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Loving in Secrets and Whispers:
an Affirmative Reading of the Politics of Desire in Contemporary Arab Anglophone Women's Literature

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To my immigrant parents
Aicha and Layachi,
for teaching me how to endure.
To my aunties,
Aicha and Hayate,
for teaching me how to soften.

"One has to become ethical,
as opposed to applying moral rules
and protocols as a form of self-protection:
one has to **endure**.
Endurance is the spinozist codeword for this process."
(Braidotti, 2015:2)

"Therefore we must fearlessly
pull out of ourselves
and look at and identify with our lives
the living creativity
some of our great-grandmothers
Were not allowed to know.
(Walker, 1972:405)

4

my family's honor—"between my legs," as Fatima Mernissi (1982) puts it. Through studying my roots and my hybrid legacy, I began a deeper, decolonial reflection. I realized that I was not taught the importance of desire and pleasure not because of Islam or my heritage, but because of class and the condition of immigration—a condition that did not allow it. My parents and their parents saw pleasure as a privilege reserved for those who had the time and the permission to enjoy it—not for those who had to work tirelessly every day just to prove they had a right to exist. Sometimes, to be an immigrant is to not own your own body. Because your body belongs to the employer. To the immigration office that decides whether or not you are permitted to exist in a given space. And yet, in retracing my family's genealogy of pleasure, I found many spaces of resistance within subalternity. The earliest memory of resistance and liberation through desire dates back to my childhood, to the hands of Aisha, my paternal aunt. As a child, I struggled to endure the summer heat in Morocco, and Aisha would refresh me with orange blossom essence, soothing my thirst for care. The trajectory of her hands on my skin told stories. I used to think this was merely a gesture of kindness toward me, but I now understand that it was also a moment of rest and release for her. We did not speak the same language, so we communicated through glances and skin. Through her care Aisha introduced me to pleasure, to take the time to rest and listen to our bodies—to the flow of that creative force that is desire. This thesis is for her.

Table Of Contents

Loving in Secrets and Whispers

An Affirmative reading of the Politics of Desire in contemporary Arab Anglophone Women's literature

Abstract

This dissertation explores the politics of desire, power, and subjectivity in Arab Anglophone women's literature, with a focus on how emotions shape agency, resistance, and identity. Through an affective framework informed by Sara Ahmed's theory of emotions, alongside feminist conceptualizations of desire, sexuality, and power, this research examines how contemporary writers Salma El Wardany and Alya Mooro navigate the intersections of gender, sexuality, cultural identity, and emotional regulation within Arab and Western socio-cultural contexts. By analyzing their narratives, this study highlights the ways in which taboo, secrecy, and silence structure experiences of sexuality and gendered expectations, addressing themes such as virginity, halal sex, premarital relationships, pleasure activism, family honor, and double standards. The Islamic feminist perspective on sexuality and power further informs the exploration of how these authors challenge restrictive discourses and carve out spaces for alternative expressions of desire and agency. Additionally, the research considers how their works engage with the politics of affect, examining how emotions such as shame, fear, pleasure, and longing operate within gendered power structures. This dissertation ultimately argues that Arab Anglophone women's literature constructs an affirmative politics of desire, in which emotion and sexuality function as transformative forces that contest normative frameworks of gender and identity. By foregrounding the affective dimensions of their writing, this study contributes to feminist discussions on sexual agency, gendered emotions, and the politics of pleasure in contemporary Arab women's narratives.

Loving in Secrets and Whispers: An Affirmative reading of the Politics of Desire in contemporary Arab Anglophone Women's literature

Introduction: For An Explicit Articulation of Desire[1]

The aim of this thesis is to examine how desire is portrayed in Arab Anglophone women's contemporary literature. I intend to achieve this by analyzing two of the very few novels in Arab Anglophone women's literature that have desire as a driving theme. These novels explore experiences of love, sex, dating, religion, spirituality, and communities of women. Arab Anglophone women's literature refers to works written in English by women of Arab descent. This descent encompasses a complex array of cultural, historical, and diasporic identities, which scholars like Geoffrey Nash, Layla Al Maleh, Anastasia Valassopoulous[2], Nouri Gana, have extensively examined in their studies. While these foundational works offer valuable insights, I find Dallel Sarnou's research approach particularly compelling, as she focuses on women, contemporary voices and contexts and places this literature in the framework of minor literature.

What sets Arab Anglophone women's literature apart is its ability to articulate the lived experiences of those navigating the intersections of Arab identity, diaspora, and gender. In the works examined for this thesis, the authors vividly portray the realities of growing up in Arab households within host Anglophone countries. They capture the nuances of *living in secrets and whispers,*[3] the negotiation of spirituality, and conflicts with religion and familial expectations. Central to these narratives are embodied struggles: tensions with the body, the search for identity, and the performance of Arabness.[4] Themes such as secrecy in dating, navigating double lives, and the trauma of sexual

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[1] Joan Morgan in Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure, (2015:37) referring to pleasure invites black feminist theory to move from a politics of silence to a politics of articulation.

[2] See Valassopoulos, A. (2008). *Contemporary Arab women writers: cultural expression in context*. Routledge.

[3] In Salma El Wardany's *These Impossible Things* (2022:8) one of the protagonists, Jenna, speaking of her friends' secret interfaith love stories.

[4] In this thesis Arabness will be interpreted in detail in Chapter Three through the lens of Ramy M. K. Aly's research *Becoming Arab in London: Performativity and the Undoing of Identity,* not as form of "being" but as a repertoire of "doing". (2015:1)

violence emerge alongside stories of mistakes born from a lack of knowledge about sexuality, knowledge often denied by cultural taboos and the absence of open dialogue. These works also depict the alienation of engaging with the world without adequate tools to decode its messages. The protagonists grapple with an overabundance of cultural 'contaminations,' conflicting worldviews inherited from their surroundings, which hinder their ability to construct their own sense of self.

Arab Anglophone women's literature thus provides a critical lens through which to examine these experiences, not merely as individual struggles but as reflections of broader intersections between identity, gender, diaspora, and power. Desire will be approached as it emerges through processes of subjectivity, agency, and their relations to power. Furthermore, this study will investigate the production of affects as an essential component in the trajectory of desire.

I did not conceptualize desire as such when I first started investigating Arab Anglophone women's literature. I would speak rather of pleasure, since I have been under the impression that in Islamic feminism, there has historically been an avoidance of addressing sex and sexuality directly, particularly outside the framework of marriage. While the right to sexual pleasure has been acknowledged within marital boundaries, pre-marital sexuality is largely excluded from the conversation. For women, this absence translates to a denial not only of sexual pleasure but also of desire itself. Desire, in this context, is socially and culturally suppressed; women are expected to align with the norms set by their communities and perform their roles within the confined spaces of the home and private life. Yet, reading works like Audre Lorde's essay *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (1978) I could find an inspiring counter-narrative. Lorde reframes the erotic as an energy that 'flows through and colors my life,' linking it to empowerment and agency.

This idea of an energy resonated with me, particularly in the light of Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of desire, not as lack, but as a productive, generative force as Philip Goodchild highlights in *Deleuze & Guattari: An Introduction to the Politics of Desire* (1995). Hence Lorde's assertion that 'we have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves' (1978) aligns with what I see as the affirmative politics of desire: a reclaiming of desire as something positive and transformative,

rather than something to be feared or repressed. Lorde's words— 'in touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness'— offer a critical entry point to explore the intersections of desire and power. In feminist theory, desire often struggles against structures of *anti-production*,[5] those mechanisms of power that constrain and negate its generative potential. This thesis intends to investigate the relationship between desire, power, and their intersections with agency and affect. How does power condition desire, and how can the affirmative, creative force of desire be reclaimed to resist "resignation, despair, and self-denial" (Lorde, 1978)? How can it dismantle the hierarchies and prohibitions that define not only women's experiences of sexuality but also the broader politics of desire? My primary goal is to identify how the productive character of desire shapes the dynamics between characters and influences their relationships with their environments.

Key questions include: How is desire created? What is the politics of desire? How does it guide the narrative? What processes, values, and sociocultural forces influence relationships to desire? How is desire practiced and articulated in the narratives of Arab Anglophone women? In these novels, in what way can desire picture an affirmative politics? This body of literature is particularly significant due to its hybrid and hyphenated character (Sarnou, 2014:69), which situates it within a constant process of *deterritorialization*[6]. By locating these texts within this framework of *becoming*, meaning is allowed to cross boundaries, enabling encounters between various 'lines of flight'— a concept central to understanding transformation and multiplicity within desire. In other words, as Dallel Sarnou (2014:67) contends why, Arab Anglophone women's literature production has been qualified as a 'minor literature.' As such, it means that it does not align with the interests of the majority. Instead, it reveals the complexity of our realities by exploring paths that dominant theories, influenced by systems of power, would not venture into. Furthermore, I argue that Arab Anglophone women's literature also provides an example of the liberation of desire in a way that transcends its

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[5] With the words of Deleuze "a model of death in the unconscious, for it produces nothing itself - its lack of output is its lack of organs". (1984:7)

[6] "Travelling in foreign areas" (Goodchild, 1995:4) physically and metaphorically.

reduction to purely sexual terms redefining notions of agency and subjectivity for Muslim women, the *muslimwoman* as miriam cooke [7](2007) would call her in particular. Although sexuality is at the basis of the epistemology of desire, I do not wish to address desire only in its sexual characterization, but as Guattari argues:

> The problem as I see it is not a sexual liberation but a liberation of desire. Once desire is
> specified as sexuality, it enters into forms of particularized power, into the stratification of
> castes, of styles, of sexual classes. The sexual liberation for example, of homosexuals, or
> transvestites, or sadomasochists belongs to a series of other liberation problems among
> which there is an a priori and evident solidarity, the need to participate in a necessary fight.
> But I don't consider that to be a liberation as such of desire, since in each of these groups
> and movements one finds repressive systems. (as cited in Crane, 2005:564)

Considering the observations outlined above, I argue that the protagonists' relationship to desire and particularly, its repression extends beyond the sexual dimension of their lives and encompasses all other domains as well. Initially, my focus was on identifying moments of *disjunction*[8], however, I soon realized the importance of also examining forms of *conjunction*, production, and affirmation that characterize the protagonists' and authors' engagement with desire. Specifically, this thesis explores the significance of acting in accordance with desire— what it implies for the protagonists and the values it represents and the transformations that they create. Furthermore, I will analyze how their attitudes and practices toward desire can be understood as both political and affirmative. I am speaking of desire as if it was something that we possess, but as we will further discover, desire is not something that belongs to the body as a quality, it is rather an affective relationship:

> "when he advocates "not a sexual liberation but a liberation of desire." For Guattari, the
> task at hand is to liberate that primary energy of desire from all blockages, including its
> channeling into subject production. Speaking of the liberation of desire, then, circumvents

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[7] The name of this author is spelled in lowercase.
[8] Interruptions in the flow of desire as Deleuze and Guattari name it. See Goodchild, 1995:85.

the language of subjectivity and instead employs a language (and concepts) of (non subjective) affective relations between people." (Crane, 2005: 587)

From its earliest theorization, namely from Freud to Lacan desire has often been described in terms of lack— we desire what we do not have or cannot have. As we will be able to see in this thesis, we desire the Other. We desire to enter the symbolic order. We desire recognition. As we will explore, our desire is ambiguous—we desire to exist, but only if we are at risk of not existing and in our desire there is some space to desire our death. Desire is often depicted in binary terms. However, one of the aims of this study is to challenge this perspective by highlighting how feminist theory has also conceptualized desire as a productive force with positive potential.

Rather than being depicted solely in negative terms, desire is reimagined here from an affirmative perspective, emphasizing its creative and generative dimensions, particularly in its powerful relationship to affect. Desire emerges as a force capable of creating *affective assemblages* that drive 'bodies into affective states of resonance with other bodies' (Crane, 2005:577). This thesis explores desire's capacity to create communities, as it represents 'a capacity or an expansiveness that produces affective connections' (Ibid.), thereby generating affective economies and communities, a concept inspired by Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion (2004)*. Ahmed's political interpretation of emotions, particularly her view of how emotions are relationally created and implicated in structures of power, shapes much of the methodological approach of this study.

Special attention will be given to the *performing* of identity within a postcolonial framework, where race and gender are understood not as fixed states of being but as processes of becoming— something we *do* rather than something we *are*. Ramy M. K. Aly will help us with that with his *Becoming Arab In London: Performativity and the Undoing of Identity* (2015) which serve as a perfect introduction not only to the geo-political and social context my authors move in, namely London, and consequently their characters, but also as an initiation to the process of Becoming which will take a lot of space in this dissertation as it represents the main process that desire enables that enables its liberation. Becoming will be explored through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari, but also

Braidotti. De Beauvoir and Irigaray will be interpellated as well. This performance will be linked to the concept of agency, not defined as a capacity that is possessed in opposition to power, but rather as something that is enabled. Agency will be explored in its connection to desire and its structures—or lack thereof—aligning with Deleuze and Guattari's view of desire as fundamentally anti-hierarchical and rhizomatic. Rejecting arboreal (or fixed, hierarchical) models of power, this thesis embraces the rhizomatic nature of desire, which proliferates in non-linear and subversive ways.

The relationship between agency, subjectivity, desire, and affect will be at the heart of this study. However, power inevitably intervenes in this relationship, framing desire as a hostage constrained by structural forces (disjunctions). Affects, therefore, become a tool for liberating desire from the manacles of power and reaffirming its affirmative potential. Through this lens, we will explore not only how agency and subjectivity enable the existence of power, but also how they can be reconfigured to subvert it—not by offering or imposing a new model, but by allowing it to 'go schizo,' to fragment and deterritorialize in a Deleuzian sense.

