instance, she describes the general anxiety that Iraqis feel as similar to that of wondering if the iron has been left on except that “it lasts all day” and goes on month after month (Baghdad 196). The horror of this is its pervasiveness: “everyone I know is suffering from that mental strain. You can see it in the eyes and hear it in the taut voices that threaten to break with the burden of emotion” (Baghdad 256). Similarly, she is able to portray the sense of isolation and desperation arising from the restrictions placed on her movement outside the house by appealing to the reader’s sense of independence. By insisting on her right to choose eggplants herself, she highlights her desperation for freedom. The ridiculous juxtaposition of this primary need with the banal need to select one’s
own eggplants reflects the tragedy of the reality for ordinary Iraqis. Time and again, River invites us to imagine the experience of her reality. The anxiety experienced because Iraqis want to maintain a semblance of normal domestic life would seem untenable to readers sitting in the comfort and safety of their living rooms in the West.

Riverbend’s strength in witnessing derives from her ability to present the experience of singular individuals in contrast to the abstractions about them presented in media and other reports. A good example of this lies in her post for Friday 19 September, 2003 titled “Terrorists.” This post describes a raid in detail. It begins with a general description of what happens during a raid such as weapons checks, doors being broken down and homes searched. As counterbalance to these news reports, Riverbend conveys the human impact of the raids, an aspect not usually incorporated in the narrative. She reveals that in the face of the military raid “all you have to do is stifle your feelings of humiliation, anger, and resentment at having foreign troops from an occupying army search your home” (Baghdad 71). She writes of raids that contradict army claims to efficiency when they go “horribly wrong” and “all hell breaks loose. Family members are shot, others detained, and often women and children are left behind waiting” (Baghdad 71). This kind of personal information undermines the authoritative versions that attest to smooth and efficient military operations. The power of this specific entry lies in her first person eyewitness account and of the personal details provided that humanise the people being raided. Her narrative reveals the human dimension: fear, humiliation, shame, pride and dignity, a range of emotions that are denied Iraqis in the discourses that frame them as terrorists and insurgents and therefore subject to raids. The power of the first person testimony is evoked at the outset.
when she states: “I first witnessed a raid back in May.” The scene is recreated with the full intensity of helicopters whirling overhead, the bright lights, shouting and heavy armoured vehicles circling the neighbour’s house. This narrative is then interrupted by River’s memory of Abu A. walking his grandson down the street and lovingly washing the three year old’s chocolate-covered face. She gives us a brief profile of the family: Abu A., the eighty year old respected army general who had retired in the 1980’s, his wife, two sons and two daughters. Having provided this context, the narrative then shifts back to the sequence of events she witnesses during the raid:

Abu A. was out next. He stood tall and erect, looking around him in anger. His voice resonated in the street, above all the other sounds […].

His oldest son A. followed behind with some more escorts. The last family member out of the house was Reem, A.’s wife of only four months. She was being led firmly out into the street by two troops, one gripping each thin arm.

I’ll never forget that scene. She stood, 22 years old, shivering in the warm, black night. The sleeveless nightgown that hung just below her knees exposed trembling limbs […] I couldn’t see her face because her head was bent and her hair fell down around it. It was the first time I had seen her hair … under normal circumstances, she wore hijab.

That moment I wanted to cry … to scream … to throw something at the chaos down the street. I could feel Reem’s humiliation as she stood there, head hanging with shame – exposed to the world, in the middle of the night.

One of the neighbours […] moved forward […]. The man held up an ‘abaya,’ … ‘Please […] cover her’[…]". (Baghdad 74).
The power of the personal witness here enables the reader to experience a range of emotions that Riverbend and others experienced at the scene, including outrage, humiliation, shame and helplessness. The “I” who will never forget that scene becomes the reader who will be hard pressed to forget this post. As readers we see the scene unfold before us, read the shame in the face shielded only by a head of hair, see the trembling knees and feel the nakedness of a young woman exposed to the street. Her shame is exacerbated because we have been told that she is normally in hijab. This narrative arouses more anger, compassion and sympathy for this family because we have been told their names, we felt their warmth as a family, saw them walk down the street in other guises – as doting grandpa with chocolate smeared grandchild, as young newly-wed woman in hijab, still the blushing bride. The narrative is so evocative as to enable each reader to sense Abu A.’s helplessness at not being able to protect his family from this humiliation and Reem’s shame at being exposed and uncovered to the onlookers on the street. The pathos is rendered deeper with the neighbour’s polite request of the soldiers to “cover her.” The reader is similarly helpless before the scene. This description requires the reader to acknowledge that these raids are carried out on real families with stories of their own, not nameless statistics.

In Riverbend’s reality, there is no collateral damage. This term is used by the American media to talk about ordinary Iraqis killed by the American and coalition forces in their fight against Iraqi resistance and terrorism. The term situates Iraqis as commodities and denies them their humanity. In the newspapers they appear as the anonymous dead who make that day’s death-toll tally, a statistic, a number, a piece of collateral damage. In Riverbend’s reality the people who are buried by the side of the road and identified only as “man in white car”
have names, personalities and a story to tell. The “collateral damage” in discourses of terrorism and Iraqi liberation are her neighbours, relatives and acquaintances. We learn their names, their personalities, families and professions. The personal details provided by River create an empathetic connection to ordinary Iraqis living under occupation, real Iraqis who cannot be nameless collateral while Riverbend and other bloggers testify to their names, personalities, their warmth, fears, desires and loves. It is because of these that readers like me rush to the computer to check that River is still blogging when we hear about bombs or raids or imprisonments in Baghdad. We start to appreciate the fear and anxiety over the loss of friends and family and pray that this tragedy doesn’t visit hers as frequently as it visits others. The blog provides a powerful means for readers to connect with ordinary Iraqis. Readers of this blog in the book testify to the community that gravitates around Riverbend and validates her in the process.

**Witness the price of our war: implicating the reader**

The American and European news stations don’t show the dying Iraqis…they don’t show the women and children bandaged and bleeding – the mother looking for some sign of her son in the middle of a puddle of blood and dismembered arms and legs…. You should see the price of your war and occupation – it’s unfair that the Americans are fighting a war thousands of kilometres from home. They get their dead in neat, tidy caskets draped with a flag and we have to gather and scrape our dead off of the floors and hope the American shrapnel and bullets left enough to make a definite identification. *(Baghdad 251)*
Passages like this implicate the reader directly in perpetuating the war against Iraq and the ensuing suffering experienced by its people. In this post, Riverbend’s anger, frustration and helplessness are palpable and heighten her credibility as a witness because it contrasts her humanity with the apathy of the average reader in the West. The posts made during this time, a year after Iraq is “liberated” are explicit about exposing the implicit hypocrisy that underpins the war rhetoric: American dead are celebrated and honoured whereas Iraqi dead are beyond dignity – a mess of blood and sinew strewn about the ground. Media hypocrisy reflects this disparity over the value of life and fuels public outrage when “one Brit, American or Pakistani dies” but is silent even though dozens of Iraqis die daily in Fallujah or Najaf (Baghdad 278). Riverbend’s unrestrained representation of Iraqi emotion: “we’re watching the television and crying” (Baghdad 250), shames the reader based in the West into evaluating their stance when watching the news about the war in Iraq. She writes that despite the overwhelming powerlessness which is viscerally described in her blog: “It’s like being held under water and struggling for the unattainable surface – seeing all this devastation and suffering” (Baghdad 250), her writing tells us of struggling Iraqi families who demonstrate compassion and humanity by assembling the food that they can share for aid, and accommodate refugee families within already crowded homes (Baghdad 250, 254). Iraqi compassion and agency is used by Riverbend to shame the reader based in the West. Her testimony exposes that their apathy is underpinned by an implicit assumption of moral and ideological superiority.

Riverbend’s posts disempower the reader invested in narratives prescribing the West’s moral authority because this is revealed to be morally bankrupt. Time and again, she writes that the intended consequences of the invasion are opposite
to that predicted: post-invasion Iraq is rife with sectarian warfare and the position of women has deteriorated. Rising Islamic fundamentalism has resulted in families keeping women at home for their safety as “a girl wearing jeans risks being attacked, abducted, or insulted by fundamentalists.” Instead of the secularism promised, there is an increase in Islamic fundamentalism and religious extremism, the opposite of the secularism already enjoyed by Iraqis before the invasion. For example, in 2004 secular family laws were replaced with Islamic Sharia (Baghdad 187). Narratives like Riverbend’s prohibit empathetic identification of the West as an “empowered agent” or an “agent of social change and humanitarian betterment” (Schaffer and Smith 12) because it undermines the hegemony of the Western narrative of progress and moral superiority.

Powerful examples are provided by Riverbend to reveal the duplicity of the West because the rhetoric of the war is contrasted with the reality she describes. For example, the terror that is experienced by Iraqis during occupation is unrecognised in the narrative of Iraqi liberation: “helicopters, tanks, missiles, rattling windows and explosions aren’t war – they are ‘protection’: they are Operation Iron Hammer, not to be confused with war” (Baghdad 140). The Americans bomb, drop missiles, raid and kill but because they wear khaki, ride tanks, and fly Apache helicopters they are “liberators” not terrorists (Baghdad 228). Her testimony is rebuked by a commentator who accuses her of being ungrateful: “You ungrateful Iraqis! They are doing this for YOU […] the raids are for YOU!” (Baghdad 8). This kind of accusation justifies the raids that require a young girl’s stoicism, as she masks her fears through the bombing, and it is only “if you sit particularly close, you can hear her grinding her little teeth” (Baghdad 140). Elsewhere, Riverbend writes of the inhumanity of the American occupying
forces in Fallojeh where they leave the dead to decompose in the sun, and prevent food and medical relief from entry because their priority is to restrict movement (Baghdad 250). The hearts and minds campaign that the Americans embark on reveals itself to literally mean the shattering of hearts, brains and bodies as Americans pound Fallojeh and kill more than 600 civilians. She indicates that "precision weapons" are a misnomer because they convey the impression that the American military minimise the loss of life during their bombardment. Applied in Fallojeh a "small city made up of low, simple houses, little shops and mosques" it implies that the 600 people killed and the thousands injured were all "insurgents" (Baghdad 254). Pre-empting the bombardment of Fallojeh, Riverbend remembers the precision bombing of the shelter in Amiriyah where 400 mostly women and children were killed when American missiles were directed at it. To emphasise the illegality of this act, she cites the Geneva Conventions that prohibit such action if any doubt exists about the purpose and use of a building (Baghdad 207, 212). In Riverbend’s narrative the West’s disregard for the sanctity of Iraqi life is made painfully explicit.

These gross violations of civil and human rights occur because the moral authority of the West in promulgating them goes unquestioned. So, in the case of Iraq, Iraqis must paradoxically experience the terror of raids, and the suffering experienced by raids, curfews and bombing because this is intended to guarantee their safety. A similar paradigm unfolds in the case of Palestine. In Western media, raids are glamorised through Hollywood-style depictions of strong, uniformed troops eliminating hostile insurgents. These narratives are fuelled by discourses of terrorism that undermine narratives of resistance.

Baghdad Burning operates at the nexus of both print and online media and
provides a powerful means through which to interpellate further witnesses. There are fundamental differences in the conventions of print and online media that affect the way the reader is interpellated as a witness. A visitor to <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/> comes immediately to Riverbend’s newest post, whereas in the book version the reader is presented with the oldest entry first. The blog emphasises immediacy and currency whereas the book engenders a sense of narrative and historical continuity. The ability to scroll through a blog also presents a different reading experience to the strong convention of reading a book in linear form from start to finish. Where the book version invites reflection, the online version inspires interactivity. In the print version, readers observe how an anonymous online community affirms Riverbend’s authenticity as a credible witness. These readers also observe Riverbend’s commitment to be an agent for change. On more than one occasion, she voices her reluctance to blog because she didn’t feel like it (Baghdad 255). The reasons for this include the challenges caused by the irregular electricity supply, the heat or by being overwhelmed by the situation. Punctuating the narrative regularly, these reflections reveal the commitment required to maintain the blog. At times, the task appears onerous as the computer looks “rebukingly” at her (Baghdad 255). These confessions reveal that Riverbend blogs because of an underlying motivation to inform her readers. She continues to blog simply because she has “more to say” (Baghdad 256). In an interview with Al-Jazeera, Riverbend defends her style as enabling her to witness to the human dimension of the war, a dimension not incorporated in traditional media representations:

Bloggers are not exactly journalists, which is a mistake many people make. They expect us to be dispassionate and unemotional about topics
such as occupation and war, etc. That objective lack of emotion is impossible because a blog in itself stems from passion – the need to sit for hours at one’s computer, slouched over the keyboard, trying to communicate ideas, thoughts and frustrations to the world.

Riverbend’s insistence on maintaining her blog site post publication attests to her desire to maintain control over both means through which witnesses, especially those in the Western world can be interpellated. Prior offers from publishers required that she cease blogging, a condition she flatly refused. In contrast to other publishers, Feminist Press agreed to allow her to continue to blog. This ensures her ability to maintain her independent voice online. It also means that readers of the book inspired to visit the blog site to find out more of what happened after the book ends may be drawn into an interactive, informative community. Inevitably, this interaction inspires a more intimate relationship with the author who continues to assert a living presence through her voice on the Web. This enables her to provide living testimony and maintain a position of resistance rather than transitioning into a cultural artefact. The interactivity that blogging supports prevents the consumption of her testimony as empathetic consumerism because the relationship that it promotes between reader and living witness forces the reader to take a moral stance.

The last post by Riverbend on the blog site was dated 22 October, 2007 following her arrival in Syria, following weeks of family deliberations about their flight from Iraq. Sadly, readers of the book who now go to the blog are left with feeling bereft at their loss of contact with Riverbend, whose flight from her beloved Iraq was clearly a painful decision. This nonetheless emphasises the horror of the legacy of the invasion and of the imperative to stand up in solidarity with them.
Conclusion

Testimonials do not focus on the unfolding of a singular woman’s consciousness (in the hegemonic tradition of European modernist autobiography); rather their strategy is to speak from within a collective, as participants in revolutionary struggles, and to speak with the express purpose of bringing about social and political change. (Mohanty, Feminism 81)

The social change that Amiry and Riverbend aim to achieve requires an epistemological shift. Their testimony is not just to the suffering and injustices of occupation but to the horrifying consequences of an extreme form of discursive violence that renders an Other so devalued that injustices of this nature can be perpetrated. To this end, they have both invested in the express purpose of raising the reader’s awareness of the imperative for this change. This must occur to pave the way for justice. Their testimony is aimed at Western readers with the explicit aim of facilitating this shift, a move that represents a commitment to shared humanity. Their work is not merely aimed at galvanising support because this alone without the corresponding paradigm shift feeds liberal hypocrisy, and the third world difference that reinforces a sense of Western superiority.

The interaction of media and genre create exciting opportunities for testimony emerging from Palestine and Iraq. Both authors convey the unrepresentable aspects of political and strategic rhetoric: human frailty, anger and grief, aspects that have no scope for representation in the political rhetoric of facts, figures, power, victory or loss. This is most evident in Baghdad Burning where the nexus between Web and print is explored. The readership of the print version adds
to Riverbend’s Web community and together both media create synergies that testify to the imperative to rectify the injustices in Iraq. The book serves as a platform for reflection on the currency and pre-emptory nature of the Web posts, a process that confirms the authority of the blogger/author and emphasises the imperative to act quickly.

Amiry’s technique relies more on satire and parody to address the reader to shock them into evaluating the assumptions underpinning the discourses that support narratives of the occupation. This, together with the first person reporting of life under curfew dismantles the myth of Israeli victimhood, and of the moral superiority of the Israeli state in maintaining the occupation of Palestine. The difference in the techniques chosen by the authors reflects the difference in the material realities of Palestine and Iraq. The occupation of Iraq is recent compared to the sixty years of occupation of Palestine. Moreover, the Palestinian resistance must work against entrenched myths surrounding the creation of the Israeli state. With this in mind, the humour that characterises Amiry’s work reflects more poignantly the practice of sumoud itself: everyday resistance is manifested through steadfastness that requires a kind of dissociation that paradoxically denies expression of their humanity but asserts it strongly in the process.

The immediacy of the blog is evident in Riverbend’s blog site “Baghdad Burning” as it produces a sense of the eternal present. Arguably, the opportunity to connect in real time with the author fosters a sense of responsibility that the print media does not. On the other hand, the testimony designed for print media suggests a sense of closure that does not reflect the reality on the ground. Although both books do not see the end of occupation, it is reasonable to envisage that the witness’s relationship to the book ends when they close the book.
Harlow argued in *Resistance Literature* that this kind of work made certain demands on their readers of “historical referencing and the burden of historical knowledge” (Harlow 80). As the texts are rooted in their specific material and historical circumstances, the reader familiar with this will appreciate more fully the author’s intervention. Each author attempts to weave the historical context into the testimony to provide this grounding though neither actually demands it of the reader. Amiry, for example, imbibes empathy by specifically stating her own ignorance of the impacts of occupation prior to actually experiencing it herself. Nonetheless, she does refer to the history of Palestinian dispossession and provides snippets of information on Israeli policy. A good example of this is Amiry’s reportage of the conversation with her mother-in-law that reveals that the elderly lady’s inability to act quickly when being evacuated is not a product of age but of a prior experience of exile. Um Salim’s response to her daughter-in-law’s frustrations of “leave it. We’ll come back soon and get it” are sobering when she reveals: “That’s what we said in 1948 when we left our house in Jaffa” (Amiry 138). The pattern of repeating cycles of exile and dispossession reveal the realities of Palestinian existence that are erased by the dominant narrative promulgated by the Zionist machine. In *Baghdad Burning*, the commentary by James Ridgway provides context to the narrative as does the reference to other authors and bloggers. Devoid of this historical placing, the reader may fetishise the trauma depicted by the author. At the same time, these narratives provide important interventions in the historical record in their attempt to “produce and impart new historical facts and analysis” (Harlow 116). In the next chapter, I will look at how Soueif animates a generation of Egyptians to remember the nuances that have been deliberately elided in the dominant narrative about Egyptians and Arabs, a discursive process that fosters a sense of insuperable differences between Arabs and the West.
Chapter 2

The politics is in the writing: reading an Egyptian in the text

‘People have to have something to hope for.’

‘But there’s lots,’ Asya says. ‘There are the things we’ve always hoped for.’

‘Yes, but it’s all changed -.’ (Soueif, In the Eye of the Sun 17)

Everyone, everyone, is simply worried – worried sick about what would become of Egypt, the Arab countries, ‘le tiers monde,’ in the twenty-first century. (Soueif, The Map of Love 7)

Ahdaf Soueif’s In the Eye of the Sun (1992) was the novel that enabled a germinating thesis idea to take root. Exploring the nexus between war, politics and women’s articulations of the displacement experienced through the turbulent history of the Middle East led me to many Arab women authors whose work appears in English translation including Etel Adnan, Huda Barakat, Hanan al-Shaykh and Nawal el-Saadawi. The work proved fascinating but problematic because they were translated works and I did not read Arabic. One afternoon in 2003, browsing in a bookstore in Brisbane, I discovered Soueif. Over 800 pages, her novel In the Eye of the Sun swept me on a journey encompassing politics, love, desire and despair. Through its pages I saw the cities I had travelled through: Cairo, Damascus and Beirut and glimpsed the impact of the many conflicts in the region through the perspective of an Egyptian woman. I felt that the novelist was
speaking directly to me: a woman residing in the West, interested in the Middle East, its politics and what its women authors had to say. Here was an Arab woman author’s voice and I could read it without the mediating influence of translation.

Soueif’s novels are situated in the middle of this thesis now but strategically placed because her work directly and implicitly addresses the politics, history and identity of the region. Together, In the Eye of the Sun and The Map of Love (1999) chronicle over a hundred-year period of the history of the region through the eyes of an Egyptian woman. The political, social and military events that I had read about were placed in perspective and lodged within the lived experience: the occupation of Palestine, the June 1967 war, Black September, and so on. Later, reviewing critical material on her work, I was surprised that more was not made of these historical and political aspects. The anxieties that spoke to me in her novels were not addressed in the critical material available. In a climate of increased and heightened tensions between the West, Arabs and Muslims, those anxieties resonated resoundingly for me, a reader situated in Australia. It seemed to me that critical material on her work had simply failed to hear her, and that all her eloquence had fallen on deaf ears.

After Naguib Mahfouz and Nawal el-Saadawi, Ahdaf Soueif is the most well-known Egyptian author in the West today. Certainly, she is the most celebrated Egyptian female author currently writing in English. Aisha, her first publication, a collection of short stories was published in 1983 and won the Guardian fiction prize of that year, and The Map of Love published in 1999 was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. In the Eye of the Sun published in 1992 received positive critical reception while a collection of short stories in Arabic, Zinat al-Hayah, won the Cairo International Book Fair “Best Collection of Short Stories”
prize in 1996. Her work has been translated into Arabic, Dutch, French, German and Italian. Though she considers herself primarily a fiction writer, Soueif also writes non-fiction pieces and contributes regularly to The Guardian, The Times and al-Ahram, the major Cairo-based newspaper, amongst many others. Much of this non-fiction work is collected in Mezzaterra published in 2004. Her corpus, a sustained critical and literary output since the 1980s has provided steady commentary on a range of socio-political issues in relation to Arabs and the West.

Literary critics of Soueif’s work have generally treated it through the framework provided by strands in postcolonial discourse that focus on identity and representation. This treatment is predictable as her novels and short stories explore cross-cultural translation, rework Orientalist stereotypes and draw on the tropes of travel, migration and the East–West encounter. Literary critics applying this framework to her work have highlighted its discursive aspects: Soueif’s critical engagement with postcolonial theory or its usefulness in a literary analysis. For example, Anastasia Vassalopoulos argues for Soueif’s self-conscious engagement with postcolonial discourse in The Map of Love. She argues that Soueif integrates postcolonial theory into the narrative to expose the tensions that arise out of its unavoidable complicity with different disciplines such as the colonial romance, the travel genre and the concept of the native informant (29). Critics also argue that the textual, linguistic and discursive hybridity in her work creates a bridge between cultures.33 To support these readings, critics invariably draw on elements of Soueif’s own biography. They remind readers that she is an Egyptian national.

33 For examples of the application of this trope as a bridge between cultures, see Malak 140-62 and Darraj 91-103.
who lives in England, was married to the English poet and biographer Ian Hamilton, that her sons have combined Arab-Anglo names, and that her signature is comprised of her family name in Arabic with her first name nestled within it in English. These indicators suggest the author’s hybrid subjectivity and support a framework that highlights issues of representation, migration, exile and cultural translation in her corpus. Her work reveals an author comfortable with Arabic folklore and customs as well as Western literature and Western sensibilities. The trope of hybridity positions Soueif as an author in-between the Egyptian and British life-worlds.

I query this treatment and the kind of political imperative it serves because it ignores the worldliness that I read into her novels. Readings of hybridity are plausible but Soueif’s in-betweenness is not upheld by close readings of the novels that show her situatedness in an Egyptian life-world. Soueif insists that her “consciousness is Egyptian” (“Two writers”), and that she has “always been political” (qtd in Ghazaleh), a position that defies any sense of lack or in-betweenness. Clearly this identity informs her politics and her writing. Her personal context reveals a family history of political activism in Egypt. Her parents were activists in the revolution in the 1950s and her sister, Leila Soueif, is a leftist Professor of Mathematics at Cairo University and a founding member of the grassroots Kifaya movement currently campaigning for legislative change. Leila’s husband Ahmed Seif al-Islam was a communist activist in the 1960s and frequently imprisoned. Soueif’s two most extensive fictional works, In the Eye of the Sun and The Map of Love are firmly embedded in the Egyptian experience. In the Eye of the Sun tells the story of Asya al-Ulama against the turbulent political landscape of Egypt and the Middle East as it unfolds over a period of fourteen
years from the 1967 war. *The Map of Love* explores two time periods, one at the beginning of this millennium and the other at the end of the last century. The earlier period recreates the lives of individuals caught in an uncertain Egypt reconciling itself to the failed Urabi revolt and the realities of British military occupation. The latter period captures the dilemmas and anxieties facing present day intellectuals who are increasingly subject to government surveillance in a climate of increased terrorism against the West. That the main protagonist in each novel is a woman from Soueif’s generation suggests most strongly that these novels reflect a personal project. Soueif was born in 1950 and her main protagonists Asya in *In the Eye of the Sun* was born in 1950 and Amal in *The Map of Love* was born in 1952. This generation of Egyptians came to adulthood in post-revolutionary, post-independence Egypt, the dreams of pan-Arabism, Egypt’s leadership of the Arab world, non-alignment and socialism. Indeed, one could argue that the concerns of these characters reflect Soueif’s own concerns and that the novels testify to the experience and fears of a generation of Egyptians.

In *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Said argued for the imperative to examine the historical, social and political interests that are served by critical communities and their interpretations (26). Readings of hybridity find their apotheosis in the figure of the migrant or the exile who enjoys the gift of double consciousness because of displacement from an essential position such as race, culture or nation. This tendency to focus on the ambivalence of the postcolonial subject is representative of the critical reception of Soueif’s novels in English. In an increasingly globalised age, the promise of utopian egalitarianism proposed in the concept of hybridity provides a way through seemingly impermeable national and cultural identities. In a sense, this hope provides a bulwark against the horrors
anticipated in the “clash of civilisations” narrative. However, readings of cultural and linguistic hybridity look for cues to reflect the paradigm that the Other in the centre poses no essential threat. Soueif hints at this in The Map of Love where she reveals that the British imperialists in Egypt regarded the Western-educated Cairene Effendi as incapable of representing “real Egyptians” because their Western education made them unauthentic Egyptians. Her novel, however, demonstrates that though these Effendi were Western-educated, they asserted their identity as Egyptians and were committed to melding the best ideas of both worlds. In In the Eye of the Sun Soueif’s exploration of the legacies of colonialism in the region and the perpetuation of Orientalist structures of control over Arabs is overshadowed by the enduring focus on Asya’s maturity, albeit as a hybrid individual, via her sojourn in the West.

These readings ignore the truths that the author reveals about discourses that continue to perpetuate the West’s moral and ideological hegemony over Arabs. Attention to these aspects of her novels reveals the blind-sightedness in hybridity’s over-valorisation. Critics of the concept of hybridity such as Ahmad argue that in reality, displaced individuals locate themselves on a stable identity platform. He argues that hybridity conceived as “in-between-ness” assumes that subjects, especially historically displaced subjects are free from gender, class, race or political position. Ahmad argues that subjects are constituted not in displacement but in “given historical locations” and that “a stable commitment to one’s class or gender or nation may be useful for defining one’s politics” (“Politics” 14). The emphasis on representation and Asya’s identity as hybrid reflects Western-centric obsessions with individual subjectivity and ignores Asya’s other real affiliations with community, nation and culture. These
paradigms also ignore the impact of the West’s discursive treatment of Arabs and the region on the formation of her identity. As a result, the legacy of colonialism and the impact of entrenched Orientalist attitudes towards Arabs remain unexamined in critical readings of the novel. Bhabha suggests that such readings privilege “ambivalence that is neither the contestation of contradictoriness nor the antagonism of dialectical opposition. In these instances of social and discursive alienation there is no recognition of master and slave, there is only the matter of the enslaved master, the unmastered slave” (“Articulating” 131). The effect is that readings invested in locating cultural translation, transcendence and the utopia promised by hybridity depoliticise the writing. They are rendered palatable for metropolitan consumption because enduring structural differences and discourses about power are ignored.

My analysis in this chapter is framed by the imperative to acknowledge and restore the worldliness of the text. Said argued that “texts are worldly, to some extent they are events, and when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted (The World 4). Privileging politics in the novels and reading Soueif through this frame reveals a different story to that told through the valorisation of hybridity, and reflects the kind of above and below-ground politics that Said alerted critics to in The World (22). Said cautioned against the blind application of paradigms and discursive traditions that inevitably reflect Eurocentric assumptions. Critical openness or “secularity,” he argued, exposes issues previously disregarded, obscured or deemed unimportant because they do not reflect Western assumptions and paradigms (The World 22). An indication of Soueif’s politics is provided in the introduction to Mezzaterra, where she tells of
her anxiety over the increasing polarisation of Arab and Western worlds. She writes that the current era, characterised by the “clash of civilisations” mentality is intensely alienating because it is markedly different to that which shaped her own political and social consciousness. The following paragraph portrays this:

Growing up Egyptian in the Sixties meant growing up Muslim/Christian/Egyptian/Arab/African/Mediterranean/Non-Aligned/Socialist but happy with small-scale capitalism. On top of that, if you were urban/professional the chances were that you spoke English and/or French and danced to the Stones as readily as to Abd el-Halee. (5)

This generation occupied what she describes as a “spacious meeting point, a common ground with avenues into the rich hinterlands of many traditions” (Mezzaterra 6). It inherited an intellectual tradition where “differences were interesting rather than threatening, because they were foregrounded against a backdrop of affinities” (Mezzaterra 7-8). Some social and political observers write that since 1967, Egypt’s socio-political climate has gradually shifted away from this expansive identity. Fouad Ajami, for instance, writes that the current Egyptian sensibility is so markedly different that it is virtually impossible to begin to imagine that an alternative politics or vision existed before the present theocratic sensibility washed over it (193-52). Soueif expresses this loss metaphorically as the ground trembling and shrinking beneath her feet (Mezzaterra 9).

In The Eye of the Sun and The Map of Love respond to these anxieties by recreating specific Egyptian life-worlds from the past to animate agency in the present. This impetus illuminates Maurice Halbwachs claim that the past is “a social construction, mainly, if not wholly shaped by the concerns of the present” (25). Framing Asya and Amal’s journey into history are their personal contexts:
Asya is anxious about Egypt’s socio-political landscape, its dependence on US Aid, its diminishing status in the region and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, and Amal reveals that twenty years on from Asya’s Egypt, the concerns of a nation have worsened. The nationalistic fervour of the 1960s characterised by President Gamal ‘Abd el-Nasser’s anti-colonialism, non-alignment and socialism, are contrasted with the socio-political realities of subsequent decades of heightened dependence on US Aid, bilateral peace with Israel but the worsening of conditions for Palestine, and an open-door economic policy. The religious tolerance of the 1960s is contrasted with rising Islamic fundamentalism of the 1990s. The anxieties that these changes generate translate into a sense of personal stasis: Amal waits for things to happen for her and Asya is burdened with a sense of “waiting, helplessness – paralysis” (Eye 61). Amal in The Map of Love, voices the concerns of fellow Egyptians “everyone, everyone, is simply worried – worried sick about what would become of Egypt, the Arab countries, ‘le tiers monde,’ in the twenty-first century” (Map 7). These anxieties foreground the route taken through memory as each storyteller constructs a narrative to understand her anxieties and placate the need for groundedness.

My reading of the novels is also informed by Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories on the discourse of the novel. In the Eye of the Sun comprises a multi-layered narrative that includes authorial interventions, Asya and Saif’s first person diary accounts, letters between family members and friends, as well as documentary style reportage on social and political events. Similarly, The Map of Love draws together the voices of the colonialists, anti-imperialists and nationalists from one hundred years ago, and places them in dialogue with equally disparate discourses from the present. Bakhtin’s theories on dialogism in the novel provide a
constructive way to read these disparate narratives. Bakhtin argued that:

[At] any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given bodily form. These ‘languages’ of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying ‘languages.’ (291)

Meaning is made not only by the word on the page but through its interaction with its other meanings. Bakhtin’s theories provide a framework through which to consider “the thousands of living dialogic threads” or the competing discourses that coalesce on any issue at any time (276). According to Bakhtin, “the way in which the word conceives its object is complicated by a dialogic interaction within the object between various aspects of its socio-verbal intelligibility” (277). As an extension of this idea, Soueif’s novels layer different discourses and time periods, to suggest that the meaning of a place and time is also comprised of the interaction between all its past and present meanings. This concatenation of discourses disrupts the unifying impulse of narrative forms of representation. Considering the dialogism in the novels shows that Soueif’s works compel a sense of political agency in Egyptians by evoking memory to demonstrate the possibility of a different engagement between Arabs and the West, signifying in the process the importance of restoring a sense of historical awareness. This historical awareness reveals how the West continues to exert its hegemony through the historical narrative.

Soueif’s novels reveal deeply political work that speaks to the current
concerns about Arab marginalisation in the global imagining. My reading aims to situate the author as providing a sensitive response to the hegemony of the dominant culture by demonstrating “people systematically disputing the possibility of a sovereign system” (Said, The World 22). Soueif is not merely a “child of the culture, but a historical and social actor in it” (Said, The World 15). Clearly, I am aware of my own critical agenda in reading Soueif this way, but I also reflect the anxieties and circumstances that I raised in the introduction to this thesis of resonating with these themes as an Other. Celebrations of the valorisation of the value of Western equality and liberalism have not circumvented the present global crisis that situates Arabs and Muslims as a threat, even when they appear to present as archetypal hybrids situated in the West, and displaying all the signs of Westernisation. By profiling the narrative of Arab disenfranchisement in the text, I will show that Soueif offers an alternative bridge between cultures. Where the investment in hybridity assumes that cultural dialogue is only achieved through a transformed state because the hybrid is a “new” being, a subject that is “neither one nor the other” (Bhabha, “The Commitment” 25), Soueif shows that cultural dialogue is possible without this kind of transformation.

My analysis begins with In the Eve of the Sun and will expose the below ground material that readings that focus on Asya’s hybridity have missed, including her growth in political awareness as an Egyptian, and how this identity is situated in the West. In the course of depicting this growth, Soueif writes a novel that is an act of cultural memory because it establishes and reclaims a specific Egyptian identity. The process of narrating both the history of Egypt and of Asya enables Soueif to demonstrate the imperative for a more ethical engagement for cultural dialogue, one that is not predicated on the over valorisation of hybridity but a more egalitarian and inclusive politics.
I am Egyptian and a person “in place”: validating an Egyptian identity in *In the Eye of the Sun*

‘But that was ‘Abd el-Nasser’s time – it was different, it was all opening outward: Pan-Arabism, Pan-Africanism, non-alignment –.’ (Soueif, *Eye* 472)

‘But even after that it looked like it might all come together. Him and Nehru and Sukarno, the non-aligned world realising its potential. The whole African thing: Patrice Lumumba and Jomo Kenyatta and Nkruma-

’ […] It’s all fallen apart rapido. Every bit of it. (Soueif, *Eye* 219)

Soueif’s meditations on a generation’s disillusionment with post-independence politics begin in *In the Eye of the Sun*. The personal nature of this novel is reflected in the fact that of the two novels, this one reveals characters that are clearly drawn from Soueif’s life and family. To situate and understand the genesis of the disillusionment, Soueif retraces a period of Egypt’s history from June 1967 to 1980 through the eyes of Asya al-Ulama, who is seventeen and living in Cairo when the June 1967 war with Israel breaks out. The fourteen-year period of Asya’s life recounted commencing from June 1967 and her school days in Cairo through to her completing her PhD in the north of England are narrated against the socio-political context of Egypt and the Middle East. This method of recounting meshes the story of Egypt with Asya’s memory and personal narrative. This also enables her to inscribe in Asya a specifically Egyptian identity. The process required to remember and narrate history interrogates the discourses that foster this sense of disillusionment, and provoke greater critical engagement with the
paradigms that circumscribe identity.

Readings of this novel overwhelmingly profile Asya’s hybrid subjectivity over other themes that arise. Darraj, for example, pivots her argument around Asya’s struggle for representation and finds that Asya’s eventual “control of her narrative signals her ability to speak from the weaker position of the culturally, linguistically, and sexually colonised.” Asya, she argues, can only speak from the “nebulous space between England and Egypt” (101). Amin Malak suggests that the many unresolved paradoxes in Asya’s life reflect her hybridity: her ambivalent affiliations to Arab-Muslim cultural ethos on one hand and an acquired European intellectualism on the other (147). Paradoxically, the interest in the novel’s linguistic and cultural hybridity positions it as marginal. The overwhelming interest in Soueif’s use of English and the ascription of the label “Anglophone” to her work positions it within a liminal category: it is neither “authentic” English literature in terms of content and language, and for the same reasons it is not “authentic” Arab or Egyptian fiction. The linguistic hybridity evident in the novel is used to point to the author’s hybrid identity, and as the hybrid, Soueif’s consciousness is positioned as being concerned with defining the hybrid’s place between Egypt and England. Subject hybridity has been considered in terms of ambivalence (Bhabha, “Signs” 112), it is also conceived of in terms of “less than one and double” (Bhabha, “Signs” 119). Consequently, Asya is read as displaying “ambivalent affiliations to both Arab-Muslim cultural ethos as well as to European intellectualism on the other” (Malak 147). Arab literary critics have also been consumed with assessing Soueif’s positioning within the Arab literary corpus. Her use of English as a medium, and the depiction of a young woman’s sexuality as it matures in the West have caused some Arab critics to question her identity as an
Arab author. The effect of both positions is that Soueif’s assertion that her “consciousness” is Egyptian is overshadowed by this emphasis on hybridity.

My reading of the novel aims to restore its worldliness: to expose the material issues of structures of power that continue to situate the Arab as Other vis-à-vis the West. To demonstrate this, I will show that privileging nation and politics over indicators of cultural or linguistic hybridity illuminates that Soueif inscribes a very Egyptian consciousness to speak to the reader. Foregrounding this consciousness exposes the material realities of ongoing power relations between Arabs and the West. My reading will show that by exposing the discourses and assumptions that underpin this relationship, Soueif highlights the imperative to enact a more ethical engagement between Arabs and the West. This focus reveals the limitations of normative critical paradigms used in the metropolitan West to engage with these inequities meaningfully.

An Egyptian consciousness

Ahdaf’s sensibility is the sensibility of her generation [...]. It is the consciousness formed in the late ‘60s, a consciousness of the occupation of the Arab world. (Ashur qtd in Edemariam 20)

Discourses that privilege narratives of cultural and linguistic hybridity undermine the specifically Egyptian identity that Soueif inscribes in the text. A range of structural and narrative techniques makes explicit that her novels are firmly

34 For insight into why Soueif’s status as an Egyptian author is questioned because of her residence in England, and her choice to write in English, see Alibhai-Brown and Elbendary. For indication of the public disquiet over material perceived to be sexually explicit, see Ghazzaleh and Pakravan 281.
35 This claim is asserted by Soueif in interviews, see “Two Writers” and Pakravan 276.
anchored in Egyptian history, politics and identity. For example, in this novel, the
family tree immediately follows the table of contents that carries a listing of
chapters according to date periods. Each chapter in the book is titled after a time
period that corresponds to significant political and military events in Arab history
in the region such as the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Black September, the October
1973 war or the signing of the Camp David accords in 1978. Each of these events
has had a significant effect on regional politics and on Egyptian and Arab
collective memory. Mapping Egypt’s history onto the more encompassing fabric
of the family tree indicates the temporality of these events, and reiterates that
individual narratives provide another way through which history is narrated.