Braidotti, Ahmed and Grosz will be crucial in this phase of the works. I have chosen to focus on the works of Alya Mooro and Salma El Wardany because of their contemporary character and their resonance with my own situated experience. This positioning allows me to adopt a *halfie*[9] perspective as a researcher and, consequently, a *halfie* methodology, as I will elaborate later. The themes explored by these authors reflect a marked departure from the concerns of earlier Arab Anglophone women's literature. To understand this shift, we must first examine the historical emergence and development of Arab Anglophone women's literature. The pioneers of this literary tradition were largely Arabophone women who were raised in predominantly Arab and Muslim societies and migrated to Anglophone countries for education or in response to war, persecution, or socio-political constraints. Their works, often best understood through a post-colonial lens, grapple with the effects of colonialism, exile, and displacement. By contrast, the authors I have chosen to study—Alya Mooro

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[9] As a Moroccan PhD student born in France and brought up in Italy from a Muslim family I identify as a *halfie*, a term that describes the identity and experience of the migrant and diasporic researcher (Subedi, 2006).

and Salma El Wardany — represent a newer generation of writers who are second-generation immigrants. Their hybrid and hyphenated identities reflect both a continuation of the struggles of their predecessors and a confrontation with new challenges particular to the contemporary diasporic experience. While their work still seeks to build bridges between cultures, combat reductive stereotypes, and give dignity to Arab cultural heritage, these goals are refracted through their unique position as second-generation women. They do not necessarily carry firsthand experiences of war, exile, or Arabophone geopolitical contexts, yet this heritage is embedded in their bodies and continues to shape their sense of self, agency, subjectivity, and relationship to power, desire, and affect.

This post-colonial inheritance is thus performed in new, layered ways. These authors pay homage to the earlier generation while adding personal, contextual, and agentic dimensions to their work. In essence, their literature emerges as both a continuation of and a response to the evolving nature of Arab Anglophone identity—a process that reflects the intersections of personal experience, cultural legacy, and contemporary transnational dynamics. Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, and Diana Abu Jaber occupy a foundational role in shaping the feminist and feminine dimensions of Arab Anglophone women's literature. Their works, informed by their migration from Arabophone countries to Anglophone contexts, are deeply embedded within postcolonial frameworks.

This literature engages with the systemic racism and alienation encountered in host countries while simultaneously interrogating the enduring structures of colonial power that condition these experiences. A recurring theme in their works is the confrontation with displacement and exile, wherein protagonists grapple with a profound sense of nostalgia— a longing for a homeland that exists more in memory than reality. This impossibility of return reflects a tension between diasporic identity and notions of nativism, which are always already fractured by colonial legacies and cultural shifts. Nostalgia here becomes a double-edged sword: while it connects the protagonists to their roots, it also underscores the instability and mutability of those very roots. At the same time, their literature explores the difficult processes of assimilation and cultural negotiation. Language becomes a central site of resistance and identity formation, where the mother tongue emerges as a tool of defiance. The

act of preserving or reverting to Arabic disrupts the pressures to assimilate fully into Western cultural norms, functioning as an assertion of identity and cultural memory. Yet, resistance often occurs alongside mimicry, a term used in postcolonial theory (notably by Homi Bhabha (Nayar, 2008:50) to describe the ambivalent imitation of the colonizer's language, behavior, and cultural symbols. Mimicry reveals both a desire for inclusion and a critical defiance, exposing contradictions inherent to diasporic subjectivity. The protagonists navigate these contradictions, embodying an 'in-between' identity that challenges static categories of race, gender, and belonging.

A critical element that characterizes these narratives is trauma, particularly colonial trauma, which casts a long shadow over the lives of the protagonists. The narratives center on experiences of uprootedness, exile, and cultural loss, foregrounding the psychological and affective toll of displacement. For women, however, trauma extends beyond the colonial framework; it intersects with patriarchal structures that confine them as guardians of 'family honor' or reduce them to cultural symbols. As such, Soueif, Faqir, and Abu Jaber illuminate how women become repositories for cultural anxieties, forced to negotiate competing expectations of tradition and modernity. Furthermore, their works expose and critique the Orientalist gaze that permeates Western perceptions of Arab women. Upon arrival in host countries, protagonists are otherized and exoticized, reduced to simplistic representations that fulfill Western fantasies about the 'Orient.'

This encounter reveals the continuity of colonial power, as Orientalist stereotypes are mapped onto women's identities in ways that deny their complexity and agency. Simultaneously, the protagonists resist these depictions through acts of self-expression, agency, and transgressive storytelling that reclaim their narratives from reductive frameworks. In this sense, Soueif, Faqir, and Abu Jaber not only continue the postcolonial critique established by earlier Arab women writers but also introduce an overt feminist dimension to their works. By centering women's voices, agency, and lived experiences, they resist the multiple oppressions of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. Their literature can thus be understood as a space of negotiation and resistance—a space where identity is continuously renegotiated through nostalgia, cultural memory, trauma, and desire. Through their

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protagonists' journeys, these authors highlight the ways in which Arab women reclaim subjectivity and disrupt the intersecting forces that seek to define or silence them. What undeniably connects both generations of Arab Anglophone women writers is their engagement with desire, although the nature and articulation of this desire differ significantly. As Marta Cariello (2009:314) theorizes, earlier generations contend with petrification, a stasis of expression enforced by external and internal limitations. Similarly, Shaffira D. Gayatri (2015:71) speaks of *dual objectification*, wherein Arab women's identities are shaped both by external Orientalist gazes and by internal community pressures, resulting in substantial self-censorship. In contrast, contemporary authors such as Salma El Wardany and Alya Mooro navigate a transformed relationship to desire—one that is more overt, multifaceted, and deeply connected to the negotiation of sexual agency, sexual rights, and matters of pleasure, sensuality, and the erotic.

While this dissertation addresses sexual desire, it approaches desire expansively—as a lens to examine the dynamics of power, its taboo nature, the silences and secrecy surrounding it, and the ways these forces actively shape identity and offer pathways for alternative forms of agency. This thesis will specifically explore the concept of psychic repression in relation to desire and how alternative epistemologies can be constructed by placing desire at the center. Deleuze and Guattari's politics of desire offer a valuable framework here: for them, desire is not a lack but an affirmative force with transformative potential— a driving energy capable of forging connections, subverting oppressive structures, and enabling societal change. Their notion of desire and affect as collective and immanent, escaping rigid hierarchies and transcendent frameworks, informs the methodology of this study. By examining how desire operates within the novels' protagonists, I argue that these characters build affective communities of care that serve as sites of transformation. These communities resist the restrictive environments imposed on them and affirm desire as a tool of resistance both personal and collective.

In doing so, they create what can be seen as nomadic subjectivities a figuration elaborated by Rosi Braidotti (1994), who draws from Deleuze and Guattari's work on deterritorialization and

multiplicity. The nomadic subject embodies the generative and boundary-defying potential of desire, moving beyond fixed identities and allowing for transformation without succumbing to neoliberal or Western-centric paradigms of agency. Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to demonstrate how desire— whether personal, sexual, or political—becomes a central force in reshaping subjectivity, reclaiming agency, and resisting power, all while constructing alternative ways of knowing, relating, and being. In this sense This study focuses on *These Impossible Thing*s (2022) by Salma El-Wardany and *The Greatest Freedom* (2019) by Alya Mooro, employing close reading alongside affect studies as a critical framework. The analysis explores how emotions, feelings, and bodily experiences are represented and politicized in these texts.

Particular attention will be given to the dynamics of gendered emotions within patriarchal structures, the affective resistance to such systems, and the intersections of affect, religion, and spirituality. Furthermore, the study examines embodied emotions and trauma resulting from identity conflicts inherent in hybrid, postcolonial subjectivities. An additional focus will be on affective communities of care as sites of resistance, reflecting the enduring postcolonial legacy within Arab Anglophone women's literature. By analyzing the ways power operates to repress desire—and subsequently impacts agency and subjectivity— this study demonstrates how these authors reclaim desire as an affirmative, creative force.

Through the powerful expression of emotions in autobiographical and semi-autobiographical narratives, desire emerges not merely as a site of conflict but as a means to generate an affirmative politics that resists structural oppression while reimagining possibilities for agency and subjectivity. Spirituality as a strategy of resistance but also a site for the exercise of desire is one of the bridges between the pioneers' work and these contemporary authors. Following an introduction on the emergence and development of Arab Anglophone literature, with a particular focus on women's writing in the first chapter, I will conduct a literature review of key theories on desire to trace its trajectory within a feminist framework, culminating in the selection of a theoretical perspective that will underpin the entire dissertation. The review will begin with Lacan's conceptualization of desire,

establishing its foundational framing as rooted in lack. From there, I will move to French poststructuralist feminism, particularly exploring notions of desire in terms of jouissance and its subversive relationship to the Symbolic Order. Central to this discussion will be the concept of *écriture féminine* (Cixous, 1976) and the ways in which desire is intricately tied to the emergence of a distinctly feminine voice. The chapter will further consider strategies developed within this framework to deconstruct the Oedipal model, revealing how desire can function as a tool for destabilizing patriarchal structures of power and representation.

Next, I will examine Simone de Beauvoir's perspective on desire as an ambiguous force—a theme that raises essential questions about freedom, agency, and selfhood. This discussion will then move toward Judith Butler's understanding of desire as tied to the desire for recognition.

Butler's approach, grounded in Hegelian philosophy, challenges the subject's relationship to the Other and frames desire as a site of both vulnerability and potential transformation. This theoretical grounding will serve as a critical foundation for understanding how desire operates in the narratives of Arab Anglophone women's literature, both as a force of agency and as a site of tension within intersecting structures of power, identity, and subjectivity. Black feminism will be pivotal in reconceptualizing desire as a form of energy rather than lack. This reframing will lead to the exploration of desire as intimately linked to affect in the Chapter 3, where desire, affect, agency, subjectivity, and performance—particularly in terms of becoming as defined by Rosi Braidotti—will be intricately intertwined. A significant contribution to this discussion comes from the notion of performativity as developed by Ramy M. K. Aly. Building on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Aly demonstrates that race, much like gender, is performed rather than essential. He argues that Arabness in London is something that is learned, practiced, and performed— something one becomes rather than an innate or fixed identity one is born with. In this sense, the performativity of race, much like gender, can be parodic, allowing for alternative approaches that broaden one's capacity to act and thereby expand agency. Moreover, the type of performance that is enacted inevitably reflects a

desire— a desire to belong, to resist, or to transform. This performance also reveals an understanding of the affectivity of subjectivity, which itself emerges as a product of desire.

Agency is a concept that will primarily be understood through the frameworks of Saba Mahmood and Elizabeth Grosz, both of whom develop a vision of agency that is not solely rooted in opposition to Western power structures. Instead, they conceptualize agency as the potential to act. This perspective builds on Bergson's conception of agency and serves as the foundation for the analysis of the novels in this study. The focus of this thesis is on desire as a site of resistance—as a tool of empowerment, rather than a capitalistic instrument of power. I interpret desire as a movement, a flow from one thing to another, and therefore as an affect. Desire, in this sense, is connection.

As Goodchild (1995:41) states, "One gains access to desire through encountering becomings expressed in other modes of existence; desire is produced when becomings are connected together." After a brief review of feminist conceptions of desire, particularly focusing on French feminism's fundamental and necessary deconstruction of Lacan's thought, I will engage more deeply with Deleuze and Guattari. Why their theory? Because their framework possesses certain characteristics that align with feminist methodologies in both form and dynamic. For Deleuze and Guattari, transformation occurs only through the collective.

Their thought is inherently nomadic it possesses a quality of deterritorialisation that emphasizes multiplicity and consistency, concepts I will address in later sections. At the core of Deleuze and Guattari's epistemology lies sexuality. If desire is a powerful force driving us to pursue what we need to feel fulfilled, it is necessarily connected to sexuality: it shapes the way we seek connection, relate to ourselves and others, cultivate self-love and recognition, and present ourselves to the world. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is not lack but a productive, positive force—an energy capable of fueling entire systems of thought or "abstract machines." As Goodchild (1995:73) explains, "Desire is a spontaneous relation which emerges by connecting up heterogeneous elements, producing some kind of flow." So why focus on desire above all else? Because desire is a productive, transformative force that should not be domesticated or interrupted by majoritarian discourses. In the

novels I examine, I observed that the central issue often revolves around the repression of desire. My goal is to unravel the roots of this repression and reveal the ways in which desire still emerge often insistently and affirmatively despite these obstacles.

Part I. Theories and Methodology

Chapter 1.

1. Arab Anglophone Literature: An Overview

The Arab novel in English dates back to the 20s, when Ameen Rihani's 1911 *The Book of Khalid* was published, however it has started to attract interest only very very recently. According to Nouri Gana "the novel is a largely imported European genre yet a profoundly resonant latecomer into the history of Arab letters which had traditionally found in poetry its major and most enduring form of literary and artistic expression."(2013:2) Furthermore the author affirms that the Arab novel in English did not see significant development beyond occasional publications in the 1960s, such as *Hunters in a Narrow Street* (1960) by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and *Beer in the Snooker Club* (1964) by Waguih Ghali, both of which received little critical attention until recently. Several factors likely hindered the continuity, let alone the establishment, of the Anglophone novelistic endeavor initiated by Rihani, including the harshness of European imperialism in the Arab world, the decline of the *nahda* (Arab renaissance), the rise of Arab nationalism and subsequent anti-colonial movements, and the U.S. restrictions on Arab immigration in the 1920s. Unlike Rihani's contemporaries, such as Khalil Gibran and Mikhail Naimy, who primarily composed poetry and explored other literary forms, the novel genre did not flourish. In the past three decades, however, the Arab novel in English appears to be experiencing a resurgence following Rihani's pioneering contributions. (2013:2) Scholar Geoffrey Nash starts the book *The Anglo Arab Encounter* by stating that: "there is a qualitative difference between the Arabic Literature, the Arabic literature translated into English and a literature conceived and executed in English by writers of Arab background" (Nash, 2007:11) As the author states the expression Anglo Arab Encounter is a term invented by Edward Said when referring to Arab authors writing anglophone fiction and autobiography an encounter that started taking place after 9/11:

> To the extent that Arab and Islamic-oriented events in recent history have impacted on the West, it
> might be argued, the level of interest they have raised feeds into a dissemination and consumption
> of texts that might be deemed to interface with (and even partially 'explain') those events, the most
> obvious recent instance being 11 September 2001. (Nash, 2007:16)

As Layla Al Maleh confirms in her book *Arab Voices in Diaspora* Arab Anglophone literature started to gain attention after 9/11 to give the audience a possibility of lurking into the life of the Arab Other. People were interested in who the terrorist other was and this literature seemed to provide a window to who Arabs really were: "It simply so happened that their works came in handy in recent years, as they seemed to meet the needs of a readership eager to learn about Arab culture and intellectual make-up in a language that was the lingua franca of the modern age." (Al Maleh, 2009:1) or as Nouri Gana writes in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English* when it comes to this literature: "more than half of Arab novelists writing in English today wrote their début novels after September 11, 2001, and the number of new novelists will continue to proliferate exponentially" (2013:3) .