Events of significant Egyptian historical and political consequence are
included in Asya’s story and demonstrate her commitment to Egyptian collective
memory. This commitment is heightened because many of the events were not
personally experienced. For example, after Asya leaves Egypt for England, she
learns of political and social events in Egypt and in the region from friends and
family through letters, newspapers or telephone calls. These snippets of
information are incorporated into the narrative and woven with Asya’s personal
accounts of her life in England. For instance, the narrative for the period of
October 1973 includes Asya’s diary entries, a letter from her to her friend Chrissie
about settling in England with newspaper style excerpts about events in Sinai,
Damascus, Beirut and Cairo, and authorial intervention depicting Asya reading
The Times newspaper’s coverage about the events (Eye 337-38). This format is
used repeatedly through the book to juxtapose events occurring in the Middle East
with Asya’s life in England. As the unfolding war is recounted with and through
Asya’s memories of the time, the reader gains the sense that this war is an integral
component of her memory and identity. Another example is provided in the long
description of the student demonstrations in 1968 but of which she was never a
participant (Eye 104). By including these memories into her narrative, Soueif
demonstrates a commitment to Egyptian collective memory. In this way, she
fulfils what Halbwachs’s observed is a process fundamental to group identity: “it
is individuals who remember, not groups or institutions but these individuals being
located in a specific group context, draw on that context to reinscribe or recreate
the past” (22). The effect on the reader is that in reading Asya’s story, the reader
also reads the story of Egypt and the region. The effect of this is that Asya is
located within the specific life-world of a generation’s collective memory and
situated as actively reproducing that identity as a means of maintaining it. Even
while in England, Asya’s orientation is towards Cairo, Egypt and the Middle East,
and though it is maintained through her network of family and friends overseas,
Cairo, Asya says, “is always on my mind” (Eye 321).

Critical reception that ignores this specifically Egyptian orientation misses
the opportunity to engage with the material reality of ongoing inequities between
Arabs and the West. Profiling Asya’s affiliation to Egypt reveals that the author
frames her present sense of dispossession through an Egyptian identity, and how
the West situates this. The meticulous construction of a specifically Egyptian
identity critiques the valorisation of metropolitan conceptualisations of hybridity.
These conceptualisations celebrate a postcolonial euphoria that continues to assert
the hegemony of the West, and refuse to confront the legacy of colonialism and
ongoing neo-colonialism in the region. Soueif’s treatment of the 1967 war and its
legacy clearly demonstrates this.
Re-reading the legacy of 1967

Soueif most clearly inscribes Asya as sharing in the Egyptian collective memory by her investment in the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War to show its foundational importance to her consciousness as an Egyptian. The immediate signifier for the 1967 war is of the Arab defeat and the rise of Israel as a powerful force. The result of this war changed the balance of power in the region and had a huge and immediate impact on national boundaries. With the Arab defeat came the Israeli occupation of what was left of Palestine with the fall of Jerusalem, Gaza and the West Bank. Syria’s Golan Heights and Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula were also lost to the State of Israel. The result of the war transformed the fledgling state of Israel into a regional superpower in six days (Morris, Righteous 329). For Egypt specifically, the defeat was crushing and humiliating because President Gamal ‘Abd el-Nasser’s vision for pan-Arab unity and leadership of the global anti-imperialist struggle dominated Arab politics in the region. Under Nasser’s tenure, Cairo was one of the centres of the non-aligned movement. This era of Egypt’s leadership in the region ended in the six days of the war leaving most Arabs with a sense of what Said, also a product of that generation described as “defeat, profound shock and bewildering uncertainty” (Politics xiv). The war had severe consequences for the political, cultural, social, military and geographical landscape of the region. The foundational aspect of this loss on the Egyptian psyche is best encapsulated by poet Mourid Barghouti’s meditations:

Is that June defeat a particular psychological problem for me? For my generation? For contemporary Arabs? Other events took place after it, other disappointments and setbacks no less dangerous. Wars raged, massacres were committed, political and intellectual discourses were
altered, but ‘67’ remains different. We are still paying its bills until this day. There is nothing that has happened in our contemporary history that does not bear a relationship to ‘67. (172)

The defeat spawned one of the most enduring narratives about the Arab world: that it was the penultimate turning point in relation to the big dreams of Arab nationalism, secularism, liberalism and modernization (Ajami, *Dream* 30-87). It generated an exhaustive period of self-reflection in Egypt and the rest of the Arab world where “all facets of Arab life were subjected to a ruthless assault: Islam, the Arabic language, the capacity of the Arab as individual, the record of the radical Arab states” (Ajami, *Arab* 32). In this respect, Soueif joins many other Arab authors who have written about the war, and their disillusionment with the current state of Egyptian politics. In this sense, they are part of the larger project to represent and support national and communal identities through specific genealogies of their past. Soueif’s treatment of this war in this novel, however, decentres the dominant narrative about Arab loss and inadequacy to recognise nationalistic impulses, the commitment to justice for Palestinians, and the human experience of the war. It also enables her to refocus attention on the legacy of colonialism in the region.

Soueif’s narrative of the war resists its fetishisation as a defining moment in Egypt’s “fall.” Structurally, the narrative of the war is comprised of fragments: snippets of information from Asya’s personal experience are woven with reportage from the war front. At one level, these fragments heighten the pathos of

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36 For a sampling of the scholarship in this area, see Anderson; Caldicott and Fuchs 11-32; Hobsbawm and Ranger; Huyssen 11-29; and Terdiman 8-27.
the Egyptian loss because they recreate the sense of confusion and chaos. While Egyptian news “broadcast one announcement after another counting the number of enemy planes shot down from the Egyptian skies” (Eye 50), the war front reports “Rafah is lost, al-‘Arish is under attack [...] General ‘Abd el-Mon‘im al Husseini surrenders Gaza [...] Khan Younis falls [...]” (Eye 56-58). The disjoint between the reality on the war front and the news reports mirrors the rapidity with which events occurred. The cognitive gap between these narratives forces Asya to question the truth:

The radio announces: ‘Our troops are valiantly holding the Second Line of Defence.’

How, wonders Asya, do we go from shooting down a hundred and fifty planes, and incurring minimum casualties to holding the second line of defence? Straggling, dazed-looking soldiers begin to appear on the streets of Cairo. (Eye 59)

Soueif’s cacophonic narrative sees all the fragments converge on replaying the story of chaos, bewilderment, confusion and shock. Collectively, they reveal that ordinary Egyptians, the military and government alike were denied the truth. Like Asya, Nasser also has to request the “truth of the situation” (Eye 56). In Soueif’s treatment of the war, the “truth” lies not in more political analysis, but in acknowledging the collective memory of the war contained in the human responses to the political and military events that unfold: shock, bewilderment, chaos, and loss. Instead of political analysis, Soueif’s investment is in acknowledging that discourses of nationalism are undermined by the story of the great Arab defeat.

Here, Bakhtin’s theories of dialogism in the novel reveal that Soueif’s
project of resisting the dominant narrative of the Arab loss of 1967 is a counter-hegemonic enterprise. The fragments that comprise the narrative typically represent Bakhtinian heteroglossia: a reflection of the multitude of voices that contend for recognition in every social moment and historical context. These voices resist the hegemony of the dominant discourse that asserts coherent and unified meaning by suppressing diversity and naturalising their power in the process (Bakhtin 92-93). Over the course of sixteen pages, Soueif provides a space for voices and representations that are normally excluded from military and political discourses about the war. From the war front, she depicts human frailty through commanders “weeping” and a “pale and concerned” Nasser (Eye 53, 56). On the streets she depicts a nation galvanising around Egyptian nationalism: the greengrocer’s wife proclaims: “If I were a man […] I’d be at the Canal if I had to get there on foot” (Eye 54), and popular nationalist Arabic music is played on the radio. She acknowledges the hope for Palestinian liberation and Arab pride that Egyptian success implied: crippled ‘Am Salih propels himself excitedly along the footpath on his little cart with the radio balanced on his stump shouting “You’re going to fight and be men and get Palestine back after all these years” (Eye 53). Political and military discourses acknowledge the result of the war in terms of loss of territory, military hardware and political power but do not acknowledge the human impact of the war. Soueif acknowledges that the narrative of the war was also one of Egyptian nationalism, pride, and the pursuit of justice for Palestinians. It decentres the all-consuming narrative about the loss with due attention to the narratives that are remembered in Egyptian collective memory but undermined by discourses that perpetuate a state of Egyptian inadequacy. Soueif shows that the narrative of the Arab defeat contains the palimpsest of narratives about
nationalism, pride and justice, that when retrieved provide the possibility for political mobilisation in the present.

This kind of historical contextualisation prevents the destructive fetishisation that invests certain discourses, such as that of the disastrous Arab defeat of 1967, with inordinate narrative power. The structure of the novel demonstrates that any social moment contains within it the "heteroglossia" of its history, and the diversity of Historical (official, recorded narratives) and historical narratives (personal, unofficial and unrecorded experiences) contained within it. A good example of this occurs when Soueif makes this tension overt, as in this example where Asya reflects on the different historical, political, social and personal meanings that one geographical place holds:

She looks at her unlit stove and sees the terrace where they had drunk iced lemonade in the sun: on the edge of the terrace, on the white upright slatted wooden chairs, some men dressed in camouflage fatigues [...] their submarine guns pointing outwards towards the wooden jetty where she’d lain and asked him about Didi Hashim [...]. And, further in, in Zahle where they had sat in the square and she had half envied the Seven-Up drinking teenagers, five people had just been killed. (Eye 443-44)

The unavoidable palimpsest that is history demonstrates the imperative to consider the limited ability of narratives of representation to accommodate competing truths. Here, an analogy provided at the beginning of the book illustrates the importance of context. It concerns Asya’s impressions of the crash scene involving Uncle Hamid’s car:

It stood, as reported, just outside the gate [...]. Apart from the wheels, it
did not look like a car any more but like an empty cigarette packet that had been crushed [...]. No other car, no lamp post, no indication of how this had come about. Just one crumpled little car in a sober position, waiting at a traffic light. (Eye 38)

Uncle Hamid’s car accident in 1967 and subsequent illness serves as an analogy for Egypt. All that is left of the new Citroën Deux Chevaux is a crumpled mass of metal marooned in a police cordon. Only eye-witness accounts reveal that it was crushed between two armoured trucks: a story that is absent from the picture of its solitude. A consideration of context requires dialogue between past and present, a strategy facilitated by the use of dialogism in the novel. Soueif stages the dialogue across time and history to reveal that important complexities are omitted in metanarratives.

A powerful idea arising from Bakhtin’s concept of the heteroglossia of the novel as articulated in “Discourse of the Novel” is that of the struggle over control of the narrative. Bakhtin wrote that dominant groups imposed their truths in a monological fashion through metanarratives of history. Working simultaneously against these monological discourses are the impulses of heteroglossia that disrupt the integrity of these narratives. This concept is integral to unlocking Soueif’s novel as the dialogues she stages across time and space and between personal and political genres emphasise the imperative to rethink the authority of these metanarratives of history and representation. In this context, important insights are gleamed through the dialogue she stages between the narratives of Egypt’s history and Asya’s personal history about the value of heteroglossia to raise consciousness. The author emphasises that events in time, no matter how immutable, compete with dominant authorial impulses in narratives of
representation. An example that draws this out clearly is in the passage recounting Asya’s first meeting with Saif her first love and the man she marries. This passage is comprised of Asya’s diary entries interjected with Soueif and Saif’s authorial interventions. The scene begins with Asya’s diary entry detailing in youthful gushiness about having met “him” and coming home “all shivery” (Eye 98). The narrative quickly shifts into third person as the author addresses both the reader and Asya: “Skip the tremulous bit. The purple passage. Everyone’s been through it. There it is though, that seminal image […]” (Eye 98). Towards the end of this paragraph the point of the intervention takes on an ominous tone: Saif is described, a virtual Adonis, with perfect feet and a smooth, muscled brown back, but then in italics: “So what the hell did you feel, when you touched the bastard? Did you run your hands over his pimply white back?” (Eye 99). This interjection seems out of place, given that it is not until six pages later that readers start to associate italics with Saif’s narrative, and it is not until page 444 and eight years have elapsed that the affair with the person with the white back occurs. Soueif and Saif’s interjections into Asya’s account demonstrate the narrative struggle over representation. These forceful interjections intrude on Asya’s memory and persuade her to reconsider it in light of what is to happen much later with the affair with Gerald. In reality, these memories are held in a state of tension with each other because they are irreconcilable; the affair with Gerald does not change the fact that meeting Saif was an unforgettable moment. The different voices, memories and impulses indicate the possibility of multiple meanings and interpretations. Their representation on the page demonstrates the difficulty of seeking a coherent narrative and the overbearing impulses of the metanarrative that seek to destroy the complexity of the narrative. The only way to resolve these
tensions is to acknowledge that there are seminal images and feelings that remain in spite of what occurs in the future. These seminal images resist the homogenising tendency of reinterpretation. Falling in love with Saif remains that momentous moment despite the later affair. “Whichever way you turn,” the narrator suggests “it’s the same old puddle” (Eye 98-99). Not under threat of being reinterpreted, the past and its bank of contradictory images can be recouped and integrated.

A consequence to the monological discourse is that consciousness is stifled when certain events are fetishised in the construction of the metanarrative. Soueif calls attention to the danger of fetishising memories by showing the disastrous effect that this can take. An example of this is provided through Asya’s fixation on the memory of Saif and his ex-fiancée Didi Hashim. Asya constructs a story about Saif and Didi’s love based on some information that Saif had given her about having been intimate with Didi. She uses these scant facts to construct a paradigm that situates her as unable to compete with Didi for Saif’s love. This paradigm feeds her insecurities. She interprets their problems with intimacy through this paradigm and frames every setback as confirmation of Saif’s inability to love her the way he loved Didi. It torments her each time she and Saif are together intimately and destroys their relationship. It is not until the sexual relationship with Saif has completely broken down that Asya suddenly realises that the memory has lost its sting. The extraordinary symbolic power invested in this memory rendered it destructive and crippling. In this respect, the dialogism of the novel reflects the need for greater inclusiveness to incorporate, acknowledge and integrate memory rather than ascribe it with inordinate power. This personal example resonates with the analogy provided at the beginning of the book.
depicting Uncle Hamid undergoing consultation with an Oncologist to excise cancerous growths in his lungs. His cancer is the culmination of ill health and injuries sustained since his collision with Egyptian army trucks on their way to the front in the days leading up to the 1967 war. An arm has already been amputated. Previous treatments have left him suffering and confused and radical surgery to "carve the bastards out" is his last recourse (Eye 10). By opening the novel with this story, Soueif anticipates her treatment of the memory of the legacy of the 1967 war as an attempt to excise the destructive aspects of this memory. The example provided by Asya’s fixation on the memory of Didi to disastrous effect on her marriage to Saif serves as a warning against fetishising certain memories. Reflecting on history, a focus on the decontextualised loss fails to remember the nationalistic impulses that provoked the war nor consider the material legacies of colonialism, and the operation of neo-colonialism in the region.

The legacy of colonialism

Narratives of the Arab defeat undermine the legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism in the region. These narratives must be understood within the context of the political goals that underpin representations of national and communal identity. As Shohat reminds us, “the question is: who is mobilising what in the articulation of the past, deploying what identities, identifications and representations, and in the name of what political vision and goals?” (“Notes” 110). Representations of Egyptian national identity in the post-independence age

37 For discussion on the need for critical awareness of the politics behind representations and mobilizations of identity, see Said, The World, 26 and Shohat, “Notes” 110.
hardly refer to the legacy of colonialism. An example of the disconnection between the legacy of colonialism and the material realities unfolding in Egypt is dramatised early in the novel in 1967 where Asya studies the Sykes-Picot Agreement for her examinations while war brews but is oblivious to the historical connections between the events (Eye 45). Brokered in 1916, this was a secret agreement between France and Britain to carve up the region even though it was held by Syria and Iraq. The Sykes-Picot agreement divided the region into spheres of British and French influence and areas of direct control, changing the shape of the region as a result. In making this agreement, the superpowers reneged on promises made to the Sharif of Mecca. Ultimately, this agreement, the Balfour Declaration and the Husayn-McMahon correspondence was responsible for the partition of Palestine and the eventual state of Israel (Pappe 66-99). The restless sixteen year old Asya does not make the connection between the History studied and the reality of war unfolding around her. For her, History was an imposition that she anticipated being free of after the exams: “never ever again Geography or History or Sociology” (Eye 48). However, by juxtaposing this agreement with the start of the war, Soueif resituates the cause of the war to the imperialist interests that underpinned this agreement.

Shohat writes that narratives of postcoloniality inhibit “forceful articulations of what one might call ‘neo-coloniality’” (“Notes” 104). Narratives of postcoloniality and post-independence cannot accommodate those that reveal ongoing structural and material inequities perpetuated by the continued hegemony of the West. In the Egyptian context, independence has not guaranteed respect for sovereignty. For example, the 1967 war was precipitated by the Israeli response to Egyptian nationalism and specifically the decision to close the straits of Tiran to
Israeli shipping. Israel interpreted this act of nationalism as an act of aggression because its interests were threatened by this demonstration of Egyptian nationalism. In another example, Soueif cites the discussions for the Camp David Accords of 1978 to show that they were underpinned by a need to protect Israeli interests and not for justice for Palestinians:

‘Their offer amounted to the annexation of the occupied territories – he can’t accept that.’

‘The Palestinians have turned it down anyway. And the Israelis won’t make a better one.’

‘Not ever?’

‘I don’t think so. I don’t see why they should.’

‘Saif! Because it would be just.’

‘But what’s in it for them? Think about it. If you take the question of justice away. Why should they give back the West Bank? It gives them more space; it gives them a captive source of cheap labour; it gives them a carrot to dangle in every negotiation.’ (Eye 728)

An analogy that occurs shortly after this incident confirms the underlying attitudes of superiority that condone the manipulation of Arabs. Here, Gerald tells Asya of a common practice of race pigeon owners to replace the content of their pigeons’ eggs with a worm. The pigeon is tricked into flying back quickly because it believed it had live eggs to fly back to (Eye 714). This story works metaphorically in the context of Egyptian President Sadat’s failed negotiations with American President Jimmy Carter during the Camp David Accords. Carter undermines Sadat’s negotiating position because the United States’ does not want a “fairly radical new independent state in the region” (Eye 714). The influence of
the West is analogous to the actions of the race pigeon owners, and the Egyptians and Arabs like the pigeons, are unaware that “some omnipotent human with a pocketful of worms” pierces holes in their eggs (Eye 715). The analogy heightens Asya’s awareness of the spurious nature of the negotiations, where for Mr Begin and Mr Shamir it is an act about concealment and giving nothing away (Eye 713).

These behaviours indicate an epistemic ploy is in operation through which the dominant narrative advances the hegemony of Israel. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Palestinian narrative is edged out of public discourse while the Zionist narrative claims the moral authority. The twin narratives of Israeli magnanimity and Israeli victimhood conceal their ongoing oppression and occupation in the region. So, Asya’s attempt to explain to a dinner guest that the legacy of colonialism is responsible for the violence in the region is met with incredulity. In response, her dinner guest recasts her assertion as Egyptian admission of the inability to transcend the loss caused by colonialism: “what you’re saying is, you are unable to outgrow your past.” This position is maintained because the truth about Israeli aggression is suppressed. Asya points out her dinner guest’s ignorance: “Bahr el Baqar and ‘Abu Za’bal” targets of Israeli retaliation against “Qiryat Shemona” were a “primary school and a factory. In Egypt.” (Eye 384). Public ignorance enables the narrative of Israel’s victim status to continue.38 The Arab need for colonialism to be recognised is countered by the assertion that this need is proof of the valorisation of the twin poles of either victimisation or terrorism. This position refuses any acknowledgement of the structures of power

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38 The narrative of Israel’s victimhood is extensively discussed, for a sampling of these arguments, see Boyarin and Boyarin 109; Said, Blaming the Victims; Said, “Michael” 161-78; and Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel” 39-40.
that continue to assert the West’s hegemony in the region. So, when Asya argues in response, “we are not allowed to outgrow our past” (Eye 383), she alludes to the difficulty of transcending the structures of power and the discourses that continue to maintain the economic, cultural and political hegemony of the West over Arabs. The subversiveness of this position is reflected in the fact that some critics have labelled her a Nazi like Goebbels and even that her novels are anti-semitic. Both here and in The Map of Love, Soueif addresses the issue of Israeli terrorism against Palestine and the issue of justice for Palestinians. Labelling her as an anti-semite reflects an intention to shut down critical engagement with the real issues underpinning the violence in the region. These discursive tensions eventually contribute to Asya’s political awakening.

An Egyptian coming of age

‘How do you get to be Carlos the Jackal? […] What is the route, and at what point does it open up to you? (Eye 446)

Paradoxically, Asya’s growth as a politically engaged Arab is precipitated through her experience of living in the West. Readings that situate the novel as a young woman’s bildungsroman celebrate its testimony to the liberal West’s conduciveness to her awakening as a sexual being with individual agency. In this novel, Soueif stages the West as conducive to her political awakening as an

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39 The public discomfort over Soueif’s position on justice for Palestinians is discussed in “Scheherazade Tells All” and Hamdan.

40 Some examples of how this trope is utilised can be found in Darraj 99-101 and Massad, “The Politics” 75-78.
Egyptian. The significance of this is heightened because Soueif stages Asya as a depoliticised subject to begin with. Asya’s apathy contrasts sharply with that of her family and is heightened by the fact of her name: Asya al-Ulama or Asya of the learned clerics, as her name suggests in Arabic belongs to a class of Egyptian intelligentsia who had demonstrated a history of political activism in Egypt (Said, "Anglo" 407). While Asya’s uncles, parents and sister all engage in political and social activism, Asya is politically disengaged and apathetic from not just Egyptians and Arabs but from the rest of the third world:

I know that out there in the world plenty is happening [...] six thousand people have died in Lebanon, that Jewish settlers are camping out near Bassam’s mother in Nablus under army protection, that Jehovah’s Witnesses are being tortured in Malawi and black guerrillas are being killed in South Africa and that Pinochet is claiming that there have been no abuses of human rights in Chile. And I know – in view of all this – that it’s a pretty good thing that nothing is happening here; that all I need to think about is right here on this table; I don’t have to think about the world outside. (Eye 448)

Soueif stages Asya’s apathy as a product of her Eurocentric education and in particular her immersion in English literature. In “The Burden of English” Spivak argued that literature is the “staged battleground of epistemes” and a means through which to achieve the cultural and epistemic transformation necessary to civilise the colonial subject (134 -54). Soueif’s emphasis on Asya’s “love” for English literature demonstrates the power of this kind of indoctrination. For example, Asya views Arabs through the tropes and character archetypes common in English literature. A rural Egyptian scene describing her sister’s in-
laws is imagined through character tropes found in Western literature: the family is a combination of sisters from Louisa May Alcott, the brothers are “a couple of well meaning buffoons out of Dickens or Fielding” and the father is a “dreamy, expansive sort of man from Tolstoy” (Eye 26). As a young teacher she believed in the power of English literature to teach about values, human sensibilities and humanity. Her love of English literature created an ambivalence: she is “in love” with both England and Egypt, unable to feel any resentment towards England and is as proud of both (Eye 512). Literature has bought her assent “in an almost clandestine way” (Spivak, “Burden” 137). Asya is drawn into the world of the text, has absorbed the cultural values implied in those texts and is shaped by those texts. As the implied reader of the novels that she had so closely studied, such as Middlemarch she is oriented towards the West, and expresses sentiments that demonstrate the impact of Said’s cultural imperialism, or what Asya comes to understand as a “form of colonialism that no rebellion can mitigate and no treaty bring to an end” (Eye 512). Asya reads the Middle-East and Arabs through Western eyes, and paradigms that disengage her from the realities of the region. In this respect Gerald’s observations are astute when he comments that “all [her] ideas are second-hand; they are derived from art – not life” (Eye 706).

Soueif stages Asya’s epiphany by re-reading the celebrated double vision that is valorised in the trajectory into the West. The implication of this political awakening is that a more politicised and situated subject is produced through the process of travel, migration and pedagogy and not the unhomed and depoliticised subject. Proponents of the concept of hybridity argue that the dislocation from an essentialist subject position creates conditions that enable “newness,” in Bhabha’s terms, to enter the world. In practice, hybridity is underpinned by the assumption
that the subject is on a march towards assimilating the values of the West. Soueif turns this critical eye back onto the West to reveal the hypocrisy that underpins celebrations of this construct.

This reflexivity is staged in the narrative by revealing Asya’s presence in the West highlights the daily praxis of discourses that render her as Other, an experience that she would not have experienced so intimately had she remained in Cairo. The experience in England forces her to confront how she is situated as a political subject with respect to the West. It shatters her illusions about the West and its values because it forces her to realise that Arabs are not situated within the same universe of discourse that the West situates itself. In England, she discovers that Orientalist discourses continue to situate Arabs as objects of Western interests. For example, as a student at her university in England, she is called on to demonstrate Arabic sounds to enable Western students to “plot them on a universal phonetic alphabet” (Eye 353). The process makes her increasingly aware of how her words remain disjointed specimens, “odd sounds without meaning” (Eye 354). During the speech demonstration, Asya is left mute, unable even to say her name, because she can only express herself within the parameters allowed her.

The empiricism with which her language is studied is a pale reflection of the Orientalist discourses that disembody the reality of the lived experience in pursuit of theory. The example provided by Asya enables the class to plot the Arabic language on a scale of development, an analogy for the larger project whereby the West plots the rest of the world along a trajectory at which it finds itself at the apex.

The insidiousness of Orientalist discourses means that these operate under the guise of liberal Western philosophies. These continue to posit the
epistemological superiority of the West. Soueif stages Asya’s relationship with Gerald to reflect how these Orientalist paradigms operate. The sinister nature of the epistemological control exerted by these paradigms is revealed by the fact that it takes Asya some time to recognise that Gerald’s intentions reproduce established patterns of control. Gerald claims to know what she needs to do to lead “a real life – a full life” (Eye 559). However, it is not until Asya is literally positioned as an Odalisque “naked and perfumed […] hair falling over [her] shoulders, wearing only [her] jewels” (Eye 563), that she realises that Gerald’s interest in her reflects that of the Orientalist’s gaze. The image heightens Gerald’s crude exploitation of both Asya and her husband: Gerald lives in Saif’s house and enjoys Asya bedecked with jewellery that Saif had given her. Asya’s epiphany about Gerald’s relationship with her occurs when she understands the epistemological struggle being played out: Gerald claims to know what is best for her but beneath his “I know you better than you think you know yourself” is a project to mould Asya into a subjectivity that inevitably benefits him. In this context, Saif’s steady admonishing of Gerald’s interest in improving Asya through various theories on the self, being and becoming serve as a dire warning to her gradual loss of self in which her proposed dealings with Egyptian peasants upon return to Egypt see her “coming on like some European” (Eye 24). Asya’s relationship with Gerald metaphorically reflects a broader theme of first world exploitation of the third world. Sexual conquests like Asya enable Gerald to feel superior (Eye 723). Inevitably, Gerald’s new-age scripts contrast with Saif’s hard sciences and render his claim to this intellectual superiority inert. Asya’s struggle with Gerald’s paternalism indicates more troublingly her initial lack of conviction to challenge and reject it because she had internalised assumptions about the
West’s moral and ideological superiority. Asya ends the power struggle when she reveals the game plan to Gerald: “the way you think I should be is better for you than the way I am” (Eye 823, italics in original). By exposing the discursive power of the West, Asya rejects its discursive hegemony. This empowering act frees her from the epistemologically inferior position that she is bound in and leaves her free to invite a more ethical engagement with the Other. By rejecting her participation in these games, Asya escapes the Manichean dilemma and emerges from the heart of the empire with her integrity intact.

Asya’s epiphany leads to a re-evaluation of the value she had ascribed to English literature in its ability to culturally indoctrinate. The power of English literature politicises pedagogy because it is integral to cultural imperialism. Asya realises that the richness of Arabic literature provides equally civilising impulses that would free her students from needlessly grappling with culturally and socially unfamiliar material:

Why should they not learn all about that in Arabic? At least then they wouldn’t have to look in the dictionary every two minutes, at least they could recognise for themselves the reference to the Qu’ran or to Imru’al-Qais, at least they’ll know that when a character refers to 1882 he’s talking about ‘Orabi and the occupation […]. What’s English literature to them or they to English literature? (Eye 452)

Most of Asya’s students are already disillusioned with the West and no longer credit it with epistemological authority. They study English for the mechanics of language and for its utilitarian purposes and not for its civilising impulses. The English literature courses at Cairo University are filled past capacity because it offers a cheap way to learn the language and as a means to “get
In *In the Eye of the Sun* Soueif has produced a work of literature written in English that presents its implied reader with an Egyptian sensibility. The cultural transformations that have been mooted as evidence of hybridity in fact assert a stronger Egyptian identity that resists the object status of the Arab that is assigned her while she is in England. The novel concludes with two analogies that confirm that Asya is firmly grounded in an Egyptian identity. The first sees Asya returned to Egypt and telling a story to her nieces and nephews that draws on the traditions that comprise Egyptian heritage: Muslim, Pharaonic and Arab. At the conclusion of the novel, Asya stumbles upon a recently unearthed Pharaonic statue. She observes that once the woman who had been the inspiration for the statue belonged to the Pharaoh, but now she lies “delivered back into the sunlight still in complete possession of herself” (*Eye* 785). Taken metaphorically, the statue and the story confirm that Asya returns to Egypt with a complete and restored Egyptian identity.

The process of remembering enables aspects of Egyptian collective identity to be recuperated and narrated as part of her identity. Asya’s insecurities and political apathies reflect the effect of displacement from her own historical and cultural inheritance. Discourses that fetishise Egyptian weaknesses essentially displace other discourses that celebrate valuable traits such as nationalism. That the Egyptian identity that is restored in the process is undermined by paradigms that privilege readings of cultural and linguistic hybridity reveals underlying assumptions about metropolitan constructions of identity that are limited in their ability to accommodate narratives of the structural inequities that are perpetuated by prevailing discourses that privilege the West.
In The Map of Love Soueif draws on a longer reach of history to trace the legacy of Orientalist structures of control in the present. Her focus in this novel is on demonstrating that these discourses continue to maintain the hegemony of the West by divesting Egyptians of their ideological and cultural inheritance.

**Beyond the holiday romance: recuperating political purpose in The Map of Love**

I look at the stars and I imagine the universe. Then I draw back to our galaxy, then to our planet – spinning away in all that immensity. Spinning for dear life. And for a moment the utter precariousness, the sheer improbability of it all overwhelms me. What do we have to hold on to? (Soueif, The Map of Love 10)

In The Map of Love, Soueif continues to explore the theme of a generation’s disillusionment and disenfranchisement. Set twenty years from where In the Eye of the Sun ends, both novels collectively chronicle the increasing polarisation between Arabs and the West. In this novel, Soueif uses an intricate narrative structure to trace a history of displacement and marginalisation over a hundred-year period to reveal that the despair and frustration of a generation can be attributed to increasingly intricate structures of control perpetuated through neo-imperialism.

Here also, the author uses a complex dialogic structure that engages past and present and multiple discourses as a framework for self-reflexivity. The Map of Love nests stories within stories as it tells the story of Amal al-Ghamrawi telling the story of her ancestors Anna Winterborne, Sharif and Layla al-Baroudi, and her brother Omar and his lover Isabel. To emphasise the main protagonist’s
disenfranchisement, the author stages Amal as a descendent of Pashas and Cairene Effendi who had been active in resisting the British occupation of Egypt during the early 1900s. One hundred years later, titles have been abandoned, the old family home, once a site of political and intellectual activity, is now a dusty museum and no longer belongs to the family. Of the surviving descendents, Omar al-Ghamrawi is an intellectual living in “Amreeka” while Amal al-Ghamrawi leads a quiet life alone in her city apartment. Her sons have little connection with Egypt and her relationship with the fellaheen who work on their ancestral lands is reduced to a cursory one to honour economic, community and social obligations promised by their father. Amal is aware of the political crisis in Egypt, manifested in Government surveillance, terrorist activities and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism but is overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness and ineffectiveness at her inability to do anything about the “big stuff” that is happening (Map 463). The path to reviving this sense of purpose begins when Isabel Parkman an American brings her a trunk full of memorabilia, letters and journals that belonged to her grandmother Anna Winterbourne. The process of reconstructing Anna’s story enables Amal to recognise the traces of imperialism in her socio-political context, despite the formal end of colonialism. The reflexivity offered through the process of revisiting history provides a framework that enables a critique of the discourses that have contributed to her present state of disempowerment. The process re-ignites her political agency by demonstrating the prospect for alternative models of engagement with difference.

My reading of the text will focus on the themes that extend Soueif’s treatment of the disempowerment of Egyptians in the current milieu. Grounding her work firmly within the socio-political context of the periods that are the focus
of this novel enables her to critique the Eurocentric discourses that contribute to her despair. However, the tropes that present in this novel easily lend themselves to the discourses within postcolonial theory that focus on the issue of identity and representation, and it is within this context that the novel is usually read. The novel is touted as a “holiday romance,” and its front cover of gauzy window curtains framing a view of Egyptian feluccas sailing the Nile is suggestive of the romance set in and with the Orient. The dual romances between the Pasha and the Englishwoman and its modern-day parallel of the American woman Isabel Parkman and the Egyptian debonair conductor and cultural theorist Omar al-Ghamrawi create a framework that lends itself easily to the discourses within postcolonial criticism that are concerned with the issue of representation and the reworking of Orientalist stereotypes. As a trope, travel is central to postcolonial theory and figures in discussions of exile, migration, diaspora and hybridity. James Clifford describes it as a metaphor for the contemporary postcolonial condition, covering a range of displacements and interactions, and allowing for trajectories and identities to be narrated (Routes 36-39). The travels and travel diaries of the Victorian woman Anna Winterbourne and her romance with the Egyptian Pasha suggest the kind of analysis that foregrounds travel as a means through which transformation is achieved. In her article “Rewriting Travel: Ahdaf Soueif”s The Map of Love and Bharati Mukherjee’s The Holder of the World,” Shao-Pin Luo draws on travel in the novel to discuss cultural transformation under the rubrics of translation, hybridisation, and connection. Furthermore, as Valassopoulos suggests, the author uses the form of the romance to stage the unresolvable tensions within the discipline of postcolonial theory itself. These kinds of readings highlight issues of representation and subjectivity and
foreground the binary of the colonial and its periphery. It supports observations made by Kalpana Ram that can be applied here:

Postcolonial studies has encouraged us to think that our primary relationship with the past is that of our relationship to representations, to the texts, images and discourses produced by colonialism (‘orientalism’) in its contradictory interaction with ‘derivative discourses’ of anti-colonial nationalism. (273)

The tendency to frame *The Map of Love* in terms of the politics of representation subsumes the pressing imperatives within the text that draw attention to the discourses that continue to situate Arabs as Other. Soueif centres her project on the discourses that perpetuate the West’s hegemony over Arabs and Egyptians, to indicate that the mere fact of postcoloniality has not brought real equality to the colonised because neo-imperialism maintains Egypt in a state of dependency on the West. The discourses that perpetuate this dependency alienate Egyptians even further from their rich cultural, moral and ideological inheritance.

My reading of the novel restores the worldliness to the text by showing that it speaks to the sense of disempowerment and disillusionment experienced by a generation of Egyptians. My focus on this part of the chapter is in responding to observations raised in the novel on the paralysing discourses that perpetuate the fallacy of Egyptian disempowerment: “We’re being told we haven’t – but we have. But to use it we have to have the will (Map 228). To expose this fallacy Soueif evokes the period between 1900-1914 to draw from a historic example that illuminates how narratives of disempowerment conceal narratives of oppression.

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41 For a sampling of critical readings that draw on this premise, see Luo and Vassalopoulos.
This period depicts a period of Egyptian history that demonstrates political agency and enlightened philosophies. Soueif uses the dialogism of the text to demonstrate the structural inequities and discursive continuities that connect the present realities to forms of neo-imperialism. The moral to this story, however, lies in the contextual information that Soueif restores to bare historical facts that enables historical actors to be situated and understood within their time. This, ultimately a novel on a specific period in Egyptian history testifies to Egyptian empowerment, and through the testimony, urges readers to the same.

A repeat of the past: the delusion of postcolonial equality

If people can write to each other across space [...] why can they not write to each other across time too? (Map 493)

Soueif places past and present in dialogue to empty the trajectory into postcoloniality of its emancipatory investment. Structurally, the narrative is framed by the self-reflexivity of two women from different times who engage in dialogue: an Arab woman from the present, and an Englishwoman from the past. Together, they track and reflect the similarities that connect their different milieu. For example, Anna writes in her diaries that the British in Egypt were like “bright, exotic creatures, walking in a kind of magical space, oblivious to all around them” (Map 195) to maintain their distance from the “natives” (Map 159), and one hundred years later, Amal observes that “officials of the American embassy and agencies” drive through Cairo in their locked limousines with the smoked-glass windows, opening their doors only when they are safe inside their Marine-guarded compounds” (Map 70). Anna observes that the British sowed “distrust” between
“Muslim and Copt” (Map 263) and Amal reflects on the divisiveness fostered by American foreign policy in contemporary Egypt (Map 462). The dialogue between the women demonstrates that similar discursive paradigms underpin the relationship between Egypt and the West in both periods.

A striking demonstration of this occurs when an incident in Amal’s village of Tawasi in 1997 bears remarkable parallels to the incident in 1906 in Denshwai reported in Anna’s diaries and letters. Anna’s diaries recount that soldiers had contravened the law by shooting pigeons in the village without permission. Fighting erupts in which some men are wounded. The outcome is a trial in which the fellaheen are brutally punished: four are publicly hung, eight lashed and three others receive lengthy sentences of hard labour. Though she never states it specifically, her report suggests that the trial is a farce: in addition to the hypocritical treatment of Egyptians she quotes a local newspaper report that revealed that Cromer had prepared the gallows before he went on holidays (Map 426). Immediately after Amal has quoted from Anna’s diary reports on Denshwai, seventeen fellaheen from her village of Tawasi are arrested following a terrorist attack in Luxor.42 As in the incident at Denshwai, these men are arrested because a state of emergency is declared and not because they are implicated through an investigation. This state of emergency situates all Egyptian peasantry as suspect. In a revealing admission, the Egyptian police refer to the peasantry as “natives” (Map 438), a term that was used by the British in Anna’s times (Map 159). By signalling their difference from the “natives,” the policemen reflect that their

42 On 17 November, 1997, tourists were fired on as they visited the temple of Hatshepsut in Luxor. 57 tourists, a local guide and two policemen died in the attack. This attack was mounted by outlawed Islamic extremist groups, see “1997: Egyptian Militants kill tourists at Luxor.”
government draws on the same Orientalist discourses of control exercised by the British authorities when they viewed “group differences” as “dangerous separatisms” (Breckenridge and van der Veer 12). The peasantry is suspect in this case because they have the capacity to undermine the moral authority of the government exerting its control over them.

Here, the concept of “postcolonial orientalism” proposed by Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer in Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament is useful. Breckenridge and van der Veer suggest that contemporary politics is haunted by the specter of colonial Orientalism, they write:

Orientalism without colonialism is a headless theoretical beast, that much the harder to identify and eradicate because it has become internalised in the practices of the postcolonial state, the theories of the postcolonial intelligentsia, and the political action of postcolonial mobs […] postcolonial orientalism, no longer explicitly formulated as part of a theory of difference and of dominion, but transposed now into the very sinews of public life and group politics. (11)

The dialogism of the text discursively connects the treatment of Egyptian peasantry by the colonial occupiers in 1906, with that afforded by the Egyptian government in 1997 to reveal that the postcolonial Orientalist structures of control evident in contemporary times in Egypt are in service of the West: “You see, ya Sharif Basha? I say, and the tears well up once more into my eyes. And his dark eyes look back at me and behind them lie el-Tel el-Kebir and Umm Durman and Denshwai and it seems to me that he does indeed see” (Map 442). As Sharif Basha and Amal reflect the past and the present onto each other the connections between them of a history of oppression are illuminated. The trajectory that emerges in the text is that Amal’s present realities are intricately connected with the history of
British colonialism. Tel el-Kebir, Umm Durman and Denshwai are important incidents in the narrative of British colonialism in the African sub-continent. Through them a history of British use of force, violence and brutality in the establishment and maintenance of empire is narrated. One hundred years on from Denshwai, the Sa‘id in Amal’s time is controlled by the Egyptian military through roadblocks, checkpoints and barricades, and a demonstration of power that sees “ordinary fallaheen […] arrested” (Map 227). In the Sa‘id a state of emergency is declared because Islamic militants kill foreign tourists. As discussed in the previous chapter, in these states of exception, categories of citizens are created whose rights as equal citizens are diminished in order to extend the state’s control over them. In this case, the discourse of terrorism is used to justify the Egyptian government’s control over opposition offered by the peasantry or the Islamic groups in Egypt, and used to justify state sanctioned oppression but as elderly Am Abu-el-Ma‘ati explains they “are neither the first nor the last village to have his happen to it. And this is not the first nor the last government to terrorise the people” (Map 450). Amal writes of “ordinary people going to work” being questioned and held for days without charge (Map 186); sugarcane fields are burned down because it is alleged that they conceal “terrorists” (Map 124) and community schools are closed, and teachers arrested for “terrorism” because they teach the children about “justice” and the “unfairness” of the new land laws (Map 125). Tellingly, as Soueif explains in an article published in Guardian Unlimited on 25 April, 2005 a few years after this novel was published, the Egyptian government’s policies of rapprochement with the West required it to increase its surveillance over the population to demonstrate “it is very serious” about the war on terror and the fight against Islamic extremism (“I have”). Rather than deal with
the root causes of social disenfranchisement in Egypt, the government suppresses resistance and Islamic groups because this would appease the West.

Soueif reveals that in 1997, the trajectories of control are harder to distinguish than in colonial times even though the traces are apparent. The valorisation of postcoloniality in the restricted sense of the temporal end of colonial rule obscures the material realities of ongoing neo-colonialism. In “Notes on the Post-Colonial,” Shohat urged greater critical engagement with the theoretical and political implications of the term the “post-colonial.” She argued:

[The] term ‘post-colonial’ carries with it the implication that colonialism is now a matter of the past, undermining colonialism’s economic, political, and cultural deformative traces in the present. The term ‘postcolonial’ inadvertently glosses over the fact that global hegemony, even in the post-cold war era, persists in forms other than over colonial rule. (“Notes” 105)

For example, nationalism seems to be tainted by neo-imperial and economic interests. Her old friend Tariq ‘Atiya is considering paying Israeli agricultural firms to help him modernise his farm. Tariq’s argument is that he is “transferring their technology” and in doing so he is “strengthening [Egypt’s] economy” (Map 202). He defines these actions as evidence of his patriotism (Map 202). The insidiousness of this is that Israeli agribusiness is supported by the United States. Similarly, Egypt’s reliance on US Aid has shaped its foreign policies as this aid is predicated on normalisation with Israel. Tellingly, the need

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43 Criticism of the term the postcolonial are extensive, for an indication see, McClintock 88 and Said, “In Conversation” 2.
to support regimes that appease the West translates into censorship of the press and a flawed election processes (Map 224-38). The oppression of Islamic groups and other forms of resistance by the Egyptian Government is a way to silence opposition to the nepotism of the ruling regime. So, when Deena, a jaded activist discussing Egypt’s predicament, observes, the “interests of the governing class are different – are practically opposed to the interests of the majority of the people” she expresses the belief that most ordinary Egyptians feel that their government owe allegiance to foreign powers rather than to the people themselves (Map 230). This ruling elite is invested in foreign regimes and big business, and in aiding and abetting the creation of a new world order that is underpinned by tacit acceptance of the West’s hegemony.

The dialogism of the text heightens an awareness of the nebulous networks of power that bear striking resemblance to the more direct manifestations of it through colonial rule. The difficulty of locating points of resistance is demonstrated in the battered, tired bodies of human rights activists: Arwa Salih who had played a part in the student uprisings of the 1970s and Deena al-Ulama (Asya’s activist sister making a cameo appearance from In the Eye of the Sun) are tired and wear “faint circles under their eyes, a slight droop of the shoulders, a certain dullness of skin” (Map 222). Their resistance had ended in “nothing” and most, like Salih, eventually opt out of revolutionary politics (Map 221). Their tireless struggle for democracy, liberty and human rights has proved futile and challenging within the Egyptian context. Government nepotism, coupled with foreign influence leave many Egyptians in Amal’s time feeling disillusioned and disempowered. These challenges are posed by the kind of decentred power that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri discuss in Empire. The authors suggest that
discourses of power manifested today demonstrate a profound shift from the Manicheanism of coloniality but expand on already established structures. They argue “the geographical and racial lines of oppression and exploitation that were established during the era of colonialism and imperialism have in many respects not declined but increased exponentially (43). Understanding the trajectory of control reveals that the real political agenda that is served by these discourses is control over Egyptian self-determination in order to perpetuate the hegemony of the West. Retrieving this sense of self-determination requires recuperating evidence of Egyptian empowerment, and exposing the hypocrisy and the emptiness of the new world order that is proposed by the West.

The hypocrisy of the New World Order

This is a race to subjugate the world – each nation using the tools it masters best: France, brute strength; Italy, terror, Britain, perfidy, false promises and double dealing; the Zionists, business schemes, blackmail and stealth. (Map 471)

This incisive quote from Sharif Basha summarises the ethos of European imperialism. In the current socio-political context it appears that these tools continue to be used. In the previous novel, Soueif’s story of the race pigeons and their eggs served as a macabre analogy for the double dealing that underpins peace negotiations in the Middle East. In this novel, she alludes to the Zionist business schemes that undercut local tenders, a process that eerily resembles the Zionist land acquisition process of one hundred years ago. She notes foreign influence in Egyptian domestic matters, for example, she writes of the American congress...
trying to pass a bill “about their duty to protect the Christian minority in Egypt,” an impulse that repeats “the game the British played a hundred years ago” (Map 186). In this discourse, Egyptians need the Americans, as they did the British one hundred years prior, to liberate them. British paternalism sees them treat the Egyptians as a “nation of infants” who must depend on them (Map 364). These kinds of discourses are predicated on Egyptian inability and disempowerment. They perpetuate intrinsically Orientalist ideas of a weakened, backward and subservient Egyptian Other in need of the magnanimity of the West.

For Egyptians, these discourses cripple the narrative of Egyptian self-determination. Internalised as truth, their effect is sobering. This is depicted through a conversation that Soueif relates between jaded political activists, where paradoxically, their collective self-reflexivity reveals the internalisation of their powerlessness. They acknowledge the “role of victim, the Done-to. We sit here and say ‘they’re planning for us, they’re doing to us’ and wait to see what ‘they’ will do next” (Map 223). This sense of powerlessness creates an inability to fathom alternatives to normalisation with Israel in spite of its aggressive policies, colonialism and human rights abuses in the region because of Egypt’s reliance on US Aid. Powerlessness sees them muse that Egypt’s timelessness will see them through: “mother of civilisation, dreaming herself through the centuries” (Map 100), the “peaceful, patient Nation” who will still be Egypt in the next millennium (Map 231). Paradoxically, these political activists parrot Orientalist discourses that maintain Egypt as mystical, timeless, unchanging and intrinsically unable: Egypt has no choice but to remain dependent on the West.

In this context, Soueif’s representation of the period 1900 to 1914 represents a strategic choice because it undermines the moral and ideological
superiority of the West by representing an era in Egypt’s history that epitomised a humanistic approach to modernity in the face of oppression. This period presents a narrative of Egyptian agency and a national ethos that is suppressed by discourses that are used to justify the influence of the West in the region. Historically, this period has received little critical or historical attention. Joseph Massad suggests that the reason for this is that it is overshadowed by the two revolutions that precede and follow it: the Urabi revolt of 1882 and the revolution of 1919 (“The Politics” 82). Massad acknowledges that Soueif’s novel unearths a significant amount of historical research for the reader’s attention (“The Politics” 82). The lack of critical attention that this period has received is testimony to the fact that it challenges the paradigms through which both the West and Egyptians are read. Modes of reading postcoloniality suggest that everything that is from Europe arrived courtesy of the legacy of imperialism (Ahmad, “The Politics” 5). Soueif’s narrative shows that Egyptians demonstrated a more humanistic approach to modernity than that demonstrated by the Western powers because theirs was premised on an egalitarian exchange of and respect for ideas not moral and ideological supremacy.

In his article “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” White argued that the power of the narrative to represent real events lay in its ability to present a moralising judgment. Soueif does not simply represent history but uses multiple witnesses to expose British hypocrisy and testify to Egyptian agency. Soueif’s critique of the British approach is heightened because it is offered through Anna’s journals. Most English and American women travel writers of the period engaged in what Mary Louise Pratt cites as the “imperial quest par excellence: the civilising mission” (171). Pratt argued that Western
women travellers’ interest in other peoples validated their sense of superiority in their own culture but also enabled them as agents to promote the values of that culture. In contrast, the self-reflexivity of Anna’s journals serves as a form of colonial introspection and her journals as a kind of testimony. For example, her matter of fact reporting such as in the example of Denshwai situates her as a credible, unbiased witness. Anna’s diary accounts provide chilling evidence of British brutality and miscarriage of justice but because they are delivered in straightforward account, her credibility as a critical and unbiased reporter is enhanced. In an early entry on the matter, Anna reveals her reservations about the statement the British issued before the trial: “praising the officers and blaming the fellaheen for the events” (Map 424). Four days later she confidently reports “this is what happened in Denshwai” (Map 424), then proceeds to narrate the events in a factual manner. Her critique amplifies British hypocrisy through its presentation of facts of which this is a good example: “Captain Bull died later in the day and the villagers were to be tried for murder. But he was exhumed and it was found that he had died of sunstroke” (Map 426). Anna’s reports are powerful because they are devoid of judgment. In the context of her reports the men’s sentences appear extremely harsh: four men are publicly hung, another eight lashed, and three others received lengthy sentences of hard labour. On other occasions, Anna chronicles Egyptian history for her English friends. For example, she writes of the reluctance of the British to improve the education of Egyptians, of the strict regulation of schools, students being arrested and of Egyptian lawyers being arrested when they demand that Egyptian workers be entitled to “the same terms of employment as foreign workers” (Map 158). Anna’s observations and insights are corroborated by Layla’s journal which testify to the Egyptian perspective:
The Occupation determined the crops the fallah planted [...] it stood in the face of every industrial project, it prevented us from establishing our own financial institutions, it hampered our wishes for education, it censored what could be published, it deprived us of a voice in the Ottoman parliament, it dictated what jobs our men could hold and it held back the emancipation of our women. It put each one of us in the position of a minor and forbade us to grow up. And with every year that passed we saw our place in the train of modern nations receding.

(Map 472)

Together both Egyptian and British accounts corroborate and strengthen the other’s testimony to confirm British repression.

The structural mechanisms of control that are testified to above manifest the epistemological attitudes that enable the imperial project. Said argued that imperialism and colonialism were supported by “impressive ideological formations which include notions that certain territories and people require [...] domination” (Culture 8). It is these epistemological underpinnings that define the Orient as lacking that which is epitomised by the West. Amal’s research reveals that the hypocrisy demonstrated by the British reflects the attitude of the West towards Arabs more generally, and reflects an endemic problem that is not confined to the experience of colonialism. She reports that Anna’s diary entries record Egyptian disappointment at American President Roosevelt’s pronouncement that “it would take ‘generations’ before [Egyptians] learned to govern themselves” (Map 456). Roosevelt’s pronouncement is disappointing because the United States had held itself out to be a beacon of hope and democracy as these values are “clearly set out in their constitutions” (Map 380).
The symbolism of this is heightened when in an article published in *The Guardian* on 3 December, 2005, Soueif quotes Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak as saying that Egypt was not ready for democracy. This qualification, she argued, enabled him to subsequently justify the erosion of civil rights through extra-judicial control, surveillance, incarceration of civil rights activists, torture and other techniques of collective punishment used on farming communities. Soueif explains that the effect of this is that “the dominant power in the world is encouraging regimes to suppress their people – even while it talks of democracy and human rights.” The war on Iraq brought the harsh reality of the Arabs’ dependency on the goodwill of the West into perspective. In *The Guardian* article of 3 December she writes that this war “proved conclusively that the Arab regimes, for all their internal strongman posturing and for all their slavish toeing of the American line, were ultimately powerless to guarantee even the sovereignty of their lands and the lives of their people.”

Soueif warns that this experience of inequity has created a sense of disillusionment with Western epistemology. She argues that in response, Islamism presents an appealing alternative to the disenfranchised, the socially marginalised and those whose experience of Western epistemology has fallen short of expectations. Islamism’s ongoing appeal is evident despite government oppression because it provides an accessible alternative to Western epistemology. Arwa the activist explains:

Their Idea appeals to the people because it reinforces who they are. It says hey, you don’t have to become the dumping ground of the West. You’re worth something. It appeals to those thousands of young men and women who go through school, through university, and then find the
road blocked in their faces. (Map 225)

This turn to Islamism pre-empts Anna’s prediction that appears later in the novel that British hypocrisy would have the effect of turning people “completely from the West” (Map 457):

The Nations of the West hold one system of values to themselves while denying it to their fellows in the East. It is a hard lesson to learn for a people who, for the last hundred years, have read our philosophers and admired our institutions and have aspired to a system of government like our own. (Map 457)

As present and past bracket the book, it is evident that the effect of the West’s hypocrisy has increased the sense of insuperable differences rather than reduced them. This occlusion can only occur because vital contextual information is lacking from the discursive representations about Egypt.

In this context, Soueif’s portrayal of the Effendi during occupation reveal a cultured, nationalistic, educated class of Egyptian intelligentsia who were intent on an ethical engagement with the British in spite of the disparity in power. They demonstrate a more humanistic attitude towards alterity. For example, Sharif Basha emphasises the necessity of adhering to the rule of law on many occasions while the British openly flout it. When Anna is captured, Sharif Basha explains to the young men who captured her in retaliation for the arrest of Layla’s husband “they acted within the law and you acted outside it […] the law serves no one. The law may be bent […] but if we wish the English to respect our law we cannot suddenly put it to one side and say, but this time we will act without reference to it” (Map 139). This respect for the law is contrasted with the British disrespect for it. The example of Denshwai already discussed clearly demonstrates this. That
narrative also depicts the Egyptians as more humane than the British. In response to the barbaric public hanging in Denshwai, and inhumane treatment of the dead and their grieving families, the Effendi commit themselves to disseminating the truth through foreign newspapers. The disparity in behaviours is heightened by Amal’s description of the hanging, “they hang one man, leave him dangling there in front of his family and his people, and tie another to the ‘bride’ and whip him. And again. And again […]” (Map 427); this is contrasted with Sharif Basha’s kindness and respect when he offers his home for the grieving families to mourn (Map 428). By contrasting Anna’s and Amal’s narratives, Soueif draws out the difference between British brutality and callousness and Egyptian civility and kindness to emphasise the hypocrisy in British claims to being “civilised” and enlightened (Map 427). In keeping with this hypocrisy, the British prefer to expend Egypt’s money in military missions in the Sudan and deny Egyptians an education. Egyptians were to be used as labour: “technical education – British brains Arab hands,” but “not an extra piaster” was to be spent “for any project to do with culture or education” (Map 261-62). In spite of these challenges, the Effendi finance modernisation projects on their own and build a School of Fine Arts and the Museum. The behaviour of the Effendi in this context represents a genuine attempt to demonstrate that the freedom to choose to adopt ideas that complement one’s history, traditions and aspirations is the “legitimate commerce of humanity” (Map 484). In contrast, British attempts to thwart Egyptian development represent an attitude premised on a tacit denial of Egyptian equality.

Scholars of Arab history have shown that the nationalist movements that later emerged had their genesis in this early generation of Arab reformers and not in European colonisation. The reading that situates nationalism as arising out of
colonisation occludes the incredible intellectual heritage of nineteenth-century Arab intellectuals who sought reformation through modernisation and secularisation. Paradoxically, it also situates colonialism as the harbinger of nationalism. As Soueif reveals, the ideals of these reformers expressed a sensibility that tried to combine the best of both worlds. The Islamic ‘Ulama scholars, for example, held that accepting the views of the modern West was compatible with Islam and did not betray their past (Hourani 308). For example, in the novel, Amal recreates a scene where the Mufti, the Grand Imam of Egypt, Sheikh Muhammad ‘Abdu agrees that women should have the right to choose to veil (Map 376). This reform movement commenced before European colonisation of the region and continued to be nurtured throughout occupation until national independence movements. Soueif’s evocation of Nasser in her epigraph attests to her personal project to retrieve this buried historical connection:

It is strange that this period (1900-1914) when the Colonialists and their collaborators thought everything was quiet – was one of the most fertile in Egypt’s history. A great examination of the self took place and a great recharging of energy in preparation for a new Renaissance.

This empowerment is concealed in the narrative of Egyptian powerlessness and is the necessary corollary to the narrative of Western supremacy. British paternalism thwarted Egyptian attempts at modernisation because this would maintain Egypt in a dependent state and make it susceptible to management. The politics of contemporary Egypt reveal that a similar paradigm operates. The notional “new world” that is promised by American foreign policy rhetoric simply continues to operate on the premise of Western hegemony and situates all Others as dependent on the West for enlightenment and progress.
**Restoring the worldliness to historical narrative**

If only people can be made to see, to understand – then wrongs can be undone, and history set on a different course. (Map 481)

I’m putting together the whole picture and I know everything that happened and wasn’t written down –

Great. Yalla. Let your imagination run away with you. (Map 133)

Soueif demonstrates that narratives of disempowerment thrive when they are stripped of context. In this respect, this novel demonstrates the imperative to restore context to historical facts and narrative. My contention is therefore that the novel does not comprise a form of “writing back” as defined by Ashcroft et al in *The Empire Writes Back*, neither does it merely attempt to “set the story straight” as argued by Valassopoulos (38). Instead, I argue that Soueif problematises monological, grand narratives of history through a polyphonic, multi-variant representation of historical events to suggest that a more inclusive narrative goes some way towards foregrounding an ethical engagement between Arabs and the West. The intricate form of the novel in its layering of multiple authorial voices represents an attempt to represent the approach. *The Map of Love* draws together a range of fictional and non-fictional sources and presents this in a form that encompasses both historical and romance genres. Set in two time periods of 1898 to 1913 and 1997-1998, the novel draws on historical research, diary entries and first person narration. It is comprised of fragments drawn from multiple narrators: Amal, Layla, Isabel, and the narrator, and from multiple sources including diary, memoir and news reportage. Real historical figures such as Yusuf al-Khalidi,
Theodor Herzl, Rabbi Zadok Kahn, Cattoui Pasha, Shukri al-‘Asali, Rashid Rida, Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh, the Baroudi and Khalidi families, Lord Cromer, Mr and Mrs Blunt and fictional characters such as Anna Winterbourne are woven into the fabric of the novel. The presence of real historical characters authenticates the narrative and anchors it in history. The technique of quoting from Anna and Layla’s diaries similarly conveys a sense of authenticity. The effect of incorporating these sources collaboratively in the text reveals the need for greater inclusivity of the multiple lenses that can be cast on any subject or issue in order to approach an appreciation of the complexity. It also approaches a semblance of authority through its inclusiveness. Paradoxically, the fragmentary nature of the text repudiates this assertion simultaneously.

A necessary corollary of the incompleteness of any grand narrative of history is the element of fiction. As White argues, the narrative form connects real events to display coherence, integrity, fullness and closure whereas in reality, the world does not present itself in terms of coherent stories with plot lines, central characters and structure displaying beginning, middle and end (27). In this novel, Amal must imagine connections between the fragments of information that are presented to her. On the one hand, a powerful form of memory that Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory” is deployed to authenticate Amal’s project. Hirsch argues that “postmemory” is a very powerful form of memory because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation (Family 22). Postmemory legitimises Amal’s narrative because of its genealogical connections but also emphasises her mediating influence over the material presented. Quotations from diary excerpts legitimise her narrative. Furthermore, the contents of the trunk delivered to her present a tangible connection to the individuals in history. The material objects
within it, such as shawls, an Egyptian nationalist flag, children’s clothes and journals provide the framework on which to anchor her authorial interventions. She breathes life into these inanimate objects and situates their owners in a living socio-political world.

This process reflects Soueif’s broader imperative to restore the worldliness to the material facts of history by contextualising historical events and their actors. As she breathes life into inanimate objects, historical events and snippets of lives lived represented in journals and memoirs she animates a historical moment with more nuances than are reflected in a monologic narrative. That material to supplement the historical record must be fictionalised arises because historical facts themselves lack context. A penetrating example of this is presented in the conundrum that presents itself in the scant material available about Sharif Basha’s life:

I have heard his story from my father [...] and from my mother [...]. His story is there in al-Raf‘I and Hussein Amin and other chronicles of the times and his own writings are in al-Ahram, al-Liwa and, later, al-Garidah. In Layla’s account of him I see my own brother, and in Anna’s I find the dark, enigmatic hero of Romance. And now it falls to me to weave all these strands together and write Sharif al-Baroudi as the man I imagine he must have been. (Map 255)

Sharif Basha the man exists in the interstices of the discourses that represent a facet of him. Soueif reveals that these discourses are limited even though collectively their multi-variance nuances the representations of the man. She demonstrates the ease with which these representations decontextualise:

I lay his letter out on the table and wonder once again at the things that
survive us. He was my age when he wrote it: a man, tall, and vigorous and alive, a man who filled a room when he entered, who thought and spoke and suffered and loved and - all that is gone and this piece of paper remains. (Map 254)

So, when Amal completes the story by presenting the context behind the personal decision taken by Sharif Basha to propose to Anna, she attempts to recuperate the personal narrative of a man’s resistance and agency in his time. Her lengthy deliberation presents a man humbled by his political struggle: having witnessed “lives ended on the scaffold, cut down on the battlefield, destroyed by exile and retreat” (Map 255). She depicts a man tired of the “inch by inch” struggle that has left him with a sense that he had never lived, yearning for the new kind of richness that Anna could give him in spite of the difficulties that they would have (Map 276). The result is that Amal’s entries humanise Sharif Basha and furnish him with the hope, fear and doubt that are not otherwise represented in the historical record.

Narratives of history are limited because they can only provide a perspective of history at a particular time. Amal’s process of writing and the finished product demonstrate that the historian’s task is necessarily flawed because he or she cannot be in possession of all of the facts. A good example of this is the fraud committed by Mr Boyle in producing a letter purportedly written by Egyptian nationalists preparing for a revolution. Amal writes that Anna’s diaries reveal that she is advised by the British foreign office that they had intercepted a letter written by an Arab detailing preparations for a revolution. The historical record reveals that Cromer’s reaction to this letter was to increase the number of troops in Egypt. Fifty years later, Amal discovers proof of the letter’s
falsification in Lady Boyle’s memoir, an obscure out of print book, in which she admits that her husband had written the letter “to use his knowledge of the oriental, for what he meant to say was to the benefit of the Egyptians and towards better understanding” (Map 493). Amal’s addendum alerts the reader to the fact that the historical record may well contain falsified information to buttress the control of the dominant group. It also suggests that “truth” lies buried in marginalised sources and may never be brought to light to correct the recorded history.

The fragmentary nature of the novel highlights the discursive tensions between indigenous and Orientalist discourses of power and reflects their struggle for epistemological hegemony. Again Boyle’s letter enables Soueif to demonstrate the epistemic violence that occurs with historical narratives, especially when they emanate from those more powerful. To demonstrate this, Amal depicts the Effendi considering this letter but deciding against action because of the difficulty in convincing Cromer that it was a fake. They acknowledge that the letter attempted to emulate Arabic turns of speech and so must have been produced by the Orientalist, Mr Boyle: “an ignorant Englishman who imagines he knows how Arabs think” (Map 419). She describes their discussion about the letter’s illogicality and that it is fraught with errors, but also writes that the Effendi know that the letter plays straight into the Foreign Office’s hands. They know that the Foreign Office look for predictable clichés such as “‘camels’ and ‘God is generous’” and when they find them, will assume that it is written by “‘fanatical Arabs’ and send the troops” (Map 419). Her depiction captures the difficulty of their position: the letter is written in the flowery style of classical Arabic but filled with errors that are impossible to explain to the British. For example, a translation
of a “perfumed” greeting into “odors of greetings” is clearly incorrect but the subtle points of language that prove the fake cannot be easily explained (Map 417-19). They are silenced by the fact that they do not hold the moral weight in public discourse because the British rule over them. This passage operates dialogically with an earlier passage quoted from Anna’s letters where she wrote to a friend in England that Egyptians “cannot speak because there is no platform for them to speak from” (Map 399). Anna writes of the urgency of a speaker for the Egyptians, someone who could use “the right phrases, employ the apt image or quotation, strike the right note” (Map 399). This wish is eerily prophetic as Boyle’s fake letter emerges six months after Anna’s letter and is put to the service of the colonisers in extending their control over Egypt. Boyle’s letter highlights the danger in assuming Orientalists who purport to know the truth can adequately represent Arabs. Amal’s dramatisation represents the kind of epistemological violence that occurs because the Egyptian narrative is silenced in the course of history. Her chance find of locating the admission fifty years later attests to the danger of these narratives being lost forever, but also to the fact that the truth will be revealed, eventually, to the person intent on looking for it.

Testifying to political purpose

People have to work out for themselves the ways they can be really useful (Soueif, qtd in Edemariam 20)

In an interview, Soueif reiterated the importance of individual agency and political engagement with the realities of our time. This theme emerges strongly in this novel as she depicts Amal’s re-awakened sense of commitment following her
journey through memory to understand the reasons for her feelings of helplessness. The process of recuperating the past enables her to witness to an alternative political sensibility. For example, excerpts from Anna and Layla’s journals represent everyday resistance to the impact of politics on their lives. She reads in Anna’s early diaries of a genuine attempt to transcend difference when the women first meet: “we felt our way towards each other as though our ignorance [...] were the one thing in the world that stood between us and friendship” (Map 136). For Anna, marriage to an Egyptian Pasha meant that, “politics overshadows everything” because it affected her relationship with her husband and how they were situated in both Egyptian and English society (Map 409). The commitment of Anna, Layla and Sharif to communicate to each other in a neutral language, French is analogous to their efforts to transcend the discourses that maintain their difference from each other. The parallels revealed with the past indicate the imperative for individual engagement for “we are living in difficult times and it is not enough for a person to be interested in his home and his job – in his own personal life (Map 151). The project enables Amal to define a sense of purpose in the present and the author notes:

She cannot do anything about the sale of national industries, about the deals and the corruption and the hopelessness and brutality [...] but she has a piece of land and people who depend on it. She can hold that together. She can learn the land and tell its stories. (Map 298)

A sense of political purpose lies in recuperating “what’s in her hands” (Map 338). As her predecessors could only work with their material and social circumstances so Amal realises her possibilities and her limitations. The process of putting together the story puts things in perspective: Amal and others can ever only know
“however dimly – the pattern of the weave that places them at this moment of history on this spot of land” (Map 299). It enables her to recuperate and narrate an Egyptian story that provides an alternative narrative of Egypt that demonstrates empowerment, political will and a model of humanism. What’s in her hands has been authorship of this Egyptian story of a generation of particularly astute and modern Egyptian leaders.

**Conclusion**

Soueif’s narrative connects historical actors with their socio-political context to expose the connections between them. Said emphasised the importance of this when he argued:

> Literary theory has turned its back on those things [...] connection between texts and their existential actualities of human life, political society and events. The realities of power and authority - as well as the resistances offered by men, women and social movements to institutions, authorities and orthodoxies […]. (The World 15)

The critical attention that Soueif’s novels receive privileges the cultural aspects to the text over the material realities that are represented. Celebrations of cultural translations, cultural hybridity or technical ingenuity undermine the considered response to the material and social inequities between Arabs and the West that are also represented in both texts. This inhibits her call to social justice and a more ethical critical engagement. In some respects, the attention that Soueif’s novels have received represents the kind of inane discursive attention that Deena the activist observes to be the prime output of the intellectuals of her generation: “we’re a bunch of intellectuals who sit in the Atelier or the Grillon and talk to each other. And when we write, we write for each other. We have absolutely no
connection with the people. (Map 224). Reading the worldliness into Souef’s text restores the text’s connection with the impulses that engendered it.

Both of the novels considered here represent a sustained meditation on the disjoint between the promises afforded by postcoloniality and the realities of post-nationalism. The worldliness presented in her novels presents readers with a sense of the ongoing structural and material inequities between Egypt and the West. In her introduction to Mezzaterra, written after these novels were published, Souef captures this disappointment:

Generations of Arab Mezzaterrans had, I guess, believed what Western culture said of itself: that its values were universalist, democratic and humane. They believed that once you peeled off military and political dominance, the world so liberated would be one where everyone could engage freely in the exchange of ideas, art forms, technologies […]. But as the Eighties rolled into the Nineties the political direction the world was taking seemed to undermine every aspect of this identity. Our open and hospitable Mezzaterra was under attack from all sides. (Mezzaterra 8-9)

Clearly, signs of this concern are manifested in both novels and together they trace a sustained history of Arab marginalisation effected through discourses that perpetuate the continued assertion of Western hegemony. For this reason, refusal to acknowledge the specifically Egyptian identity in both texts strategically elides questions about these structural inequities. Profiling the cultural or literary aspects of her work feeds metropolitan expectations that celebrate the progression into political modernity in the postcolonial context, and utopian visions of the new world order. Themes raised by Souef in both novels on the nebulous structures of
power exerted through the World Bank, the IMF, American foreign policy and forces of globalisation remain unattended even though, as I have tried to indicate, they foreground the continued divisiveness and difference that operate throughout both stories.

In both novels, the past is used to explain the present: in it lays the genesis of a range of Egypt’s current problems, but it is also an enabling impulse for agency in the present. The statues that find their way in the conclusion of each novel provide illuminating metaphors for the restored Egyptian identity in the text. In *The Map of Love*, Amal reflects on the statue of Nahdet Masr, under whom thousands had marched in numerous demonstrations. They had taken Masr as a symbol: “fallaha, one hand on the head of the sphinx, rousing him from sleep, the other putting aside her veil; a statue at once ancient and modern” (*Map* 297). In *In the Eye of the Sun*, Asya finds a half submerged statue of a woman from Pharoanic times. Symbolically, both are used to reinforce the sense of Egyptian identity in the text but also to reinforce the necessity of returning to history to trace its impacts on the present to empower it. This process enables Soueif to understand how discourses that maintained the West’s hegemony and Egypt’s dependence can be just as easily countered by reading the nuances to the historical contexts and restoring the worldliness to her sense of disappointment and helplessness.
Chapter 3

Navigating an “unhomely” existence: reconnecting redundant selves in Jean Said Makdisi’s *Teta, Mother and Me*, and Diana Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava*

I had felt myself to be an unconnected and redundant object. (Makdisi, *Teta, Mother and Me* 11)

He squints at our oversized name tags: ‘Farouq, Ibtissam, Jaipur, Matussem […].’ I see his mouth working as he walks up our row of beaming, black-eyed kids. Eventually he gets to me. ‘Diana!’ he cries with evident relief, then crashes into my last name. But apparently once this man starts going, he must see the thing through. He squints, trying to sound it out: ‘Ub-abb-yuh-yoo-jo-jee-buh-ha-ree-rah […].’ This guy’s a scream! I can’t stop laughing. What an idiot! I’ve got green eyes and pale skin, so evidently he feels I must speak English, unlike the rest of the row. He squats beside me, holds the big mike in my face, and says, ‘Now, Diana, tell me, what kind of a last name is that?’ (Abu-Jaber, *The Language of Baklava* 3)

Out of all the novels written by Arab women that I read, the novels discussed in this chapter resonated most for me at a personal level. As a member of a minority community in Australia and having emigrated from Singapore, I could relate to the issues of displacement raised in the novels, and in a strangely reassuring way
locate parallels in our experiences. In Jean Said Makdisi’s *Teta, Mother and Me* (2006) I saw reflected the frustrating process of piecing together my mother and grandmother’s stories. Whilst my history was not set in the Middle East, the women in my patrilineage and matrilineage lived through war, displacement and colonialism in China, Malaya and Singapore. In *Teta* I saw my own grandmothers: one left China at age sixteen to escape marriage to a much older man and another who raised many children in abject poverty during World War II in Malaya. I knew that like many young Chinese women, my grandmother had rejected the idea of an early marriage and left China to work in Singapore. Most had never been beyond their village prior to this and most spoke only a Chinese dialect, my grandmother’s being Cantonese. However, it was after migrating to Australia and during an anthropology class where I recounted some of my grandmother’s stories that I realised that many of my white Australian colleagues viewed my ancestry through a different lens from mine. I was slightly insulted when my colleagues automatically assumed my grandmothers from Asia were “traditional” women but perplexed at their surprise that these women could demonstrate traits that were “ahead of their time,” it seemed to me that my grandmothers were oddities to them. I found these comments disconcerting as family conversations never made these kinds of distinctions. Reading *Teta*, I was reminded of that time and of my inability to understand the fuss or articulate a response. In this book I read how another woman thousands of miles away faced a more sinister reflection of the problem because she had internalised these representations and came to view her forebears through lenses that proved to be alienating. Her book narrates the exposure of an insidious epistemological system that positions women from the non-Western world as inferior, backward, and in need of the kind of modernisation modelled by the West.
In Diana Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava* I could relate to the problems of asserting an identity as a minority individual who shares the diasporic experience. In this novel, the author depicts how she reclaims her identity by thinking through the discourses that define her difference and her Otherness, and complicate her attempts at self-definition. These negotiations are dramatised in the novel through the metaphor of food. In this manner, the book combines the cookbook memoir with the immigrant made good story. As an immigrant, I could understand the symbolic power of food through its representation in the novel. Encoded into the food we shared amongst ourselves, with similar Others, kept private or modified for some Other’s consumption were much deeper messages about our identity as an immigrant family and how we wanted to project that identity to others and to ourselves. Food had the extraordinary power to evoke very strong memories of home, family and community. The combination of recipe, memoir and narrative enabled me a unique form of commensality with the author. Through her narrative I could see that we shared many dilemmas associated with defining ethnicity and identity. In Abu-Jaber’s novel though I could see that she grappled with the added difficulty arising from the fact that Arab ethnicity was highly politicised.

Of all the novels selected for this archive, these two novels conform most to forms that are usually associated with what is loosely termed “ethnic” writing. *Teta, Mother and Me* uses a form popularised by many Chinese-American authors when they wrote about their women forebears. *The Language of Baklava* draws on the trope of the cookbook memoir. Both of these books utilise accepted markers of the ethnic exotic such as that of the trajectory from tradition to modernity and the appeal of ethnic food. These features are what Graham Huggan describes in his
book *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* as exotic markers that feed a metropolitan commercial appeal. These codes reinforce a fetishised Otherness that increases the marketability of the books. Literary texts captured under the rubric “ethnic writing” reflect the way their authors are situated within the Western market. It is a term used by first world markets to position work that is from “elsewhere.” As this category includes immigrant writing as well as work in translation, it is another way through which these communities are marginalised. The categorisation elicits certain expectations from readers who are conditioned to locate themes that inevitably confirm their position as emancipated first world readers. These themes loosely substantiate the third world difference and reinforce the first world reader’s cultural, intellectual and moral supremacy. For example, Uma Narayan argues that these texts are read for loss, displacement, witness or testimony, and the third world women within them are assigned one of three roles as “emissaries,” “mirrors” or “authentic insiders” (121-57). According to Narayan, emissaries valorise their culture, mirrors confirm the West’s interventions and predation whilst authentic insiders provide assurance against misrepresentations based on prescriptive knowledge (133-42). In this way, the consumption of “ethnic writing” acts as a kind of colonisation because it relies on the circulation of ideas about cultural Otherness. Certain tropes such as the migrant-made-good and the rejection of tradition for the modern reinforce the first world–third world divide. My aim in this chapter is to draw out how these authors use the immediate appeal of the exotic to challenge established paradigms of reading and defining Otherness.

The analysis in this chapter is framed by the concepts of the “unhomely” and the stranger. The main protagonists in each text experience a state of
“foreignness” expressed as an inability to locate a sense of belonging to family or community. Each memoir explores the constitution of feminine subjectivity in displacement arising from very different socio-political, historical and cultural circumstances. Teta, Mother and Me: Three Generations of Arab Women tells the story of three generations of Arab women. Collectively, the stories provide a glimpse of life lived against a broad sweep of the Levant’s turbulent history from the Ottoman Empire through to the arrival of the British in Palestine, the loss of Palestine in 1967 to Israel, the Palestinian diaspora and the Lebanese Civil War.