Nevertheless, this literature has roots dating back to early 20th century when Arab immigrants to the U.S. engaged with the language and culture of their country. Apart from Gibran, who achieved major success with *The Prophet*, few other writers became widely known. Gibran and his Arab contemporaries blended messianic discourse with Sufi thought, presenting themselves as visionaries with cosmic missions, a role traditionally associated with poets in Arab culture. However, their "poet-prophet" image has sparked controversy, raising questions about whether they "orientalized" themselves to gain fame in American literary circles or if their attempt to bridge East and West relied on a simplistic view of a mystical East versus a rational West:

> They were the first real cultural mediators between East and West, finding themselves as they did in
> the conciliatory position of being able, through the medium of English, to dispel misgivings about
> each culture and establish genuine intellectual rapprochement between the two traditions. (Al Maleh,
> 2007:4)

As the scholar points out the first anglophone Arab writers, often criticized for mysticism, naiveté, and self-exoticism, nonetheless expressed a collective optimism and celebration in their works. They coveyed a joyful sense of negotiating boundaries beyond their homeland, contrasting sharply with the pain and dislocation often seen in contemporary postcolonial literature. This "metropolitan hybridity, as described by R. Radhakrishnan in (Al Maleh, 2009:4) allowed them to navigate identity politics with greater ease, maintaining a dual allegiance to both their origins and their new environments without the tension faced by later writers. Their literature did not focus on displacement; instead, it balanced temporal and spatial differences while celebrating their unique cultural position.

However they kept an apologetic tone to it, infact: "While the autobiographers apologized to the people they left behind, they tended in their memoirs to solicit the sympathy of the people they joined." (Al Maleh, 2007:5) As Tasnim Qutait states in *Nostalgia in Arab Anglophone Literature* scholars such as Evelyn Shakir and Layla Maleh have separately categorized Arab Anglophone literature into three chronological stages, a framework that has gained broad acceptance. The first stage, as identified by both scholars, encompasses early twentieth-century immigrant writers in the United States known as the *Mahjar* writers, including figures like Khalil Gibran and Ameen Rihani, alongside contemporaries such as George Antonius and Edward Selim Atiyah, who were involved with the British administration in the Arab world.

The second phase, as noted by Shakir and Maleh, features authors like Edward Atiyah, Waguih Ghali, and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, whose works in the 1950s and 1960s reflected a British educational and intellectual influence (Al Maleh, 2007:7). Maleh argues that these writers employed English more instrumentally rather than as a means of appropriation, subversion, or resistance to its dominance (Ibid.). Unlike the more organized Mahjar writers, who established the Pen League literary society (al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya), works from the mid-century period were less cohesively organized. (Qutait, 2021:19) In the 1930s and 1940s, while Arab immigrants in the USA were assimilating into

mainstream society, anglophone Arab writing began to shift focus. Many Arab students, educated in missionary and foreign schools in the Middle East, moved to British universities or sought jobs in Britain. Influenced by cultural colonialism, they admired the English language and lifestyle and aspired to express themselves creatively in what they viewed as the language of the "superior" Other. "They yearned to express themselves creatively in the language of the 'superior' Other and to internalize the 'Other' in every possible way." (Al Maleh, 2009:6) in 1946, Edward Atiyah, a British citizen of Lebanese descent, proudly declared his English proficiency, claiming equality with educated Englishmen and feeling no shame about his identity.[10] He became one of the most prolific writers of his time, while others, like Waguih Ghali and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, produced single works before their tragic ends. Their writings, largely shaped by their British education, lacked a distinctive Arab-English style, in contrast to their predecessors. They adhered to metropolitan discourses and avoided innovative or experimental language, resulting in a body of work that did not yet find a place in the broader canon of world literature:

> The reason for this is that 'Arab English,' if such a thing ever existed, during this period developed its most vital character from within the boundaries of Western discourse, from the very language of Britain and British schooling, not from a locally emergent language, an appropriation or subversion of it, or from a desire to challenge its dominance. The writers were not only inhibited by the English language that they used so reverently but also by Western culture in general, consequently seeing themselves and their people through the eyes of Europeans, and presenting mostly a folkloric picture of life in the Arab world. Perhaps the success of some of these works actually derived not from any literary merit so much as from the unfamiliar experiences conveyed. (Al Maleh, 2009:7-8)

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[10] "I can meet any Englishman on a footing of equality. I need no longer feel ashamed of myself, inferior. Everything that an Englishman can boast of having, apart from the blood in his veins, I have inherited." (Atiyah, An Arab Tells His Story, 124. As cited in Al Maleh (2009:6)

1.1.   Defining features and major themes

Thematically, the works of anglophone Arab writers often explore psychological and social alienation, the experience of exile, hybridity, and a quest for authentic self-representation, frequently leaning toward autobiographical writing. Political themes also feature prominently, as these writers aim to express their perspectives on serious issues affecting their home countries.

> Realizing that Western readers had more often than not formulated their opinions of Arabs through prejudiced accounts of travellers (who held a romantic vision of the Middle East) or the studies of orientalists (who held a narrow and reductionist view of Arabs), anglophone Arab writers, it seemed, had the will to reclaim their narrative voice and recover their own discourse. (Al Maleh, 2009:9)

The mid-1950s and 1960s marked a promising start for these authors, who were lauded for the simplicity and directness of their writing, as well as for their authentic cultural representation and political insights. However, much of the praise seemed rooted in surprise that Arabs could write creatively in English. Critics noted their adeptness with the language, often expressing astonishment at the achievements of former Bedouin shepherds or those educated solely in Arabic. This exoticization of their work underscored the cultural crossing that accompanied their literary efforts, with some reviewers taking a patronizing tone in acknowledging their accomplishments.

Overall, these anglophone Arab writers were not just bridging language barriers but also addressing the West from their unique cultural perspectives. "The subaltern was addressing the West and in its own language and from its own perspective!" (Al Maleh, 2009:10) As mentioned earlier in the past century of anglophone Arab literature, three distinct trends have emerged: the Mahjar writers (early-twentieth-century émigrés in the USA), the Europeanized authors of the mid-1950s, and the contemporary transcultural, hybrid, and diasporic writers of the last four decades. The initial wave of Arab immigrants often came from impoverished backgrounds and managed to establish themselves in elite literary circles while maintaining a balance between their Eastern roots and Western

influences. In contrast, the writers of the 1950s emerged from privileged backgrounds and sought to adopt the identity of the European 'Other,' reflecting the traumas described by Frantz Fanon as a consequence of cultural colonization These authors faced rejection by the dominant culture while losing their connections to their homeland, leading to feelings of alienation.

The third group of writers, emerging after the 1970s, is the most diverse. This includes second-, third-, and even fourth-generation Arab writers who grew up in their immigrant parents' countries and newcomers who experienced transculturation. They hail from varied intellectual, social, and political backgrounds, settling in countries like Canada, the USA, Britain, and Australia, and maintain different connections to their homeland. Recent mass migrations have been driven by numerous factors, including the Palestinian 'Exodus' of 1948, wars with Israel, the Lebanese civil war, the Gulf wars, and political repression. A report from the National Association of British Arabs estimates that there are about 500,000 Arabs in the UK, 200,000 in Canada, and around three million in the USA, which represents the fastest-growing immigrant group. In Australia, over half a million residents claim Arab ancestry. Anglophone Arab writers share a rich cultural and linguistic heritage, unified by a common belief in Arab culture despite individual differences in religion, social practices, or political views. Even those born outside their homeland maintain a connection to their roots, reflecting a warm relationship with their heritage in their writing, regardless of geographical distance.

As Qutait states "much of the critical discourse around the Anglophone Arab novel can be mapped onto these two approaches, locating the texts either in relation to the writers' countries of origin or their countries of settlement" (2021:20) Qutait moves on by quoting Amal Talaat Abdelrazek's book *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings* which provides an in-depth analysis of the concept of "hyphenated identity" as it pertains to Arab American women, shedding light on the term's specific significance. This study clarifies the use of "hyphenated identity" for Arab American writers, contrasting with "hybrid identity," which is often used for Arab British writers. This conceptual distinction emphasizes how each group expresses their identity through literature in both unique and overlapping ways, contributing to a broader categorization of

Anglophone Arab women's narratives. These identity differences shape each group's themes, perspectives on "home," and diasporic experiences. My main focus will be on Arab British Literature and in particulare women's literature.

1.2. Women's Literature: Female and Feminist

Scholar Geoffrey Nash (2007) explains tha it is crucial to note that Anglophone Arab women's writings encompass a diverse range of perspectives on feminism, nationhood, religion, and identity. Therefore, in discussing this body of literature, emphasizing it solely as a voice for "Third World subaltern women" may not yield significant insights, especially because:

> Third world women join mainstream feminists in their struggle against gender oppression and inequality, and quest of women's universal rights of education, labour and freedoms of choice and expression. However, they criticize their white sisters for their ethnocentric assumptions about the singularity of feminism, the homogeneity of women's experiences and the universality of their struggles; and they alternately pluralize feminism and assert the plurality of their voices and the heterogeneity of their colonial and postcolonial identities. (Ouhiba, 2017:35)

There is also a lack of consensus on the stance to take—if any—on issues that have notably engaged Algerian women writers, such as religious fundamentalism and its impact on women. Ahdaf Soueif's works, while clearly aligned with a secular feminist viewpoint, largely avoid Islamic themes, focusing instead on the Egyptian cultural struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism. Conversely, Leila Ahmed, a notable and influential figure who has developed her own feminist stance, rewrites women's histories through oral family and cultural memories in her autobiography, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America.*

Ahmed's blend of traditional Islamic perspectives and modern feminism contrasts with the feminized Islam depicted in Leila Aboulela's works, which reflect the voices of emerging female Muslims within Western migrant communities. Fadia Faqir's writing aligns more closely with a recognizable Middle Eastern feminist framework, engaging with regional feminisms. As the editor of a significant series of translations of Arabic women's autobiographies and fiction, Faqir's novels vividly articulate the challenges faced by Arab—particularly Bedouin—women caught between the

dual patriarchal forces of colonialism and nationalism. Her distinctive writing style does not cater to Anglophone readers but strives to convey Arab meanings.

If assessed through the typology of women's narratives in modern Arabic literature developed by Sabry Hafez[11], Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*, which presents a strong protest against patriarchal standards and values, would firmly be classified within the "feminist" category. Maha's refusal to cook for the British soldiers who killed her husband, Harb, signifies an anti-colonial stance that acquires gendered implications due to her brother's support for the British. The intersection of British colonial power and local patriarchal authority leads directly to Maha's confinement in an asylum overseen by a British doctor. While these events may exhibit confrontational feminist tones, *Pillars of Salt* is also softened by contexts that illustrate a sisterly collaboration, similar to those in the works of Egyptian author Salwa Bakr, who has been praised for her focus on female perspectives.

Faqir's fiction, particularly in *My Name is Salma*, which tells the story of a Bedouin girl fleeing to Britain to escape an "honor killing," navigates the delicate balance between advocating for the rights of marginalized Arab women and potentially reinforcing stereotypes of the Third World as underdeveloped and backward. As Ouhiba states speaking of Anzaldua the risk for epistemic violence when it comes to speaking of and for this women is high:

> The "borderlands" as Anzaldua (1987:3) describes it, is a place of conflict. It is also a place of violence and this violence emerges from the scraping experienced as variant worlds collide. Women often find themselves squarely in the middle of these conflicts, struggling to make sense of the expectations of multiple cultures. This is what Anzaldua terms the "third country." Identities formed here are not reducible to a whole, conceived as half-ethnic and half-American or half-British, devoid of cultural conflicts. According to Anzaldua (1987), the new mestiza retains the two irreconcilable worlds at the same time and turns "the ambivalence into something else," a radical consciousness of what it means

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[11] See Hafez, S. (1995). Women's narrative in modern arabic literature: A typology. *Love and sexuality in modern Arabic literature*, 154-174.

to live on the border, to be constantly crossing between two states of being, to be in-between. On this border are also the differences of race, class, ethnicity, gender, age, and sexuality. This is a contentious area, a place where identities are reconstructed and renegotiated. Narratives are rewritten and by virtue of this so are knowledges (Anzaldua 1987 as cited in Ouhiba, 2017:32)

A fear that will characterise author Alya Mooro as well as we will see in the analysis chapter. However, author Nash strongly believes that Faqir's writings seldom resort to stereotypes; instead, her vividly drawn central female characters—who are joint victims of both Arab and Western male chauvinism—break traditional patriarchal molds and authentically voice the experiences of suppressed women a legacy that the contemporary new generation of Arab Anglophone women's literature largely represented by the two authors, namely Alya Mooro and Salma El Wardany, protagonists in this study share.

1.2.1. The Use of English

Geoffrey Nash, in *The Anglo-Arab Encounter: Fiction and Autobiography by Arab Writers in English* (2007), and Dallel Sarnou (2017) suggest that contemporary Anglophone Arab writers often choose English over Arabic for their creative work due to personal preference, a desire to avoid cultural restrictions and censorship, and the opportunity for wider exposure. For some, English is virtually a native language, either from immersion in English-speaking environments in their home countries or from life in the UK or the US, making English a natural medium of expression. Others, especially those who learned English later, make a considered choice to write in English, acknowledging that this decision brings both gains and losses in terms of acceptance and rejection.