The changes brought by modernisation, effects of immigration, colonial imperialism and war caused women of each generation to experience displacement under different guises. As the author, Makdisi, experiences an all-pervasive sense of alienation from society, community, culture and politics in addition to a sense of alienation from her mother and grandmother, all of which is compounded even further by her identity as an exilic Palestinian (Teta 11). The Language of Baklava continues Abu-Jaber’s engagement with Arab-American identity evident in her two previous works of fiction. This memoir is written as a collection of stories and memories of how she “grew” into herself. She writes of learning how to construct what seems to be a schizoid identity: “We are Arab at home and American in the streets.” This precarious juggling act means that mistakes can occur, for instance, her father Gus “sometimes slips and haggles with the clerk at Sears over the price of ties” (Language 5). The author’s father and uncles who are from Jordan grapple with the implications of no longer being “who they thought they were” (Language 19) while their children struggle to find an identity as Arab and American, of being born in America and of being infused with the longings of a diasporic parent. In this context, food becomes the language through which to speak about
identity as it metaphorically negotiates the spaces that must be traversed in order to locate and process a meaningful concept of self in displacement as well as reflecting the difficulty of actually arriving at or embodying a sense of placement.

In literary criticism, this sense of estrangement and foreignness is described by Bhabha as the experience of the "unhomely." Bhabha’s adaptation of Freud’s concept of unheimlich considers the way in which cultural and political interventions experienced because of colonialism and imperialism are expressed in literature. This confluence results in tension between private and public boundaries that are manifested in terms of alienation, unease and discomfort. Bhabha’s own exposition of unhomeliness is through the figures of Aila in Nadine Gordimer’s My Son’s Story and Beloved from Toni Morrison’s novel of the same name. Though the historical and cultural specificities of each novel differ, the female protagonist in each is only emancipated from the controlling narratives that have created their condition by recognising and revisioning historical knowledge ("Introduction" 13-18). Critical readings generally interpret Aila as the unspoken “totem” of black South Africa and Beloved as the reincarnation of black infanticide during slavery. These characters are devices used by the authors to revise normative narratives of history and provide an opportunity for emancipation by revealing previously obscured narratives. Unhomeliness in this sense signals the enduring effect of a complex web of interventions that over time have had the effect of creating a sense of different, Othered and alienated subjectivity.

The concept of the unhomely is particularly useful for my analysis of Teta and Baklava because the characters engage in a process of enquiry to demystify their alienation. The process reveals that this is the result of historical and contextual positioning. In Teta, Makdisi comes to understand that her position as a
middle-class Palestinian diasporic woman who had been given a Western-centric education has led her to read women from the Arab world through Western eyes. This paradigm has resulted in her alienation from other Arab women. In Baklava, Abu-Jaber grapples with a “system” that insists on organising people according to racialised identities. Agency comes for her when she realises the possibility of transcending the limiting binaries of hybridity or the constraints of ethnic purity in order to define subjectivity. My analysis has also benefited from the insights provided by Ahmed’s concept of stranger fetishism. Ahmed argues that the figure of the stranger is produced in the process of welcoming or expelling. The process of fetishism isolates the figure of the stranger from its historical context and gives it a “life of its own” because it is removed from the conditions that created it (Strange 5). This dehistoricised fetishism means that we forget how the body of the stranger came to be defined. Ahmed suggests that “the stranger when used in this way works to conceal differences; it allows different forms of displacement to be gathered together in the singularity of a given name” (Strange 5). Ahmed’s insight into the construction of the stranger is useful to this analysis because it reinstates the need for historicisation. As the stranger is also a person who is “out of place” Ahmed’s insight provides a complementary lens through which to view the unhomely. Examining the making of the stranger necessitates looking at the ideology that creates it.

In the reading that follows, I will show how Makdisi’s memoir uncovers that her alienation from her forebears arises from having internalised paradigms that designated them as different from her. Teta, Mother and Me is about three generations of Arab women. Its form, the story of three generations of women became very popular following the vast commercial success of novels published
by Chinese-American authors such as Amy Tan and Maxine Hong-Kingston and Chinese-British author Jung Chan. These novels traced matrilineage from the vantage point of the daughter who is an immigrant in the West, and lends itself to supporting the narrative of the “immigrant made-good.” In the course of presenting the matrilineage for a readership based in the West, the daughter-author as immigrant is positioned as the authentic insider who represents her forebears. The form inevitably reflects and valorises the trajectory from “tradition” in the “motherland” to modernity in the West. *Teta* is set against a turbulent war and conflict-laden canvas and speaks of displacement, exile and loss. It is told by a granddaughter anxiously attempting to remedy her own sense of social and political isolation in the current milieux. In the discussion that follows, I will argue that Makdisi problematises the legacy of colonialism for Arab women to reveal that it is intricately implicated in her experience of alienation.

**Mirror, mirror on the wall: who’s most modern amongst us all? Unsettling the teleology of modernity in *Teta, Mother and Me***

So intensely did I feel my alienation from the politics of the war, and from all the decisions that had led to it, even while feeling as intensely my attachment to some of the issues it raised, that a great need arose in me to investigate my function as an individual, as a woman, as a mother and as a teacher in its context. I especially felt the need to validate my woman’s role in society – for I had felt myself to be an unconnected and redundant object – and therefore my mother’s and grandmother’s as well. (*Teta* 11)

This book continues Makdisi’s concern with the experience of alienation begun in
her first memoir *Beirut Fragments: a War Memoir*. The process of writing that memoir enabled the author to situate herself as an active agent during the war. In *Teta*, Makdisi re situates herself and her foremothers as active agents within the larger canvas of the history of the region. The process of writing this book enables her to expose the ideological basis for historical positioning that created the experience of alienation. Makdisi is sister to Edward Said, the renowned literary critic, academic and Palestinian activist. Said is mentioned in the memoir: he is included in the dedication and Makdisi writes of their close relationship. She does not, however, write about Said’s academic fame and his influential work *Orientalism*, nor does she mention his memoir *Out of Place*, published a few years earlier, and yet, both memoirs pivot on the experience of alienation and attempt to understand it. Said’s memoir traces his exilic state to the physical condition of Palestinian exile and a confluence of socio-political and intellectual influences that created an intellectual and psychological sense of alienation. Together, these circumstances led him to feel part of multiple traditions but not being entirely at home in any. Makdisi offers a similar but gendered perspective on alienation through the focus on women’s lives. In this sense, her book speaks to Said’s memoir and complements it.44

In an interview with the *Lebanese Daily Star*, Makdisi indicated the wider political thrust to her project and its broader implications for Arab women:

> We unlike the British, for example, have not done our homework […] whereas scholarly work on the lives and work of the English women of

44 Said’s oeuvre has sustained significant criticism for his general inattention to gender, for a provocative argument about the gendered foundations of Orientalism see, Yegenoglu 2-116.
the Victorian era have been done, we have not [...] hence we are
ignorant of our past and let our false assumptions prevail. (qtd in Melki)

Clearly, she puts the onus back onto Arab women to educate themselves about
their forebears and to unearth them as Western women had unearthed theirs.
Makdisi insists on Arab women like herself acknowledging these assumptions in
order to recognise their complicity in the process through which their histories
were buried. These false assumptions prevail because of the ignorance of Arab
women who have accepted these representations. Makdisi’s personal story adds
authority and emphasis to this assertion because she admits to having been
similarly ignorant. The book details the process and the self-reflexivity through
which she evaluated and discarded the assumptions that she had been imbued
with, and through which she had been taught to read women like her Teta.

Makdisi’s project is underpinned by the imperative to question the
paradigm through which she had viewed the lives of her ancestors. She begins by
acknowledging that her assumptions about Teta situated her as a quaint
“exquisite” specimen from another time, a representative of a world that neither
bears a relation to the present nor to her. It is an admission of the kind of stranger
fetishism that Ahmed discusses because Teta was thought of as:

Exquisitely old-fashioned, so thoroughly remote from the frantic
‘modern life’ I was living [...] my great love for her had, I am sorry to
say, more than a hint of the patronizing notion that she would not, could
not possibly, understand my anguish as a modern woman because she
had been so safely ensconced in a carefree, though boring and limited
domestic existence. (Teta 129)
The memoir documents the complex process of “re-reading” Teta’s life and that of
the women of her generation (Teta 19). It exposes deeply embedded
epistemological and discursive mechanisms that create paradigms through which
these women were read and situated by their descendents. These paradigms are
exposed when Teta is recontextualised in order to evaluate the differences in their
lives to work out “in what way [the author’s] was better” (Teta 10). Situating her
foremothers within history enables her to untangle and expose as Ahmed suggests
“the social relationships (involving both fantasy and materiality) that are
concealed in stranger fetishism” (Strange 5). Her project reveals that like many
other young people, she had also judged her foremothers, as having “lacked
strength, or imagination, or gratitude, or willpower, or intellect, or something”
(Teta 11). Her project reveals that as the figure of the Arab woman is
dehistoricised she becomes a fetishised object that bears no connection to the
socio-historical forces that have produced her. The project enables her to reveal
how the figure of the stranger, the fetishised traditional Arab woman, embodies
some of the anxieties of the West, and that her creation and maintenance is
necessary to enforce boundaries and power relations. It is because of this that
Makdisi’s project emphasises the social and historical context.

The process of uncovering reveals more about Makdisi’s present
positioning than it does about her foremothers as it exposes how she had
internalised and reproduced the discourses that estranged and unhomed her from
her rich inheritance. The author uses an intricate narrative that weaves authorial
reflections through a nested series of memoir, history, biography and
autobiography. Personal history provides the framework that enables comparison
and reflection. All of these strands operate dialogically across spatial and temporal
dimensions to expose the tenuousness of the ideological process of designating Others and “strangers.” This framework unsettles the reader to challenge their understanding and reading of modernity and into greater awareness of the forms of epistemological control that are expanded pedagogically.

The politics of remembering Mother

Critical analysis of the literary representation of the mother-daughter relationship is predominantly Western-centric. Interest in the area emerged in the 1970s and 1980s when feminists in the West drew their attention to women and memory. Many of these feminists suggested that female memory held an alternate history that was embodied by the mother figure. Maternal discourse was taken to be feminine, ahistorical and counter to patriarchal discourse, which is public, historical and written. Since then, extensive scholarship on a culturally and socially diverse archive from a range of disciplines including sociology, anthropology and literature has problematised these early theories to argue for the imperative to appropriately contextualise the reading of texts to consider the specifics of class, culture, history and ethnicity in the formation of feminine subjectivity and identity. Furthermore, the literary representations of women and mothers from non-Western traditions reveals much broader definitions of motherhood and mothering than that found in Western-centric discourses. Writing by Asian-American women, for example, using this trope is especially extensive

45 For a sampling of material in this extensive field, see Davidson and Broner; Hirsch, “Review,” and Spacks.
46 For a sampling of the extensive critical material in this field, see Heung 599; Joseph; Peteet 103-104; and Zaatarí 54-59.
and offers a more culturally specific form of mothering and daughtering. In this genre of writing, the matrilineage is often explored in conjunction with the search for cultural roots and the need to explore the psychological or cultural differences between mothers and daughters (Grice 35-75). On the other hand, studies of motherhood in Lebanon and Palestine reveal very different conceptualisations of motherhood and women’s subjectivity. Julie Peteet reveals, for example, that the nexus of women and war necessitates a conceptualisation of feminist agency and political activism centred on nation and culture even though culturally accepted images are deployed (104). Palestinian mothers and daughters sustain life and the cultural production of the nation through a politics of resilience (Mehta 821). These other archives indicate that the paradigms offered by white, middle-class and Western women are not universally applicable.

There are no extensive studies on the use of the matrilineage as a trope in Arab women’s writing. And yet, memoirs by Arab and Muslim women, especially those that focus on the lives of women under repressive social, cultural or religious regimes are popular and marketable in the West. It is within this context that the exhortations to cultural and historical authenticity on the dust jacket of Makdisi’s book must be read. The dust jacket of the American hardcopy edition cites quotations from three well-respected scholars in the field of Arab and Islamic studies from a range of disciplines. Arab-American author Diana Abu-Jaber writes that this is a “stirring memoir” of “nation, politics and history,” Sondra Hale, Professor of Anthropology, alerts readers to the “important addition to the oral histories of Arab women and to feminist literature” and Leila Ahmed, Professor of Divinity, recommends the book as a “must read” for its insight into a tumultuous historical period. These endorsements specifically draw attention to nation, history
and politics as key issues addressed in the book. Collectively, they testify to the historical accuracy and validity of the representations made in the book. The front inside jacket further emphasises the need to distinguish this book from the kind of memoir that exoticises Arab women: “neither princesses, nor paupers, nor members of a harem or otherwise exotic figures Teta (‘Granny’ Munira Badr Musa), Mother (Hilda Musa Said), and ‘me’ (Jean Said Makdisi) embody over a century in the history of the Middle East.” Where women’s writing in the West has sought to recuperate women’s histories from patriarchal repression, Makdisi’s project recuperates Arab women’s histories from a broader system of cultural and historical oppression by Orientalist thought.

To expose this system of epistemological control Makdisi shows the ease with which narratives can be manipulated. For example, the claims to historical and cultural authenticity asserted by the cover are problematised in the book through narrative techniques that insist on putting this claim under erasure. The book is comprised of a prelude, postlude and four parts between them, three of which address the life of each of the women in the genealogy with the fourth a general reflection on motherhood. The prelude to this book destabilises the act of reading because it provides the reader with the conclusions that Makdisi arrives at before the first chapter of the book even begins. Here Makdisi tells the reader that the self-reflexivity required for the process of writing challenged her preconceptions and changed her ideas. This takes the surprise out of the reading process. Though it forewarns the reader of what is to come, it destabilises the act of reading because it upsets the accepted teleology of the linear writing structure. In this sense, the prelude contains, as Spivak suggests in her preface to Of Grammatology, “the lie” as it does not come before the book but can only come
after material has been processed and the conclusion arrived at. The tension created by the prelude between the author's summation that she had re-evaluated Teta from traditional woman to modern woman and the narrative that problematises this teleology negates this conclusion. The anxieties caused by the prelude are suggestive of the author's ambivalence about working with the limitations of the form, because "the lie" puts the whole text under erasure.

Makdisi undermines her authority as the author and as the "authentic informant" by frequently reminding the reader that she "does not know" and must supplement her knowledge with archival research and an imaginative investment (Teta 156, 160). As discussed in the previous chapter, putting her authority under erasure this way reveals both the fictionality and the subjectivity of historical representation. Furthermore, the reader's complicity in acknowledging the narrative is obtained through tacit acceptance of these authorial confessions. Consequently, the book is comprised of an amalgamation of forms and narratives containing a nested set of memoir and biography, of reflections by other relatives, excerpts from letters, archival research, photographs and other historical records including school reports, newspapers and memoirs by other people. Makdisi's authorial interventions draw these fragments together in an attempt at a coherent representation. A good example of her attempt to exert her power to shape the interpretation is one of her more explicit attempts to depict Teta as a "modern" woman. Makdisi includes many anecdotes to try to support her assertion that Teta took pride in her "conscious, deliberate stand" in becoming a modern woman (Teta 213). The anecdotes themselves, however, are ambiguous and open to interpretation. For example, Makdisi remembers Teta saying that she only washed her face on her wedding day. Over the years, the author has interpreted this
curious statement in many different ways: as a rebuke against the use of cosmetics, as a proud claim to the beauty of her skin or eventually, as resistance to the traditional wedding customs and elaborate ceremonies (Teta 213). Each of these interpretations resonates with Makdisi’s own personal context and desires. As a teenager, she read that remark as Teta’s rebuke against cosmetics and as an adult she read it as evidence of the “modern” woman in Teta. The ambiguity in the statement, coupled with an inability to seek clarification from the speaker, enables the author to legitimately apply whatever assertion she chose. To strengthen the argument for caution in exercises of interpretation, the author includes two radically different modes of interpreting Teta’s acceptance of Shukri Musa’s marriage proposal. On the one hand is her representation of Teta’s story of how they both felt an “instant regard for one another” and on the other is Aunt Melia’s story that Teta accepted Shukri’s proposal based on her father’s approval (Teta 213). Makdisi voices a preference for the love story because it shores up her representation of Teta as modern woman, just as she prefers to believe that Teta rejected the elaborate Galilean wedding ceremonies in preference for a different course in life. The narrative suggests that Teta does not comfortably and unambiguously fit either label of traditional or modern and that it is probably better to position her within her social and cultural context than to apply a label. The effect of the technique that places fact and speculation alongside each other is to draw attention to the ease with which a narrative can be manipulated to reach specific politicised ends. The reader is forced to accept that the cobbled-together nature of the narrative belies both its fragility as well as its robustness in offering potential for creative interpretation.

The fragments also serve the purpose of mirroring in physical form the
sense of dispossession and alienation from place, personal history and community. This idea is already foregrounded in the prelude when Makdisi writes about the geographic scattering of the family to far-flung corners of the world following the loss of family homes across Palestine, and in particular Jerusalem after the Israeli occupation of 1967. The fragments of information are evidence of her wide-ranging research to supplement the large gaps in her knowledge about Arab history. At one level, the collation of these diverse pieces of information in the text are indexical of the need to integrate out of a series of disintegrated fragments a sense of belonging and contiguity. Another way to read this deliberate weaving is that it reflects the diverse influences that coexisted and the many, many histories that were being written simultaneously.

These diverse fragments paint a richer picture of the socio-historical context than is captured in narratives of turn-of-the-century Lebanon most frequently rendered by Western-centric authorship. This contrast is clearly brought out in the chapter “Alternative Paths” where Makdisi shifts attention away from Teta’s familial and domestic spaces to that of the broader social context. Here, a whole chapter is devoted to the different kinds of schools in operation at the turn of the century. She writes that the majority of students attended the numerous schools that coexisted with those run by the missionaries. These included schools operated by local priests trained in Rome, State schools established by the Ottoman government, schools opened by Ibrahim Pasha in Egypt and the Islamic kuttubs or Quranic schools. The Islamic community had its own network of girls’ schools run by the Makassed Philanthropic and Islamic Association. These Makassed schools were directed primarily at the poorer families as wealthy families could tutor their daughters at home. Makdisi emphasises that the
schooling of girls was in accordance with liberal Arab thinkers of the time who held that “the progress of the nation depended on the progress of women” (Teta 204). Education, especially of girls, was not introduced to the region by imperial and colonising forces but was already an integral cultural, religious and social value that was boosted by nationalistic impulses. To reinforce the efficacy of these educational systems to produce politically and socially engaged women, Makdisi cites Huda Shaarawi and Anbara Salam, two political activists contemporaneous to Teta who were both educated in the Islamic school system. The former was educated in total seclusion as befitted a woman of her class and the latter in the Makassad. Shaarawi went on to play a direct role in Egyptian nationalist politics and was one of the founders of the Central Women’s Committee of the Wafd Party that negotiated Egypt’s independence from Britain. She also established the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1919. Salam played a prominent role in Lebanese and Palestinian politics and society. This long chapter contextualises the educational system in the region to emphasise that the missionary schools attended by the author’s mother and grandmother were not the only source of modern ideas and education. By shifting the narrative emphasis away from the intimate familial world of Teta and onto a broader social context, Makdisi reveals the different and contradictory impulses that operated within the social context at that time to suggest the richness of Arab women’s cultural, political and social inheritance. These stories operate dialogically to allow the author to claim as her inheritance the women educated in both Arab and Western traditions: the Arab women activists, the foreign missionaries and the Arab women in seclusion (Teta 208). Inevitably, the fragments of information presented in the book represent much larger repositories of information and point to other narratives, other histories and
other authoritative voices. The effect of this is to lead the reader to question how and why these were occluded from the author.

**Pedagogy as a way through which to ingrain epistemological control**

I look back at the received history of women in this part of the world, I see it clouded by false assumptions and myths. The complexities of cultural history have been reduced to a few simplistic half-truths.

*(Teta 208)*

Makdisi’s reflections on the differences between what she learnt through formal education and that which she unearthed through archival research demonstrates that she is a product of an institutionalised form of ideological control. The dialogism created by the weaving of the Arab perspective garnered from oral histories, local records and analysis with the history written from the Western-centric perspective reveals that the latter is a biased representation intended to shore up its intellectual, cultural, moral and social superiority.

The narrative that modernity was a colonial gift is exposed as a fallacy in the novel. Makdisi reflects that she had “often read that the missionaries, with their secular schools, their modern medical knowledge and their new social rules, introduced modernity to this part of the world” *(Teta 148)*. This narrative recounts time with the arrival of the missionaries. Makdisi counters this by beginning her narrative from a point before the arrival of the missionaries to show that a rich social and cultural history in the Levant preceded the missionaries’ arrival. She provides a detailed account of Teta’s family origins, tracing both maternal and
paternal ancestry through a number of generations. This situates Teta in history and reinstalls her as a social agent with deep historical, religious, cultural and social connections. For example, the family can claim that it had ancestors who belonged to an Orthodox monastery established in 1648 and others who had thriving commercial interests in the region. This exercise in contextualisation paints a picture of a rich cultural, social and commercial life in Mount Lebanon at the turn of the century. It counters the narrative that the missionary movement, which began around 1820 as part of the evangelical revival in Britain and America, brought civilisation to the region. Makdisi positions her ancestors as path-breaking pioneers: “My great-grandparents were part of a new and dynamic movement. They were to inhabit the frontiers, the territorial outposts, of a new cultural map; indeed, they were among the pioneers who helped draw this map” (Teta 148). Positioning them as active agents who together with a range of other people redrew the map of the region has the effect of foregrounding a more humanistic understanding of Teta and her forebears as social agents. The author acknowledges that “these were changing times, however, and new and rival influences were being felt” (Teta 149). The lived experience of this can only be imagined and so she imagines a house that reflects various aspects of their identity: a lack of religious iconography to reflect their Protestantism, the simple furnishings typical of an Arab household with the odd additional new items of furniture such as the armchair modelled on the English Morris chairs. Her research reveals that a more nuanced appreciation of history provides a fairer representation of it. The diverse array of information provided from domestic scenes through to local politics shows that the region was not a flat canvass upon which the missionaries acted. The effect of weaving the biography and autobiography of and
by the three women is to reveal that whatever forms of modernity imported into this household in the form of new products, implements or an attention to personal hygiene, existed alongside seasonal traditional rituals such as harvest and religious festivals. This suggests that individuals decided how, when and what they adopted of the new things and practices introduced into the region.

The interweaving of the narrative of the role of the missionaries with the oral histories of local Arab women reveals that the “official” narrative suppressed the role of the locals in order to erase evidence of their agency and achievements. This is brought out through the narrative of Aunt Melia’s involvement with the missionary school. Aunt Melia, who taught at the school for many years, is remembered on a plaque at the school’s entrance as an “associate and friend” of Miss Kyle the school’s first Principal (Teta 197). Makdisi’s research reveals that personal reminiscences of former students attest to Melia Badr’s role in upholding Arab culture because she encouraged her students to absorb secular culture but grounded them in their heritage. That Melia Badr’s amazing role had to be unearthed from “unofficial” record exemplifies the insidious nature of the lie of the colonial gift. The act of suppressing the role of the locals in this version of the historical narrative erases evidence of their agency and achievements from the “official” record. Hence, Melia Badr’s achievements in upholding Arab culture are irrelevant to the overall intent of the school’s founders which means that she is not officially accorded a more significant role (Teta 198). Makdisi also argues that the narrative valorising the role of the missionaries does not give due recognition to the fact that local factors and the socio-political context at the time of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire facilitated their influence (Teta 148). These narratives falsely credit the missionaries with being “the sole founders of this or
that school or university, as though they had done this entirely independently and alone" (Teta 148). Makdisi’s research causes her to reflect “in every one of the foreign mission stories known to me, there is a ‘native’ lurking in the background, without whom the enterprise would not have been accomplished” (Teta 197). The effect of this is to keep the Melia Badrs of the world confined to their role as “associate and friend” rather than being remembered as instrumental agents. The local example of the relationship of Melia Badr and Miss Kyle uncovers the power relationships within which they were enmeshed. The unchallenged fossilisation of Ms Badr as helper and friend in the narrative of the school’s history reinforces the West’s intellectual, moral and cultural superiority for historical posterity. These arms of epistemological control extend the West’s influence and hegemony. These become even more entrenched and powerful when Arabs internalise them.

Makdisi’s self-reflexivity reveals awareness that her sense of alienation is a result of her particular social-circumstances and may not be shared by other Arab women. The alternative histories that she unearths reveal that education played an integral role in this process. She traces the roots of her cultural, social and historical dispossession to the Victorian cult of domesticity perpetuated by the missionaries. To demonstrate this, she inserts copies of detailed transcripts from the nineteenth century Syrian schoolgirls’ curriculum and lengthy excerpts from school reports. These include long lists detailing numerous kinds of needlework. Her research reveals that the curricula were designed to cultivate a particular feminine subjectivity that was in effect alien to the social, economic and political realities of Palestine and the region. She observes:

What fascinated me most of all in the lists was the lack of any exterior reality. The real world, the outside world of politics, empire, conflict,
resistance, social and economic transformation, was banished from this inner, segregated, rarefied atmosphere inhabited exclusively by highly educated girls. Women’s place in life as taught to Teta lay in an alternative, densely constructed and organized space entirely separate from the world. Learning, however elaborate and sophisticated, was not meant to be a liberating path to the outside world, nor a means by which women were to achieve equality with men, but a refinement, an elevation, a kind of exquisite adornment, a way to make them better wives and mothers, and thus only indirectly affect society. (Teta 186)

These observations validate her own sense of alienation and situate her on a trajectory begun with her grandmother’s education:

I was taught that the world outside the ken of domestic life did not belong to me, or I to it. The world was not mine to create or shape. Somehow, I do not know exactly how, I was taught that I was outside history. My function, I was taught, was merely to deal, graciously and without complaints, with whatever happened; to provide shelter, comfort and hospitality no matter what the circumstances. But the normal function of the outside world remained a mystery, and a terrible separation and alienation from it grew up within me. (Teta 65)

This terrible sense of discomfort or “unhomeliness” reflects a subjectivity that is at odds with the wider world and unable to validate a position within it. Later in the book Makdisi adds that her education as a “modern” woman taught her nothing of significance (Teta 116) and that she felt that she was in a “a fog of directionless, automatic motion” (Teta 115). This education did not help her understand her social world and had inadvertently left her feeling ideologically and politically dissociated and disconnected.
Like Soueif, Makdisi traces this sense of alienation to an insidious form of colonialism perpetuated through pedagogical institutions established by the colonising forces in the Levant. Curricula and language of instruction oriented students towards the West, its values, customs and traditions. The curricula provided by the missionaries and later the imperialists moulded students into subjects that were alienated from their own homelands and cultures. Instead of learning about traditional Palestinian embroidery, its symbolism and importance as a cultural language, Teta learnt European embroidery and European traditions, and Mother sang English ditties instead of Arab songs, aspired to see the places in England that she read about, and chose names from English literature and popular culture for her children. Makdisi exposes the empty rhetoric of enlightenment promulgated by the missionaries. Their claims that Arab women lived in “darkness” and “degradation” for instance (Teta 187), contrast sharply with the reality of the social context where Arab Muslim women were afforded more rights than their counterparts in England. She reveals that where women in England and America were only allowed to inherit property after the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870, Muslim women had always kept control of their finances according to Sharia law. The empty rhetoric behind the liberatory pedagogy of the missionaries is parodied through the change in mode of dress adopted by the Arab women. Makdisi quotes an article published by Mrs Bowen-Thompson, founder of the British Syrian schools in which she applauds a well dressed young lady in a “plain lilac dress, fastened up to the throat” sitting next to another sister dutifully cutting out garments from cloth for her other sisters who lay about reclining on a divan (Teta 189). The contrast is stark enough for the reader, but emphasised by Makdisi’s authorial commentary when she observes a “degree of freedom and
confidence” rather than “degradation and neglect” in the women who lie on the divan and instead a “contraction, a diminution, a repression” in the other women dressed in their severe attire (Teta 190). The narrative reveals that the curricula had the effect of limiting the potential of the Arab girls who were schooled in it. Teta’s education for instance, was a wholesale adoption of English curricula that did not consider nor reflect the social realities in the region, which were vastly different to that of the women in England. Where the education provided by Islamic schools was premised on the fact that the improvement of the nation rested on the education of its women, Teta’s education omitted the narratives of resistance, empire and conflict that were a more accurate reflection of her world, but moulded her instead to European conceptions of wife and mother.

The introduction of this form of schooling strengthened the imperial project while it eroded the position and power of Arab women. To support this assertion, Makdisi includes information she finds from the Missionary Review of the World dated October 1878 that overtly acknowledges the role of pedagogy in the imperial project. In this article, the reason to conduct education in English rather than Arabic is revealed for its imperialist motivations, as language “helps to conquer and assimilate and transform, more, even than battles and treaties” (Teta 153). The elimination of texts in Arabic meant that the Arab intellectual tradition was removed from transmission in those schools and that Arabs would come to be represented to themselves through Western sources. She writes that in the English imperial schools that she attended, Arab history, literature and culture were taught through T. E. Lawrence’s Seven Pillars of Wisdom. Arab girls like her learnt about Arab history, culture, politics and society through definitive texts like Lawrence’s and not through Arab scholars. Lawrence’s novel paints a romantic
picture of the Arabs and their revolt against the British. Immersed with the Arabs as “one of them” Lawrence was presumed to possess expert knowledge about the Arabs from an insider’s perspective. Later, immortalised in movie form, the kefiya-clad figure of Peter O’Toole as Lawrence of Arabia continued to entrance generations of viewers through its narrative of the Arab revolt. However, Lawrence’s text is an Orientalist text that “symbolises the struggle, first, to stimulate the Orient (lifeless, timeless, forceless) into movement; second, to impose upon that movement an essentially Western shape; third, to contain the new and aroused Orient in a personal vision, whose retrospective mode includes a powerful sense of failure and betrayal” (Said, Orientalism 241). These constructs perpetuate the West’s intellectual and cultural hegemony over Arabs. By reading Arabs through Eurocentric paradigms, girls like Makdisi internalised the Orientalist stereotypes represented.

Makdisi reveals that the paradigms imparted through the Western-oriented education system reinforced her sense of difference from her Arab inheritance and her matrilineage. For example, she writes of rediscovering the histories and stories of Arab feminists once she ceased reading them through Eurocentric lenses. She acknowledges that she had been taught to think about the activism of well-known female Arab political activists Huda Shaarawi and Anbara Salam “in the context of their religion, rather than their class or personal circumstance and temperament” (Teta 208). Her self-reflexivity reveals that she had been taught to read Arab women through paradigms that reproduced a hegemonic discourse about third world women through analytical categories of interest to the West such as religion, culture and tradition. These reinforced the West’s difference from Arabs, and are used to demonstrate Arab backwardness and difference (Mohanty,
“Under” 70-71). Researching Salam and Shaarawi reveals the disparity between her knowledge of history compared to other women who went through an Arab and Islamic-centric educational system. The reader is led to Makdisi’s realisation that the missionary educational systems had the more sinister effect of creating a “cultural schism between these students and those who took a different road to modernity (Teta 171).

The effect of the three interlinked stories is to expose a trajectory of increasing alienation. Makdisi’s education, like that of her grandmother’s was oriented towards the West. Girls in the missionary schools during Teta’s time engaged in nationalist politics despite the admonishments of their teachers. In contrast, in the 1970s while women in the Arab countries mobilised through strikes and other actions for the liberation of Palestine, Makdisi protested against the serving up of white meals while attending Vassar College in America. Clearly, the granddaughter’s transformation and alienation is more complete. The insidious work of Orientalist thinking had taken root and the distinctions between Orient and Occident became deeper and harder (Said, Orientalism 42). Makdisi’s sense of alienation from society, other women and ambivalence about her own position generally suggest that she had internalised much of these distinctions and begun to reproduce them herself. She had applied more contemporary, Westernised views of self and agency to her foremothers. Her own lack of interest indicates that she had internalised certain assumptions about them and saw no need for further query, she had indeed looked at Arab women, as Mohanty would suggest, through Western eyes.
Adjusting the frame: appreciating invisible and visible feminisms

The project of tracing her foremothers’ lives forces Makdisi to reassess the paradigms that she had used on them. This is clearly brought out through the narrative tensions between Makdisi’s representations of Teta as isolated and disengaged modern woman and her mother’s memory of Teta as being a much-loved, socially respected member of the community who was “looked up to and admired” (Teta 250). Makdisi draws on Mother’s reminiscences of being laughed at and lonely and of being thought of as different as proof that Teta’s modernity was isolating. However, in another place in her memoir, Mother writes that many people in the community wanted their daughters to “become a lady like Im Munir” (Teta 252). In her quest to paint Teta’s modernity as isolating, Makdisi fails to recognise that this social ambivalence was characteristic of the way in which villagers in Mount Lebanon reacted to returning migrants from the mahjar and to the innovations and new ways of life that they introduced (Khater 117). Makdisi’s reading of Teta sharply contrasts with that of her Mother’s: where Mother writes that Teta “didn’t care” for the flowers (Teta 244), suggesting that was a personal preference, Makdisi writes in stronger terms that Teta “was ignorant of – or at least ignored – the countryside, and the trees and the plants that grew there. She was ignorant of – or at least turned her back on – the customs, weddings and funerals and other celebrations of the native Orthodox Church.” Then there is the damning conclusion that Teta was “inwardly estranged from much of what was going on about her” (Teta 251). The narrative tensions strongly suggest that each woman has applied a different frame of reference to assess Teta. The author’s self-reflexivity again states a new awareness: that the obsession with assessing Teta through the label “modern” as defined normatively has been a severely limiting exercise.
Here, Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke’s work on feminism in Egypt is insightful because it reveals some of the limitations of Western feminism. Badran suggests that the concepts of visible and invisible feminisms provide a more useful framework to think about feminism in Egypt than that provided by Western feminism. Western feminism tends to locate feminine agency within the public sphere. As a result, alternative modes of agency that do not conform to this model are undermined. The more “discrete” nature of invisible feminism rescues it from being understood as an “exclusively public and explicit phenomenon and provides an analytic framework within which to locate and explain the more comprehensive feminist historical experience” (xviii). Makdisi’s reflections suggest that she had come to assess her foremothers through this lens. For example though she acknowledges that women’s civil movements were active in Palestine, she does not include Teta as a politically aware individual:

Teta herself, however, did not participate in any of these activities. She was too involved with her domestic and pastoral duties, too busy being the ultimate wife and mother to spare any time to the public domain. The only political comment I remember her making was when she recounted how she had boycotted a European Jewish dressmaker, whom she had earlier patronized, when she became aware of Jewish intentions in Palestine. *(Teta 227)*

What Makdisi fails to see is that private acts of resistance such as the example quoted above indicate that Teta was politically engaged. Like her great-grandmother, Teta read Palestinian dailies like *Falastin* and *al-Carmel* and engaged in “serious discussions of the political and social issues of the day” with her mother Leila *(Teta 234).* In *The Nation and its “New” Women: The*
Palestinian Women’s Movement, 1920-1948, Ellen Fleischmann argued that Palestinian women’s activism during mandate era Palestine challenges conventional definitions of feminism. Fleischmann argued for the need to historicise women’s activism to enable different modes of activism to be validated. Her research revealed that even the work of bourgeois women who engaged in charitable, religious, or social organisations is demonstrative of forms of social activism (8). Her work re-evaluates the role of women in the political sphere and reveals how Westernised notions of feminism inhibit more incisive readings of these women’s lives and actions. Makdisi’s inability to recognise feminist agency in Teta and her mother indicates that she had inadvertently undermined the kind of agency that women and more specifically motherhood in that region demonstrated.

Makdisi’s inability to identify political engagement and agency in her foremothers reflects the Western tendency to locate feminist agency in public manifestations. This approach undermines readings of agency that do not reflect this model of feminism. For example, initially she believes: “political awareness, not to mention involvement, was almost entirely absent from our family existence” (Teta 62). She writes that political or historical events were not represented to [Teta] in terms that required her to deal with it discursively,” things were never explained, explicitly argued or discussed (Teta 64). This assumption reflects a gross undermining of the agency that is borne out of the specific culture of motherhood in her region. Her ignorance of this reflects her alienation from culture and society and an immersion in a Western-centric education and orientation. Research has shown that women in Palestine and Lebanon displayed agency through civil participation within the culture of motherhood. In times of
civil unrest, war and displacement, mothers presented their role as being integral to the survival of the nation and to political struggles. They performed a kind of “activist mothering” that was manifested in various activities that were accommodated within culturally prescribed roles (Peteet 103). Moreover, though referring to women’s agency during the first Intifada, Brinda Mehta reminds readers that Palestinian women were among the first Arab women to mobilise themselves politically and to “reevaluate their cultural roles [...] in which the qualities of care-taking and nurturing have taken on an explicitly political dimension to demonstrate their initiative in creating an alternative war ethic that converts marginality into resistance” (813). It was only after experiencing the Lebanese civil war as a mother with a young family did she come to realise that the realities of political engagement necessitated specific actions in the lived experience. The experience provided her with a “new vantage point as a war veteran” that enabled her to appreciate the immensity of her mother and Teta’s contribution as mothers during those times, not just in maintaining domesticity but in ensuring cultural continuity.

In this context, her childhood memory of the domestic haven, which was a shelter from the politics and the upheaval outside the domestic space, reveals that this normality itself functioned as a form of everyday resistance. First exiled from Palestine following the Israeli occupation, the family experience political and social turmoil in every subsequent home: Suez and the threat of war on Egypt, social revolution in Egypt and long years of the Lebanese Civil War. Through all

47The role of mothers as political agents in Palestine and Lebanon is discussed in Zaatari 54-58 and Mehta 811-21.
of this, the events that interrupted their lives were “presented as vicissitudes that interrupted the natural course of things and had to be dealt with domestically” (Teta 64). Her own experiences enable a reassessment of the limited view of her forebears: “we had minimised the sapping, breaking effect that events had on them. We did not understand how much strength they had. We did not credit them enough with their survival and ours, with what they had done to make life quite simply continue, nor did we understand the inner price they had paid” (Teta 11).

She comes to appreciate a female heritage that is borne out of specific socio-political conditions. The reality was “packing under stress, leaving behind what had to be left and taking with you what was necessary; taking care of the younger children, silencing their fears and wiping their tears, finding food under curfew, cooking with what was left in the pantry when you couldn’t go out, and so on” (Teta 64). For this family who is constantly both literally and figuratively unhomed, a form of resistance to a life of constant upheaval lies in stemming the disintegration at the threshold of the household. Motherhood under fire in this context enacts a form of resilience and resistance. Similarly Makdisi is able to interpret the religiosity with which her mother maintained relationships with the family as they scattered across the world as a more contemporary manifestation of the process through which life, community and cultural production was sustained by both Teta and her mother in their lifetimes, and in the context of migration and diaspora. For a society experiencing so much displacement, the personal and familial nurturing provided by mothers in this context extended to a cultural nurturing that ensured cultural and political survival that was integral to cultural continuity.

Makdisi’s myopic reading of Teta’s “modernity” undermines her role as an
active agent who negotiated cultural production. Mother’s reminiscences show that Teta was not ignorant of customs and traditions. On the contrary, they indicate that she allowed the children to go with Halimeh the maid to attend village festivities, weddings and henna days, and on one instance at least, coaxed her husband until he allowed the children to attend the Orthodox Easter feasts (Teta 248). Mother says they never went to these things “with their parents” (Teta 248).

By allowing and encouraging the children to go with Halimeh, Teta actively encouraged this connection with the land, the customs and local village communities. As the Baptist Minister’s wife, Teta’s role was to support her husband’s new venture. Shukri Musa Teta’s husband, already a Protestant Minister, “returned to Palestine in 1910, transformed by his experiences abroad” and introduced the Baptist sect to Lebanon (Teta 219). As the dutiful wife, Teta was his first convert and became heavily involved in her husband’s new venture in setting up the Church. Fouad Khater argues that women were as instrumental in consolidating and introducing modern ways into the local contexts. By supporting her husband’s new venture Teta fulfilled the demands required of her as a dutiful wife in support of the patriarchy. This aspect of her role may have required her to eschew Orthodox festivals and other traditional village festivities on religious grounds. As a joint administrator of the growing Church, Teta’s education in the mission schools proved useful, she completed the accounts, taught at the schools, was fluent in English and sang in the choir. As the dutiful wife she was a model modern Pastor’s wife. However, Teta’s insistence on Halimeh being allowed to take the children with her to village festivities and to learn about the land shows that she valued and recognised this aspect of her children’s education and put strategies in place to mitigate against the loss of these traditions. Entrusting this to
Halimeh enabled her to safeguard her children’s connections with the land but did not compromise the integrity of her role as the model modern Pastor’s wife. This process enabled both grandparents but particularly Teta, to incorporate new modes of femininity manifested in modern domestic processes whilst protecting and reinforcing the patriarchy. Teta was not “inwardly estranged” from her social context, instead, she appears to have carefully planned and anticipated both private and public acts of resistance and compliance to achieve fulfillment. Teta actively incorporated modernity by pushing the boundaries of existing cultural frameworks and was not merely a passive agent experiencing the effects of modernity.

Similarly, through the example of Mother’s marriage Makdisi finds another example of women negotiating cultural change by gently but firmly pushing boundaries. Makdisi quotes lengthy passages from Mother’s diary to indicate her ambivalence in giving up her education and independence to marry Wadie Said. The narrative itself holds contradictions: Mother’s diary writes “in Arabic and in our tradition it is my destiny” (Teta 297), yet, within this role, she stages her rebellion by removing the word “obey” from the wedding vows without the groom’s consent. These explorations along the axes of domestic spaces, marriage, family and community reveal how these women charted the modern life that the author was to inherit through the “small, hidden, processes of everyday life” (Teta 208). At every stage “a kind of cultural conservatism is blended with cultural adventurism” (Teta 209). Makdisi reveals that her foremothers pragmatically negotiated culture, tradition and the new practices that they were exposed to within the social and gender requirements of their role. Fleischmann urges readers to remember women’s intuitive understanding of what they could achieve: “if they did not advocate ‘feminism’ as we define it, they acted it in a
way that conformed to their own notions of how far they could go and effect changes” (209).

This pragmatism reveals a tension between the discourses about Arab women proffered by feminist paradigms and the lived reality, the effect of which is to urge greater critical awareness and engagement with these discourses rather than blind application. This is very clearly demonstrated through Makdisi’s engagement with the politics of dress. The West is obsessed with the practice of veiling, headscarves and hijab because these symbolise the “backwardness” of the East and the need for women to be rescued from oppressive regimes. As a result, discourses on the veil are extensive and designate the veil as a political symbol that is appropriated. It has the ability to embody widely contradictory meaning: it is seen as empowering, disempowering, a sign of oppression and liberation.  

Makdisi contextualises the veil and situates the discourse away from politics and back into cultural practice. She writes that the practice of wearing a headcovering is common to both Arab men and women in the region regardless of whether they are Christian, Muslim or Jewish. She traces how her ancestors complied with the social mores by adapting them with the fashion. Her great-grandmother relinquished the black habara of Galilee (the long black cloak that was worn over the head and covered the body) but retained the practice of head covering. Similarly, Teta replaced her black silk scarf or woollen shawl with first a hat then finally a black velvet turban. Earlier, Teta’s mother Leila had incorporated Western elements into her “native costume” (Teta 165). A photograph depicts her

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48 For a sampling of literature on discourses on the veil, see Abu-Odeh 29-35; El-Giundi; and Majid, Unveiling 110-17.
in an austere Victorian dress with local Syrian embroidery, and her hair is covered by a short mandeel decorated with an oya (fringe), a head covering typical of women in the region. These mundane explanations contrast with a more famous example that is celebrated by Western feminism. In this example, Western feminists read Huda Shaarawi’s public removal of her veil as she disembarked at Cairo railway station in 1923 as a sign of agency. In context, Shaarawi’s act was not as outrageous as Western feminists have made it to be, as the many social and traditional meanings of the veil are not accounted for in this explanation. In a similar vein, the author cautions against reading too much significance into the actions of her foremothers in choosing their dress by noting the banality of the women’s choices. She writes that her great-grandmother might simply have relinquished her headscarf on a day because she could not find her pins and was in hurry. The banality of this insight draws attention to the danger of looking for the wrong signs, of looking in the wrong places, and of letting received paradigms based on Western markers of feminist agency determine our frame of reference as readers. Clearly, as Makdisi reveals, these paradigms create difference that supports the hegemony of the West.

The tensions exposed in the narrative reveal that the analytical tools used by the author differ from those used by her foremothers and are inadequate to measure them with. This revelation, brought out through the complex dialogic operation of the disparities in memory, representation and history leads the reader to Makdisi’s conclusion:

Somehow, over the decades, I had absorbed the notion that the new and the modern had brought with them success and happiness, especially for women. Yet now I felt excluded from these improvements, and could not help but wonder, as I compared my life with my mother’s and
grandmother's, in what way mine was better. I began to see the much-trumpeted advancement of women as a fiction. In this attitude of mine lay hidden deep misapprehensions and misunderstandings of modernity and the social life of women in our part of the world, and even of our personal lives. (Teta 10)

The idea of having "absorbed" particular notions of modernity has led her to misunderstand how it is experienced and translated by women in her part of the world. Her difficulty in evaluating the agency of her foremothers according to this schema reflects the deep definitional challenges that Said alluded to in Orientalism: "Notions as modernity, enlightenment and democracy are by no means simple and agreed upon concepts that one does or does not find, like Easter eggs in the living-room" (xiv). Makdisi's text reveals the imperative for a more nuanced understanding of the experience of modernity that allows for the specifics of socio-historical events and gender subjectivities to be considered. The author's endeavour to determine in what way her life was better than her foremothers reveals the vacuity of the project because it decontextualises all of them. The slipperiness of the terminology "tradition" or "modern" is exposed to show how binary distinctions like these contribute to a sense of alterity predicated on differences that are easily overcome by looking for solidarity and similarities elsewhere rather than on superficial markers.

Another look at cosmopolitan, urban life

One of the ways in which Makdisi unsettles the teleology of modernity is by showing how increasing urbanisation has led to increasingly demarcated gender roles and greater restrictions for women. The comparison across generations
enabled by the contrast in the stories of the three women show that the more urbanised and “modern” the women become, the less freedom they actually experienced. Teta for instance, was never actually separated from her community and could incorporate new forms of femininity whilst remaining deeply connected to her community. Mother’s move to urban Cairo upon marriage meant that she was cut off from family and community and plunged into a new set of relationships. The nuclear family’s isolation was intensified by “insuperable” class barriers that eroded traditional relationships (Teta 68). With the nuclear family, forms of femininity are shaped less by broader communal and family relationships and more by the immediate family and spousal relationships. Najla Hamadeh argues for greater scrutiny of the implications of this model on women in the Arab world because it reinforces a form of urban patriarchy. She argues that urban patriarchy and its focus on the nuclear family has the potential to be a more oppressive form of patriarchy as women are separated from their wider community or tribe networks and reliant on civil society and their husbands for protection. The rise of urban patriarchy is facilitated by physical displacement from rural communities. Hamadeh warns that the urban, nuclear family, its valorisation of Western ideas and the impact on Arab women’s happiness and status must be considered (170). For example, Makdisi writes that the imperative to embrace modernity and its outward markers such as “hygiene,” resulted in both Teta and Mother incorporating “new, elaborate and needless domestic procedures” (Teta 231-32). Mother indulged her husband’s love of new appliances and gadgets into her domestic routine despite the fact that gadgets such as waffle and ice-cream makers required more time in the kitchen and created more work for her. As dutiful wives, both Teta and Mother adopted these “modern” ideas and gadgets
because it buttressed their husbands’ reputation as modern and adventurous. They incorporated these appliances and practices into existing gender roles. Eventually, this is to take its toll as Makdisi writes that for her, modernity was experienced as an endless round of duties arising from her professional and personal responsibilities as a woman, wife, mother and teacher. As a “modern” woman, she continued to be responsible for the “deadly work” involved in child-rearing, domestic duties and self-sacrifice, because it is what “society dictated” (Teta 387). Modernity, she writes with exasperation, had left her “thoroughly worn out” (Teta 10). Consequently, the author’s ambivalence about her own modernity questions and challenges its valorisation. The intricate layering of the stories of the three women reveals increasing separation between men’s and women’s spheres, exacerbated by the introduction of modern implements, gadgets and domestic processes.

Makdisi’s stories also reveal that the teleology to modernity taken by the women in her family led to an increasing separation and alienation from Arab culture. The contrast between Makdisi’s childhood, of attending the opera, reading the English classics, watching American television and movies with that of Mother and Teta’s reveals that hers was most divorced from Arab culture:

By the time I came to consciousness, the separating process, the alienation, which was so painful to her as a child had been completed, and a new kind of culture had been born. This was the culture I knew, the urban, middle-class, cosmopolitan, universalized culture, created by the synthesis between the specialised, the particular, the local, and that other more universal quality which today we call globalization. (Teta 251)

This urbanised, cosmopolitan culture fosters a sense of rootlessness and
disconnection that is contingent on the focus on individual rather than societal or community goals. Urbanisation for Arab women has been found to lead to increased dependence for emotional support on their husbands and the nuclear family rather than community. Furthermore, women’s increased identification with their role as wife rather than daughter leads to increased passivity and dependence (Hamadeh 163-173). This trajectory is evident through the discussion that has unfolded to this point.

Makdisi’s experience as a diasporic Palestinian, however, exacerbates the sense of rootlessness that follows from the disconnection from community and culture. Makdisi locates her identity firmly within that of Palestinian dispossession and disenfranchisement in the diaspora. She reflects on the “deep and irreversible transformations that have taken place in [her] family since the loss of Palestine, and the series of separations and scatterings which have resulted from its loss” (Teta 27). The loss of Jerusalem sunk “deep” into her being and results in the scattering of the family throughout the world (Teta 28). She writes that her identity is forged in exile, a realisation that since “1948 we have been outsiders” (Teta 31), or, as her famous brother Edward Said described it as a condition of being “out of place” (Ou 295). This overt sense of physical homelessness and exile takes on deeper undertones when the cultural disconnections become apparent. This is highlighted in the different childhood experiences of Mother and daughter. Against Makdisi’s urban upbringing is contrasted Mother’s experience of a deep connection to Palestinian land and culture. Makdisi recounts lengthy passages in Mother’s memoir about the Palestinian countryside, of learning about the wildflowers and herbs and shopping expeditions to large Palestinian towns like Haifa. These passages give Mother a deep connection to the land and affirm her
identity as a Palestinian. For instance, the task of drawing water as a child in Nazareth has added significance as: “the ‘ain [fountain] was the same place where the Virgin Mary used to draw water, and it was the only source of drinking water for the people of Nazareth” (Teta 247). Mother can reminisce about village festivities such as weddings and feast days that she used to attend with her maid Halimeh: “a real village wedding with singing, dancing and a night of henna [...] all sorts of old traditions, old songs and dabke [traditional dance].” (Teta 249). In contrast, Makdisi and her siblings live a lifestyle rooted in modern implements, a concrete urban setting, artificial environments, connections to class rather than community, and an education that is oriented towards the West. The contrast between Mother’s Palestinian girlhood and Makdisi’s urban childhood reinforces her family’s exilic state and the impact of alienation from culture, society and tradition. This loss comprises the human dimension of physical exile from the land. Its absence in her life and the transformations that have arisen because of this exilic state emphasise the enduring impact of exile. She suggests that the loss of Palestine framed her parents’ outlook and their ensuing emphasis on education and relationships: “with their backs to the wall after the loss of Palestine, my parents’ primary concern was to provide their children with a security based on relationships, morals and education rather than on more tangible material goods” (Teta 62). The exilic state reinforced the integrity of the nuclear family over larger communal and cultural bonds. This representation is characterised by a shrinking outlook and worldview, and not the expansiveness celebrated in the figure of the exile proposed by her brother Edward Said. In Makdisi’s rendering, exile leads towards a narrowing of mindset focused on survival, her figures of exile bear no resemblance to the celebrated figures of postcolonial exile.
The narrative reveals how a range of socio-political forces contributed to the entrenchment of Orientalist ideological frameworks that inadvertently created a sense of alterity between Arab women. Makdisi’s inclusion of the story about her paternal great-grandmother Teta Mariam is a clear example of this. The author discovers that Mariam Nakhle, her great-grandmother was known as a farissa, the term for an accomplished horsewoman (Teta 216). This news surprises her as she had only seen Mariam as an old, half-blind, strange and remote woman (Teta 216). Similarly, she had only known Teta as old, frail, widowed, and being in physical and emotional pain. To think of her otherwise was “deeply disorienting” (Teta 133). She was simply unable to imagine her as “a young, fertile woman with a life of her own” (Teta 133). These discoveries prompt her to reassess the way she has assimilated history:

What did this discovery say about my inheritance as an Arab woman?
What did it say about my lost status, my dispossession, my lost freedom?
And what did it say about ‘modernity’, and about the myths surrounding the genesis of this notion of ‘modernity’ that have so often led us astray? (Teta 216)

This rhetorical question engages the reader to reflect on the complex convergence of circumstances that have led the author to become estranged from her cultural and social inheritance. The narrative reveals that the value of her rediscoveries lies not so much in unearthing a very rich, Arab history which is alternate and complementary to that of the normative Western narratives, but more so of the value in a humanistic understanding of agency and location. The course of the project enables the author to understand that she had viewed her foremothers through Western eyes, and that an alternative frame of reference reveals a more
nuanced and dynamic picture. The encounters between Makdisi and Others or “strangers” and what has made her “strange” to others, is dependant on the assimilation and reproduction of specific ideological positions. In this case, being positioned as “modern” or “traditional” speaks for boundaries that are erected between Arab women. By making some Arab women strangers to other Arab women a false sense of solidarity is fostered with a transnational “modern” community. Makdisi’s unhomeliness reveals the tenuousness of this belonging and reignites the sense of community and solidarity with Arab women, and the inheritance that can be realised when these labels are discarded.

In the next part of this chapter, I will consider the experience of unhomeliness demonstrated in Diana Abu-Jaber’s book The Language of Baklava (2005). It is a memoir written from the perspective of the second-generation diasporic Arab-American and takes up the theme of the trajectory into the West. My reading will show how the author exploits the reader’s expectations of the popular form of the cookbook memoir to prompt for a different paradigm through which to view alterity. Abu-Jaber’s self-reflexivity also urges the reader towards a more humanistic acceptance of alterity that is centred on inclusiveness rather than the encoding of difference.
So you come from cooking? Food and eating as a way to process Otherness in *The Language of Baklava*

Memories give our lives their fullest shape, and eating together helps us to remember [...] My childhood was made up of stories [...] the stories were often in some way about food [...] and the food always turned out to be about something much larger: grace, difference, faith, love (Abu-Jaber, *The Language of Baklava* foreword)

Originally titled “The Logic of Baklava,” the title of Diana Abu-Jaber’s memoir was changed after an accidental slip by her publisher in referring to it as *The Language of Baklava*. This was fortuitous because the intended and the actual titles work dialogically to suggest the patterns and intentions behind the recipe-filled memoir. In an interview with <curledup.com>, Abu-Jaber suggests that she considers food as “a way of seeing and processing experience.” The experience she refers to is that of processing and representing identity: of being Arab-American, Arab and American. Abu-Jaber’s interest in the representation of Arab-American identity was already evident in her earlier novel *Arabian Jazz*, critically acclaimed as the first mainstream literary work to represent the Arab-American experience. Writing *The Language of Baklava* provided her with what she describes as the “process” of looking “right at the conundrum of being Arab-American. Arab and American” (*Language* 235). These tensions are wedded symbolically in the marriage of her parents: Pat, an American woman from a German-Irish Catholic family with no certain place of origin and Gus or Ghassan Abu-Jaber, also known as Bud, who can trace his family back a thousand years to a place in Jordan (*Language* 31). One is always looking to somewhere else for a
sense of home while the other is rooted in a deep sense of self and home; one is American while the other is Arab. In the memoir, she reflects that a grant application for a book set in both America and the Middle East based on characters that undergo “self-exciavation, recovery and reconciliation” was actually a veiled reference to her own need for a process to understand her identity.

In *The Language of Baklava*, Abu-Jaber uses her character’s relationship to food as a metaphor to convey the process of reworking the discourses that define Otherness. Readers familiar with her earlier work will recognise that this technique is used in *Crescent* and *Arabian Jazz*. In fact, the large number of recipes accumulated during the research for *Crescent* inspired her to think about the evocativeness and suggestiveness of food. Her cache of recipes and stories was given to her by many people during research for the book and reminded her of her own “joyously gathered and prepared meals.” As a result, *The Language of Baklava* is narrated through a series of meal-centred stories that recounts her life from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. The centrepiece of each chapter revolves around eating or preparing food. As she explains in the foreword, the memories have been “honned” and “altered” to draw out their “emotional core.” Each chapter thus represents an examination of the ways in which identity is constructed by self and Others in the context where this identity is transcribed by the markers of diaspora and ethnicity.

In ethnic writing, food is often used to convey the sense of loss, love,
memory and other tensions associated with displacement and marginalisation. Critics drawing on the metaphor of food have argued that the preparation, consumption, sensuality and power of food convey ideas of home and serves as a medium through which identity is resolved and communicated. Jaber’s memoir contributes to a growing genre of life writing that draws on the relationship between food and memory. These memoirs invariably deal with a sense of loss and dislocation experienced personally, culturally or geographically. The huge variances in how food and memory is inflected in this genre reflects the variety of ways that this metaphor can be evoked, including cookbook-memoirs, memoirs with recipes, culinary memoirs, collective-memory cookbooks or nostalgia cookbooks (Bardenstein 357). In her work on Middle-Eastern cookbook memoirs, Carol Bardenstein argues that the memoirs reveal interesting ways in which memory and collective identity are shaped in dislocation. Bardenstein’s readings show how complex identity reconfigurations inflected by class, gender and ethnic affiliations experienced as a result of physical displacement are manifested in the cookbook memoirs. Her careful and insightful analysis of food-knowledge transmission demonstrates how the language of food problematises some accepted precepts in diaspora studies including the effect of exile and displacement on cultural transmission. Food preparation and recipes feature in anthologies and work by Arab authors, including the groundbreaking Food for our Grandmothers: An Anthology by Arab-American authors edited by Joanna Kadi and published in 1994, this anthology is a collection of essays, poems, and recipes by Arab-

49 For a sampling of the extensive literature available on this topic, see Gunew “Introduction” 227-36; Loichot 94-111; Innes; and van Gelder.
50 This is a huge genre of work, for a sampling, see Allende; Schami and Fadel; Rossant; and Shihab.
American and Arab-Canadian feminists. The collection was groundbreaking as it was the first anthology to articulate a complex range of Arab women’s experience in the diaspora. This anthology enriched narratives about Arab women in diaspora by addressing sexuality and gender issues in relation to displacement and ethnicity. A common Arabic food embodies the theme of each section, as does a recipe using that food. The title evokes the need to nurture and reconnect with ancestors and community by making an “appropriate” offering (xx). The recipes and stories in this book engage a wider non-Arab community by enticing it to recreate, experience and establish a sense of community with the authors, and through them, a wider Arab community. Similarly, Abu-Jaber writes of the hope that her memoir will inspire others to share their stories. This in turn will create a greater repository of narratives through which to validate the lived experience of similarly displaced individuals.

The author uses the language of food to explore boundary issues in intercultural exchanges. Understanding the language of food reveals ways through which the self in displacement finds healing, expresses resistance and finds constructive means to negotiate displacement. Anthropologists have confirmed that as material culture, the rules around food and its consumption can signify how a community defines itself against Others. Structuralist anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss argued “the cooking of a society is a language in which it unconsciously translates its structure” (35). As an extension of this, Mary Douglas suggests instead a more nuanced, relativist interpretation that reflects the maintenance of boundaries between groups. She argues “the message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries.” “Food categories,” she suggested, “encode
social events" (36). If, as Douglas suggests, the language of food communicates important information about boundaries then it also reflects the complex boundary processes that diasporic individuals engage in. These anthropological perspectives are useful because they provide another lens through which to understand the kind of boundary work that occurs when subjects define and redefine themselves in the context of cultural contact. They are useful to reflect on hybridity and unhomeliness as processes of boundary maintenance. The concept of the “unhomely” resonates with diaspora because its attention to “home” suggests the tensions that arise when making home in a different place. As mentioned, postcolonial critics such as Hall, Gilroy and Bhabha suggest “hybridity” as a way to transcend essentialised identities and offer possibilities for greater inclusion.

The hybrid status is achieved when boundaries are reconfigured to provide liberating rather than restraining subject positions. This fluidity and inclusiveness makes this concept foundational in discourses of multiculturalism and globalisation because the focus on “becoming, hybridity and in-betweenness” is more desirable than essential, determined subjectivities (Ahmed, Strange 13).

However, as Ahmed argues, if the figure of the stranger is inadvertently reproduced in the fetishisation of hybridity, then in the process it is inadvertently “unhomed.” Discourses about food consumption reflect this paradox. Often used as an indication of the success of multiculturalism and globalisation, as a symbol, food is fraught with definitional problems: it is never just a benign sign because the consumption and commodification of food can conceal deeply entrenched assumptions about culture and power. In Baklava, the author draws on the

51 For discussions that elaborate on the assumptions about power embedded within food
language of food as a creative technique through which to explore the tensions
experienced when communities interact because food can encode the way these
communities maintain and manage boundaries. The language of food is used to
understand and demonstrate how the anxieties that accompany the “unhomeliness”
of simultaneously being of and not of either “homeland” or “newland” are
negotiated and a sense of alterity constructed.

With this in mind, Abu-Jaber’s distinction between the people who “come
from cooking” and those that do not, reflected in the contrast between the
immigrant’s relationship to food, and that of the white Americans is a metaphor
that reverses the Othering process when it groups immigrants to the exclusion of
white Americans. This excerpt conveys the sense of community that is
experienced by “those who come from cooking:”

Well, all I can say is I wish her big chief father were here,” Gram
confides to Chen, tipping her chin at me. “That man, he thinks he’s the
alpha and the omega when it comes to dinner. Fuss, fuss, fuss, nothing’s
good enough, nothing’s right.” [...] Only the little onions, the itty-bitty
cucumbers, only the meat from his butcher,” Gram minces. “Only this
and that sort of rice. Oh, for the love of Pete, the rice! Only a certain kind
of rice, washed, dried, oiled, sprinkled with ground lamb, and fancy pine
nuts. He spends more time on his rice than women spend on their hair. Chen glances at
me again when Gram mentions the rice. “So you come from cooking,” he says. “I
thought this when I see you eat.” (Language 102-03)

consumption and commodification, see Fish 378; Friedensohn 171; Gunew “Introduction” 227;
and Heldke 175. Here, Ghassan Hage’s discussion of how white multiculturalism exploits ethnics
through their food and other attributes in order to entrench their position of cultural and social
power is also illuminating, see Hage 118-137.
Gram does not realise that the Chinese attention to their cuisine reflects the same
detail that the author’s father does when he insists on “only the little onions, the
itty-bitty cucumbers, only the meat from his butcher” (Language 102). She does
not realise that these behaviours are only strange because they are strange to her
and not to Chen, Diana or Gus. Gram’s insistence on Gus’s unnatural attention to
food delineates her from Gus, her granddaughter and the Chinese waiter. In the
novel, immigrant food is luscious, rich, abundant and unprocessed while American
food is in limited quantities, packaged, processed and frozen. The immigrants’
love of food marks them as different from their American neighbours. For
example, at school, the American girls are always on diet and permanently hungry
but prefer to discard their sandwiches than eat them. The immigrant girls on the
other hand are never on diet, their lunchboxes exude the scent of garlic, fried
onions and tomatoes and they eat “pierogi, pelmeni, doro wat, teriyaki, kielbasas
and borscht” (Language 160). On the one hand it can be argued that the
description of ethnic food with difficult to pronounce names reflects the Otherness
of the communities that eat and produce this food and is a form of self-
Orientalising. Nonetheless, the use of transliterated names for these dishes resists
assimilation by its grounding in cultural specificity. Furthermore, the inclusion of
a range of foreign names collectively as opposed to the “sandwiches” of the
American girls reverses the normative generalisation of Otherness that usually
includes ethnic communities together under broad categories such as Orientals. It
also creates a sense of collective belonging between these ethnic groups rendering
them simultaneously in-place with the people who come from cooking, as opposed
to the people “who have no tongues and no noses” (Language 103). The
delineation of those who come from cooking from those who do not situates the
“ethnic” people as relating to each other rather than being defined as Other in terms of their relationship to the dominant “non-ethnic” population. This recuperates a sense of valid subjectivity and asserts an understanding of inclusivity amongst otherwise marginalised ethnic communities. It is a kind of resistance to assimilation with the dominant American culture and turning towards “marginalised” others for a sense of community.

“Eating is a form of listening”: defining Otherness through food and eating

‘Who am I?’ she snaps. ‘I am America, Israel, England! What am I doing?’ She waits another long moment, her eyes shining. ‘I’m shutting up and listening.’ She draws the last word out so it hisses through the air.

“I am the presidents, the kings, the prime ministers, the highs and the mighties – L-I-S-T-E-N!’ […] ‘The woman who made the baklava has something to say to you! Voilà. You see? Now what am I doing?’ She picks up an imaginary plate and takes an invisible bite. Then she closes her eyes and smiles and says, ‘Mmm […] that’s such a delicious plate of Arabic-Jordanian-Lebanese-Palestinian baklawa. Thank you so much for sharing it with us! Please will you come to our home now and have some of our food?’ (Language 190)

Anthropologists argue for the powerful symbology of food to create and maintain social relationships. How food is shared, refused or rejected through fasting encodes powerful social messages (Counihan and van Esterik 3). The feast itself

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52 The quote is from Abu-Jaber, Language 191.
"is a locus for suspending the tensions between ‘us’ and ‘them’" (Gunew, “Introduction” 233). During a feast, the welcoming of guests suspends hostilities and reduces the distinction between guest and host (Pitt-Rivers, qtd in Gunew, “Introduction” 233). A powerful example of this is metaphorically demonstrated through Aunt Aya’s kitchen dramatization of an alternative Middle East peace process quoted above. In this example, Aunt Aya muses that the ability of the Western superpowers to correctly name the dish that the Arab woman has prepared for them indicates their increased understanding of Arabs and a willingness to work towards peace. By accepting the food of the Arab woman and eating it, they are able to correctly name the baklava that was previously represented to them as baklava, the Greek name for the dish. Encoded in this story is the challenge of Arab self-representation. This is a difficult magic to administer, and Aunt Aya explains the necessity of perseverance: “I looked, I tasted, I spoke kindly and truthfully. I invited. You know what else? I keep doing it. I don’t stop if it doesn’t work on the first or second or third try. And like that! She snaps the apron from the chair into the air, leaving a poof of flour like a wish. ‘There is your peace.’” (Language 190). If the invitation to feast and the ensuing commensality provides the metaphor, then peace is achieved in the region when there is a willingness to transcend boundaries.

The process of offering and receiving food enables complex messages about difference to be communicated in a way that enables boundaries to be negotiated and regulated. The author reveals how social relationships between diasporic Arabs, Americans, Jordanians and Arab-Americans are enacted through the sharing and refusal of food. Gus’s public barbecues, food parcels to his children’s school teachers, friends, and neighbours are attempts to encourage
commensality and reduce alterity. However, his attempts to encourage a sense of community with his neighbours with the barbeque on the front lawn leave him feeling bewildered because it is greeted with hostility. The American neighbours reject the offer of food and question the appropriateness of the barbeque on the front lawn. Their rejection is an attempt to situate Gus’s shish kabob and baba ghanoush as unknown “burning things” and Gus and his family as strange, out of place and the source of “trouble” (Language 80). These behaviours signal the kind of estrangement that Ahmed discusses when she argues that even in the multicultural environment, our response to strangers is predicated upon what it means to be “in place” (Strange 97). Gus’s family behavior in this instance is a visual cue that signals that they are not “in place.” The white neighbours’ admonishment of this behaviour indicates a deeper fear of the encroachment of Arab culture on their way of life. By rejecting the commensality offered by the Arab family, these White neighbours make a strong statement for assimilation into the American way of life instead. Arab culture is acceptable only when contained in the backyard of the house, not on public display. In contrast, the author narrates an incident in Jordan where Munira the Bedouin tries the pancakes that the author’s mother makes. Despite her initial apprehension Munira pronounces her approval: “okay, well, now that’s something a Bedouin could eat” (Language 38). The fear and apprehension of the unknown is removed because of her willingness to accept difference. This has a cumulative effect as more neighbours gather to eat the strange, dense, chewy pancakes, and supplement the feast with their own offerings of bread, eggs, tomatoes, yoghurt and salty cheese (Language 38). This feast eliminates inter-communal rivalries and fears and rejects alienation. Sadly, these examples heighten the reality that the family is welcomed in Jordan but
viewed with suspicion by white Americans in America. It is a sobering indication of the politicisation of Arab ethnicity in America.

The giving and receiving of food is also a way to emphasise difference. A good example occurs when Gus uses food to heighten the sense of alterity between himself and an American boy who comes to visit the author as a young girl. The scene that unfolds parodies Gus’s battle with “legions of invisible American cowboys” (Language 198). Gus serves Ray typically Arabic food with a tirade emphasising his daughter’s cultural difference: “so I don’t know why you come here, walking into my house and looking at my daughters” (Language 198). His lecture and the strange food are his form of an alienating offensive against Ray that is intended to emphasise his difference in values from Americans. The exchange is a test of the receiver’s response to this assertion of power, authority and difference but fails to elicit the desired restraint. Ray savours the food and later wants to know the names of the food he had eaten. His consumption of the food signals his rejection of the insuperable differences between himself and the Arab family, and a willingness to embrace this difference and learn about it. Paradoxically, this interaction also encodes Ray’s unwillingness to accept Gus’s authority over him. He eats the food “without anyone noticing” (Language 200). The power of this resistance does not escape the author either who learns through it “there are all sorts of things that can be done that don’t require anyone’s permission” (Language 200). Later, she and Ray hold hands without her father’s permission. The process of offering and receiving food enables complex messages about difference to be communicated in a way that enables boundaries to be negotiated and regulated. The unspoken exchanges facilitate interpersonal relationships and the establishment of solidarity.
Gus’s position of relative powerlessness in diaspora creates conditions that lead him to sometimes exploit his ethnicity to gain acceptance. For example, when he discovers Sister John’s interest in the Holy Land, he invites her to have dinner with the family to demonstrate his connection with it. Over a hearty Arabic dinner Gus stages an exoticised version of Jordan: “it’s where anyone who’s holy goes [...]. It’s true – Jesus, Moses, Muhammed. All of them guys, they’re over there somewhere around. They’re hanging around all over the place” (Language 27). In the ensuing weeks, Sister John is plied with more Arabic food. Sau-Ling Wong describes this kind of self-exploitation as “food pornography.” Wong argued that a kind of “food pornography” defined as an exploitative form of self-Orientalisation occurs when subjects reproduce the “exotic” nature of their foodways in order to gain acceptance in the dominant society. Wong writes:

In cultural terms [food pornography] translates to reifying perceived cultural differences and exaggerating one’s otherness in order to gain a foothold in a white-dominated social system [...] superficially, food pornography appears to be a promotion, rather than a vitiation or devaluation of one’s ethnicity. (55)

Gus’s over-emphasis on lampooning his ethnicity is a way to render himself in an acceptable manner to the dominant subject by exploiting its fetishisation of his difference. The process is rewarded as the author quickly becomes the Sister’s favourite student. However, this process has limited application: Gus is accepted as long as ethnic food and an association with the Holy Land define his Arab identity. The overt rejection of other behaviours such as the picnic on the front lawn reveals a deeper apprehension of and resistance to Arab culture and values. The Arabic Gus remains an unassimilable Other because of the ostensible threat to
American values that he poses. The ease with which superficial markers of his identity are separated from other aspects of his identity reveals the nature of this fetishism. To add to the pathos, Gus’s exploitation of his ethnicity to gain acceptance reveals his acknowledgement of his status as Other, and that this is inherently devalued in the eyes of the dominant culture, even though it professes an interest in him. Stranger fetishism persists because of a reluctance to consider the social relationships that are hidden by this process of fetishisation (Ahmed, Strange 5).

The social dynamics exposed through the relationships with food reveal the persistence of Orientalist attitudes that assert the assumed superiority of the white majority in the American context. At one level, the acceptance of the feast is a travesty of the meaning of commensality when the guest metaphorically consumes the host through what Lisa Heldke calls cultural food colonialism. For example Sister John’s table manners: “voluptuous little sounds of appreciation” symbolically represent the physicality of her consumption of the Arab Other (Language 26). There is no sense of shared community here, only a statement of power whereby the Arab is being consumed for her pleasure. Heldke suggests also that food colonialism manifests as a kind of adventurism in food motivated by the desire to have contact with and “somehow own an experience of – an exotic Other as a way of making [oneself] more interesting” (177). Sister’s consumption of Gus’s food is a purely self-serving exercise to satisfy her need to be close to the Biblical lands. Assumptions of white supremacy maintain a sense of difference with the ethnic Other. At a Chinese restaurant, Gram’s attitude towards the Chinese waiter reveals her sense of intellectual superiority. She makes no distinction between Japanese and Chinese people: “we don’t really like to make
these sorts of distinctions [...] we feel it’s more polite to call them Or-i-en-tals” (Language 105). She also claims to know everything about Chen the waiter even though she has no appreciation of his history or culture. In this respect, the waiter’s attempt to create a community with Gram when he replaces their order of egg foo yong for “real Chinese food” is misplaced (Language 101). Gram’s purported interest in Chinese culture reinforces her sense of difference from him and her sense of superiority. The pathos is heightened because Chen mistakenly assumes that Gram understands him. Chen’s statement that “every grain of rice is precious” is countered by Gram’s “just like during the Great Depression” (Language 105). The insidious hypocrisy in this is overt to the child Diana, who knows that Chen is unaware of the unequal relationship in operation, and of how to Gram he is nothing more than a plaything. For Gram, “Oriental” men are “not like real men at all” (Language 104). The author’s affinity with Chen is acute:

I am annoyed with Gram’s claim to understand. I imagine Chen being held prisoner by a Japanese soldier who offers him one grain of rice at a time, balanced on the tip of his flashing sword. I want to signal to Chen that it is I who senses his terrible pain. (Language 105)

The author’s identification with Chen problematises the stranger status that Gram has assigned him as in this taxonomy she would also be a stranger to her grandmother. Cognitively her identification with Chen rejects identification with Gram and her Orientalist attitudes.

The exotic Other is nebulous and is difficult to locate through the text. The author’s reversal of normative expectations of minority and majority cultures depicts the white Americans as strange and out of place. For example, Sister John’s “openly sensual display” of eating sets her apart as an unusual creature at
the dinner table. When righteous neighbours come to investigate the Abu-Jaber’s front lawn picnic in order to report their inappropriate behaviour, they are the ones who are “marooned and stateless” (Language 80). As the American neighbours reject the opportunity to suspend difference they become in this instance, the marginalised Other. They stand literally and metaphorically on the fringes of the Abu-Jaber property and its circle of belonging. Throughout the novel the white Americans are depicted as strange creatures and Other to the ethnic Arab, Polish, Italian or Chinese immigrants. The white Americans humanise the Abu-Jabers and their ethnic friends and appear to be abnormal themselves. In the narrative, the stereotype of the exotic ethnic Other is rendered ineffective when it brushes up against these other equally exotic creatures. Moreover, the insistent positioning of the ethnic as Other by their American counterparts makes transparent the futility of this process. This problematic representation enables the author to resist rendition of the book as a commodity that encourages the subjugation and fetishisation of the Other.

As the Other is not clearly defined, the book itself cannot be appropriated as a commodity that encourages food tourism. Extensive work on the proliferation of cookbook memoirs has shown that this kind of literature leads to colonialism through commodification because it thrives on the objectification and fetishisation of an exotic Other. In this book however, the recipes resist categorical descriptions and confirm that construction of the Other is an elusive and pointless process. The book is filled with both Jordanian and American recipes, a range

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53 For more information on culinary tourism, see Heldke and for a related discussion on food porn, see Brownlie et al 7-24; Wong 18-76.
which problematises the staging of essentialist identity because it stages and constructs identity difference and similarities with mainstream White Americans simultaneously. In this way, any sense of culinary tourism is interrupted because the Jordanian Arab recipes mingle with American ones. Furthermore, the author personalises each recipe by suggesting new ingredients or substitutes to denote her own separate identity: “if you really want to make the children happy, add pieces of chicken and substitute sliced carrot for the eggplant” (Language 132). In “I Yam what I Yam,” Anne Goldman suggests, “reproducing a recipe, like retelling a story, may be at once a cultural practice and autobiographical assertion” (172). Abu-Jaber maneuvers between the autobiographical “I” and the collective “we” as she personalises the recipes that have been handed down to her. Her eclectic selection of American and Jordanian recipes reflects her own lived experience, which is different to that of her parents and symbolically represented through her version of the recipe. Their inclusion in the book is an invitation to the reader to try them, to replicate the sensory experience of which she writes, to share and to listen. The reader cannot consume the exotic Other through either the narrative or its recipes because this exotic Other is elusive and undefined. In this book, the recipes stage a sense of both the exotic and the ordinary simultaneously.