This diversity in linguistic background results in varying literary expressions among Anglophone Arab writers, as noted by researchers like Sarnou, who highlights that some women writers of Arab descent choose English deliberately to satisfy specific literary needs or because, for some, English feels like a mother tongue. Writing in English, however, can carry significant risks for Anglophone Arab women authors, especially when addressing sensitive topics such as women's status and social conditions in Arab countries. Authors like Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, Diana Abujaber, and Mohja Kahf face these challenges, with Nouri Gana noting that Arab novelists writing in English have increased notably, especially following events like 9/11.

This growing group of writers often aims to counter stereotypes and misrepresentations of Arab and Muslim identities that have proliferated in Western discourse. For these women writers, their English-language works engage in a dialogical relationship with both Western and Arab audiences. In a Bakhtinian sense, they seek to reshape misrepresented images in the West while avoiding the censorship common in the East. Fadia Faqir, for instance, has risked her career by writing in English and confronting Western readers with an unfiltered portrayal of Middle Eastern, Arab-Muslim, and

immigrant women's experiences. Her choice of language is rooted in both her educational background and her life as a British citizen.

In an interview with Lindsay Moore[12], Faqir describes how living next to an exclusive English club in Jordan sparked her desire to assimilate, much like her protagonist Salma in *My Name is Salma*, who is often depicted looking into others' gardens from the periphery. Faqir's decision to write in English was also influenced by her father's authoritarian and patriarchal attitudes in Jordan. His attempts to control her life and dictate her identity eventually led to her dislocation, pushing her toward a diasporic existence in Britain, where she transitioned from marginalization to a more central position as a woman, an Arab, and a Muslim. Despite facing rejection and marginalization in her adopted country, Faqir chose to assert her identity. The use of English by Anglophone Arab writers is often more than just a linguistic choice; it's a medium for cultural negotiation.

As Nash points out, many writers address primarily Anglo-American or European audiences, requiring a form of cultural translation that bridges their Arab backgrounds with the expectations of a globally dominant readership. This cultural translation is evident in the works of writers like Soueif, who blends English and Arabic in transformative ways, infusing English with Arabic expressions and reshaping narrative structures. Soueif's bilingual and bicultural narrative techniques create a unique cross-cultural dialogue that reflects her identity's complexity and provides Western readers with an authentic portrayal of Arab culture.

Ultimately, Anglophone Arab women writers navigate a delicate balance between self-expression and cultural mediation. Writing in English allows them to address sensitive issues, challenge stereotypes, and assert their voices against both Western and Eastern frameworks of censorship and control. This choice, whether driven by a sense of linguistic familiarity or a deliberate rejection of Arabic's cultural limitations, underscores the significance of language as a site of both personal and political agency for these writers.

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[12] See Moore, L. (2011). "You arrive at a truth, not the truth": An Interview with Fadia Faqir. *Postcolonial Text*, *6*(2).

1.2.2. Representations of Home

As scholar Geoffrey Nash tells us, when it comes to the Arab Novel in English, it's essential to consider the foundational influences shaping contemporary international literatures: postcolonialism, which examines intercultural dynamics by exploring how colonialism and imperialism have impacted non-Western literatures; the internationalization of literature, where the effects of globalization today shape the creation of works for transnational audiences; and feminism, particularly the adaptation of Arab and Islamic feminisms (along with the Western influences that shaped them) into literature intended for a non-Arab, non-Islamic readership. (Nash, 2007:21)

Arab Anglophone Literature in Britain especially is highly feminine and feminist as Layla Al Maleh states (2009:13) Arab Anglophone women writers are influenced by the contrasting ethnic and racial discourses in each country, which affects how they perceive "home" and their sense of identity. Their sense of "home" is shaped by their unique hybrid or hyphenated identities, enabling authors like Ahdaf Soueif[13], Fadia Faqir[14], Leila Aboulela, Diana Abu-Jaber[15] to explore diverse interpretations of "home" in their work.

For instance, British Arab writers may critically reinterpret their homeland from afar, while American-born Arab writers may recall it with nostalgia, especially if they were raised in the West. In the writings of Arab Anglophone women—through various genres like poetry, novels, short stories, and drama—the notion of "home" appears in distinct ways. Sometimes home enables the creation of heterotopias "as space of crisis, deviation and temporal discontinuity, home might be reconfigured in oppositional ways" (Moore, 2008:102) The term "home" can evoke traditional ideas of patriarchy, identity, and comfort, with the authors' views often reflecting the complexity of homeland, heritage, or national belonging, in *Community Boundaries and Border Crossings* Sarnou affirms that:

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[13] See Soueif, A. (2012). *In the Eye of the Sun*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
[14] Faqir, F. (2008). *My name is Salma*. Random House.
[15] See Abu-Jaber, D. (2003). *Arabian jazz*. WW Norton & Company.

To further illustrate the new conception of home, I add that the boundaries and borders of home seemingly extend beyond its walls to the neighborhood, even the suburb, town, or city. Home is a place, but it is also a space inhabited by family, people, things, and belongings— a familiar, if not comfortable, space where particular activities and relationships are lived. In this way, home is a virtual place, a repository for memories of the lived space. In Soueif's view however, home has now been doubled, dualized, and perceived as a twofold notion. (2017:84)

Lindsey Moore finds that "the construction of post-colonial national identity often involves a "homing" or "the reclaiming and reprocessing of habits, objects, names and histories that have been uprooted" (S. Ahmed et al. 2003:9 as cited in Moore, 2008:100). In this sense, often "domestic space can be imagined as a haven of continuity that ameliorates the negative effects of colonial incursion" Ibid. Anglophone Arab women authors hold distinctive views on home, cultural identity, and bridging Western and Arab cultures, informed by their particular "politics of location."[16]

1.2.3. The Narrative Voice: Hybrid, Hyphenated, Polyphonic and Dialogic

As Dallel Sarnou states in the paper "The Polyphonic, Dialogic Feminine, Narrative Voice inAnglophone Arab Women's Writings" Voice and voicing are central themes that critics often analyze in the study of women's narratives. Situated within postcolonial literature, Borderlands narratives, diasporic stories, and writings by immigrants or those with hybrid identities have flourished. It is at this intersection that Arab Anglophone women's narratives should be placed. (Sarnou, 2016:202)

Sarnou then explains drawing from Bakhtin and Genette that in literary studies, it's well established that narratives can be told from various perspectives, ranging from an all-knowing "omniscient narrator" situated outside the story to an unreliable narrator who is an active character within the story. The choice of narrative voice is a critical stylistic decision for authors, as it

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[16] See Rich, A. (1984). Notes toward a Politics of Location. *Women, Feminist Identity and Society in the 1980's: Selected Papers*, 7-22.

significantly shapes how readers perceive the events. For instance, an omniscient narrator might seem more credible to readers, while an unreliable narrator may lead them to question the accuracy of the recounted events. In British-Jordanian writer Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2007), Salma narrates her own story in the first person, yet her reliability is often in question. Sarnou, citing Faqir explains how due to her psychological trauma from past experiences, Salma's voice as an "I" narrator can be unstable. Early in the novel, Salma's reflections blur past and present, leading readers to question her memories.

She recalls, "A few years ago, I tasted my first fish and chips, but my mountainous Arab stomach could not digest the fat, which floated in my tummy for days. Salma resisted, but Sally must adapt" (Faqir 9). Here, the reader may find themselves questioning Salma's memory of her first meal in England, unsure of how clearly she recalls the experience. (Sarnou 2016:203) In third-person narration, the voice of the narrator often dominates over other characters, and the perspective is typically limited yet omniscient. Here, the narrator uses third-person pronouns and shares the internal thoughts, emotions, and consciousness of a single character—usually the protagonist.

> Writing in the third person allows complete freedom in terms of the perspective from which
> the story is told: an impersonal narrator can be omniscient, a repository of potentially
> unlimited knowledge about the universe. This perspective can encompass the most intimate
> and hidden emotions of the characters, traversing spatial and temporal distances.
> Alternatively, it may adopt the point of view of one or more characters, thereby limiting
> the information the narrator can possess and convey to what a given character could
> plausibly know and understand. Or it might simply record what occurs on the surface, as if
> it were a spectator of a drama. (Neri & Carrara, 2022:236.)[17]

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[17] My translation from Italian to English of: Narrare in terza persona lascia piena libertà per ciò che riguarda il punto di vista dal quale la storia è raccontata: un narratore impersonale può essere onnisciente, depositario di un sapere potenzialmente illimitato su l'universo. Funzionale di uno sguardo che abbraccia i moti più intimi e celati dei personaggi, che attraversa distanze spaziali e temporali. Oppure può adottare il punto di vista di un personaggio o di più personaggi, limitando dunque le informazioni di cui può disporre, che può trasmettere a ciò che un dato personaggio e plausibilmente in grado di sapere e di capire, o ancora, può limitarsi a registrare ciò che avviene in superficie, quasi fosse lo spettatore di un dramma. (Neri & Carrara, 2022:236)

In some cases, this omniscient narrator may use a stream-of-consciousness technique to reveal the protagonist's thought process as it naturally unfolds. For example, in *My Name is Salma*, Salma's reflections flow in a continuous stream of consciousness, pulling her between past and present: "The interior monologue or polyphonic Stream of Consciousness reveals a fragmented, shattered, porous consciousness, where fragments of others' words float." Ivi.240.[18] Her thoughts jump between different ideas, although an omniscient narrator, likely representing the author, attempts to organize these reflections to help the reader understand Salma's inner turmoil.

Stream of consciousness, however, differs from the interior monologue in that it is less structured, allowing thoughts to flow without a clear start or end. In contrast, the interior monologue is more organized, presenting thoughts in a sequence that mirrors an individual's internal voice, though it doesn't necessarily require a first-person perspective. This distinction between interior monologue and stream of consciousness is significant in the analysis of Arab Anglophone women's narratives, which often rely on the interior monologue to convey the inner world of displaced feminine voices. Similar to Virginia Woolf's exploration of memory and emotion, Arab diasporic women writers use interior monologue to bring these complex voices to the forefront.

In narratology, the concept of "voice" addresses questions such as "who speaks?" and distinguishes between the narrator's point of view, perspective, and narrative level. Sarnou explains that Genette's typology, including auto-, extra-, hetero-, homo-, and intra-diegetic narrators, helps categorize these voices. Furthermore, she points out that Lanser further elaborates on this by suggesting that voice and the narrated world are interdependent: just as a story requires a narrator, the narrator shapes the experience of the story. This relationship gives the narrator a unique, liminal role—they have no existence outside the text but bring it to life.

> A third-person narrator, being heterodiegetic, does not take part in the story being told and does not designate themselves as a character, but only refers to third-party subjects. Their

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[18] My translation from Italian to English of "Il monologo interiore o Stream of Consciousness polifonico, esibisce una coscienza frantumata, esplosa, porosa, in cui galleggiano pezzi di parola altrui. (Neri & Carrara, 2022:240)

voice, therefore, has an ontologically unfathomable and untraceable origin. (Neri & Carrara, 2022:235)[19]

When analyzing women's narratives, it's essential to recognize that narration inherently involves social relationships, extending beyond technical concerns. Narrative voice, especially in feminist literature, addresses both individual and collective identities. While feminist critics emphasize the social implications and ideological significance of voice, narratologists often focus on its formal elements. Yet by merging these perspectives, as Bakhtin's concept of "sociological poetics" suggests, narrative technique can be seen as an embodiment of ideology. This intersection of social and literary practice is central to understanding the narrative voice in Arab Anglophone women's writings. (Sarnou, 2016:205) Arab women's narratives can be described as polyphonic.

According to Bakhtin as explained by Sarnou authors don't impose their own voice between the character and the reader; instead, they allow characters to speak for themselves, creating a layered and subversive text. This approach makes it seem as though each book is co-authored by its characters, who each bring their own perspective and consciousness to the story. Rather than presenting a single reality as defined by the author, these narratives reveal a multiplicity of realities, each shaped by how characters perceive the world. For example, in Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma*, the reader encounters dual voices representing different aspects of the protagonist's subconscious: Salma, an oppressed Bedouin woman, and Sally, a displaced British Arab.

The presence of multiple voices in a story allows it to emerge as an interplay of distinct perspectives or ideologies. Characters can express their own thoughts and even challenge the author's intent. Thus, the author's role shifts, as they no longer hold the "power to mean." English-language texts by Arab diasporic writers who navigate multiple cultural spaces are inherently dialogic due to their double consciousness, double commitment, double perception, and bilingual fluency. This

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[19] My translation from Italian to English of: Un narratore in terza persona, invece etero diegetico, non partecipa alla storia raccontata, non designa sé stesso in quanto personaggio, ma solo soggetti terzi. La sua voce ha dunque un'origine ontologicamente insondabile, non tracciabile. (Neri & Carrara, 2022:235)

creates a "double-voicedness" or "polyphony" where the narrator's voice interweaves various identities, experiences, and languages. In examining polyphonic traits within Arab diasporic novels, short stories, and poems, we observe that hybrid or hyphenated identities foster multi-vocal texts in which multiple ethnic, cultural, gendered, and narrative voices are represented. This double-voicedness captures two realms of consciousness: homeland and diaspora, English and Arabic, past and present. Bakhtin argues that in polyphonic works, characters are not confined by the author's voice; they possess the freedom to "answer back."

In these narratives, the protagonist's voice is as influential as the author's. Instead of describing the protagonist through an external lens, the author builds the character's identity through the character's own words. Bakhtin describes this as the author constructing the character not through foreign or neutral definitions, but through the character's self-expression (Bakhtin, 47 as cited in Sarnou, 2016:206). This is a common feature in many Arab Anglophone women's narratives, where female protagonists are crafted by female authors.

However, readers engage in a dialogical, interpretive relationship with the text, often focusing on the protagonist's discourse and overlooking the author's presence. As a result, readers hear the voices of characters like Amal, Salma, Asya, Khadra, Najwa, and the Sandpiper, rather than those of authors. (Sarnou, 2016: 207-208) The voice in Arab Anglophone literature is characterized by its polyphonic, dialogic, and disrupted nature. While many other notable works could have been referenced to support this argument, the texts discussed in this article are among the most acclaimed, best-selling, and widely read in Arab English literature. Sarnou describes how literary critic Paul John Eakin emphasizes the significance of narration in identity formation, arguing that storytelling is not merely self-indulgent but a crucial act of self-construction. He states, "talking about ourselves involves a lot more than self-indulgence; when we do it, we perform a work of self-construction" (Eakin, 51).