To be both exotic and ordinary

Food in Jordan is better, much better for us because it’s real food. It sticks with you and doesn’t just evaporate [like American food] […] it’s full of jinns and bad omens – she can tell just by looking at us […]. She says we got here just in time! She says it’s going to take a little while longer for us to recover from being Americans. (Language 36)
The author’s musings on the transformatory and redeeming power of food for displaced people suggest that those misplaced spatially must negotiate the issue of corporeality. Gunew suggests “in the ‘ethnic’ or diasporic text, food traditionally functions to mark the memory of another kind of corporeality, of the body moving through a different daily repertoire of the senses” (Language 230). The need to sustain the “originary” identity in diaspora is best encapsulated by Gus’s attempts to regain lost corporeality as an Arab and as Jordanian Bedouin. The reader’s first impressions of Gus derive from a lovingly painted picture of a father at home in the kitchen, dressed in his undershirt, baggy shorts and sandals, sliding a side of lamb out of the refrigerator, then skewering chunks of meat, onion, and tomato. In the next chapter we see Bud crooning in Arabic to the frying liver and onions. He sings of missing loved ones but is missing no one in particular though his daughter writes that he misses the old country with an “ache in his blood” (Language 20). Gus is mostly depicted in relation to some part of the production or consumption of a feast: shish kabob, stuffed squash and vine leaves. On Saturdays and after a substantial home cooked breakfast, the family routinely heads to the homes of other relatives for more food and feasting – be it kibbeh at Professor Uncle Hal’s, stuffed squash at Businessman Uncle Danny’s or roast leg of lamb at Crazy Uncle Frankie’s (Language 5). This emphasis on the communality of feasting means that the community participates in rituals to recreate a communal corporeality that is important in transmitting cultural memory and enable a community in diaspora to maintain and develop their cultural identity. These acts and rituals of cooking reconnect Gus to rhythms and traditions that are ignored in the American household and provide a sense of rootedness in an otherwise tradition-less, globalised society. Most of the stories centre around large family gatherings,
eating together and hospitality. The elaborate feasting and attention to ritual resists assimilationist tendencies and affirms their ethnic identity, but more importantly enables Gus and his brothers and their families to recreate the corporeality of Arab identity as community.

At the same time, the impossibility of recuperating this loss undermines the concept of a fixed identity. Despite Gus’s attempts to cook Arabic food, Aunt Aya acknowledges that her brother is “eating the shadow of a memory. He cooks to remember, but the more he eats, the more he forgets” (Language 190). He thinks he’s cooking and eating Arabic food, but the ingredients are not Arabic as food itself cannot have an ethnicity. What he eats is American food cooked into a Jordanian recipe, and therefore the food he prepares is already an adulterated product that takes him further and further away from the real thing. The pathos in this is exemplified in the story of Mr Basilovich. Like the other immigrants in this memoir – the Chinese waiters, Mr and Mrs Manolo and Gus – all are united by a sense of loss. Even their children recognise the diasporic persona: “haunted. Sure, he’s Russian. He’s Jewish. But all of our fathers are haunted. Big deal” (Language 162). Each is haunted by the weight of memory that reminds them of their loss and haunted by the inability to remedy against that pain in the new country. Food is a way for all of them to access and inhabit that corporeality because the memory of other foodways drags to the fore the remembrance of an abandoned or lost corporeality (Gunew, “Introduction” 232). Gus and Mr Basilovich share a “kindred spirit” expressed in their mutual appreciation of the preparation of cabbage rolls, which must be “like a lady’s skin” (Language 164). The horror of being unable to inhabit the lost corporeality is evident when Mr Basilovich plunges into a deep depression after eating Gus’s stuffed cabbage rolls. He is
hospitalised but commits suicide when unattended. The memory evoked by the food heightens his loss because this can only be part of his imagination and not part of his current reality. The symbolism of this is drawn out in his drawer full of photographs of people he never talked about – a drawer full of memories bearing the physical weight of his pain. These immigrants are suspended between worlds, one that they have lost and the new one that they cannot possess and required to negotiate a dialectical tension: “the failure to find the identical charms of [the] first culture in this new one” coupled with “the failure to recognise the promises of his new country” (Language 102).

The access to alternative corporealities enabled through food further destabilises essentialist notions of identity. As a child, the author’s struggle between her American and Jordanian identities is remembered through taste. The experience of being in each has its own taste, America tastes of: “sugar, stone and chemicals,” while Jordan is: “the scent of mint in [her] parents’ garden,” and “the seeded crust of the bread, and the taste of dried yoghurt steeped in olive oil” (Language 136). The struggle over identity is metaphorically represented by the struggle to remember the different tastes and sensory perceptions. When in America she dreams of the scent of mint and understands this as a sign that she has “lost her sense of Jordan” (Language 136). Similarly, she registers the child’s fascination with the food served by her “real American” neighbours: instant food in aluminium tubs that her friends clearly relish but that tastes to her like burnt plastic. She believes that her inability to like American food is a result of having “somehow forgotten it” (Language 73). These tensions arise because it is simply impossible to expect that only one corporeality represents her identity. This is clearly illustrated in this example when Mother swiftly subverts Munira’s hold
over the author by reminding her of her American life with the mere suggestion of certain foods:

My mouth falls open; I’d forgotten about pancakes. In that instant I miss them unbearably and completely. It washes over me, all the foods I forgot I loved: pancakes, ice cream, hamburgers. (Bud takes us out for falafel and says these are Jordanian hamburgers. And even though I’ve eaten falafels back in the States and I know their smoky taste of cumin and sesame, I’m so hungry for the tastes of home that I’m willing to imagine that in Jordan they are transformed. But what a disappointment – they don’t taste like hamburgers at all.) Our breakfasts here are much the same as our breakfasts in America – cheese, bread, hard-boiled eggs, olives, tea. But at the moment there is nothing better than pancakes.

(Language 36)

The struggle is particularly fraught because Arab and American identities are experienced as oppositional and exclusive. As the memory of each place is vastly different, the child must actively “re-create” herself each time the family uproots itself. This jostling for space in her consciousness indicates the struggle over an implied cultural hierarchy regardless of which country she is in. To be in America and to be American, she knows she “must remember” how to like American food (Language 73). Access to any given corporeality rests on the ability to remember, recreate and appreciate its codes and conventions and to the approval of the dominant society. The unnaturalness of the mechanics of remembering and performing reveal that these identities are politicised.
The politicisation of identities along ethnic lines creates a sense of unhomelessness in the author in both American and Arab identities. On one hand this is demonstrated by the domestic arrangements for living in America that create a schism that delineates the Arab persona from the American. This translates into practical considerations entailing the rules for appropriate behaviour like wearing the right clothes, socks, shoes, having the right food in the lunch box, the right food preparation and consumption habits and using the right language. An Arab identity is best manifested within the domestic sphere because the social rules dictate that aspects of Arab identity do not have a place in the wider community. Being Arab in public only brings on a sense of “shame” (Language 82). An “unhomelessness” arises with the realisation that the Arab corporeality does not fit the dominant imagining of what it means to be an American, making it difficult to be “Arab” in America.

The social obsession with racialisation creates a particular conundrum for mixed-race subjects and effectively alienates them. The author dramatically illustrates this through a number of examples that indicate that the tendency to racialise identity is entrenched cross-culturally. For example, Bennett, Diana’s new English friend advises her against fraternising with her Arab/Jordanian friends: “You don’t belong with them! You know that. You know that. Father says. No in-betweens. The world isn’t meant for in-betweens, it isn’t done. You know that” (Language 49). The problem is that Diana doesn’t quite belong with Bennett either, both are shocked to realise that closer inspection of their skin colours reveals differences: his arm is “bony white” while hers is “golden with a telltale greenish cast.” She is neither like Bennett nor like Hisham. Her aunts
demonstrate a similar propensity to delineate according to colour: “that one is
American, that one is Arab” (Language 50). Ironically, Bennett’s treatment of the
author exposes assumptions about cultural and ethnic hybridity that are
undermined by contemporary valorisations of it. Bennett’s admonishment conjures
in the author an imagined experience of the in-betweens “walking the earth,
friendless, lonely, and improper, not allowed” (Language 50). This is the lived
experience of the social realities for many cultural and ethnic hybrids. The figure
of the “not allowed” is the stranger that is reproduced through valorisation of the
figure of the hybrid in discourses of multiculturalism and globalisation. These
personas continue to be estranged from society through definitions of identity that
sit uncomfortably with them. Unhomeliness arises because subjects like the author
cannot fit the identities that are prescribed them.

To resolve the identity crisis, the author must reassess how she positions
herself with respect to the racialised identities that are prescribed her. This
negotiation is reflected in the tensions played out through her relationship to food.
The problem reaches its climax while the author is in college and living away
from home. At this time, her Arab identity is relegated to home visits only while
the rest of the time are “days of candy and nights of cappuccino,” filled with
music and a boyfriend, “nothing here that Bud knows about or would approve of”
(Language 223). This schism is untenable and reflected in her body’s physical
rejection of the food that Gus prepares for her. She eats the lavish meals but
regurgitates them at night. She begins to “mourn” the food even before she eats it,
anticipating the nausea and the rejection of it (Language 223). As she has rejected
Arab corporeality, her body rejects Arab food because it provides access to that
corporeality. In order to retain the food, she must revise her understanding of what
Arab identity is to her. This crisis is resolved through reflecting on a lesson learnt as a teenager with Aunt Aya who was intent on enabling her resolve her identity crisis. As a teenager, Aunt Aya had enticed her to embark on a week of baking, an activity the author accepted on condition that they do not make Arabic food. Their baking lessons incorporated “voluptuous pastries from a variety of ethnicities,” and everything but Arabic food (Language 186). The lessons culminate in a dish known as baklava by Greeks and baklawa by Arabs. To get the niece to agree, Aunt Aya has to reassure her that they weren’t making anything Arabic: “I asked around [...] there are reports that baklava originated in Anatolia – so we’re safe. It’s still not Arabic” (Language 191). The ambiguous roots of baklava or baklawa show that things do not always fit into neat here/there either/or “originary” categories. The finished product “is so good, it gives [her] a new way of tasting Arabic food” (Language 191). This lesson illuminates an alternative conceptualisation of difference: “I sense the distances between places, the country house and suburbs, even between America and Jordan, start to disintegrate. Geography turns liquid. There is something in us connecting every person to every other person” (Language 223). This epiphany enables her to move beyond the strict boundaries afforded by a politicised and racialised identity. Once again, the metaphor of food illustrates her meaning. She turns instinctively to lebeneh, a simple dish of strained yoghurt. The purity of lebeneh suggested through its whiteness acts as a metaphor for moving beyond the racialisation of identity as either Arab or American, as after all, white is not a colour. The epiphany highlights the provisionality of her in-betweenness, newness enters her world when she appreciates that there are many ways to be in the world and that she can invent her own meaning of what it means to be Arab in America or Arab-
American. The author resists a fixed identity at book’s end. She declares alternately that she is American with traces of a “few lingering suggestions of another place in [her] nature” (Language 234) and acknowledging that her wandering, free spirit is that of the Bedouin. Choosing to say that she is “Arab-American” and “Arab and American” suggests the inadequacy of each of these labels to properly represent her and the imperative to reach for something more inclusive. She rejects the overly politicised terminology and declares the importance of the “and” more than the “not” in an unhomely situation.

**Conclusion**

Two very different personal meditations on alienation have traced their roots to paradigms that continue to situate Arabs as Other through discourses that maintain the hegemony of the West. For Makdisi, the legacy of colonialism is evident: it has directly caused exile from Palestine and the geographical sundering of cultural roots. This legacy is also more insidiously manifested through pedagogical strategies that have moulded her into a proxy for the West. She has internalised discourses about Arab women and modernity that have led her to view her foremothers through Western eyes and in the process alienated herself from them and from her heritage as an Arab woman. Abu-Jaber’s text traces the legacy of the diasporic experience through the eyes of the second generation who is a product of a mixed marriage between an American woman and a Jordanian man. Despite this immediate access to the claim of cultural and ethnic hybridity, the author learns that the lived experience of this is not equivalent to its celebrated representations. Her identity is politicised difference that sits uncomfortably with her: discourses of identity are predicated upon locating difference that the author finds difficult to
actually pin down. Both meditations reveal that Orientalist attitudes underpin the discourses that have prescribed Othernesss. In Makdisi, they are overt but in Abu-Jaber, they are there nonetheless, albeit almost a ghosting of it.

As Makdisi and Abu-Jaber unearth the root causes of their alterity, their sense of unhomeliness and strangerhood diminishes. Their memoirs have exposed the politicised nature of what their difference is founded upon and the fragility of this positioning. To this end, our reading process is challenged as like the protagonists in the memoirs, we are encouraged to look beyond our accepted paradigms. As Bhabha suggests, “looking for solidarity, the join or home, is in fact looking “beyond” prescribed categories for it (“Introduction” 18). The unhomely offers productive potential because of the need to rehome, and of the need to find new strategies for selfhood and subjectivity that can transcend the well-oiled markers of difference through which relationships are structured. Readers are encouraged to be more sympathetic to context and history and to establish solidarity rather than difference.

In the next chapter, I look more closely at how an understanding of texts informed by paradigms that have not derived from European enlightenment is limited because these paradigms are embedded within interpretive strategies used in the West.
Chapter 4

Leila Aboulela and ‘Halal Fiction’

Out there, right now, are people who are twisted into hatred for us and Islam. (Ali 310)

This thesis was written during a four and a half year period that was characterised by a heightened sense of the fear of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. When I first turned my mind to writing this chapter it was July 2005 and the London bombings had just occurred. Within two weeks British police, in accordance with their shoot-to-kill policy enacted after the event, murdered Jean Charles de Menezes, an innocent Brazilian man. De Menezes was killed because he matched a profile. In the immediate aftermath of the bombings a deadly cocktail combining nervous police, racial profiling and the fear of more Islamic terrorism swirled in the British community. For me, his death represented the overt racial and religious intolerance towards Muslims and Islam expressed by mainstream voices in the Western world where I lived. It left me desperately angry and marginalised even though I am not Muslim. In July 2007, as I reviewed the material written two years prior, the botched terrorist attacks in Glasgow and London occurred. The Muslim identity of the bombers was highlighted, as was their affiliation to forms of radical Islamism. Once again the need to toughen anti-terrorism laws was publicly debated and campaigns were waged to enlist the public in intelligence gathering activities. To appease nervous Muslim constituents, government leaders in the West engaged their Muslim communities to reassure them that the anti-terrorism laws do not target Muslims. These events built on the spectacle and
magnitude of trauma that the Western world experienced through the events of 9/11. They fuel essentialist thesis of the “clash of civilisations” kind proposed by Samuel Huntington and show that this war of civilisations is staging its battleground in the megalopolis of the West. For example, on 9 July, 2007 shortly after the botched Glasgow and London bombings, the Sydney Morning Herald published an editorial by Paul Sheehan titled “Mind this Gap, Where Trouble Brews.” The provocatively titled article is accompanied by a picture of London easily identified by the icons Big Ben and the River Thames overlaid with figures of black burqa-clad women. Sheehan writes explicitly about the “schism between Islamic communities and Western society” and the “problems with reconciling two very different systems of thought and social organisation” (13). Sheehan’s article is typical of the proliferation of material in the aftermath of 9/11 that disparages Islam and argues for its incompatibility with the West. The public interest in this debate seems not to have abated; the Melbourne Writers Festival of 2008, for example, featured a panel session titled “A Clash of Civilisations?” to discuss “whether the fault lines in Australian society are the result of polarised religious and cultural values.”^54 The West’s interest in this cultural schism between it and Islam continues unabated.

Reading Leila Aboulela in this context was and continues to be refreshing because her main protagonists are Muslims who unapologetically live an Islamically inspired worldview within the Western metropolis. Aboulela is of Sudanese-Egyptian descent and her work features Sudanese women living and

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54 Panelists included authors Haneefa Dean who wrote The Jihad Seminar and Riaz Hassan author of Inside Muslim Minds. Both books purport to provide insight into the Muslim mind from the Muslim’s and hence authentic insider’s perspective.
working in Aberdeen and London. Her books paint a rich picture of Muslims that refuses essentialism. She writes of both liberal Muslims who buy harram (unsanctified) meat out of convenience and cost considerations, or who fast because it is a community event or to lose weight, and pious Muslims who strictly observe Islamic rituals of prayer. Islam is represented as discursively dynamic and heterogeneous. The mosque caters to a range of personalities and interests and provides a range of activities such as learning how to read the Qur'an correctly, religious instruction and staging theological and philosophical debate. The mosque is more than a place of religious instruction; it also provides community activities, resources and social services. Moreover, the women characters in her novels unsettle Western assumptions about Muslim women. The main protagonist in her novels *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005) find refuge and solace in Islam contrary to normative albeit Eurocentric depictions about Islam’s oppression of Muslim women. Mohja Kahf argues that Muslim women are read in the West through three conventions: that of the victim, the escapee and the pawn. The first portrays her as a victim of oppression, the second as an escapee of her oppression and the third as the pawn of Arab male power (“Packaging” 149). The burqa-clad women in the picture illustrating Sheehan’s article symbolise oppressive Islam, with the women as victims of this oppression. In the media, images of veiled Muslim women are conflated with that of people praying, Islamic militants and terrorism, so that the image of the veiled woman has come to symbolise oppressive, violent Islam and of a backward religion, races and peoples. Depictions of Islamic fundamentalism collapse a “heterogeneous collection of images and descriptions, linking them together as aspects of a singular socio-religious formation” (Hirschkind and Mahmood 348). In the aftermath of 9/11, the
“Muslim woman to be saved” was the narrative that justified violent incursions into Afghanistan because “the burqa-clad body of the Afghan woman became the visible sign of an invisible enemy that threatens not only “us,” citizens of the West, but our entire civilization” (Hirschkind and Mahmood 341). In conjunction with this, the escapee’s narrative provides further proof of the oppressive nature of Islam. Its corollary is the liberatory potential that the West is believed to possess. When read through the paradigms described by Kahf, many of the stories about Muslim women that circulate in the West inadvertently reinforce stereotypes about them. In contrast, Aboulela’s protagonists are “saved” by their conversion to Islam. In The Translator, Rae Isles, a Scottish Historian converts to Islam and in Minaret, Najwa reverses the trajectory into Western modernity by renewing her faith in Islam and choosing to live her life according to Islamic rules. Both narratives renew Islam as a valid, viable and attractive choice in the current geopolitical moment. This choice represents a repudiation of the hegemony of the West’s epistemological system.

**Islam and this thesis**

Aboulela’s novels are a good way to conclude the analysis in this thesis because they best demonstrate Chakrabarty’s call to provincialise Europe. In chapter one, Riverbend and Amiry demonstrated the imperative to resist narratives of imperialism that dehumanised them and perpetuated states of occupation. In chapter two, Soueif demonstrated the impact on political will of displacement from indigenous narratives of history. In chapter three Makdisi and Abu-Jaber revealed that an enduring sense of alienation arose from the internalisation of discourses about subjectivity. In each case, these narratives were revealed only
when normative interpretive frameworks were problematised, questioned and suspended through the techniques enlisted by the authors to engage the reader. This chapter enables me to show more clearly that epistemological domination occurs through the normalisation of Eurocentric ideology in the West. Aboulela’s repudiation of the West’s epistemological system in her narratives brings this out sharply.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argued that the imperial project is given effect by cultural practices that reinforce the hegemony of the West. In the postcolonial era, the legacy of European enlightenment thought continues to exert its hegemony over much of the world because its discourses are naturalised. As discussed in the introduction to the thesis, in *Provincializing Europe* Chakrabarty argues that some of the concepts used in discourses about political modernity are deeply embedded in European intellectual and theological traditions. Concepts such as citizenship, civil society, civil rights, human rights, distinctions between public and private, the individual, the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty and social justice “bear the burden” of European thought and history and can be traced to European enlightenment (4). Even though these discourses have become the yardstick by which political modernity is measured, their Eurocentric roots have largely been forgotten. The implication of this is that ideas deriving from a particular moment in European history are held as universal truths. The hegemony of these assumptions creates a teleology of progress that situates the secular vision as the goal of all humanity. Those cultures and traditions that do not demonstrate these markers of “enlightenment” are relegated to a “waiting room” of political modernity. These discourses insist on the primacy of secularism and judge those cultures that are not secular to be backward, superstitious and inferior in
philosophical, moral and other bases. Chakrabarty argues that there are two ontological assumptions embedded in this, one, that the “human exists in a frame of a single and secular historical time that envelops other kinds of time” and two, that the “human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end “social facts,” and that the social somehow exists prior to them” (16). The normalisation of these discourses and their implicit hegemony aligns the West with modernity. This is the insidious form of imperialism that Said described when he urged us to consider that “the ideological insistence of a culture drawing attention to itself as superior has given way to a culture whose canons and standards are invisible to the degree that they are ‘natural,’ ‘objective,’ and ‘real’” (Said, The World 9). The tacit acquiescence to these Eurocentric formulations of modernity enables the Orientalist project in its more contemporary guises:

Discourses of truth operate in conjunction with various kinds of intellectual, moral and political power with the will or intention to understand, in some cases, to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world. (Said, Orientalism 12)

Islam provides a good example of the need to problematise these discourses of truth and in the process provincialise European thought. Interpretive paradigms that operate without consideration of their Eurocentric roots cannot accommodate the epistemology that Islam presents. As a result, Islam continues to be represented in Orientalist terms as undifferentiated, monolithic and opposed to the values of the West. This in turn enables structures that perpetuate the power

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55 For the arguments that support this assertion, see Majid, Unveiling 29 and Buck-Morss 2-3.
relationships between the West, Arabs and Muslims and is reflected in mundane discourses in all disciplines. The narratives in Aboulela’s novels draw out through specific tropes and examples the limitations of these frameworks to adequately account for individual action that is motivated by Islam. The interpretive challenge that Aboulela’s novels pose requires the kind of secular criticism that Said championed when he urged critics to resist the lure of the dominant paradigm. This call, articulated in The World, the Text and the Critic, urged critical readers to have greater awareness of how these concepts were embedded in scholarship. To fully appreciate the value of this kind of secularism on the interpretation of the text it is necessary to have a sense of the intervention that the author intends.

Islam-informed writing

Muslim women scholars and authors have been instrumental in rethinking notions of gender, resistance and interpretations of the Qu’ran. Post-revolutionary Iran, for instance, provides many examples of gendered activism within an Islamic framework. There are many Iranian feminists writing within Iran and in the West, such as Afsaneh Najmabadi and Haideh Moghissi. A range of Iranian feminist journals provide fora for feminist scholarship such as Pizuhish-i-Zanan, a feminist Islamic journal formed in 1991, Nimeye Digar, Persian language feminist journal founded by Afsaneh Najmobadeh and Badjens, an Iranian on-line feminist journal. Outside Iran, women scholars including Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Mai Yamani amongst many others have explored a range of channels to explain the gendered formation of Islamic epistemology (Cooke xvii). Much of this is published in the West and available in English. Most of this work is in academic scholarship in the fields of history, religious studies, anthropology,
sociology and law and is initially directed at an academic or special interest audience.

Literary production involving Islam can be highly politicised. The uproar caused by Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, for instance, remains in the public imagining. More recently, the unrest resulting from the publication of Danish cartoons depicting the prophet reinforces negative stereotypes already circulating in the media of Islam’s intolerance. These reactions result from what Talal Asad describes as a “deliberately provocative rhetorical performance in an already charged political field” (*Genealogies* 283). Rushdie’s book was burned, banned and a fatwa issued against his life. Debate in critical circles continues today, a testament to the power of this narrative and its resonance with the West. Rushdie’s example points to the need to consider the worldliness of the text: the social context that influences the politics of production, reception and readership. The reality is, as Asad reminds us, that “everything published about Muslims has a political significance” (*Genealogies* 273). Nonetheless, despite the large number of Muslim authors whose work is written in English or available in translation in the West, not all of this work is politicised despite the highly charged political moment.

With this in mind, some of the literary production by women available in the West that addresses Islam has enjoyed widespread commercial success, not only because they may support normative stereotypes but also because they purport to make readers in the West more informed about Islam. In an interview with QNews, Aboulela acknowledges that because her work can be co-opted to support stereotypes of Islam’s oppression of women it can be categorised as similar to work like Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, published in 2003,
even though its message is different. In this case the worldliness of the text is to her advantage. The novels are not subject to over-politicisation because they appear to support the normative assumptions about Islam. This enables them ostensibly to speak to their readership without the mediating influence that publicity and propaganda can bestow.

Aboulela’s work aligns with an emerging genre of writing by Muslim authors in the West some have termed Muslim fiction.\textsuperscript{56} This body of work explores the dialogue between Islamic cultures and a way of life that is associated with living in large metropolitan cities. The work depicts Islamically-inspired living as normative within the Western metropolis. Authors who directly address this theme include Leila Aboulela, Fatima Mernissi and Mohja Kahf. Their work challenges stereotypical depictions of Muslim women and especially of Muslim women living in the West. For example, Australian author Randa Abdel-Fattah whose book \textit{Does My Head Look Big in This?}, published in 2005, directs her book at young Muslim and non-Muslim readers to depict a coming of age story through the eyes of a Muslim girl. It is well received in Australian schools as a text that increases the awareness of Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Within the West, discussions about migrant and minority identity place greater emphasis on ethnic, racial, cultural or national identity. In an interview with the Scottish Muslim Newspaper \textit{The iWitness}, Aboulela notes that generally, books written by Arab and Muslim authors are characterised by an absence of religion in their characters lives. These authors emphasise religious identity over other aspects of

\textsuperscript{56} The term was coined by Mohja Kahf initially in reference to Muslim American fiction and the poet Marvin X but is being used in a more widespread sense now.
identity to draw attention to a formation of identity that is usually denied legitimacy in the secular Western context. Majid suggests that writers who underestimate the Islamic component of their identity and privilege categories such as race and nation instead tend to “reiterate colonial prejudices” (Unveiling 75). Postmodern concepts of identity that have emerged in the West generally do not privilege a religious identity. These authors show the need to understand a religious identity because it brings to bear an epistemological framework that creates a different lived reality to that supported through the norms of secular Western liberalism. The reality of this difference urges a greater acceptance of alterity and Otherness as a sign of the diversity that necessarily comprises this world.

The political imperative of Aboulela’s work is to offer the worldview of the Muslim to the Western audience. In the interview with the Observer she claims she writes “to make Islam more familiar to the reader.” The imperative to write evolved initially as a reaction against the anti-Arab and anti-Islam sentiment in the media during the Gulf War. It was an impulse, she explains to Susan Mansfield in an interview with The Scotsman driven by the need to educate and inform, not to challenge the reader but to “tell it as it is.” Her stories reveal the Muslim’s perspective and highlight the shaping influence of Islam in life. They reveal that there are fundamental differences between the Muslim worldview and that of white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Western society generally. In the press release for Bloomsbury, she claims that she wanted to write fiction that “reflected Islamic logic: fictional worlds where cause and effect are governed by Muslim rationale.”

57 Aboulela elaborates on this in interviews, see Mansfield and QNews 50.
That her work is highly praised by the Muslim community indicates her success in doing this. Her novel *The Translator* was dubbed by *Muslim News* as “the first halal novel written in English” (qtd in Ghazoul), and *QNews* more specifically described it as a “genuine work of British Muslim fiction” (50). In the interview with *QNews*, she explains her philosophy as deriving from Islam because she writes her characters as a Muslim would and through a logical framework that derives from her faith (51). This kind of logic is unfamiliar for a readership based in the West because though religious informed literature from the Christian perspective has had a long history, this readership is unfamiliar with writing informed by Islam. Aboulela cites Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* to illustrate this. She suggests that because Tolstoy wrote as a Christian author, Anna dies because she commits adultery. In contrast, a secular author might suggest that the woman is liberated after adultery, but this is an outcome that as a Muslim she could never contemplate (*QNews* 51). While the internal logic may be obvious for a Muslim reader, the non-Muslim reader is made aware of a different interpretive framework through the narrative techniques used by the author to provoke critical engagement. As a non-Muslim reader I found that probing my reactions to the narrative revealed insights into the many assumptions that underpinned my critical engagements. On reflection, perhaps as a reader from a minority group within Australia, I have a greater awareness of the marginalising impact of the interpretive frameworks used normatively in the West and have experienced Otherness myself. Aboulela has acknowledged that authorship for her is like “having a different conversation with different readers” (*QNews* 51). The conversation with Muslim readers affirms their identity in works of fiction in English, but the conversation with non-Muslim readers has the important
dimension of revealing a worldview framed by a logic with which they may be unfamiliar. “Making Islam more familiar to the reader” occurs not by teaching about the religion but by showing that it provides a different epistemological framework comparable to that of the West. It requires what Chakrabarty argues is the process of provincialising Europe in order to create a discursive space to include it.

In the analysis that follows I will address two of Aboulela’s novels, beginning with The Translator and concluding with Minaret. In the first part of the analysis my reading will show how Aboulela narrates a love story between a Muslim believer and non-believer to reveal how normative interpretive frameworks used in the West about the love story are embedded with Eurocentric assumptions. The process of decentring the hegemony of the West requires the concept of the Orientalist is problematised in the course of it.

Testing the limits of tolerance: The Translator reveals an alternative way of living

How much of the truth could he take, without a look of surprise crossing his eyes? (Aboulela, Translator 6)

The Translator, Aboulela’s aptly titled first novel, is an appropriate point at which to explore the West’s tolerance towards different epistemological systems. Published in 1999, the novel tells the story of the love affair between Rae Isles, a Scottish historian and his Sudanese translator Sammar. A romantic relationship develops between the couple but comes to a stalemate over his refusal to convert to Islam. They separate, and Sammar returns to Khartoum and prays for his
enlightenment. Months later, she is advised of his conversion to Islam and he comes to Khartoum to ask for her hand in marriage. This simple plot line provides the staging ground to draw out the limitations in Eurocentric discursive traditions and the mechanisms by which they are perpetuated. In the process, Islam is used as the vehicle to enable a dialogue about these limitations.

Grounding her discussion in the terrain of epistemology enables the author to advance an alternative to the ways in which difference and cultural dislocation are predominantly considered in the West. Discourses of identity politics that have emerged from the West generally perpetuate categories of race, nation, culture and ethnicity. These discourses do not consider the epistemological underpinnings that can drive a sense of dissonance. Nor do they consider their core Eurocentricity. At this juncture, reflections on the critical treatment of Tayeb Salih’s Season of Migration to the North are useful. Published in 1969 the book is considered a classic postcolonial text and taken to represent the “crisis of colonially educated African Muslim elites” (Majid, Unveiling 88). Said described the novel as a “mimetic reversal” of Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (Orientalism 255). As a result of the colonial experience, Salih’s protagonist Mustaffa Saeed is depicted as torn between the irresistible pull of the West and his own traditions and people and unable to connect fully with either. Tragic Saeed is viewed as symptomatic of the “black African Muslim in a world dominated by the White European” (qtd in Majid, Unveiling 87). Critical readings have concentrated the articulation of difference on the black man’s journey into the heart of white territory, a journey

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58 Postcolonial works by some African men of Muslim descent depict displacement from their culture has tragic consequences, see Bugul and Salih.
that metaphorically lends itself to reinforcing categories that reflect the centre and periphery distinction. The novel also attributes Saeed’s destruction to the irresistible pull of Western philosophical systems and an inability to reconcile these with his own. On his return to his village he constructs a secret room that contains a replica fireplace and an extensive library of books only in English, even the Qu’ran is in translation. It is a “graveyard. A mausoleum” (Season 146).

Critics have interpreted this library as testament to the hegemony of Orientalist thought: Saeed is destroyed because he loses the ability to represent himself and comes to know himself, his culture, history and religion through the discourses of the West. His exile is thus founded on an epistemological basis. Notwithstanding this, prevailing readings assert the centre/periphery distinction and the assumption that this struggle is necessarily a Manichean one.

In The Translator, Aboulela depicts an alternative to the Manichean struggle within which Salih’s postcolonial men were bound. Aboulela pays tribute in the novel to Salih, also Sudanese, on several occasions indicating her placement in both Sudanese literary and postcolonial lineages. Her work continues to explore the themes of cultural and geographical dislocation developed in Salih’s novel, but this novel, written thirty years after his, depicts a contemporary Britain in which the staging ground of difference is ideology and articulated through the lens of religion rather than race, colour or nation. In the post-independence globalised world that Aboulela describes, the West is no longer the epicentre of

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intellectual, philosophical or economic power. Large metropolitan cities outside the Western world and in the Arab world such as in the Gulf or Saudi Arabia like Doha and Abu Dhabi have emerged as commercial and financial hubs. The author also removes the distinction between coloniser/colonised and centre/periphery by upsetting the expectation that her main protagonist is born elsewhere. Sammar holds British citizenship by birthright, and for both her and Rae, Africa was “arrived at and loved” (Translator 40). Her characterisation indicates that it is getting increasingly difficult to make a sharp distinction between centre and the periphery.

In Aboulela’s context, it is impossible to ignore that the alienation experienced by her characters is associated with the dissonance between their Islamic worldviews and that of the secular metropole. For example, an added benefit of the rise of the alternative commercial and financial hubs like Abu Dhabi and Doha is that these places are attractive to Muslims because they reflect an Islamic worldview as opposed to a secular one. Yasmin, Rae’s Pakistani secretary is “happier” in Doha, and overt about the racial and religious intolerance she experiences in Aberdeen. The schism is overt as she openly acknowledges her difference from “those people” in Aberdeen who are not Muslim. Her novels indicate that the polarities between Islam and the West have hardened. She writes of religious vilification, the threat of terrorism and the rise of Islamism in her novels. Intolerance and religious vilification continues alongside narratives of multiculturalism indicating that discursive narratives perpetuate difference under cover of tolerance and inclusion.
Critiques of the novel

Critical readings of the novel that address Aboulela’s use of Islam do not explicitly discuss how it is used to illustrate the intolerances embedded within normative critical interpretive frameworks used in the West. Abdulhadi Khalaf reads the text through the lens of postcoloniality and argues that it embodies “writing back” to empire as a form of resistance through which the colonial past and the postcolonial present is interrogated (7). Other critics suggest that Aboulela shows that North and South find harmony through Rae’s conversion to Islam.60 These readings utilise the rubrics of writing-back and the tension between alterities in the metropolis to deal with Otherness. They acknowledge the importance of the religious identity but designate religion as faith. They provide little scope to investigate the epistemological underpinnings of these paradigms. For example, the readings that suggest that north and south are joined only through Rae’s conversion are sustained by the assumption that a single truth takes precedence at any one time. According to this paradigm, the metropolitan method for accommodating difference is through assimilation. Rae’s conversion fuels the thesis of Islam’s intolerance because he must convert to marry Sammar whereas he does not require it of her. Instead, Sammar’s insistence is a rejection of the paradigm expecting assimilation. The tension created through this act indicates a struggle for discursive control that reflects the power relationship between Islamic and Eurocentric discourses in the West. The rejection of the Islamic view as unreasonable reflects the metropolitan exercise of power through discursive control.

60 This assertion can be found in Ghazoul and Stotesbury 69-82.
My reading restores the text's worldliness as representing Islam as an alternative and equally valid and viable epistemological framework to that which underpins that of Western society. It takes as its starting point that the text is not a form of writing-back and neither does it represent assimilation as a way to address alterity. Here, Ferial Ghazoul's reading is illuminating because she acknowledges that Aboulela's work reveals a "narrative logic where faith and rituals become moving modes of living." She suggests that the work provokes the reader to think more critically about the difference between Islam and Western liberalism. Her reading, a short critique published in the weekly online version of Al-Ahram did not have the scope to more thoroughly investigate the implication of this difference, but inspired me to think more critically about its ramifications. The limitations that she alludes to are raised by Amir Mufti in his paper "Global Comparativisms" where he suggests that the paradigms of critical analysis such as postcolonial literature, minority literatures and world literatures have failed to "meaningfully include these 'other' languages and literatures." He suggests that the rubrics commonly used to "attend to the encounter between the metropolitan-national formations and the range of alterities they suppress, despite their cultural successes, have been unable to sufficiently attend to the forms of cultural Otherness that are marked by the non-Western provenance of the languages in which they are produced" (Mufti 475). My reading will show that Aboulela's narrative questions the structures of historical knowledge that normalise the idea of Europe (Chakrabarty 28). To demonstrate this, she problematises the conventions of the Western romance and the postcolonial decolonisation narrative to show that culturally specific assumptions underpin them. I will show that Islam is used to demonstrate that modes of dealing with alterity continue to maintain
difference and uphold the epistemic hegemony of Western ideas and values, perpetuating new forms of Orientalism in the process. I will show that Aboulela urges readers to greater critical engagement with the interpretive frameworks that they take for granted because the perpetuation of Eurocentric concepts make it difficult to accept as legitimate alternative ways of living. To demonstrate this, I will show how the narrative exposes how modalities of Eurocentrism operate to perpetuate difference. These modalities attest to the resilience of Orientalist discourses. The analysis of this novel concludes with a close reading of the meaning and implications of Rae’s conversion to Islam. I will argue that this narrative enables the author to decentre the West as dominant paradigm.

**Fooled into believing there is equality: modalities of Eurocentrism perpetuate difference in the rhetoric of multicultural Britain**

It’s a modern thing. Something to do with not being Eurocentric. They take what each culture says about itself. So they could study all sorts of texts and be detached (Translator 83)

Aboulela shows that modalities of Eurocentrism operate under the guise of Western liberalism to perpetuate difference. By setting her characters in London and not Doha, the author is able to highlight the inability of Western liberalism to represent a truly inclusive and expansive ideology. In the novel, the author uses commonly accepted expressions of tolerance such as multiculturalism and leftist politics to show that these too are underpinned by deeply held Eurocentric assumptions. The author uses Islam to show that these paradigms are incapable of
accommodating epistemological systems that differ from the European enlightenment values that underpin them.

The multicultural Britain that Aboulela depicts in this novel and in *Minaret* demonstrates the lived experience of a superficial acceptance of difference but deeply entrenched attitudes about alterity. The social context in these novels depicts shopping centres that contain halal butchers, spice stores decorated with posters of Asian film stars and shelves stocked with imported produce (*Minaret* 58). Official government administrative programmes cater for an ethnically diverse population to support the political narratives of multiculturalism. For instance, there are prayer rooms in the University and when Sammar’s husband dies in hospital its Ethnic Coordinator ensures that his body is treated in accordance with his religious rites and customs. Multicultural policies ensure a way of living with difference. Nonetheless, despite these administrative policies and the physical proximity between ethnically and culturally diverse people, these Other communities continue to be alienated from the dominant White communities. Sammar’s loneliness derives from the fact that her identity in Aberdeen is experienced as difference. The narrator tells us that her interactions with others are characterised by “shades of surprise: surprise-sneer, surprise-embarrassment, surprise-bemused, surprise-disapproving” (*Translator* 40). These reactions reveal her cultural and social dislocation in a society that does not intrinsically accept or reflect her values. To mask and minimise the experience of difference, Sammar silences herself and restricts communication with the dominant White mainstream population. Her self-imposed silencing is not an indication of acquiescence or assimilation but an attempt to minimise conflict. She embodies the paradox as though her name means conversations with friends, she
has to consciously use her teeth and lips to “keep silent” (Translator 40). Sneered at and disapproved of, Sammar is culturally, socially and physically alienated.

Sammar’s alienation reflects the dominant group’s reluctance to accommodate criticism of their values. Here, the author’s experience of self-censorship resulting from membership of a minority Sudanese and Muslim culture in the United Kingdom is illuminating. In an article published in the journal *Alif*, Aboulela writes of being disappointed with members of her ladies’ writing group who were deeply offended when they interpreted her piece about her difficulties settling in Scotland as criticism of British values. To appease the group, she reworked the story to convey the same intent in a more socially acceptable manner but observes: “I found in Scotland very little knowledge of Islam or the Sudan, the two things that made up my identity. What people knew was as accurate as the view I’d had of Britain watching ‘Carry On’ films at the Blue Nile Cinema. I hid my homesickness” (“Moving Away” 205). This observation about misinformation masked deeper misgivings about Western society and its values to which her well-read, well-travelled Scottish friends took objection:

Was I allowed to comment on the West, in their language, in their territory? Was I allowed to express the misgivings that I had without being dismissed as having a ‘chip on my shoulder’ or reacting to a ‘terrible rejection’? I wanted to point out that the secularism which the West championed and exported, had, when it cancelled sin, cancelled with it forgiveness. And a life without forgiveness is a harsh and (paradoxically in a freedom loving society) a stunted, congealed life […] That was what I saw, that was what disturbed me […]. But was I allowed to work through these misgivings? Or was there no choice but to succumb to the sad fate of the exile? (“Moving Away” 206)
Aboulela’s alienation stemmed from a more fundamental issue of a difference in core values deriving from a worldview not reflected in the West. The reworked paragraph reveals that difference expressed in innocuous terms such as misinformation about Sudan is more acceptable to the dominant group than a critique of the secular values at the core of Western society. Censorship to minimise difference gives the impression of acquiescence to these values, but fosters a deep sense of alienation that the author experiences as exile. This exilic longing is expressed as homesickness in the novel. By defining home as belonging to an Islamic community (the umma), Aboulela draws attention to the need to consider the epistemic basis for exile that is separate from nationalism. Said’s celebrated definition of exile speaks of the insurmountable “essential sadness” that results from the “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between self and its true home” (“Reflections” 172). Aboulela’s insurmountable sadness derived from a sense of alienation from the inability to find a sense of community, or home with the people around her. The unease of her Scottish friends to accept criticism of their values is an indication of their bigotry because their overt manifestations of their acceptance of difference assume a basis of tolerance.

The author shows that the Other continues to be recreated through means of expression that purport to display more egalitarian motivations. The narrative shows that both consumer and intellectual appetite conceals insidious forms of colonialism. Her depictions of multicultural Britain demonstrate Ahmed’s thesis that multiculturalism as a national narrative reproduces the figure of the stranger (Strange 97). Multiculturalism, as Ahmed points out, is based on the premise that the stranger is welcomed. Paradoxically, this premise reinforces the stranger’s
difference. Nonetheless, an effect of these political processes to manage difference is that everyday encounters and social relationships define on a mundane basis how the stranger is situated in relation to the nation. In the novel, Aboulela shows that the commoditisation of difference reduces it to a form of lifestyle that enables the consumer to become like the stranger whilst maintaining their difference (Ahmed Strange 118). A good illustration of this is the effort required for Rae and his daughter to escape cordon bleu and go to the kebab shop at Christmas time instead. Rae’s pride in relaying the story about their subversiveness suggests that this act of rebellion enables him to mark his difference from cordon bleu consumers. Rae and his daughter virtually become the strangers by eating the kebabs. The father-daughter act is underpinned by the desire for his daughter to grow up to be as subversive as he is and hence is driven by self-serving motivations (Translator 34). While this act enables Rae to demonstrate his difference from the mainstream, it does not actually make him the stranger.

This kind of identification with Others remains at a superficial level only to mark the consumer’s difference but does not enable the consumer to experience Otherness. As a young man in Morocco Rae smoked the hubble-bubble pipe, visited mosques and entertained the local community with antics that rendered him almost Arab. As an expatriate moving in the local community his subversiveness is dangerous but attractive and expatriate women thought he looked “exactly like an Arab” (Translator 52). His “Arabness” provides a safe way through which expatriates like his ex-wife Amelia, could associate with an Arab without really being with one. Amelia had grown up in the splendid villa of her parents, “secretly and guiltily eyeing the house-boys, fancying the gardener from Fez” (Translator 54). Rae enables Amelia to vicariously have a relationship with an Arab. Despite
his antics, however, Rae cannot become an Arab but remains the expatriate playing at being Arab. He remains the outsider looking in and can never really be, as Sammar initially believes him to be “like people from back home” (Translator 19). So when the narrator tells us that Rae is the only one amongst his many Muslim staff who laughs off a comment that “Muslims should go back to the land of Allah” (Translator 89), it is evident that though he defends Islam and appears to be aligned with Muslims he does not identify as a Muslim and has no experience of being the Other. “No one else would laugh” (Translator 90) at the statement because its meaning conveys the underlying sentiments of intolerance and exclusion that comprise the underbelly of polite, albeit hypocritical Western liberalism. Rae’s assumption of solidarity with Muslim Others is shattered of real substance and revealed to mask an inability to experience Otherness.

Rae’s interest in the third world is fuelled by his desire to be marked as different from his British contemporaries. His interest in the East is sparked as a schoolboy when he learns of his uncle’s defection from the army during World War II, conversion to Sufism and marriage to an Egyptian woman. As a young man, he fits the mould of the typical British left wing intellectual moved by the global decolonisation movements. He is drawn to revolutionary ideas: “Marxist, strategic. Guerilla warfare, resistance. Nationalism. Revolution. Coup d’etat” (Translator 56). He read Fanon, heard Malcom X at the London School of Economics, witnessed the rise of Golda Meir, Haile Selessie, Fidel Castro and Nasser, all of whom were icons of nationalism for the Third World. His identity is framed as anti-establishment. His bookshelf represents his interests and is lined with “How Europe Under-developed Africa, The Wretched of the Earth, Religion in the Third World, Culture and Imperialism” (Translator 30). These texts reveal
his intellectual appetite to understand the plight of the third world and position him as an expert on colonialism and imperialism. However, this intellectual appetite is another form of colonialism through which Rae consumes the Other. It illustrates the process that “allows the subject to establish its difference from itself, which is, at once, its difference from those recognised as simply ‘being’ strangers” (Ahmed, Strange 118). Rae’s identity as a member of the dominant community is strengthened by his consumption of the Other’s difference.

Islam provides the opportunity to demonstrate the limitations of Western epistemological frameworks to represent truly inclusive ideologies. Aboulela shows that Islam proves a threat to the British national imaginary because it provides a sense of difference that cannot be assimilated. Though multicultural ideology permits Islam to be practiced as private religion, Muslim values are believed to be an “affront to the State” (Asad, Formations 160). During the Gulf War, for example, Muslim identity becomes highly politicised and Sammar finds herself subject to religious vilification. She is taunted in the street by people who scream out “Saddam Hussein” and the Head of Department at the University is compelled to advise Sammar of her religious tolerance, asserting that though not herself religious, she did not have a problem with Sammar’s dressing and “respected people who were religious” (Translator 88-89). These justifications have the effect of emphasising Sammar’s difference from the mainstream non-Muslim society. They also have the effect of revealing the Head of Department’s fears that her misgivings about Islam would be uncovered. However, the angry messages on the Department’s answering machine after a radio programme in which Rae participated titled “Is this a Holy War” reveal the nature of the perceived threat posed by Muslims to the nation: “England is a Christian country,
and it would be a good thing if you and all the rest of the odious wog bastards were to go back to the land of Allah” (Translator 89). The values that Islam prescribes are believed to be incompatible with that of England’s. These threats represent the result of the “politicization of a religious tradition that has no place within the cultural hegemony that has defined British identity” (Asad, Genealogies, 248). Asad argues that the narrative of Europe does not include Islam. He writes that the representation of Islam within European liberal democracies is problematic and that Islam is excluded from these representations (Formations 172). For example, though Spain is now considered part of Europe, it was not considered so during the 700 years it was considered part of Arab Spain (Formations 168). In contemporary multicultural Britain, Islam continues to pose a threat to the nation’s imaginary because its values are deemed fundamentally different.

Ahmed argues that differences that cannot be consumed or assimilated threaten the nation itself (Strange 106). These unassimilable differences cannot be reduced to and consumed as “style” as a matter of personal choice. Here Fish’s insights on multiculturalism are insightful in explaining this. Fish suggests that there are two kinds of multiculturalism. Boutique multiculturalism, the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants, festivals, consumer and commoditised flirtations with the Other and strong multiculturalism which is predicated on a politics of difference. Where the former is founded on respect, the latter is founded on tolerance. Paradoxically, neither accommodates the core values of the other culture when those values threaten the values upon which the dominant culture’s identity is based. Hence, where kebabs are tolerated and even desired, Islam is not. Multiculturalism as public policy cannot accommodate the difference posed by
Islam because it represents a threat to the core values of the Western nation because the nation’s identity is predicated upon the principles achieved through European enlightenment.

This Manicheanism is evident in the many strategies that purportedly demonstrate tolerance. At one level, this is expressed through the enduring centre-periphery distinction. For example, though Sammar and her son hold British passports by birthright, everyone’s first instinct is to view them as refugees with a hard-luck story having “faced the injustices of the Home Office” (Translator 64). In this post-independence world, Sammar and others like her continue to be ascribed the position of Other. In the social imaginary they remain always from somewhere else, the colonised Other. Manichean principles continue to describe the postcolonial metropole: binary divisions of centre/periphery, coloniser/colonised, black/white, tradition/modern and good/evil continue to ascribe relations between the self and the Other. This Manichean dilemma perpetuates the oppression of the Other through hierarchical means and prescribes the moral superiority of the dominant group (Ashcroft 170). This moral superiority is particularly discussed through discourses that enlist the concept of culture. In the novel, the author cites the case of the British High Court judge who awarded damages to an Asian woman slandered over the issue of her virginity. The judge’s decision was viewed as evidence of “cultural sensitivity.” However, Rae’s explanation reveals the implicit acceptance of the superiority of British values: “people understand it but in the context of its own place, its own part of the world. Here though, it’s a different story. I would think that the consensus is “in Rome do as the Romans do” (Translator 18). Immigrants are simply expected to assimilate to the values of Britain. Dirlik argues that cultural relativism confirms the distance
implied in the hegemonic culturalist thesis ("Culturalism" 25). Culture, he argues is used to establish the "ideological hegemony" of one class over another ("Culturalism" 23). The condescension evident in Rae's summation reveals a more embedded sense of the superiority of his values. In this sense, cultural relativism continues to buttress Orientalist discourses.

The resilience of Orientalist discourses

'The insidiousness of Orientalism's contemporary manifestations is that the figure of the modern day Orientalist appears as a familiar friend and champion of Islam. Through the figure of Rae Aboulela shows that the traits of detachment, objectivity and scholarly study continue to perpetuate Orientalist modes of representing and knowing Others. Rae is a respected Scottish Historian with expertise on Middle Eastern politics and Islam. His book "The Illusion of an Islamic Threat" is reviewed as being bold and insightful. His thesis is that "the threat of an Islamic take-over of the Middle East is exaggerated" (Translator 12). He was expelled from school because he wrote an essay titled "Islam is better than Christianity" (Translator 16). His knowledge about Sudan, its history, Arabs, and Islam is extensive and exceeds that of Sammar who reveals that he often taught her something she didn't know (Translator 93). Furthermore, he is a typical left-wing intellectual who is anti-establishment and has expertise in colonialism and imperialism and whose heroes were the great anti-imperialists. These give the impression that he is sympathetic to Islam and Muslims. The effect on Sammar reveals that his persona creates a sense of familiarity. His knowledge about her
culture, history and religion renders him “familiar” and “like people from back home” (Translator 19). With him “she had been given permission to think and talk. And he would not be surprised by anything she said” (Translator 40). This familiarity made Sammar’s “world vivid for the first time in years.” The comfort that he evokes is so powerful that she imagines she can hear the azan (Translator 6 and 19).

Aboulela cautions against assuming familiarity signals equality as Rae’s expertise is coopted into discourses of power through academia. Despite the rhetoric Rae remains a quintessential Orientalist: he is empowered, mobile, White, British (Western) and an academic with authority on the region. His relationship with Sammar metaphorically represents the gendered relationship between the Orientalist male and his female object of study. She is the feminised mysterious Orient to be possessed and discovered by the intellectually superior male Orientalist. This is evident by the fact that Rae’s attraction for Sammar is characterised by an element of fascination encouraged by self-interest. Sammar remains an object of study, a native informant like the other “coffee-coloured ladies” that serve on his staff. He likes the hijab because it is “secretive” (Translator 95) but admits that through her he can uncover even more about the Orient, “things that he could not learn from books” (Translator 56). Rae’s disappointment at Sammar’s inability to remember the colour of the Nile reveals his reliance on the native informant. His exasperation at her being tainted through globalisation reveals his unconscious preference for an unchanging cultural entity in spite of the reality that Sammar presents. His rebuke appears as a chastisement: “did you not look at it? Did you instead watch Peyton Place on TV” (Translator 39)? In these respects, his lineage in a well-established field of Orientalists is confirmed. Rae’s scholarship is coopted into discourses of power. To remain
funded by government, he must prove the viability of his work. This means that his focus remains on terrorism because this is the threat that the government is addressing. In *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Said suggested that Orientalist discourses were characterised by a guild mentality that required intellectual allegiance. Rae’s effectiveness to speak truth to power is limited by the guild mentality that leads him to reiterate his intellectual allegiance to the discourse. His adherence to the principles of secular scholarship prevents a more nuanced reading of the social context and political tensions of the Middle East. His readings promote the supremacy of his own Western values and in turn the Orientalist project.

Rae’s inability to critically examine the materialist conditions of Europe and the Muslim world perpetuates Eurocentric modes of the cultural production of knowledge about Islam. His scholarship continues to contribute to the discourses that situate Islam as undifferentiated monolith and as inhospitable to Western values. Islamic countries are therefore allocated a place on a developmental trajectory that holds enlightenment secularism as its goal. For example, he writes that Islam is the reason for the region’s “backwardness” arguing that it is why “capitalism developed ultimately in Europe and not in other civilisations which were more sophisticated.” He blames “Sharia’s laws on inheritance and charity” for fragmenting wealth and preventing its accumulation (*Translator* 98). Islam, he argues acted as the “internal themostat” that shielded the region from the excesses of the materialistic Western world (*Translator* 98). Islam is read as an unchanging monolith noted for its absences: of capitalism, civil society and democracy (*Majid, Unveiling* 67). Rae’s position conveys a critique of capitalist materialism but continues to lay blame for the underdevelopment of the Arab world on Islam. In contrast, other Arab/Muslim scholars argue that capitalism froze the development...
of society and not Islam and Sharia (Majid, Unveiling 65). Rae’s inability to engage with the discursive aspects of Islam reveal that he can only treat Islam as faith – a perspective derived from the European enlightenment. For example, he writes that anti-terrorist programs “cover up the real problems of unemployment and inefficient government” but discounts political Islamism as “protest movements” that appeal to people’s anger over “class divisions” and other causes such as the continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank or their mediocre ruling governments (Translator 25). The corollary of this is that Islam cannot in his eyes form the basis for viable social and political organisation. He cannot fathom that any of its proponents would view it as a “viable alternative” (Translator 25). This presumption asserts his ideological hegemony over that of Muslims and Arabs even whilst claiming to speak the truth amidst the hypocrisy.

Rae’s appeal to reason and objectivity replicate Orientalist claims to authoritative knowledge. His claims to the truth are supported through this discipline of detachment and objectivity, a principle grounded in enlightenment philosophy. This paradigm dissociates the realities of social life from their object of study. In practice this translates as engagement with the subject matter but not with the people, their socio-politico contexts or with their word view. The limitations of this approach are represented by the example of the translation of the al-Nidaa manuscript. In this example, Sammar is employed to translate the al-Nidaa manifesto. The act of rendering “Arabic rhetoric into English” (Translator 5) is a sterile process that leaves the life worlds and reality of the individuals represented by the oil and tea stains on their handwritten manifesto untranslated. These socio-cultural associations remain extra-textual and visible only to her. For Sammar the manifesto loses its potency as threat and becomes an indication of
“people overwhelmed […] by thinking that nothing should be what it is now” (Translator 24). However, she cannot translate this cultural association because the translation of words for which she is commissioned does not allow her any scope to do this. She can only observe in passing “there is something pathetic about the spelling mistakes, the stains on the paper, in spite of the bravado. There are truths but they are detached, not tied to reality” (Translator 24). The sterile translation process cannot render one life-world into another. For Rae’s scientific purposes the only truths are those represented by the words on the page, the truths about human frailty that Sammar reads in the oil and tea stains remain detached from the objective reality that is prescribed by the words. Rae’s sole interest in the words and logic of the group’s argument prohibits him from understanding the realities of their social context. The translation enables him to conclude: “there is no recourse in Sharia for what they are doing, however much they try to justify themselves” (Translator 24). Rae’s limited interest obscures the worldliness of the text. Said argued that the ethic of professionalism is a barrier to the worldliness of the text and the recognition of “the resistances offered by men, women and social movements to institutions, authorities and orthodoxies” (The World 5). In contrast, Sammar’s empathy with the authors derives from her close relationship with the text and her ability to see that it derives from a larger social canvas and context that is lost in the translation from lived experience into logical argument.

Translation is a fraught process where different epistememes are forced to accommodate each other. The narrative reveals that forms of representation fail Others where difference derives from an alternative epistemological system. As Majid argues “translations or even philosophical speculations about difference are stamped with inescapable prejudices” (Unveiling 133). Sammar describes the
experience of translating for interrogators of terrorist suspects as a violent process where she worked at “pushing Arabic into English, English into Arabic” (Translator 143). She cannot render their responses fully into English and nor can she fully render the questions to them into Arabic. Valuable information is lost in translation and the process leaves her as spent and “numb” and as “weary,” “thin” and “disillusioned” as the young men she interviewed (Translator 143). Essential cultural and social meaning is lost in translation because language contains and reflects the epistemological basis of a culture. The author gives the example of the Qur’an as illustrating the challenge of rendering meaning across language because its “meanings can be translated but not reproduced” (Translator 112). Rae’s understanding of the Qur’an is limited because he lacks experiential knowledge of living as a Muslim. Simply learning about Islam does not translate into an understanding of this experience: “He knew a lot. But he did not know about the stream of Kawthar, the Day of Promises, or what stops the heart from rusting. And the balance he admired. He would not understand it until he lived it” (Translator 105). As a translator, Sammar acknowledges that Rae’s capacity to understand is limited by his interpretive frameworks. She questions the tenacity of his paradigms: “how much of the truth could he take, without a look of surprise crossing his eyes” (Translator 6). The author’s reflections on the translator’s difficulties raise important questions about the efficacy of the interpretive frameworks applied normatively to appropriately translate the experience represented in the novel for the reader. The limitations posed by applying Eurocentric concepts unquestioningly to the novel mean that opportunities for accepting something different are impeded. The challenge is how to create that openness to enable the reader to be more critically aware of the frameworks that
they apply. To draw this out, Aboulela stages Rae’s conversion to Islam to demonstrate the Eurocentric core embedded within many normative interpretive frameworks.

**The logic of conversion to Islam: decentring the West as dominant paradigm**

Everything in my religion comes from this. The words of the Qu’ran which you told me the seventh-century Pope dismissed as heresy […]

Now tell me if you believe or not […].

When she turned around, he said ‘I am not sure.’ […].

‘I wish I never trusted you,’ she said and saw pain in his eyes. ‘What did you imagine all this was going to lead to? (Translator 112-16)

The staging of Rae’s conversion to Islam draws out the Eurocentrism underpinning the expectations of Western readers. The mundane example of the romance trope is used to demonstrate the insidious nature of the West’s ideological hegemony. For many readers, Sammar’s insistence on Rae’s conversion is read as proof of Islam’s intolerance. In a defining moment in the narrative, Rae refuses Sammar’s request to convert so that they can marry. A bitter exchange of words follows and Sammar leaves Scotland for Sudan. The futility of this relationship without his conversion is pre-empted early in the text by Sammar’s friend Yasmin who prepares both Sammar and the reader for the impending impasse. In an interview, the author explains the political imperative for staging the conversion:
I was often asked, “Why should Rae convert, why should religion be an obstacle etc. etc.? In my answer I would then fall back on Jane Eyre and say “From an Islamic point of view, why can’t Mr Rochester be married to both Bertha and Jane? In the same way that I, as a Muslim reader, respect and empathise with Jane’s very Christian dilemma, I want Western/Christian readers to respect and empathise with Sammar’s very Muslim dilemma. (qtd in Stotesbury 8)

It is difficult to assess Aboulela’s success at enabling readers’ empathy with Sammar’s Muslim dilemma. The narrative lends itself to supporting a reading of Islam’s intolerance and such a reading would not foster empathy for Sammar. For example, Sammar’s insistence can be read as intransigence, it is simply “not enough” for her that Rae wants to represent “what was reasonable and right” amidst the prejudice and hypocrisy but does not convert (Translator 114). Her responses convey a sense of superiority: Rae should not even have looked at her, she tells him, if he had not considered conversion (Translator 116). Rae’s understanding of the importance of his conversion to Sammar is evident because he has “empathy” for her (Translator 114). Sammar’s insistence, however, jars strongly with normative assumptions associated with the romance genre that do not require this conversion, making it difficult to engender empathy in the reader.

In his article, “To love the Orientalist: Masculinity in Leila Aboulela’s The Translator,” Brendan Smyth suggests that the inclusion of Muslim beliefs in the novel forces the reader to examine how romance narratives are encoded with Western, Christian religious conventions that are invisible to Western readers (177). Notwithstanding this important observation, Smyth does not develop his argument further. The impasse between Rae and Sammar creates a point of tension
that draws out the culturally laden expectations about marriage encoded within the Romance that are specific to Western society. Empathy is only achieved when the reader critically examines the presumptions that underpin their discomfort over Sammar’s insistence and acknowledges that assumptions they consider as normative are far from universal.

The tension that arises from the insistence on conversion demonstrates that the Manichean dilemma that presents itself between Islam and the West is underpinned by the desire for ideological hegemony. Readers informed by the Western liberal perspective view the insistence on conversion as evidence of Islam’s backwardness and their own perspective of freedom from religious dictates as more advanced. As Chakrabarty argues, the hegemony of European enlightenment principles has resulted in the valorisation of the secular vision of the human, the unenlightened are viewed as backward in comparison. Aboulela presents a way out of the Manichean dilemma between Islam and Western society by showing that each is as viable. In the novel, neither Islamic nor Western values are valorised. The difficulty in establishing a hierarchy of one over the other is acutely illustrated when Sammar reflects on Rae’s pedagogical messages about Islam: “Did he teach his students that the difference between Western liberalism and Islam was that the centre of one was freedom and the other justice? (Translator 168).”

Aboulela provides more examples in the novel of how each system merely represents a way through which to deal with the reality of living in the world. Many examples are given throughout the novel of how the different value systems arising from Islam and Western secularism are reflected in mundane life. Sammar notices that Khartoum and Aberdeen both move to different daily rhythms with
ritualistic regularity: in Aberdeen it is the rhythm of commerce and work whereas in Sudan it is the rituals of prayer. Each provides a foundation and a focus through which to maintain a sense of regularity in otherwise chaotic and uncontrollable environments. In Aberdeen, “superhuman” people do not “let the elements stand in their way” (Translator 3) and “shops must open, people must get to work” in spite of the weather (Translator 107). In Sudan the daily prayers occur in spite of the power cuts and water shortages that reflect the chaos of Sudanese infrastructure. During Sammar’s darkest hours of grief, the five daily prayers provided a focus for getting through the day. They were the “last touch with normality, without them she would have fallen, lost awareness of the shift of day into night.” (Translator 15). These examples enable the author to show that chaos and human frailty are common to both situations, in spite of the different epistemological systems used. In Sudan and in Islamic culture there is the deference to divine will whereas the focus on “this world” in Scotland reflects its secularism (Translator 105). Rae explains the difference in terms of the attitude towards religion:

In this society, the speculation is that God is out playing golf. With few exceptions and apart from those who are self-convinced atheists, the speculation is that God has put up this elaborate solar system and left it to run itself. It does not need Him to maintain it or sustain it in anyway. Mankind is self-sufficient. (Translator 37)

The reading of religion as faith according to European enlightenment principles has limited universal application. The enlightenment liberated people from their beliefs in tradition and religion by emphasising individual agency and freedom over divine ordination. In contrast, throughout the Islamic world the
phrase “insha’Allah” is used to acknowledge that fate is “etched out by Allah Almighty” (Translator 65). The example of the “get well soon” card that Rae receives from his daughter demonstrates this contrast. For Sammar the sentiments expressed in the card reflect an “order” rather than a “wish” or “prayer” and suggests that her father’s health was in her hands (Translator 92). The reality is that mere mortals feel that they lack control over fate, as neither Sammar nor her husband Tariq could have foreseen Tariq’s death in a tragic accident on a rare sunny day in Aberdeen “without warning, without being ill, like a little facial hair is pulled out by the tweezers” (Translator 23). Sammar’s reflections on the challenge of accepting divine will in this instance convey that this attitude is deliberately cultivated:

The ifs were like snakes, hissing, if Tariq had gone out a minute earlier, a minute later, if he had seen that old man driving towards him, if it had been a cloudy day like so many of this city’s cloudy days. The ifs were poisonous snakes, whispering. For years the ifs had tangled up her mind, tugged away at her faith, made her unable to walk up the stairs.

(Translator 51)

The encoded ambivalence indicates a struggle between forms of submission: on the one hand to divine intervention and on the other to the arrogance of human agency. Similarly, though comforted by the Azan that reminds her that “there was something bigger than all this, above everything, Allah Akbar, Allah Akbar” (Translator 130), Sammar knows that more worldly considerations have also played a part. These include laws that granted her British citizenship during a time “when the demand for people to translate Arabic into English was bigger than the supply” (Translator 65). Ghazoul explains the meaning of this struggle:
The sacred that Aboulela espouses is neither an abstraction, nor a dogma, nor is it empty rituals. Rather it is the struggle within against the incontinence of desire and the need to grasp the essence of the religious experience. The fiction’s voice is unmistakably that of a woman articulating the lived experience and the unlived dreams of a segment of society that has often been condemned to silence or made to succumb to patriarchy. (Ghazoul par. 13)

Aboulela’s narrative emphasises the shared humanity between the secular West and Islamic societies and rejects the normative articulation of Islam’s difference. As Majid argues, the “secular West is still being defined more by what it claims not to be than with what it has in common with other civilizations” (Freedom 9). The effect on the reader of Aboulela’s narrative is to highlight the common humanity between Islamic and secular societies. Her characters grapple with the fear of human mortality, the inability to control fate, avert disaster and resist chaos. Rae’s personal story conveys this aspect succinctly. The struggle to cultivate faith that Aboulela depicts defies the hegemony of both secular and Islamic religious narratives. It provides a way to think through the Manichean construction of the struggle between Islam and the West because of its focus on a common humanity rather than on the differences.

Aboulela emphasises the untenability of the clash of civilisations thesis and of the need for alternative ways to contemplate it to reiterate the unsustainability of the Manichean perspective. Islam is the religion of choice for many people from diverse nations and cultures: “You know it’s for everyone. You know it’s not just for Arabs. You know the figures, you know more than me how much percentage are Chinese, Russians” (Translator 114). The sheer numbers
prove that Islamic humanism is as viable as secular humanism. Moreover, as Sammar reminds Rae, its liberatory potential is proven by the fact that its initial converts were women and slaves. Its vast appeal in the non-Western world makes it untenable to alienate and marginalise large proportions of the world community.

Consequently, Rae’s conversion is a highly symbolic act because it undermines the premise that Islamic societies must adopt Western notions of humanism for their betterment. His conversion reverses the rescue narrative of the Muslim woman and conveys the message that the secular, white male finds redemption through faith in Islam. For greater impact, the author pre-empts the conversion by subverting the figure of the Orientalist, a signal of the discourse’s decline and irrelevance. Rae is not the strong, masculine, white Orientalist male but is unhealthy, sickly and old instead (Smyth 171). The conversion reasserts an Islamic worldview and destabilises the hegemony of the Western secular worldview. Eurocentric enlightenment principles embedded in scholarship reveal themselves in attitudes and practices that continue to reinforce the West’s intellectual hegemony. Rae’s objectivity and impartiality, the measures of his authority provide a practical example of this. He had studied Islam only because it could advance his authority in the field of Middle East politics. Though he accepted Muslims’ own “vision of the Qur’an” and “what they say about it” (Translator 79), he is not drawn to convert. In his view there is a difference between studying Islam for what it revealed about the politics of the Middle East and for studying it for himself (Translator 114). True to his discipline, Islam is an object of study not a discourse that he would personally subscribe to. His objectivity belies his hypocrisy and he projects “arrogance” onto Muslims who are confused by his representations and cannot imagine why someone who
acknowledged the Qur’an as the truth would not accept the religion (Translator 79). His arrogance reflects a belief in the superiority of his values. What Muslims say about the Qur’an is different to accepting its truth-value per se. He cannot convert until he relinquishes his claim to discursive control over the truth. When he does convert, his contemporaries discredit his motivations and attribute this to a mid-life crisis. Their actions reflect a collegiate view that he has erred and strayed from “the truth” (Translator 181). His conversion signals that he has accepted the limitations of the West’s discursive control. At this point he stops viewing the religion as an object of study and “wants it for [himself] separate from the work” (Translator 181). This conversion changes him from paternalistic Orientalist, disengaged intellectual “above all this, above [Sammar] looking down” (Translator 114) to being on a par with Sammar and believing in a religion that is much maligned in the current global political context. The conversion reasserts an Islamic worldview and destabilises the hegemony of the Western secular worldview.

Conclusion

Aboulela’s project in The Translator reasserts the Islamic worldview as equally valid as that perpetuated by the West. In an interview, she explained that she did not set out to prove that “Khartoum is nicer than London, more beautiful than Edinburgh […]. Not to prove, but to express, to show that it is a valid place, a valid way of life beyond the stereotypical images of famine and war, not a backward place to be written off” (“Moving Away” 204). The different life-worlds that she represents are not fully translatable but not incompatible within the Western metropolis. This compatibility is brought out through the formalities
Sammar has to follow to inform two people of her intention to accept Rae’s marriage proposal:

She was going to write letters in two languages. They would say the same thing but not be a translation. She wrote to Fareed first: long and cordial paragraphs, greetings hoping that his wife and children were well, in good health. When she finished, she folded up the papers, put them in an envelope, wrote out an address in Stirling.

She wrote to Rae. One transparent sheet of airmail paper, a few lines. On the envelope she wrote Aberdeen, Scotland. (Translator 173)

The careful but specific stipulation of addresses in the United Kingdom makes a statement for the coexistence of these life-worlds within the Western metropolis. The different formats and languages adopted for each letter acknowledges that though their epistemological systems and modes of expression differ, on this occasion, they can receive the same message and reflect the same values. In her novel Minaret, published six years later, Aboulela continues the themes that commenced in The Translator of exposing the Eurocentric values that prove a barrier to accepting Islam as a valid discourse. The characters in Minaret are situated in London and the centrepiece is London’s Regent Street mosque.

A mosque on Regent Street: Minaret and finding refuge in Islam

We never get lost because we can see the minaret of the mosque and head home to it. (Aboulela, Minaret 208)

Minaret was published in 2005 and during a period that is characterised by the
increased politicisation of Islam. Regular terrorist attacks in the Western world carried out by Islamic extremists fuelled this climate. Several months after the book was published the fatal London bombings of 7 July, 2005 occurred. Britain was plunged into a state of crisis with the knowledge that “home-grown” suicide bombers detonated the bombs. All four bombers were Muslims, three of whom were born in Britain while the fourth was a Muslim convert who had emigrated. Coincidentally, Minaret had been scheduled for serialisation on BBC’s Radio 4 programme “A Book at Bedtime” in the weeks after the bombings. This was timely for a population straining under the weight of the heightened tensions with Muslims and Islam. The book offered an opportunity for understanding but was also daringly different because it offered an alternative perspective on Islam to that presented in the mainstream media. The book’s publication also coincided with public debates about hijab including the banning of head scarves in France. Minaret’s central image of the woman taking on the headscarf in the course of deepening her faith prompts an alternative view to prevailing discourses about the symbolism of the veil. The book was also different because it posited Islam as a refuge and religion of choice for a woman living in central London. This message repudiates the assumption of the liberatory potential offered to Muslims by Western values. It implied that moving to the West did not diminish Islam’s attraction or viability but in fact enhanced it.

In this novel Aboulela continues to demonstrate how normative interpretive frameworks used in the West reflect Eurocentric values. In The Translator she used the trope of the romance genre to show the Eurocentric expectations about marriage and religion that underpinned how the West reads the romance genre. In this novel, the author specifically shows how discourses on
Western feminism hinder the appreciation of women’s religious agency in Islam. Discourses about the oppression of Muslim women continue to posit the backwardness of Islam and reinforce its difference. This story about the liberal Muslim woman’s reaffirmation of faith in downtown London urges the reader to greater critical reflection about the paradigms offered by the West. Her story suggests that the paradigms offered in the West do not present viable solutions for oppression in themselves.

Aboulela uses a complex structure where past and present, religious and secular viewpoints are woven together to present Najwa’s story. Najwa is a Sudanese woman whose family could be characterised as liberal Muslims. At university she falls for Anwar, a politically aware atheist who is part of the student-led coup that overthrows the Government in which her father was an official. Najwa, her brother and mother flee Sudan for London. Her father is detained then hanged. Shortly afterwards, her brother is imprisoned for drug related offences and her mother dies from cancer. Najwa eventually finds work as a maid to wealthy Arab families. The book spans a twenty-year period and documents Najwa’s downward economic spiral, her two love affairs, and the deepening of her faith. The first affair occurs with Anwar in London and the second takes place twenty years later with Tamer, the devout college age son of the wealthy family that she works for. These relationships dialogically reflect on the deepening of faith that occurs with each experience.

My reading of the text will focus on themes that extend Aboulela’s project of decentring the West’s epistemological hegemony. In this novel the characterisation of Najwa, the female protagonist, appears to support the narrative of Islam’s oppression of women. Her acquiescence to fate supports the view that
her religion is oppressive and denies her a sense of agency. The opening lines to the book are particularly provocative in this respect: “I’ve come down in the world. I’ve slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn’t much room to move. Most of the time I’m used to it. Most of the time I’m good. I accept my sentence and do not brood or look back” (Minaret 1). Book reviews of Minaret that focus on the narrative of healing and transformation through Islam acknowledge that the book writes against the paradigm of the religion’s oppressiveness. Predictably, reviews focus on unravelling the author’s inspiration to write about the conversion, which in the process reiterates the novelty and unexpectedness of the idea. In the interview with Anita Sethi published in *The Observer*, Aboulela claims that London freed her from the social pressures that in Khartoum prevented her from developing her faith. Furthermore, she argued, the life changes that occurred in London revealed to her that a religious identity provided more stability than a national identity. My reading is inspired by this statement and by the author’s project to “make Islam more familiar to the reader” (qtd in Sethi). These reviews do not explore the tensions created by the unexpectedness of this narrative. The interpretive frameworks used by readers in the West when applied to the text create tensions that urge the reader toward a more critical evaluation of the paradigms they apply to the process.

My reading will expand on the themes that arise from the author’s assertion about the conduciveness of the West towards the deepening of religious conviction. I will read Najwa’s religious conviction against normative assumptions about feminist agency to show that these assumptions are challenged

61 For a sampling of reviews that elaborate on this theme, see Phillips and Sethi.
by her decisions. The analysis concludes with a close examination of the kind of identity politics that the author advocates in the novel that suggests a different way to conceptualise it.

**The freedom to choose to be religious**

So there’s more freedom for Muslim women to be religious in Britain? Oh definitely. But then you have to decide what you are going to do with all this freedom,’ she says with a laugh. ‘You can do what you like, so being religious is one of the things I chose. (Aboulela, qtd in Sethi)

The novel empties the normative trajectory into modernity and Western secularism of meaning and value through Najwa’s conversion to Islam. To emphasise the implication of this conversion, Aboulela stages Westernised society as being conducive to the development of faith instead of discouraging it. In a number of interviews Aboulela explains that the convergence in London of a range of personal and social factors resulted in her decision to deepen her faith and practice her religion openly. London afforded certain social freedoms that made it easier for her to exercise a personal choice about religion. Being in London freed her from the social pressures exerted by her circle of liberal Muslim friends who were Westernised and frowned upon overt manifestations of religion such as the hijab. Furthermore, the difficulties of adapting to another country made her realise that a religious identity was something of which she could not be divested. Susan Mansfield reports in *The Scotsman* that Aboulela held that the secularism of London also made more overt the absence of religion from mundane life requiring her “to make an effort to put it into [hers].” This personal narrative establishes the
context for Najwa’s conversion in the novel. This narrative critiques the assumption that moving to the West liberates Muslim women from their oppression under Islam.