In this light, the narratives produced by Anglophone Arab women focus on their experiences, representing women, Arabs, and displaced individuals. This multilayered representation fosters a heteroglossic and double-voiced discourse, as conceptualized by Bakhtin. These works aim to

deconstruct and reconstruct various truths and realities, particularly concerning the Arab world and the status of women within it. Through their innovative narrative techniques, these authors challenge traditional representations and offer nuanced perspectives on identity, displacement, and gender, reflecting the complexities of their cultural landscapes. (Sarnou, 2016:211-212)

1.2.4. Deterritorialized Bodies and Selves: Ahdaf Soueif and Fadia Faqir

As Dallel Sarnou writes in "Border Crossing in British Anglophone Arab Women's Narratives":

> British Anglophone Arab women's narratives look quite closely at the different borders that Arabs cross when being dislocated to other cultures and countries. From postcolonial, feminist, postcolonial feminist, and border theory, these narratives give a vivid insight into issues of the deterritorialization process that postcolonial subjects experience in the Diaspora It is a journey of "immobile and intensive voyage" (Deleuze and Guatarri 319) (Sarnou, 2017 :83)

Furthermore, the scholar explains in her article "Deterritorialized Anglophone Arab Women: Liminal selves between home and diaspora (Case study of Faqir's *My Name is Salma*)" liminality is related to the limit. In latin *limen* it refers to threshold or boundary, frontier, limit. As Sarnou explains: "the status of liminal individuals is socially and structurally ambiguous". (Sarnou, 2017:100), The scholars discusses that by borrowing concepts from anthropology for use in literary studies, many scholars and literary critics have become increasingly interested in areas such as liminality, thresholds, margins, and borderlands.

Thinkers like Anzaldúa, Said, and Bhabha have aimed to amplify the voices of those who exist on the fringes of society, encompassing aspects like gender and ethnicity. Liminality, in cultural and literary theory, describes a space or state situated between more clearly defined spaces, periods, or identities. This threshold, or limen, represents the in-between—whether it's between home and diaspora, or masculinity and femininity. In postcolonial theory, the concept helps explore cultural spaces that exist between the (ex-)colonizer and the (ex-)colonized. Within this liminal zone, the

subaltern (as defined by Spivak[20]) may discover resources and strategies for self-transformation that challenge the rigid binaries of colonial or orientalist discourse.

Thus, liminality can denote the condition of being constrained within a specific marginal zone, where minorities find themselves trapped. This includes individuals marginalized based on gender, race, religion, and language. From this viewpoint, Arab women have often been seen as archetypal representations of liminality. Due to enduring patriarchal oppression and discrimination in many Arab countries, Arab women continue to be depicted in Western academia and art as liminal figures. In fact, Lamya Ben Youssef Zayzafoun as cited in *Arab, Muslim, Woman* by Lindsey Moore states: 'the Arab Muslim woman' is 'a semiotic subject . . . produced according to the law of supply and demand to serve various political and ideological ends' (2008: 2) Women in Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries face a double objectification (Gayatry, 2015) as they contend with both patriarchal societies and authoritarian regimes: "They are not only marginalized by religious-cultural norms, but are also excluded by domineering male-manipulated regimes. Their dislocated self are embedded and embodied in deterritorialised bodies.About dislocation Marta Cariello says the following:

> Movement across borders and identities, uncertain, stolen and disillusioning ground, the subtraction of a homeland and its material sites – these are the tropes of a literature of dislocations, where the trauma of separation, of interrupted memory, of colonization and decolonizationn calls for a deeply inscribed anatomy of the body. (Cariello, 2009: 314)

As Cariello narrates: Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* tells the story of a young Egyptian woman's coming of age during the 1960s and 1970s, set against the backdrop of both Egypt and England. The protagonist, Asya, is positioned within Egypt's intellectual elite, and her narrative unfolds alongside significant political events of that era, reconstructed through personal stories and dialogues. This

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[20] See Spivak, G. C. (2023). Can the subaltern speak?. In *Imperialism* (pp. 171-219). Routledge.

leads to a nuanced exploration of the generational and cultural conflicts that shape the sexual politics in both the Arab and British contexts, reflected in Asya's physical and emotional journeys across the borders of Egypt and Europe. Asya's body embodies these territories, mapping out European modernity and its connection to various Middle Eastern political events. It also represents her internal dis-synchrony and the self-projection that defines the experience of migration. Furthermore, the narrative reveals a longing for home and family in Egypt, which is often idealized. Asya's movement is not merely a traversal of space but a means of constituting it, piece by piece. Similarly, history is not just a backdrop for migrant experiences; instead, migrants themselves—through their very beings, emotions, and expressions—create a history that is less about narration and more about assembly, existing in a state that is present yet non-representational and non-authoritative.

In Soueif's work, the body negotiating its presence within an English-written history is profoundly sensuous and sexual. From the moment Asya meets Saif, who later becomes her ill-fated husband, the physicality of their encounter is striking. This meeting foreshadows future betrayal and highlights Asya's vibrant sensuality: the tactile connection between them is immediate—"his hands were warm" and he takes pride in "his smooth, brown back." Sarnou explains how in *My Name is Salma* by Fadia Faqir Salma experiences a state of liminality within her family and tribe due to her emerging sexuality and her love affair with Hamdan. Paradoxically, her beauty and sexual allure lead to her social exclusion. In the case of Salma, her family's reaction condemns her to metaphorical death through disownment by her father and literal death at the hands of her brother Mahmoud, who is tasked with restoring the family's honor.

Scholar Dallel Sarnou finds three instances of gender-based liminality rooted in the patriarchal structure of Salma's Bedouin society. Firstly, her father denies her burgeoning femininity by rejecting her physical development, particularly her breasts. Similarly, her mother criticizes Salma's natural expression of femininity, labeling her as impulsive for displaying her beauty. Mahmoud's animosity manifests in his disdain for his sister's femininity. Moreover, Salma is denied the experience of love— a fundamental human need—by her mother. This exclusion reinforces Salma's alienation from her

family and tribe, which is further exacerbated when she faces severe consequences for her affair with Hamdan, who ultimately betrays her. Following her ostracization, Salma's female body, already marginalized within her patriarchal homeland, becomes liminalized in Exeter.

By the end of the narrative, Salma—also referred to as Sally—confronts the various forms of liminality that have pushed her to the edges of society. She achieves an MA degree, marries her professor, has a son, and attempts to lead a normal life. Yet, she cannot ignore the anguish and memories of her daughter Leila, whom she left behind in Hima, leading her to return home to save Leila from the oppressive societal and cultural liminality that the innocent child faces alone. Tragically, Leila is killed by her uncle Mahmoud. In confronting the horrific socio-cultural liminality prevalent in many Bedouin societies, Salma ultimately meets her own death in the novel's climactic scene. In the case of Soueif's novel Asya's awakening sensuality is ultimately constrained within a cold, asexual marriage, where her inability to connect physically with Saif spirals into betrayals and self-punishment. Saif's pivotal role in this dynamic is his insistence that Asya "not feel," effectively shaping their relationship around the desire for an asexual partner. (Cariello 2009: 316)

Saif's request effectively becomes a demand for Asya's emotional numbness, which is highlighted in a story he shares with her during a moment of intimacy before their marriage. During a night of drinking, Saif and his friends toppled a marble statue in the garden. They then dragged the statue to the bungalow of a drunken instructor named Peter, placing it in his bed while he slept. Saif describes how Peter, the next morning, clung to the statue, repeatedly lamenting, "She's so perfect." Asya envisions the marble figure in the disheveled bed, her eyes open but unseeing, her stone breasts jutting towards the ceiling, and her arms severed at the elbows, while the man mourns beside her.

This image of the petrified woman resurfaces in the novel's final paragraph and remains a recurring theme in Asya's directive to "turn into stone." In the humorous story, Peter's repetition of "she's so perfect" conveys a crucial message that Asya struggles to internalize: her body must transform into marble to avoid causing discomfort or chaos. This representation of the petrified female body resonates with Elisabeth Bronfen's exploration of the dead female form, which, through

fetishization, replaces the fear of death and symbolizes the 'absence' associated with femininity. Within this framework, the marble statue symbolizes a beautiful yet lifeless body, available for contemplation.

Stripped of its sexuality, the statue embodies the notion of perfection that Peter mourns, a sentiment that lingers in Asya's mind throughout the novel. Asya's need to become "petrified" extends beyond her relationship with Saif, reflecting broader societal pressures. Male expectations demand a desensitized woman, but Asya's refusal to comply becomes the foundation for exploring bodily and sexual politics in the novel. Asya's indomitable spirit emerges as she discovers her desires and engages in an affair with an Englishman during her time in England. This relationship positions her body as a new site for identity exploration and cultural conflict, as the Englishman views her as an exotic object and attempts to preserve her 'Egyptianness.'

This dynamic reflects a colonial relationship marked by an insurmountable distance between the two disparate cultures, leading to cultural and even linguistic barriers. Despite this complexity, Asya remains tethered to a singular, if conflicted, identity. In navigating the liminal space between Egypt and England, her language itself becomes a blend of voices. Edward Said captures this duality in his review of the novel, asserting that *In the Eye of the Sun* is indeed an Arabic novel written in English, highlighting Asya's authentic, multifaceted identity that transcends simple representation, embodying a distinct Egyptian sensibility situated in the West. (Cariello:317-320)

By crafting this archetypal character, Faqir and Soueif give voice to many silenced individuals, with the words of Sarnou (2017:107) they represent a multifaceted self—an oppressed woman, a marginalized Arab British citizen, a foreigner, and a lost lover. Salma encapsulates the state of liminality that anyone may encounter when displaced or deemed different. However, Salma employs also strategies of resistance as Shaffira Gayatri (2015:69) affirms in "The Body and Beyond: Representation of Body Politics in My Name Is Salma by Fadia Faqir" such as for example "When her pregnancy became known, instead of helplessly surrendering to fate and the wrath of her tribe, Salma had decided to take her fate in her own hands by leaving her village and going to the police to

be kept in protective custody "(Faqir 2007, 41) or trying to "pass" as less foreigner, concluding by stating that:

> Salma does excercise a sense of agency. Despite the oppression imposed on her through physical violence, humiliation, and cultural traditions, Salma ultimately challenges the mainstream portrayals of Muslim women as passive. The fact that Salma takes her agency by politicising her body, in the very act which is often used against her, is of particular importance in the postcolonial feminist framework. It is essential, however, to underscore that her attempt to resist repression fails due to the existing system. While in her native home patriarchal Arab culture is Salma's main challenge, the novel suggests that in the postcolonial English context Salma's struggle to dismantle male oppression is curbed by the imperialist and capitalist patriarchal environment. The politicisation of her body is exacerbated with the alienisation that she experiences for being a displaced, veiled and coloured immigrant, leaving her with no space to seek refuge. (2015:77)

The key takeaway from this analysis is that, despite occupying a territorialized liminal space characterized by vulnerability and the dual responsibility of maintaining their sense of identity rooted in both their homeland and host culture, Arab Anglophone women protagonists demonstrate remarkable resilience. They effectively strategize to navigate these complexities while remaining authentic to themselves and exercising agency. To me, this positions them as precursors to the affirmative politics of desire explored by the authors I have chosen to study.

1.3.   A Minor Literature

In her article "Narratives of Arab Anglophone women and the articulation of a major discourse in a minor literature" Dallel Sarnou tries to relocate the narratives of Arab Anglophone women writers in a literary framework in order to give a more precise categorization to their narratives. Departing from Deleuze and Guattari's, Sarnou states that Arab Anglophone women's literature is a rhizome addressing it as a minor literature:

> The expression of this work does not crystalize into a unifying form; instead it proliferates
>
> along different lines of growth. Such work resembles crabgrass, a bewildering multiplicity
>
> of stems and roots which can cross at any point to form a variety of possible connections
>
> (Deleuze and Guattari 14 as Cited in Sarnou 2014:68)

Deleuze and Guattari's theory maps out the position of immigrants who navigate between their culture of origin and that of their new country. With intimate knowledge of both, immigrants act as mediators, interpreters, cultural translators, or observers with a dual perspective on each cultural realm. This concept applies to many Arab Anglophone women authors—such as Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Laila Lalami[21], and Leila Aboulela[22] among British Arabs, and Naomi Shihab Nye, Layla Halabi, Susan Muaddi Darraj, and Diana Abu-Jaber among Arab Americans—despite some variations in experience.

As Sarnou states in line with Hassan's[23] perspective, Arab Anglophone literature, as immigrant literature, can be seen as part of "minor literature." This term does not imply a minor language, but rather describes a literature produced by a minority within a dominant language, as is the case with English writings by Arab immigrants: *"Such literatures, for Deleuze and Guattari, have three main characteristics: 1) the deterritorialization of language, 2) the connection of the individual*

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[21] See Lalami, L. (2006). *Hope and other dangerous pursuits*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
[22] See Aboulela, L. (2005). *Minaret*. Black Cat.
[23] See Hassan, W. S. (2014). *Immigrant narratives: Orientalism and cultural translation in Arab American and Arab British literature*. Oxford University Press.

to a political immediacy, 3) the collective assemblage of enunciation." Labeling the works of Arab Anglophone women as "minor literature" stems from both linguistic and cultural perspectives.

 In the hands of these writers—English, as a dominant language, is reshaped and adapted to reflect the unique cultural identity of Arab women navigating multiple worlds, cultures, and languages. This approach thus highlights a distinctive, multidimensional form of minor literature, with specific examples to be explored in the following sections. "works by this group of writers contribute to the emergence of an independent literature that is neither Arabic nor English, but is linguistically and culturally hybrid, discursively multidimensional and literarily heterogeneous." (Sarnou, 2014:70)

Another distinctive trait of this literature is that in order to address the English readership the authors have to operate a "cultural translation that brings about problems inherent in trying to present an alien culture to the globally dominant one, i.e. the Arabic culture to the Western one." (Sarnou, 2014:71) Sarnou hightlights their effort as cultural mediators by mentioning the work of Gloria Anzaldua who is a Mexican American scholar and feminist that introduced a fresh perspective to cultural studies on how people of dual cultures, or what Bhabha terms "culturally hybrid," experience their physical and psychological spaces.

Anzaldúa developed interconnected theories, including a concept she called a "geography of selves." She writes, "I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. Gloria, the facilitator, Gloria the mediator, straddling the walls between abysses" (Anzaldúa 4) as cited in (Sarnou, 2014:72). The study of literature by Arab Anglophone women offers a rich area for cultural and discursive research.

This field is significant not only because it represents minority literature, but also because it serves as a bridge between the West and the Arab/Muslim world, especially in a time of heightened tensions. Through a blend of cultural perspectives and linguistic diversity, these works provide Western readers with an authentic portrayal of the Arab world and Arab Muslim women, countering misrepresentations often seen in media. English-language writings by contemporary Arab women

surpass the typical post-colonial framework assigned by many critics, as their distinctiveness arises from the unique social and cultural backgrounds of the authors. They remain deeply Arab while embodying diverse cultural values influenced by their varied social contexts.

These women not only write in a global language—English—but many also live between two worlds: their homeland and the diaspora. Writing in English, as we saw earlier, often allows them greater freedom to explore controversial and taboo subjects, making their work a vivid, nuanced representation of the Arab world with its specific cultural, religious, and political aspects, effectively bridging cultures between East and West. What distinguishes these works is that they're authored by women who often feel displaced yet exist at the intersection of multiple cultures. This adds a sense of uniqueness to English Arab women's literature, as these writers—whether hyphenated or hybrid—challenge labels and reflect the diversity of Arab women, including their ideas, desires, emotions, and survival strategies.

Nash explains how it's essential to note that Anglophone Arab women's narratives developed from a different context than those of Francophone authors due to the varying colonial policies of France and Britain. French colonization pursued cultural assimilation, working to "francophonize" its territories and repress cultural particularities, resulting in Francophone Arab literature often being created by women familiar only with colloquial Arabic.

In contrast, British colonial policy, based on a racialized view that excluded Arabs from British culture, did not enforce assimilation. Consequently, Anglophone Arab literature is generally authored by women with a command of standard Arabic, writing in English for various reasons, such as growing up in English-dominated regions, studying in English-speaking institutions, or migrating to English-speaking countries. They are attuned to the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization experienced by immigrants who feel a sense of displacement in the diaspora. Therefore, it is time for literary critics to recognize Arab Anglophone women's narratives as a distinct "minor literature" in a dominant language—English.

1.4.   The Politics of Desire in Arab Anglophone Women's Literature

As Joseph Massad (1999:74) tells us, Soueif's writings delve into the potential for cultural dialogue and the politics of desire, both within and beyond that dialogue. In her work, desire is always situated within a web of politics, history, and geography — elements that are intertwined and cannot be separated. Soueif seeks to navigate the confusion and stereotypes prevalent in society, as well as the complexities of international, national, and familial politics, all of which shape the framework through which life and desires are understood. The journeys of her characters do not necessarily aim for liberation as their ultimate goal; instead, they represent a nuanced process where various desires—sexual, social, economic, and political—are influenced by the characters and their surroundings.

This intricate portrayal is crafted with care by Ahdaf Soueif. The narrative centers on Asya's quest to reconcile love and desire. Throughout her journey, she learns to distinguish between the two. When she finally engages in a sexual encounter with Gerald Stone, an obnoxious English hippie who starkly contrasts the refined, cosmopolitan Saif, she realizes that her experience was driven solely by desire rather than love. Asya also becomes aware of the interplay between race and sex in Western contexts, emphasizing the complexities of sexual politics.

Soueif examines desire not as a rigid binary of heterosexual and homosexual identities but as a fluid spectrum of possibilities that spans temporal experiences from the end of the last century to the present. This manipulation of various timeframes in her storytelling allows Soueif to more effectively address another key concern: geographic dislocation. Scholar Gayatri In Fadia Faqir's work, Salma's experiences encapsulate the politics of the body and desire within patriarchal and neocolonial contexts, highlighting how her body becomes a battleground for control, societal expectations, and personal agency.

As a Bedouin woman exiled from her homeland, Salma undergoes dual objectification across two disparare cultural settings. In her traditional Bedouin community in Hima, her body is subject to

strict gender norms that dictate her social role, aligning her sexuality with public interest rather than individual choice. This is illustrated when Salma's father, likening her breasts to melons, instructs her to cover them—a metaphor also echoed in Faqir's earlier work, *Pillars of Salt* , where Um Saad similarly hides her breasts in shame.

Such comments underscore society's exertion of control over female bodies, often leading women to internalize this objectification and censor their bodies to avoid "male aggression" in public spaces. These narratives reveal how patriarchal structures use body politics as a mechanism of control, shaping women's perceptions of their own bodies. Fatema Mernissi's observations on women as "trespassers" in male-dominated spaces resonate here; women, merely by existing in spaces dominated by men, are seen as "foes" whose presence disrupts male order.

This policing extends from public spaces into private spheres, where women's bodies are surveilled, and their expressions of desire curtailed. When Salma falls in love with Hamdan and engages in a sexual relationship, her choice defies her community's moral codes, which equate female "purity" with societal honor. Her mother's warning—"keep your petals shut and legs closed, lest they shoot you between the eyes"—reflects a deeply embedded belief in safeguarding female "purity" to prevent shame from befalling the family. This warning serves as a tool of body politics, where the metaphor of "petals" highlights both the fragility and the controlled symbolism of female sexuality. By juxtaposing her mother's advice with her own rebellious sexual encounter, Salma asserts her agency, redefining her body's purpose on her terms, albeit at great risk. However, body politics extends beyond personal autonomy to the broader societal repercussions women face when they transgress patriarchal norms. Salma's mother's shift from saying "they will kill you" to "your brother will kill you" illustrates the familial enforcement of patriarchal honor codes. Here, honor killing becomes a mechanism to "restore" communal honor by punishing female transgressions.

Patriarchal authority, while pervasive in society, also permeates family dynamics, delegating the duty of policing honor to individual family members, thus reinforcing male control over female bodies and sexuality. Salma's navigation of her body politics continues as she migrates to a Western

context, where the veil she once wore—now shed in an attempt to blend into her new environment—becomes another symbol of her dual identity and cultural estrangement.

In mainstream discourse, the veil is often viewed as an emblem of female oppression; however, for Salma, it represents a link to her heritage and identity. Her sense of discomfort after removing it indicates an unresolved conflict between internalized patriarchal values and the external pressures to assimilate. The act of unveiling, intended as liberation in Western ideology, instead alienates her, revealing the dual pressures of conforming to both her community's expectations and Western societal norms.

In her attempts to reclaim agency over her body and choices, Salma defies patriarchal dictates by leaving her village after her pregnancy is discovered, actively seeking safety and a future for herself and her unborn child. Yet, even this act of rebellion is fraught with challenges, underscoring the limitations imposed by both her original cultural context and her adopted one. Salma's journey reflects a continuous struggle to reconcile her body with both her desires and the cultural and patriarchal forces that seek to regulate her identity and autonomy.

Through Salma's narrative, Faqir delves into the layered complexities of body politics, showcasing how women's bodies are sites of resistance and oppression, molded by a matrix of societal expectations, family honor, and personal agency. Contemporary authors will deal with this dual objectification as well but going beyond it and showing ways to overcome the petrification whose cause is highly relational.

1.5 Salma El Wardany and Alya Mooro

In a literary landscape historically shaped by pioneering Arab Anglophone women writers such as Ahdaf Soueif and Fadia Faqir — whose works often grappled with identity, displacement, and resistance within frameworks of postcolonial trauma and feminist struggle — from the 2010's a new

generation of writers has begun to reframe the conversation around desire, subjectivity, and agency. Salma El Wardany and Alya Mooro, both of Egyptian heritage and raised in the UK, exemplify this generational shift. Their respective works — *These Impossible Things* (2022) and *The Greater Freedom: Life as a Middle Eastern Woman Outside the Stereotypes* (2019) — emerge from hybrid positionalities shaped by diasporic belonging, cultural negotiation, and feminist consciousness. While differing in form — El Wardany's work as autofiction, Mooro's as memoir — both texts center the urgency of liberating desire: not only from patriarchal and religious constraint, but also from colonial and orientalist frameworks that have historically rendered Arab and Muslim female desire either invisible or pathological. Their narratives foreground sexuality, intimacy, autonomy, and spiritual complexity as integral to the becoming of Arab women in diaspora, offering an **affirmative feminist politics** that moves beyond critique to reimagine new possibilities for pleasure, relationality, and ethical self-fashioning. It is this insistence — on naming, feeling, and politicizing desire — that links their work and signals a significant departure from earlier generational narratives toward a more embodied and emotionally generative feminist praxis.

1.5.1. Biography of Salma El Wardany

Salma El-Wardany is a British-Egyptian-Irish writer, poet, and broadcaster whose work spans literature, journalism, performance, and activism. Born and raised in the UK, El-Wardany identifies as part of the Arab diaspora and often reflects on her dual heritage and the complexities of being a Muslim woman in the West. Her writing engages with themes of gender, identity, desire, race, and religion, focusing particularly on the lived realities of young women navigating multiple cultural pressures. Her debut novel, *These Impossible Things* (2022), explores the emotional and political lives of three British Muslim women and has been praised for its candid exploration of sexuality, spirituality, and the bonds of female friendship. The novel blends autofictional elements with social

critique, capturing the dilemmas faced by women trying to reconcile personal autonomy with community expectations. Beyond fiction, El-Wardany is known for her spoken word poetry and her work with the BBC, where she contributes to conversations on feminism, race, and cultural identity. As a speaker and advocate, she is deeply invested in creating space for marginalized voices, particularly those of Muslim women, and challenging the reductive stereotypes that often frame public discourse around Arab and Muslim identities. Salma El-Wardany contributed the essay "A Gender Denied: Islam, Sex and the Struggle to Get Some"to the groundbreaking anthology It's Not About the Burqa (edited by Mariam Khan, 2019), a collection of essays written by Muslim women in Britain that challenge monolithic and stereotypical representations of Muslim womanhood, exploring themes such as faith, feminism, sexuality, race, and identity from diverse and often dissenting perspectives. El-Wardany's work exemplifies a contemporary feminist literary practice that is unapologetically intersectional and emotionally charged. Her narratives foreground affect, resistance, and the embodied complexities of diasporic womanhood, situating her among the most compelling voices in Arab Anglophone women's literature today.

1.5.2. Synopsis of *These Impossible Things*

The novel opens with friends Jenna, Malak, and Bilqis (Kees) enjoying a seemingly carefree afternoon alongside Malak's boyfriend, Jacob, and Kees's boyfriend, Harry—both white men. While the young women are British Muslims, their relationships are hidden from their families due to cultural expectations that they marry within the faith. That evening, Jacob ends his relationship with Malak, frustrated by her lack of belief in their future together. Kees returns to her family home for a visit and is momentarily comforted by the familiar rhythms of familial life. Her younger sister, Saba, reveals she plans to marry soon through a match arranged by their parents and expresses hope that Kees won't mind if she marries first. This remark exacerbates Kees's internal conflict about hiding her relationship with Harry. Months after the breakup, Malak continues to struggle emotionally.

During Saba's engagement party, she and Kees clash over the value of marrying for love versus community approval—Kees defending the former and Malak the latter. The disagreement results in a rupture between the two. Jenna, caught in the middle, distances herself from both and reconnects with Lewis, a former lover now friend. To move on from her heartbreak, Malak relocates to Egypt in search of a reconnection with her roots. Initially enjoying her new life, she meets Ali, a British Muslim man, at a mosque and begins a relationship with him. However, his behavior soon turns controlling and abusive, marked by jealousy and physical violence. In the UK, Kees becomes increasingly anxious about hiding her relationship as Saba's wedding nears. When Harry's family offers to buy them a flat, Kees feels further pressure. Jacob warns her that Harry plans to propose and encourages her to say yes. Realizing her love for Harry, Kees accepts the proposal despite ongoing concerns about her family's disapproval. Meanwhile, Malak continues to endure abuse from Ali, attempting to avoid conflict by complying with his expectations. Jenna, now isolated from both friends, seeks intimacy through casual encounters but refrains from penetrative sex. After she is raped by a man named Mark, Jenna blames herself and retreats further, opting for a relationship with Mo, a conservative Muslim man she feels aligns with societal expectations. Eventually, Kees reveals her engagement to Harry to her family. Their response is swift and harsh: they disown her. Though devastated, she proceeds with a nikah so she can live with Harry without religious guilt. Her father makes a symbolic gesture of support by attending briefly and giving her a gold bangle, though he does not stay for the ceremony. In Egypt, following the 2011 Revolution, Malak becomes pregnant. Recognizing she cannot stay with Ali, she reaches out to Kees for help. Kees travels to Cairo, despite their long estrangement, and supports Malak through her abortion, helping her return to London. Their reunion begins to repair the damage done by past conflicts and societal pressures.Through these parallel trajectories, the novel reveals how cultural, religious, and familial expectations—combined with racial and gendered power dynamics—fracture intimacy and subjectivity. Yet, it is through feminist solidarity and care that the protagonists begin to reclaim desire and imagine new futures.

1.5.3. Biography of Alya Mooro

Alya Mooro is an Egyptian-British journalist, writer, and cultural commentator known for her incisive reflections on identity, gender, and the politics of representation. Born in Egypt and raised in London, Mooro embodies a diasporic subjectivity that deeply informs her work, which often interrogates the contradictions of growing up Arab and female in the West. Her writing is marked by a desire to complicate dominant narratives around Arab womanhood, challenging orientalist stereotypes and societal taboos around sex, desire, and autonomy. Her debut memoir, *The Greater Freedom: Life as a Middle Eastern Woman Outside the Stereotypes* (2019), offers a personal and political exploration of what it means to be an Arab woman living beyond cultural prescriptions. Through autobiographical narrative, Mooro delves into issues such as sexual repression, double standards, religious expectations, and the psychological burden of representation. The memoir functions both as a personal coming-of-age story and a broader cultural critique, contributing to contemporary feminist discourse on intersectionality, diaspora, and postcolonial identity. Mooro's background in journalism, including work for outlets such as The Telegraph, VICE, and Refinery29, complements her literary voice, grounding her prose in both affective immediacy and cultural critique. Her work aims to dismantle silences around Arab women's desires and lived experiences, articulating an affirmative politics of voice, body, and belonging. In Mooro positions herself within the growing canon of Arab Anglophone women writers who use memoir and autofiction not only as self-expression, but as acts of resistance. Her contribution is crucial in reconfiguring visibility, reshaping Arab female subjectivity, and fostering transnational feminist solidarities.