Aboulela reveals the hollow concepts of freedom contained within discourses of modernity to emphasise Islam’s appeal. The dialogism that results from the narrative structure as it weaves past and present to reflect lifestyles shaped first by liberal and then religious frameworks draws out the difference. Through the narrative the predictable signs of modernity and tradition are indicated as superficial markers that conceal deep cultural and social ramifications about modernity’s corollaries. The narrative reveals that the values espoused fail to bring meaningful fulfilment. The close association of modernity with the West brings with it cultural alienation. Modernity was associated with freedom of choice, parties, makeup, mini-skirts, drugs and music. Predictably, the modern girls viewed the religious girls as backward and traditional. As a young woman in Sudan, Najwa is described as “Westernised” and “detached from Sudanese traditions” (Minaret 230). She spoke English fluently, wore Western clothes, listened to pop music, holidayed in Europe every summer and knew little about Sudan outside of Khartoum. Modernity fostered an orientation towards the West and away from Sudan, its culture and values. In contrast the religious girls wore the tobe, Sudanese traditional dress and practiced Islamic customs such as Ramadan and the daily prayers. Modernity also fostered arrogance through the cult of the individual. Najwa’s father embezzles money from the government and takes bribes and Najwa is rejected from college because she is too proud to milk a cow (Minaret 126). Their family’s appetite for materialism fosters excess: the family lives a life of extravagance while the poor continue to languish without
education, food, shoes or clothes. Bereft of family and a means of financial support in London, Najwa continues to manifest these values and her life of excess is manifested in her weight gain and burping garlic. Freedom without regard for consequence nurtures a destructive self-interest. To dramatically expose the emptiness of promises about freedom, Aboulela reveals that exploitation is also the corollary to the cult of the individual.

The euphoric narrative of the promise of modernity is sustained only by the silencing of those other narratives that reveal the cost of submitting to its ethos. The social pressure to conform to the outward markers of modernity requires the individual to submit to its ethos. The pressure that Anwar exerts on Najwa to have sex with him is a good example of the potentially exploitative nature of this kind of coercion. He persuades Najwa by convincing her that she was “Westernised,” “modern” and “independent” (Minaret 176). He coaxes her with his memories of her as “the girl in the tight short skirt who spoke private school English, who flirted and laughed, was daring and adventurous” (Minaret 244). He convinces her that a relationship with him made her a “true Londoner” able to now take a “quiz in a magazine” rating her sex life and her lover (Minaret 176). Anwar’s relentless pressuring is rewarded because Najwa eventually succumbs, though for her the promise of exercising her freedom of choice in being liberated from tradition, being daring and modern, amount to nothing. The moment takes a negative cast as she reflects on her disappointment: “I would have preferred the breathlessness of a wedding, its glow of approval, not his room smelling of cigarettes, the sheets he rarely changed, not his flatmates’ laughter, the knowing way they now looked at me” (Minaret 176). Her experience of great emptiness contrasts sharply with Anwar’s claims to her enjoyment: “I dreamed of
nothing, no happy dreams, and no sad dreams” (Minaret 177). She is unable to vocalise these misgivings while Anwar insists she is enjoying herself. The silencing of her narrative is indicative of the submission that is required to perpetuate the empty promise of modernity’s freedom. Anwar does not realise his hypocrisy when he argues that Najwa’s guilt derives from having been “brainwashed” like every other Arab girl “about the importance of virginity” (Minaret 175). His persuasiveness enables him to exploit her love for him sexually and materially. While he courts Najwa for sex and money he plans to marry a traditional girl in Sudan. Their relationship reveals that representations of freedom can indicate an absence of social and individual responsibility. Najwa’s epiphany is insightful when she realises that her freedom to have a lover like Anwar exacts a personal price because she is no longer protected by the raft of social obligations: “A few years back getting pregnant would have shocked Khartoum society, given my father a heart attack [...]. And now nothing, no one. This empty space was called freedom” (Minaret 175). The empty space of freedom is devoid of any sense of social or individual obligation. Najwa’s gnawing sense of loss is clear indication that the exercise of will alone is not enough to provide fulfilment. The narrative exposes the emptiness behind the liberatory potential offered by the West.

In contrast, Islam is seen to offer fulfilment because its ethos provides structure, meaning and purpose for individuals in society. Through Islam Najwa has social and individual responsibilities that situate her in a meaningful relationship with family, community and with God. For example, everyone in London believed that her mother’s death freed her from responsibility, “that [she] didn’t need me anymore, that I was free” (Minaret 135). Islam taught her that she

293
could pray for her mother’s sins, because her mother needed her prayers, even in death. Islam gives her a purpose in life: “prayers will ease the hardship and loneliness of their grave or it will reach them as bright, beautiful gifts” (Minaret 245). Islam also provides an explanation for why she “came down in the world” (Minaret 240). It is a philosophy for living that resonates with human frailty in a universe that cannot always be within an individual’s control: “No matter how much you love someone they will die. No matter how much health you have or money, there is no guarantee that one day you will not lose it” (Minaret 243). It is also an ethos for living that is centred on community rather than the individual. So when the women from the mosque prepare her mother’s body for the funeral they do it because it is the right thing to do, not because of who she is. Islam provides her with an antidote for the focus on individualism in society through its sense of purpose. Prayer gives her hope and the opportunity to make restitution: “The rest of the year I have hope, but in Ramadan I have confidence, the certainty that if I keep plodding this path, Allah will give me back that happiness again, will replace the past with something grander, more potent and enhanced” (Minaret 189). This belief in restitution through faith challenges normative liberal assumptions about agency and individual freedom. Whilst Islam provides Najwa with a sense of purpose its underlying principles reflect pre-European enlightenment values. The secular worldview that emerged after the enlightenment reflected the “recalibration and redefinition of human morality to adjust it to a new social calculus that excluded traditional religious commitments” (Majid, Unveiling 2). Individuals, Majid writes, were sent into the world to maximise their self-interest (Unveiling 2). Najwa’s decision represents the opposite of this maxim. The text’s worldliness, however, would suggest that this act would be considered to
provocatively support the notion of Islam’s backwardness. The imperative to comprehend this trajectory in the context of normative assumptions of Feminist agency requires a closer examination of the tenacity of these concepts and their underlying assumptions.

Rethinking piety and agency

If you measure it with the kind of measurements of the West, yes, you will reach this conclusion. But if you actually live it, inside it, it feels different. (Aboulela, qtd in Mansfield)

In an interview with The Scotsman Aboulela alluded to the limitations of Western epistemological frameworks to represent the meaning of the lived experience of an Islamically inspired existence. Najwa’s behaviour as a devout Muslim woman is easily read as confirming women’s oppression under Islam. Her story reveals behaviour that is considered anathema to the Western conceptualisation of Feminist agency and modernity because she does not reflect or choose the values of Western feminism. Her faith sees her turning away from materialism and towards the austerity inspired by her faith. Longer skirts and a headscarf replace mini-skirts, and prayer and reflection to cleanse her soul replace superficial facial scrubs. Even more troubling are the romantic dreams that she shares with devout Tamer that are reminiscent of twelfth-century romances and medievalism. Together they dream of swords and horses and she dreams of deriving fulfilment as his concubine and slave. These dreams support the perception that Islam aspires to impose an archaic sensibility through an outdated system of sharia law on a modern world that cannot accommodate it.
In the absence of published critique about readers’ reactions to the novel, material from an online literary blog “Eve’s Alexandria” reveals the strength of disappointment that this narrative can arouse. It is recounted here because it demonstrates the imperative to understand the intention behind telling a story that could so easily be appropriated to support the narrative of Islam’s oppression:

Perhaps there is something incredibly brave about writing a woman and her religious experience this way and in this environment, positing religious belief as a balm to loneliness and conscious obedience as a safety net, the outside world as a threat and the mosque as refuge. After all, many women world over – Christian, Jewish, Muslim – feel this way both strongly and positively. Still, there is something I find faintly disturbing and more than faintly repressive about it all.

These misgivings suggest the imperative to question the efficacy of the normative interpretive frameworks used in the West to translate the author’s intentions. At the beginning of this thesis I indicated that the project was underscored by the need to understand if these paradigms enabled the voice of the author or impeded it. As Said and Mohanty have emphasised, the impact of the author’s intervention is affected by the worldliness of the text: how it is interpreted, read and located. The tension created by the author’s project to inform about Islam with the deployment of tropes that perpetuate stereotypes about it suggest that the interpretive paradigms deployed normatively may serve as barriers to her interventions. This is indicative of the difficulty of bearing witness in the Western market that is driven by very different philosophical systems to that offered by the author through the expression of religious piety.

62 For more insight into this position, see Mohanty, “Under” 77-82 and Said, The World 35.
Saba Mahmood’s work on religious piety in Egyptian women proved that agency is found in the conscious cultivation of religious piety in Islam. Mahmood argues that notions of agency in Western feminist scholarship are limited in their application to devout Muslim women. These notions of agency situate the subject’s autonomy in relation to power and limit our ability to understand the lives of women who are shaped by non-liberal traditions (203). Discourses of Western feminism are largely shaped by Western social thought and paradigms of freedom, emancipation and self-realisation are naturalised in gender discourses. The normative subject of poststructuralist feminist theory is “largely conceptualised in terms of resistance to social norms” (Mahmood 208). The depiction of Muslim women in the novel offers a different paradigm through which to identify agency than is normatively represented.

Mahmood argues that the kind of agency demonstrated by the pious Muslim women that she studied is indicative of “different forms of personhood, knowledge and experience” (209). Najwa’s agency is characterised by subordination not resistance. Liberal feminist discourse identifies agency through signs of resistance to external controls and power whereas Najwa’s goals of piety, modesty and faith are not represented by these discourses. Cultivating her faith requires a process of conscious intentionality that is described as “control” but effectively requires subjugation, cultivation and resilience of both body and spirit (Minaret 207). The challenge in exercising this control is symbolically represented by the difficulty in subjugating the body. So, Najwa’s first attempts at fasting are an abysmal failure and she feels faint and gives up, frustrated at her “body’s refusal to obey” (Minaret 235). Even her hair resists the first attempt at veiling: resistant curls struggle against the weight of the thin fabric covering her head, and
eventually escape, “springing” around her forehead and above her ears and at the back leaving the scarf flopping at a “defeated angle” (Minaret 245). Wearing the headscarf requires her to obscure her beauty. It makes her look older and less attractive (Minaret 245). Najwa’s work is focused on developing control over her desires in the form of a struggle against the self. Her orientation is towards an internal state of being: this is the “scrub [she] needed. Exfoliation, clarifying, deep-pore cleanse [. . .] Now they were for [her] soul not [her] skin” (Minaret 247). Najwa’s cultivation of piety positions her in opposition to the norms of liberal discourse. It conceptualises identity on humility and obedience not on the arrogance of the cult of the individual.

Najwa’s subservience to divine ordination repudiates enlightenment principles of objective science and individual agency. The introduction to the book concludes with a paragraph that clearly states her convictions: “The mercy of Allah is an ocean. Our sins are a lump of clay clenched between the beak of a pigeon. The pigeon is perched on the branch of a tree at the edge of that ocean. It only has to open its beak” (Minaret 4). Where the enlightenment ethos situates the human in control of destiny, for Najwa, restitution comes from plodding a path with Allah through faith and prayer (Minaret 189). This subservience requires deliberate cultivation even though it is described in language reflecting struggle. Mahmood suggests that this kind of agency can be understood not as a “synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable” (“Feminist” 210). Najwa’s subordination to the divine creates opportunities for agency to be demonstrated in ways that reflect the subjugation of the body and the mind. Talal Asad explains this in his chapter on “Agency and Pain” in his book Formations of the Secular.
Here he argues that pain is a “kind of action” (69). Asad suggests that this derives from the concept of “ensoulment” which is the “idea the living body is an integrated totality having developable capacities for activity and experience unique to it.” These capacities are culturally mediated but many traditions attribute to the living human body the potential to be shaped for good or ill (Formations 89). An essential aspect of how Najwa chooses to cultivate her faith is to cultivate her body to good through prayer, modesty and piety. Mahmood suggests that this kind of agency is similar to the devotion exhibited by the classical pianist who submits to the painful regime of practice as well as a hierarchical relationship of apprenticeship in order to master the craft. Agency is predicated on humility and the receptiveness to being taught. She suggests that this reveals the “malleability required of someone to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge – a meaning that carries less a sense of passivity and more that of struggle, effort, exertion and achievement” (210). Cultivating Islamic piety and its virtues gives her “hope” and fills her with “mercy,” “warmth” and “shelter” (Minaret 247). The realisation afforded by this practice of faith indicates that Najwa is motivated by a different ontology to that valued by Western society. The goals of liberation and emancipation that are espoused by liberal Western society cannot be assumed to hold true universally. As Mahmood argues, there are different conceptual relationships between body, self, and moral agency” and no one particular model should be held as axiomatic (209).

In this respect, the model demonstrated in the text indicates the imperative to consider not just historical and cultural specificity but also the epistemological values that underpin the relationships between women and society. In “Under Western Eyes” Mohanty argued for the need to restore historical and cultural
specificity to women’s experiences and struggles to prevent the hegemonisation of Western feminism. Her critique was foundational in setting the groundwork for greater critical awareness of the application of Western feminism to transnational dialogues. Aboulela’s novel demonstrates the imperative to consider the different epistemological underpinnings to women’s experiences because the Eurocentric discourses through which their experiences are articulated may not adequately represent these values. Aboulela’s treatment of the veil provides a good example of this. The highly politicised discourses about the veil reflect normative assumptions about women and agency that are centred on resistance. In Western discourses the veil is a sign of Islam’s backwardness and repression of women. It is also appropriated to represent resistance to Westernisation, nationalism and fundamentalism. These discourses are evidence of what Majid classifies as the shallowness that has characterised the question of feminism in Islam (Unveiling 110). In the novel Najwa’s decision has nothing to do with resistance to Westernisation and neither is it a reflection of fundamentalism or nationalism. Najwa’s decision to wear the veil is highly personal and represents a longing to demonstrate and embody religious piety and conviction. It requires the exercise of will in learning to “restrain rather than to offer” (Minaret 246). She reflects that it made her “invisible” to the builders who used to leer at her and realises that all this fuss was really just about how she looked, “nothing else” (Minaret 247). The treatment of veiling in the novel resists being drawn into highly politicised debates and remains firmly anchored on the personal motivations to this choice. Mahmood reflected that little attention is given to the fact that for many Muslim women, the veil or headscarf is based on the notion of female piety as an Islamic virtue (“Feminist” 209). Shifting the attention away from highly politicised objectives to
the personal drive for piety prevents the act rendered in the novel from being appropriated as a normative form of resistance to structures of control delimited by Western thinking. Najwa’s decision to wear the veil has nothing to do with politicised causes but everything to do with an identity formation that presents an alternative to the discourses that have emerged from the West.

Another way to think about identity

My mother is Egyptian. I’ve lived everywhere except the Sudan: In Oman, Cairo, here. My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess no, I don’t feel very Sudanese though I would like to be. I guess being Muslim is my identity. (Minaret 110)

In the postmodern context, this preference for a stable identity platform represents a different identity politics to the notion of hybridity favoured by cultural theorists. The sense of alienation and exile that seeps through Tamer’s reflections quoted here support the contention that he exemplifies the celebrated personas of Said’s “out of place” or Bhabha’s “unhomely.” His identity is severed from an essentialist, nativist one and replaced with multiple sites of belonging. These characteristics lend themselves to interpretation through postcolonial discourses because the tropes of migration, diaspora and exile have offered paradigms that have often been used to interpret cultural contact and dislocation. Cultural theorists like Homi Bhabha, James Clifford, Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, suggest that subjects are transformed through the experience of cultural contact. They argue that this transformation enables the subject to define identity situationally
through a conscious process of engaging and negotiating its constituent parts. The terminology used in this field conveys this fluidity: for Hall the subject is defined “not by essence or purity,” for Gilroy it is the politics of transformation and transfiguration (qtd in Braziel and Mannur 5) and for Bhabha the subject is “new, neither the one nor the other” (Location 25). These discourses of hybridity arose in postcolonial Britain to articulate particular moments in its history to legitimise the presence of a multi-cultural population. Hybridity was seen as a response by minorities to a history of colonisation but also to continued minority status in their host countries. These discourses enabled a way to address and accommodate difference without recourse to essentialism. In the postmodern context the concept of hybridity is championed and even expected. With this in mind, Tamer’s choice represents an unexpected identity politics. It is made more provocative because an Islamic identity is viewed as espousing values incompatible with the West.

The privileging of a religious identity as the foundation for a stable identity platform represents a powerful form of resistance to the Eurocentricity that underpins identity discourses that have emerged from the Western metropolis. As discussed earlier in this chapter, discourses of multiculturalism are limited in their capacity to accommodate difference. Islam, moreover, presents values that are deemed to be incompatible with the core values of the Western metropolis. Furthermore, despite utopian promises of the ability to transcend essentialist affiliations, embody impartiality and promote egalitarian identity politics, discourses of hybridity continue to situate the West as the aspirational goal:

Despite colonial attempts to foreground the mutual transculturation of coloniser and colonised, celebrations of hybridity generally refer to the destabilising of colonised culture. The West remains the privileged
meeting ground for all ostensibly cross-cultural conversations.

(Gandhi 136)

Critical analysis of the transformation of the colonial centre in literary criticism is uncommon compared to the emphasis on the transformation of the migrant group. The hybrid subject is normally interpellated by its difference from the colonial centre. The aspirational element is encapsulated by the ethos underpinning most readings of exiled and displaced subjects who are displaced essentially but can never be wholly Westernised.

In cultural studies and literary criticism the concept can be emptied of real meaning through its elasticity to encompass difference. The critical overzealousness to interpellate subjects as hybrids can inadvertently also depoliticise it. As discussed in the earlier chapter on the work of Soueif, the implicit assumption of the author’s hybridity is a barrier to reading an Egyptian sensibility in the text. With respect to this text, readings of hybridity are a barrier to reading the importance of a religious identity. To illustrate how this critical predilection can limit the potential for greater understanding in the novel I draw on critical readings of Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*. Salih’s novel addresses the issues of cultural and social dislocation arising from the colonial experience and is hailed as a classic piece of postcolonial writing. Readings of the novel *Season* situate the protagonist’s struggle in terms of blackness, national and cultural identity. Saree Makdisi for example, suggests that the Manichean struggle that fatally consumes Saeed is indicative of the struggle for a genuinely post-imperial world. Makdisi suggests that the text is dedicated to “readers who do not yet exist: those who can simultaneously see with two eyes, talk with two tongues, and see things both as black and white” (“The Empire” 804-20). Majid’s response
to Makdisi’s reading is that it “upgrades a cosmopolitan hybridity that privileges the aesthetic over the material” (Unveiling 84). These kinds of readings reflect a preoccupation with tropes that reflect diaspora and migration, popular with postcolonial criticism. A reading like this does not account for Saeed’s grounding in an Islamic identity as can be read from this statement made shortly after he returns to his village: “I felt not like a storm-swept feather but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots” (2). Profiling religion over nation reflects Saeed’s Islamic consciousness and indicates that this suffers through dislocation into a different cultural and social reality. Critical readings that focus on hybridity do not elaborate on Saeed’s violent uprooting from an Islamic society and the encoded assumption that this identity cannot be accommodated in the West.

In “Notes on the Post-Colonial” Ella Shohat argues that the concept of hybridity conceals structural differences in power: “Celebrations of syncretism and hybridity per se, if not articulated in conjunction with questions of hegemony and neo-colonial power relations, runs the risk of appearing to sanctify the fait accompli of colonial violence” (109). As discussed in chapter two on the critical treatment of Soueif, readings of hybridity decontextualise the subject and remove it from historical and cultural specificity. This results in what Jacqueline Lo describes as “happy hybridity,” a state of utopian bliss blind to structural inequities. Its emptiness derives from the fact that it “fails to discriminate between the diverse modalities of hybridity, for example, forced assimilation, internalised self-rejection, political cooption, social conformism, cultural mimicry, and creative transcendence” (Shohat, “Notes” 110). Shohat’s critique provides a timely reminder of the coercion that can underpin the formation of the hybrid subjectivity. Ahmad argues that in reality most migrants to the Western metropolis

304
do not enjoy the material privilege that enables them to choose a reality of their own making. The reality for these migrants is vastly different to that of the privileged lifestyles of postcolonial academics who write about hybridity from the vantage point of academic, social and financial success in the first world.  

Ahmad reminds us:

> If we don’t choose our bits of reality, those ‘bits’ will then be chosen for us by our class origins, our jobs, the circuits of our friendships and desires, our ways of spending our leisure time, our literary predilections, our political affiliations – or lack of them. There are no neutral ‘bits,’ not even of not-knowing. (In Theory 138)

This assertion is clearly brought out in the novel because Najwa remains trapped in identities chosen for her until she affirms her faith as a Muslim. She is caught in a lifestyle predefined for her as the daughter of a corrupt official in a wealthy liberal Muslim family. This context creates social expectations about how identity is performed as a Westernised girl. The social pressure to conform does not protect her from the sexual and economic exploitation that occurs later because of her relative powerlessness. Islam provides her with the opportunity for a new beginning and to chart a future of her own making. Membership in the umma with its shared beliefs, structure and social protection enable her to live a reality of her choosing. This choice illustrates what Ahmad argues is the aim for the vast majority of postcolonial and diasporic subjects for a “place from where they might begin anew” (“Politics” 16). Aboulela’s text provides Islamic identity as an

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63 For critique of the positionality of the postcolonial theorist/intellectual, see Ahmad, “The Politics” 13-16 and Dirlik, “The Postcolonial Aura” 328 - 56.
alternative way to conceive of identity politics that is free from the concepts such as race, nation, ethnicity or colour, concepts that reflect colonial prejudices.

The preference for Islamic values over Western values indicates the need to question the hegemony of Western narratives of modernity and enlightenment. In this novel and in *The Translator*, the religious converts expose the need for a different model by which to live in the world. For example, in *Minaret*, Ali Wafaa’s husband is English and was a devout Christian but “felt that the Church was not strict enough” (*Minaret* 241). The multicultural gathering of Muslims at the mosque indicates its appeal transcends race, class, ethnicity and nation. In *The Translator* Rae finds dignity in Islam that is not afforded to him otherwise. In the discussion in chapter two, Soueif’s novels revealed that the lived experience of Western hypocrisy in the practice of enlightenment values had disillusioned many Egyptians and turned them toward Islamism. The choice of Islam transcends the categories that enable the West to continue to inscribe difference and maintain its superiority. Identity discourses veil their debt to the master narrative that derives from European enlightenment. So for example, discourses such as modernity, multiculturalism and assimilation are underpinned by the assumption of the hegemony of the West. Aboulela’s repudiation of this narrative presses the imperative to provincialise Eurocentric narratives. Aboulela’s narrative cannot be coopted into the culturalist debate because of her emphasis on the epistemological differences. Furthermore, her characters do not mimic Westerners to adopt modern practices and behaviours but behave in a way that reflects different values altogether. Anwar and her brother Omar exploit others because value for family and community is not enshrined in their systems. The women at the mosque on the other hand, help her simply because it is the right thing to do. In Aboulela’s work,
it is impossible to ignore the epistemological underpinnings to the way individuals behave and know their world. The author leads the reader to accept the need to consider that her characters move to a different music, and that this is perfectly acceptable. The Islamic worldview provides a framework for living that represents an alternative to that espoused by Western values. Its philosophical system posits a different epistemology to secular liberalism. Adopting the Islamic identity resists the hegemonising tendency of Eurocentric ideas rooted in Western intellectual and social traditions. It represents a challenging and provocative statement in the current geo-political climate in which Islam is much maligned and misrepresented. It is a more powerful form of positioning than hybridity because it refuses to be denied legitimacy. The text’s worldliness however precludes this kind of reading as according to enlightenment values, religion is primarily read as faith.

Conclusion

The West’s insistence on treating Islam as a religious practice through its reluctance to engage with its discursive elements reflects its Eurocentricity. The hegemony of enlightenment philosophies underpins much of the hostility to Islam, particularly when it is articulated as an alternative to the modernity exported, supported and advocated by the West. Western attitudes towards Islamism clearly manifest an assumed superiority. This is evident in the unsympathetic representations of Islamism, portrayed through its radical expressions, not its heterogeneity, its rich and different modes of interpretation, scholarship or philosophical basis. To this end, the portrayal of Islamism in its violent extremist manifestations is a barrier to understanding Islamism as a political discourse.
The imperative to engage with the discursive field of Islamism is persuasively argued by Susan Buck-Morss in her book *Thinking Past Terror*. She argues that Islamism, which is the "politicisation of Islam in a postcolonial context," is a "contemporary discourse of opposition and debate, dealing with issues of social justice, legitimate power, and ethical life in a way that challenges the hegemony of Western political and cultural norms" (2). Buck-Morss argues that Islamism represents "a critique of the way 'modernity' has been experienced by millions of Muslims in the so-called Third-World" (2). Globalisation has not resulted in equal access to development or opportunities. In many cases the global capital economy continues the unequal exploitative relationships that were created during colonialism. Exploitation in its many manifestations continues despite the rhetoric of modernity and progress espoused alongside freemarket ideologies. Authors Aboulela and Soueif note the uneven experience of these ideologies in the Arab and African countries.

The connection between modernity and Westernisation fosters the kind of cultural imperialism Said wrote about in *Culture and Imperialism*. The pursuit of Western style modernity results in an identity crisis for many in the non-Western world. In this context, Muslims attempting to question the dominant logic of late capitalism, have had to challenge a rearticulated version of Orientalism that continues to portray Islam as undifferentiated, monolithic, condemned to clash with the cherished values of the West (Majid, *Unveiling* 22). The secular premises of the West impose:

Serious limitations on progressive theories of inclusion (since the model of change that is envisioned, or rather vaguely suggested, in prevailing postcolonial discourses is heavily coloured by Eurocentric biases) and
have prolonged the false belief that global harmonies remain elusive because of cultural conflicts, not because human cultures are being constantly battered by the capitalist system. (Majid, Unveiling 3)

Majid argues that postcolonial theory is inattentive to the question of Islam in the global economy; this lack in turn exposes its failure to incorporate different regimes of truth into a genuinely multicultural global vision (Unveiling 19). This limitation is clearly demonstrated in Minaret through Anwar’s response to the Islamic revolution in Iran. Anwar is not supportive of the imposition of Islamic law though he is supportive of the deposition of the Shah. Anwar’s condemnation of the Islamic revolution vocalises the deployment in Western media of images designed to reinforce the perception of Islam’s backwardness. He views the photograph in Time magazine of women in black chadors marching with contempt and argues that the turn to Islam represents a case of going “backwards” not forwards (Minaret 34). He cannot imagine that Islam could provide a viable alternative philosophy for Iran in contemporary times. The photograph in Time magazine of militant black chador-clad women combines in powerful symbology to represent Islam’s difference from the West through its oppression of women and its threat to it. The West’s interpretation of the events is usually that the Shah was “modern” but seen as corrupt by Iranians, and his fall was the result of medieval fanaticism and religiosity (Said, Covering Islam xii). This explanation situates Islam as hostile to modernity and fails to see how the Iranians were defining a modernity of their own making through Islam. It is an example of an alternative modernity and identity that is not contingent upon embracing Westernisation.

Aboulela’s work enables the West to read about a Muslim woman’s
perspective without the mediating influence of translation. However, her interventions can be limited because the interpretive frameworks used to read the text continue, as I have shown, to be embedded with Eurocentric concepts. Applying greater critical openness, or the critical secularism that Said espouses, enables close readings that indicate that the author is simply presenting another worldview and that her thesis is that this is not better, simply different.

In this respect her work resonates with a passage in Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* where he articulates this revolutionary view:

So comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions, and societies which draw their inspiration from her. Humanity is waiting for something from us other than such an imitation which would almost be an obscene caricature.

If we want to turn Africa into a new Europe, and America into a new Europe, then let us leave the destiny of our countries to Europeans. They will know how to do it better than the most gifted among us.

But if we want humanity to advance a step further, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries.

If we wish to live up to our people’s expectations, we must seek the response elsewhere than in Europe. (254)

The message valorises the periphery – the South, Islam, the colonised, the Other – as being sources of knowledge and a way forward that counters the hegemony of the West. By assigning value outside of Europe difference can be valued for what it is and the world can indeed be at home with the difference that comprises it.
Conclusion

But everytime Western values are mentioned they produce in the native a sort of stiffening or muscular lock-jaw. [...] The violence with which the supremacy of white values is affirmed and the aggressiveness which has permeated the victory of these values over the ways of life and of thought of the native mean that, in revenge, the native laughs in mockery when Western values are mentioned in front of him. In the colonial context, the settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man’s values. (Fanon 33-34)

In The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon stated simply and clearly that the West’s hypocrisy had condoned the dehumanising instruments of colonialism on Algerians. Written in 1961 while the Algerians fought for independence from their French colonisers, Fanon’s astute observations are, chillingly, as relevant today as they were then. Discourses that appear to be representative of Western liberalism continue to exert a form of epistemic violence. They are incapable of dealing with Otherness and perpetuate difference in more covert ways. Two chapters in dialogue with each other that represent the extremes of how this epistemic violence is experienced, bracket the analysis in this thesis. In chapter one Suad Amiry and Riverbend depict how the dehumanisation and violation of human rights in Palestine and Iraq are carried out daily under cover of a state of exception. Discourses that enable this assert the moral superiority of the oppressors and dehumanise the oppressed. The power of these discourses is
evident in the general apathy of the West in the face of the daily civil and human rights abuses that are publicly reported by NGOs, the UN and other international organisations. In chapter four, Leila Aboulela exposes that the reason for this apathy and the continued violence is an embedded assumption of the West’s unalterable moral superiority. The state of exception denoted in chapter one is testimony to the epistemic violation that can only be perpetuated by an assumption of superiority, and warns of the consequences that inadvertently follow.

I have sought to demonstrate that the West’s practice of enlightenment principles such as modernity, secularism and liberalism are shown to be empty rhetoric with no real legitimacy. The violent imposition of Western forms of modernity whether through colonialism, neo-imperialism or through pedagogy delegitimises its claims to moral supremacy. Jean Said Makdisi’s problematisation of the teleology of modernity reveals that the meaning of the term is itself tenuous with no real or factual referent. The very imposition of the Western model of modernity on Arabs confirms that Western liberalism is not truly accommodating of difference. Similarly, the trope of hybridity, celebrated in metropolitan conceptualisations of identity in a globalised world, is revealed to depoliticise, disempower and conceal structures that perpetuate difference. The discursive obsession with Ahdaf Soueif’s hybridity, for instance, totally ignores the politics in her work, and the specifically Egyptian perspective that addresses the inequities of power between Arabs and the West. Liberal discourses of multiculturalism prove to be similarly disempowering as they reify the ethnic Other and package it as an exotic for consumption. Diana Abu-Jaber reveals this commodification of exoticism inevitably presents a struggle that must be engaged with through strategies of resistance, opposition and manipulation. Aboulela demonstrates that
Discourses of multiculturalism draw a line at accommodating the values of the Other. The experience of living in the liberal West as an Arab is shown to require containment of difference in order to maintain the status quo. Soueif, Abu-Jaber, Makdisi and Aboulela show that Others are ultimately expected to assimilate to the values of the West under cover of rhetoric such as hybridity or multiculturalism, discourses that purport to accommodate difference and promise a state of utopian multicultural bliss. Aboulela’s confession to self-censorship so as not to rock-the-boat, is a sobering reflection of the epistemic violence that is experienced under these conditions.

This epistemic violence has the effect of eroding cultural, intellectual, historical and social confidence. As Arabs start to see themselves through the eyes of the West, their faith in their intellectual, moral and epistemic legitimacy bleeds away. Collectively, these authors press for a more ethical engagement of difference that is not predicated on the West’s assumed superiority. Unfortunately, it is this sensibility and the assumptions that underpin it that positions the West in such a way that it is limited in its ability to engage equally with Otherness.

Gillian Whitlock’s book Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit provides a good example of the need to critically consider the effect of the Eurocentric assumptions that underpin normative paradigms used in the West to interpret work by Arab women. Whitlock examines a range of autobiographical modes that have gained wide circulation during the war on terror including blogs, journalist correspondence from war zones, and the numerous biographies about Arab women. According to the author, her interest was sparked by the “moment of recoil at the sight of the burka.” This experience spurs her on to engage with these texts as “potent but flawed weapons for cross-cultural engagement and the pursuit
of human rights.” (3). She describes the books that are the subject of her inquiry as "soft weapons" because they are easily coopted into the West’s propaganda machine. The books in her archive include Jean Sasson’s pulp fiction of the Princess trilogies, the blue-burqa narratives from Afghanistan that crowded Western bookstores in 2003, such as Latifa as well as more literary work like Reading Lolita in Tehran. Her discussion aims to provoke the Western reader into thinking about the limitations of their critical paradigms. Indicative of this strategy are rhetorical questions like this:

How can you move forward from this otherwise and disrupt a conditioned response? Perhaps you detour and begin to transcribe the veil differently in order to move across cultures. Perhaps you choose to reinscribe the burqa differently by thinking through the skin [...]. Perhaps from here you can begin to translate the veil differently, to understand it as part of embodiment and an expression of the boundaries of the body, the self, and belief understood differently to you. (68)

While Whitlock’s language is poetic, the central subject and speaking position is still conceived as the West. There is little attempt to examine how the authors and texts themselves attempt to engage the reader on their own terms. For example, despite her reflexivity, Whitlock does not acknowledge that her own reading strategies of the veil pivot around predictable discourses defined by Western feminism such as body and boundaries. Her working premise that “no one can read the veil from a neutral space” is an indication of inordinate investment in the symbolic power of the veil, a move typical of Western feminism (48). Most troubling of all is the lament that recurs like a sad refrain throughout the book of her inability to speak “humanely.” For example, she argues for the imperative to
consider these texts because “we can read them for a piercing reminder of our own tenuous grasp on a self and its place to speak humanely” (18). Admittedly this acknowledgement reveals an awareness that her position as a Western feminist poses some limitations on her ability to engage with the texts. Whitlock’s desire for an ethical commitment acknowledges the need to move beyond Eurocentricity but does not show how these testimonial narratives actually provincialise Eurocentric paradigms. Whitlock’s acclaimed book does little to indicate how to move toward an ethical engagement except to acknowledge her complicity. As an academic based in the West and presumably trained in Eurocentric paradigms, Whitlock remains circumscribed by intellectual blindspots because she has not thought to question the assumptions that underpin them. In the context of the lives that are the subject of her book, this position of helplessness seems unnecessarily precious, as to honour the testimony of the men and women whose stories she represents surely would require a modicum of activism on her part to discursively challenge the critical modes of reception through which her “soft weapons” have been read.

The course of researching and writing this thesis has revealed many synergies and resonances between the world as revealed to me in the texts and my lived reality. The war on terror, abuses in Abu Ghraib, Israeli atrocities in Lebanon in 2006 and continued atrocities through their occupation of Palestine, the racial riots in Cronulla in Sydney and vilification of Muslims have all provided real contextual resonances that pressed the imperative to rethink the sophistication with which the Western world professes to know the Arab and the Muslim. As Gaza burned in December 2008 and January 2009, Israeli official discourse revealed to me that Palestinians did not even figure in the same universe as
Israelis. As a member of a minority community in Australia, I have found myself reacting quite viscerally to the paradigms and discourses that profess to explain these atrocities and events. I have realised that this was not a speaking position that I as a minority in Australia could claim. Reading these authors in this context and reflecting on their work has reinforced the reality of the people who are at the heart of this discursive war. Through the novels I read of the anxieties of the Arab woman and understood that these are the corollaries to the anxieties expressed by the West. For me, the thesis has demonstrated an impasse as these women have sought to reach out to the West but found that the engagement is limited by the interpretive paradigms through which they are critically read in the West.

In *Orientalism*, Said warned that the process of Orientalism was long and entrenched and that the challenge lay in surviving the consequences “humanly” (45). His insight has enormous implications for the questions addressed through this thesis. Whitlock’s admission of her inability to “speak humanely” attests to her inability to speak with compassion and kindness of the subjects who manifest alterity. This admission sets her apart from her subjects and instantly situates her as unable to engage with their difference in any other way except to recoil. Whitlock’s response betrays her assumption of essential and non-negotiable difference with the subjects in the burqa. It reveals an internalisation of Orientalist paradigms that now limits her field of vision despite the reflexivity. In contrast, the authors in this thesis reveal not just a commitment to an ethical engagement but are able to demonstrate this. Amiry and Riverbend write to obtain solidarity with the West and Soueif, Makdisi, Abu-Jaber and Aboulela problematise the discourses that render them as Other to pave the way for an engagement with difference that is not predicated on moral, ideological or epistemological
supremacy. Each has sought to emphasise similarities and affinities in our shared humanity rather than the differences. Despite being subject to the Othering process they have emerged with their integrity intact. In this sense, they have survived Orientalism more “humanly” because of their ability to demonstrate kindness and compassion under the circumstances. In this case, the subaltern can speak but the West’s ability to listen is impeded by the paradigms that it holds to be true.

Consequently, my approach has been to interrogate the politics that is advanced by the discourses through which the West frames Arabs. Women are so overtly enlisted in these discourses that examining how their work responds and resonates with them reveals insights into the true agendas that underpin the reproduction of knowledge. The issues and themes raised in their work urge a reconsideration of the conceptual boundaries including Manichean and enlightenment binaries that underpin how difference is engaged. In contrast to Whitlock, and perhaps as a product of my own minority background, my starting premise has been similarity rather than difference. I have found these by setting aside the prerogatives that I have learnt as a Westernised scholar, and listening without imposing filters for the information that I had been preconditioned to receive. I have probed my “visceral” reactions to paradigms and theories to reveal how these often conveniently elide the question of a shared humanity. With this in mind, I have tried to step into their shoes rather than to read their stories out of interest or for my theoretical archive. Most importantly, reading against the grain of normative discourses has enabled me to understand that the kind of politics embedded within them extend views of interest to the metropolitan West only. Reading against the grain with these considerations in sight has enabled me to engage with the realities that they present in their novels, and the complexities of their lived experiences and its ethical dilemmas.
My imperative has been to find the common ground between the West and that of the Arab women who have written these books. To this end, it has been necessary to engage in intellectual dialogue not just with the texts but with the discursive practices that form my apparatus as a scholar based in the West. I have learnt that the increasingly sophisticated ways through which the West positions Otherness requires vigilant critique and awareness. It demands that we question the interests that are served with these pronouncements. The response to this does lie in the need to provincialise Eurocentric discourses to achieve a more enlightened, humanistic and inclusive politics of difference but it also demands a more proactive project of increasing awareness of the histories, narratives and stories that are being marginalised so that this matter of provincialising Europe extends beyond the boundaries of academic discourse. To this end, I have participated in this Literary Intifada, if only to demonstrate a different methodology of engaging with difference. Awakening the Western world into seeing the limitations of its paradigms charts an ethical mode of engagement that intrinsically frees us all.
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