1.5.4. Synopsis of *The Greater Freedom*

Alya Mooro's *The Greater Freedom: Life as a Middle Eastern Woman Outside the Stereotypes* (2019) is a hybrid text that merges memoir, social commentary, and feminist inquiry. Structured around autobiographical reflection and interviews with other Arab women across the diaspora, the book reads as both a deeply personal narrative and a collective portrait of Arab femininity in contemporary global contexts. As such, it can be positioned within the tradition of Arab Anglophone women's literature that uses life writing not only to assert subjectivity but to interrogate systems of power, gender norms, and cultural expectations. Set primarily between London and Cairo, Mooro's memoir traces her coming-of-age as an Arab woman navigating two conflicting cultural spheres. Raised in a liberal Western society but shaped by conservative Middle Eastern norms, Mooro documents the psychic, emotional, and physical dissonance that arises from living between cultures. Her narrative voice is candid, reflexive, and often critical of both Western ignorance and Arab patriarchal values, making the memoir both affectively powerful and politically engaged. Through a polyphonic narrative that includes the voices of other Arab women—many of whom have similarly complex relationships with sexuality, religion, family, and identity—Mooro exposes the multiplicity and contradictions within the category of the "Arab woman." She critiques dominant stereotypes of Arab women as passive, veiled, oppressed figures, and instead offers a dynamic portrayal of women who are sexually assertive, intellectually curious, spiritually ambivalent, and politically conscious. Themes such as virginity, dating, mental health, body image, racism, and professional ambition are woven throughout the text, always grounded in real lived experiences. One of the key interventions of *The Greater Freedom* is its exploration of desire and agency. Mooro discusses the repression of sexual desire through religious and cultural discourses and reflects on how shame, guilt, and familial expectations shaped her early relationships and self-image. The memoir foregrounds her eventual journey toward what could be seen as an "affirmative politics of desire"—a reclaiming of bodily autonomy and emotional truth through feminist introspection. This reclamation is not positioned as a

break from Arab or Muslim identity, but as a reimagining of them on her own terms. Stylistically, Mooro's use of the first-person voice lends immediacy and intimacy to the text, while her journalistic background enables her to situate personal anecdotes within broader sociopolitical frameworks. As a literary work, the memoir participates in the tradition of testimonial writing and minoritarian discourse, creating what Deleuze and Guattari would call a "minor literature"—one that deterritorializes dominant narratives and writes from the margins with force and clarity. In sum, *The Greater Freedom* is both a personal liberation narrative and a collective feminist manifesto. It contributes to Arab Anglophone women's literature by redefining what it means to be an Arab woman today—desiring, hybrid, self-critical, and insistently free.

Chapter 2. Theories on Desire

2.1. Relational Desire

"Hardly any scholarship exists investigating the pedagogies through which desire is learned, taught, and practiced within familial and local community settings. And while work on Middle Eastern patriarchies abounds, one must turn to Literary […] rather than empirical sources to excavate the productive relationships between patriarchy and desire formation." (Suad, 2005:80)

In his paper "Learning Desire: Relational Pedagogies and the Desiring Female Subject in Lebanon" Suad examins what he terms relational pedagogie the ways in which local constructs of desire, shaped by ideas of relational selfhood, were learned, taught, and practiced within the intimate patriarchal familial and communal dynamics of the diverse Arab community.

Relational pedagogies not only shaped relational desires within the framework of relational selfhood but were also shaped by these same relational desires. This reciprocal relationship aligns well with Deleuze and Guattari's perspective on desire, which is inherently relational. For them, desire emerges in dialogue and interaction, functioning as part of a broader assemblage. As the author explains, relational desire is a generative force that contributes to the creation of a relational self. When in the field, Suad:

"What do women want?" must be addressed within the context of the constantly shifting relational matrices that animated women's notions of self. Desire, in this context, was both assimilated into and claimed by the self and agency of specific persons but could be also attributed to and claimed by the matrix of relationships in which it was constituted. Desire could be understood as multi-sourced and, as a result, responsibility for desire became multi-out sourced. (Suad, 2005:81)

Suad explores how the concept of desire in a patriarchal society is deeply intertwined with relationships and family structures rather than being a purely individual trait. In societies where relational selfhood predominates, an individual's most significant possession is not their sense of self but their network of relationships. Desire is learned, expressed, and enacted through patriarchal and relational frameworks, where hierarchy, gender, and age play defining roles:

> Desire often became invested as a property of relationships rather than singularly the property of a person in a society in which the most im portant asset of ownership was not one's self but one's web of relationships. […] Women were differentiated from men in their desire-learning/teaching/making less by relationality than by hi erarchy organized through what I have called patriarchal connectivity (Joseph 1994b)—the embedding of relationally constituted selves in gendered and hierarchical aged relations animated by kinship idioms and morality. (Suad, 2005:81)

Women and men engage with desire through processes of learning, teaching, and creating it relationally, but these processes are shaped by what the author refers to as patriarchal connectivity— the hierarchical embedding of relational selves within kinship-based morality. As the author says (2005:82) While Western feminist thought tends to critique relationality as inherently feminine and devalued, Middle Eastern perspectives on desire frequently focus on its connections to Islamic traditions and patriarchal interpretations, particularly in the realm of sexual desire.

In patriarchal family cultures, the family is prioritized over individual agency. Desire is structured around duty, responsibility, hierarchy, and reciprocity, producing different relational expectations for men and women. (Suad, 2005:83) Men's and seniors' desires are generally prioritized, while women and juniors are often tasked with anticipating and fulfilling others' desires.

> As it was considered rude to ask directly, desire was often expressed indirectly. One hinted, implied, and established a setting in which desires could be viewed, read, and act upon desires. While both women and men were trained to express and read desire though indirection, women were expected to read and act upon the desires of others (particularly the desires of men and seniors) more than men. (Suad, 2005:85)

However, indirection is a key mode of communication; direct expression of desire is seen as impolite. For women in particular, articulating desires indirectly—sometimes by voicing them as others' desires—was considered more acceptable. We will later see how this responds to the idea of the good Arab which we will reflect upon a little deeper when adressing subjectivity and performance of Arabness. Relational responsibility extends into notions of honor and shame: actions by one family member can affect the entire family's status.

Families often mediate relationships, acting as negotiators to construct and communicate desires, especially in marriage arrangements. Women, while subordinated in many respects, can gain considerable authority within familial hierarchies, especially as senior figures. Sexual desire is another area shaped by these relational norms. Islamic texts portray men and women as both highly desirous and bound by codes of modesty, creating tension and confusion.

Women are often taught to be indirect about their sexual desires, leading to frustrations in intimate relationships, while men are portrayed as having a greater sense of entitlement in this domain. A common example of the suppression of desire is seen in the realm of sexuality. Various feminist scholars of Islam have highlighted that Islamic texts present inconsistent and contradictory perspectives on male and female sexual desires. Women are portrayed as having uncontrollable lust, yet they are expected to embody modesty and either suppress or regulate their sexual urges.

Conversely, men are characterized as rational and intellectually in control, while simultaneously being depicted as easily overwhelmed by the erotic allure of women. (Suad:100) In fact Moroccan sexual sociologist Abdessamad Dialmy (2014) asserts that the formation of individuals' identities is rooted in their biological sex. Boys are groomed along a vertical axis to distance themselves from femininity and evolve into powerful men, whereas girls follow a horizontal trajectory, remaining women from birth and throughout life. The vertical axis exposes boys to violence and risk, with the ultimate goal of public life, while the horizontal one steers girls towards domestic responsibilities and prudent, maternal du-ties. Preserving virginal modesty is deemed

essential, as expressed in Fatima Mernissi's words (1982:183): "honour and virginity locate prestige of a man between the legs of a woman." Despite this, the entire responsibility for the success of the sexual act is placed on women, even though, as Mernissi (Ibid.) points out, defloration still requires two peo-ple after all. This censorship aligns with what Obermeyer (2000) underscores in "Sexuality in Morocco: changing context and contested domain." Men traditionally segregate love from conjugal sex, as those who exhibit excessive attachment to their wives are perceived as bewitched, and men displaying tenderness are viewed as weak, feminine, and under a magic spell emanating from their wives. The open expression of love and tenderness could potentially legitimize the power of female sexuality, in contrast to Freudian notions of feminine passivity. Female sexuality is considered a potent force, which, if left un-checked, may lead to chaos (Mernissi, 1975:41). Regarding hshouma Obermeyer provides insight by explaining,

> "The concept of hashma/hshuma/hya (modesty, bashfulness) holds a central role in assessing a woman's worth and her capacity to behave appropriately in matters of sexuality. Women, more so than men, face scrutiny based on their sexual conduct and the purity of their bodies, a pat-tern observed in various regions of the Muslim world (Bauer 1985 as cited in Obermeyer, 2000:243).

Finally, the paper by Suad emphasizes the relational and hierarchical embedding of personhood and desire in this cultural context. Learning and negotiating desire is a lifelong process carried out collectively, where individuals' identities and security are deeply tied to their familial networks. Political and economic instability further enforces reliance on kinship and relational proximity as safeguards against vulnerability:

> In a culture in which interpersonal dynamics supported indirect communication, relational responsibility, and brokerage, desire was often conveyed indirectly, responsibility for its articulation shared, and negotiation of its enactment played out in conjunction with others. Learning desire was a lifelong process engaged in by a chorus of people. Economic

> instability in the absence of political protections left persons vulnerable. In this political
>
> economy, the family and familial relations were valued above the person. (Suad, 2005: 101)

This study is important because it presents an ethnographic analysis of how desire is socially constructed and enacted in a patriarchal, relationally focused culture, particularly within Middle Eastern contexts. It argues that in societies where kinship and relational hierarchies dominate, desire is not simply a personal experience but a communal one shaped by age, gender, morality, and hierarchy.

These systems of connection and responsibility dictate how desires are expressed, understood, and acted upon, with significant implications for the roles of men and women, as well as broader cultural norms like honor, shame, and duty. By embedding desire within relational frameworks, the study provides insights into how cultural constructs shape agency, identity, and emotional expression.

The construction of subjectivity in Arab Anglophone women's literature is deeply rooted in the control of desire. A dive into Lacanian theory will show us how through post-structuralist[24] discourse desire becomes an analytic process.

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[24] Poststructuralism is a way of thinking about language, meaning, and identity that emerged in the late 20th century as a response to structuralism. It challenges the idea that meaning is fixed, stable, or based on clear, universal structures. Instead, poststructuralism argues that meaning is fluid, shifting, and dependent on context, interpretation, and power relations. See Butler, J. (2002). *Gender trouble*. Routledge. Butler, J. (2011). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. Routledge. Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and punish.* Gallimard. Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality: An introduction, volume I. New York: Vintage*, *95*, 1-160. Derrida, J. (2016). *Of grammatology*. Jhu Press.

2.2. Lacan and Desire as Lack

Patrick Fuery starts *Theories of Desire* with the question: "Why desire?" (1995: 1) He then provides an answer, desire has become an analytic process:

> "The first is that desire has shifted its position through post-structuralist discourse, so that instead of being simply an object or even area of study it has become part of the analytic processes themselves. The second is that through interpretations of desire we come to understand many other issues in post-structuralism." *Ibid.*

To Lacan psychoanalysis is the science of desire (Fuery, 1995:7) Lacan's theory of desire plays a crucial role in shaping the analysis of three central concerns in post-structuralist theory: the construction of subjectivity, the processes of signification and the complexities of meaning, and the functioning of analytic methods. This framework allows for an exploration of desire and its conceptualization in relation to **j**ouissance (1995:8). Among these issues power, subjectivity and therefore agency are the ones that I am interested in. In fact, as I will later on show through Deleuze and Guattari's theory, desire is the necessary tool to overcome the psychic repression our society has been facing. That is why I want to start from the author's analysis of Lacan. According to Lacan desire is necessary for the formation of subjectivity and as subjects as we enter the world we are fragmented:

> "The unconscious, as it is formulated by Freud and then developed and interpreted by Lacan, represents the site of subjectivity as fragmented, dominated by absences and filled with tensions. […] Desire, for Lacan, is constitutive of subjectivity because desire defines subjectivity, explains its operations and can be utilised to understand its actions both individually and socio-culturally." (1995:13)

Fuery explains that according to Lacan our intention is to enter the symbolic order "the social world of language and culture" (1995:16), to enter the symbolic order and therefore exist, we have to be

seen, recognized, acknowledged by someone else. Subjectivity is shaped by signifiers that exist before us— we are born into the Symbolic order, the social realm of language and culture, which is already structured by these signifiers.

As a result, we are compelled to interact with the domain of the signifier due to the workings of language, our desire for connection with others, our yearning for the Other, and the fundamental need to exist and find meaning. For Lacan, the essence of desire lies in the subject's longing to possess the signifier, a goal from which they are perpetually alienated. This experience of alienation is fundamental to our entry into the Symbolic order. The roots of this estrangement can be traced to Lacan's early concept of the mirror stage, where the subject transitions from an initial sense of perceived wholeness to the fragmented and alienating structure of the Symbolic. An experience exacerbated by diaspora in the context of Arab Anglophone women's literature.

This shift is driven by the desire to claim the signifier, representing the quest for control over oneself and others within the social framework entering social discourse. This process does not make us whole; it makes us split from the signifier, creating a split within the self. (1995:16) The will to enter the symbolic order is active, but the impossibility to achieve so is reactive because "the subject acts in accordance with these culturally defined desires, which are quite often distinct from the desire of the unconscious" (1995:17)

Desire is therefore the desire of the Other. "We desire the sense of being which is derived from a recognition of the Other ant the "control" of the signifier" (1995:24) Desire is a means of self-determination and is highly inter-relational. The concept of alterity (otherness) is central to Lacan's theories, particularly in understanding the dynamics of desire and the unconscious.

Similarly, for Sartre, as explained by Fuery, the Other serves as the critical connection between subjectivity, consciousness, and self-consciousness. With Sartre's words "the Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me… Thus the Other has not only revealed to me what I was; he has established me in a new type of being which can support new qualifications" (Sartre, 1957: 222 as cited in Fuery, 1995:13). Lacan's investigation of desire in psychoanalysis transcends

viewing it as a mere object of study; instead, he positions desire as the cornerstone of psychoanalytic inquiry. According to Lacan, desire is inseparable from interpretation:

> "For Lacan desire is not just one of the objects of examination for psychoanalysis: it is that which constitutes the essence of psychoanalysis as a discipline. […] Lacan ties interpretation to desire; for him, desire is the essence of interpretation. At one point he states: 'Desire, in fact, is interpretation itself' (Lacan, 1986:176 as cited in Fuery, 1995:8)

Thereby he aligns desire with the very essence of psychoanalytic methodology. Fuery's understanding of Lacan is particularly interesting and useful in its depiction of desire as a methodology which is essential to the reading of the novels I will later on analyse and the standpoint from which Deleuze and Guattari establish that sexuality is at the basis of the epistemology of desire. (Goodchild, 1996:41). Furthermore, Lacan's theorisation of desire is groundbreaking in its challenging of the duality and separation between the mind and the body, which will be crucial for feminist conceptualization of desire.

It is in this sense that as we already stated Lacan is highly influenced by Freud. Freud's psychoanalysis, filtered through Lacan's reinterpretation, presents a challenge to Cartesian philosophy, especially the concept of the Cartesian cogito, which posits a unified, whole subject rooted in certainty. Descartes' search for apodictic certainty—an absolute truth—reflects a humanistic desire to close the gaps and inconsistencies within the self. For Lacan, this quest for wholeness is futile because subjectivity is inherently fragmented and incomplete, largely driven by forces (like desire), which constantly disrupt any sense of unity.

Lacan harshly criticizes Descartes, notably referring to him as "that idiot Descartes," (Lacan, 1988b:73 as cited in Fuery, 1995:12) because of the way the Cartesian model of subjectivity suppresses the complexities introduced by the unconscious. In Lacan's model, the unconscious reveals subjectivity to be fractured, characterized by gaps, absences, and tensions. This fragmentation, as Lacan argues, stems from the operation of desire, which plays a pivotal role in

shaping the individual both psychologically and socioculturally. The split nature of the subject, constantly confronted with uncertainty, is seen as a direct result of the operations of desire.

As mentioned earlier, Lacan outlines four primary models of desire in his works: subjectivity, signification, cultural production, and analytic processes. Fuery states that according to Lacan our subjectivity These models are intertwined, each influencing and reflecting the others. His core argument is that post-structuralism, by problematizing desire, has integrated it into its analytic methods, fostering a deeper engagement with self-reflexivity. (1995: 15) One of the main aspects of Freud's theory that influenced Lacan is the concept of drive. As Fuery explains Lacan builds on Freud's theory of the "drive" (Trieb), a crucial concept in psychoanalysis. Lacan explores the distinctions between "desire", "need", and "demand", noting that while need and demand are tied to specific objects, desire always exceeds those objects and the subject's relationship to them.

Freud's theory of drives describes them as having four core components: "Drang" (pressure), "Ziel" (aim), "Objekt" (object), and "Quelle" (source). Lacan connects his ideas of desire to Freud's drives, blending them while also making important distinctions. He sees desire as the product of partial drives and as fragmented, much like the human body is perceived in psychoanalytic terms. (1995:18) As the author further explains in Theories of Desire:

> "Freud's theory of the drive is linked inextricably to culture, sexuality and the operation of the unconscious; when Lacan makes desire as central as the drive it must also become connected to these othere areas. In other words, from this psychoanalytic or Lacanian perspective, we cannot work towards an understanding of culture, sexuality, the unconscious, and ultimately meaning and signification, unless we account for desire. For it is in desire that we find both the motivation and articulation of these other ubiquitous parts of the Lacanian system. [...] Continuing to connect the drive and desire, Lacan argues that desire is located endosomatically in the unconscious of the split subject. In doing so Lacan attributes to desire both the continuation of this split and its origins. (1995:20) "

Lacan's theories also explore the idea of "manque-à-être", or "want-to-be," which plays a central role in the formation of subjectivity. This concept of lack or absence redefines desire as a critical tool for understanding the subject. For Lacan, the subject is defined not by any sense of completeness but by their inherent lack, a stance influenced by his rejection of Cartesian philosophy and his embrace of Freudian thought. The subject, split by desire, pursues an ever-elusive sense of being through recognition by the Other, risking the loss of subjectivity in this pursuit. Desire operates on multiple levels, not just as a quest for pleasure but as a search for identity and existence itself.

The desire to know, for Lacan, is tied closely to psychoanalytic knowledge, but it also reflects a broader human drive for understanding. This desire often leads to the construction of the "sujet supposé savoir", or the "subject supposed to know," which is particularly relevant in the process of "transference" within psychoanalysis. Lacan's famous assertion that "desire is a metonymy" reflects this ongoing displacement, as desire shifts from one object to another, never achieving fulfillment: "This is why Lacan states with such surety and clarity that we are defined by our desires and lack, and not through wholeness." (1995:20)

"Méconnaissance", or the "misrecognition" of the self, is another key Lacanian concept. It suggests that we are often unaware of the true nature of our desires and that this lack of recognition forms the relationship between the self and the ego. According to Lacan, we mistakenly attribute permanence to our desires, protecting ourselves from them while simultaneously transferring them to an intermittent ego:

> "Lacan argues that the operation of méconnaissance is what establishes the relationship of the self to the self. […] 'what he desires presents itself to him as what he does not want, the form assumed by the negation in which the meconnaisance of which he himself is unaware is inserted in a very strange way—a meconnaisance by which he transfers the permanence of his desire to an ego that is nevertheless intermitten, and, inversely, protects himself from his desire by attributing to it these very intermittences. (ibid.:312-13) […] We are what we desire, because desire is positioned in a sense of the self. (1995:27)"

Ultimately, Lacan's theory suggests that desire itself is based on a lack, making the act of desiring an infinite process. His idea that "man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other" illustrates the relational nature of desire—how it is intertwined with recognition from others and tied to our very sense of being. In addition to his analysis of desire, Lacan delves into the concept of "jouissance", which refers to a form of pleasure that transcends the limits of the Law and morality, becoming something pure, excessive, and revolutionary. "Phallic jouissance" is tied to masculine structures of the Symbolic, while "supplementary jouissance" relates to a feminine pleasure that exists beyond the phallocentric order:

> "The pleasure of jouissance—those orgasmic moments of excess—produce guilt bcause they necessarily challenge the morality of the conscious mind and the Law of the Symbolic. […] in jouissance we experience something beyond pleasure, a form of pure desire that must 'trample sacred laws underfoot' (Lacan, 1992:195) as cited in 1995:32)"

Transgression is key to accessing jouissance. Lacan argues that the Law, by prohibiting certain forms of desire, simultaneously creates the conditions for transgression, and it is through this transgression that we experience jouissance. The Law or power does not only repress, it also creates. This intersection of desire, pleasure, and transgression informs Lacan's analysis of the subject's place within culture and the unconscious. Finally, Lacan links desire and its repression to the subject's crises. Lacan calls it crisis, Deleuze and Guattari will name it disjunction. Because we cannot act in full accordance with our desires, repression leads to guilt and misunderstanding, perpetuating the subject's internal conflicts:

> "The location of the subject in the Symbolic means that the expression of the drives (the pleasure principle included) must be restricted—quite simply, we cannot act in conformity with our desires. This leads to repression and the subsequent development of systems of disguised manifestations of these desires, such as dreams, parapraxed ('Freudian slips'), jokes and the arts. These constitute the

management of pleasure— management because Freud discusses all of this material in terms of an economic model of the mind; that is, the control of psychical energy at an acceptable level. As Lacan puts it, 'it is pleasure that sets the limits on jouissance (*Ivi*: 319) […] by its very nature jouissance is transgression, and […] that transgression is jouissance (Lacan, 1992: 191-204) The reason the two interconnect is that desire is constantly being determined within the confines of the Law and its relations to the Other. This powerful structure can be subverted only by the transgression of its boundaries through the uncontrollable and unrestrained action of jouissance. (Fuery, 1995: 30-31)

Lacan, as explained by Fuery, suggests that while psychoanalysis seeks to explain these hidden aspects of desire, the arts represent them, allowing a different form of engagement with desire's elusive nature. Lacan states that the only thing we feel guilty about is having given ground to our desire. From this he goes on to argue that the operation of power, and in particular its institutionalization, works against the expression of desire. Lacan is positioning the operation of desire, and its lack of expression, as the cause of the subject's crises.

It is because we cannot act in conformity with our desires that there are repression, guilt and misunderstanding. The second point Lacan is getting at here is that we require a methodology in order to understand just how desire and its suppression or management operate. For Lacan, this operation is psychoanalysis; but his interests extend beyond that institution, and there are strong suggestions that the arts perform a similar function. The difference is that, whereas psychoanalysis would seek to explain this hidden agenda, the arts attempt to represent it. (1995:29) That is why these novels are important. They are a way to represent desire.

2.3. French Feminism

2.3.1 Cixous

What emerges from Patrick Fuery's section on French Feminism is that women's theorization of desire is both shaped by and frequently challenges the ideas of male post-structuralist theorists. When it comes to post-structuralism and desire three women engage with this critical framework largely dominated by men (1995: 77). To fully grasp their ideas, it is essential to acknowledge this context, as it sheds light on what they adopt and what they resist. For each of these women, writing becomes an act of desire itself, serving as a transformative process that enables the articulation of a distinct form of desire (1995: 78). According to Cixous, true change is initiated through desire. In her view, the subject exists entirely within and is shaped by discursive practices (Cixous, 1995:79).

She argues that continuing to establish distinctions between the masculine and the feminine remains entrenched in a phallogocentric framework. Instead, it is more fruitful—and even radical— to think beyond this division, aiming toward forms of pleasure and desire that transcend the specifics of gender. If subjectivity is to be conceptualized outside the phallogocentric system, it must avoid the binary thinking that characterizes such a system. Failing to do so would risk incorporating elements of the system it seeks to dismantle. As Fuery shows us Cixous identifies three strategies to challenge this framework: desiring differently, exploring the position of 'woman' both inside and outside cultural systems, and reinscribing women's pleasure.

Feminine desire — particularly in its form of jouissance — always resists the systems that attempt to constrain or define it. Jouissance exists outside the Law and cannot be subsumed under a masculine economy. As Cixous asserts, women's instinctual economy operates beyond masculine logic (1995:80). The deeper question hidden here is how women experience pleasure and jouissance. Both Lacan and Cixous connect jouissance to knowledge, with feminine jouissance particularly raising questions that challenge the masculine economy. This underscores the need for alternative discourses. Cixous points out that to desire requires space in society, and as long as social structures

deny this space to diverse desires, they will remain unknowable, in fact she states in "The Laugh of the Medusa":

> I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and history-by her own movement.
>
> (Cixous, 1976:875)

Lacanian theory similarly stresses the unconscious's role, which is crucial in how Cixous views feminine jouissance. It is a fluid interplay between body and unconscious, not determined by one alone (1995:81). Cixous's thinking leads to her concept of "écriture feminine", or "women's writing", which men, like Jean Genet, can also produce. This form of writing opposes phallogocentrism not solely as a gender issue but as a challenge to broader discursive structures.

A recurring theme in Cixous's work is the figure of the hysteric, a historically disruptive woman whose desires operate outside the societal order. The hysteric's desire expresses itself in ways that defy the masculine economy, often requiring a new language to articulate itself. This highlights the limitations of the current phallogocentric discourses. Cixous, referring to Freud's patient Dora, notes that she openly expresses her desires, suffering from symbolic transgression because her desires defy societal norms. Dora's desires problematize the masculine economy, destabilizing its reading of woman as 'lack' and framing her desire as inherently oppositional to masculine structures.

As Fuery explains for Cixous, Dora embodies the hysteric's challenge, defined more by her desires than by the analytic frameworks around her. The hysteric's anguish and immense desire drive her (1995:82-83). This is why Dora symbolizes a force against the Symbolic: "You, Dora, you the indomitable, the poetic body, you are the true "mistress" of the Signifier. Before long your efficacity will be seen at work when your speech is no longer suppressed, its point turned in against your breast, but written out over against the other" (Cixous, 1976:886). The Symbolic constructs spaces for certain desires while classifying others as abnormal. The hysteric's desire —what Cixous calls feminine

jouissance— exposes not only the mechanisms but also the inadequacies of the phallogocentric order. Fuery illustrates that desire, as Cixous and Clément[25] emphasize, is fundamentally revolutionary because it resists oppression and carries the potential to revive the need for change (Cixous and Clément, 1986:157). In this sense, desire becomes a social catalyst, a means of producing new forms of knowledge and economic systems. Cixous and Clément connect this desire with class struggle, noting that societal attempts to suppress feminine jouissance mirror broader efforts to control desire. Central to their argument is the necessity of creating political space for desire within the social structure, allowing various forms of resistance to emerge:

> It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. (Cixous, 1976: 881)

Desire's potency lies in its inextricable link to knowledge, offering not only a challenge to existing knowledge systems but also an alternative epistemology (1995: 83). For Cixous, this dynamic is encapsulated in the concept of "voler", which means both "to fly" and "to steal." To "steal" discourse from the phallogocentric Symbolic is also to "fly" from its repressive social order. Cixous seeks to wrest the idea of 'woman' away from its association with passivity and negativity in society. Reinscribing women's pleasure through desire is central to this project.

Once woman's desire is articulated, everything else will follow, as this is a precondition for her full realization. "It is only after her feminine jouissance is established that woman can exist; it reverses that idea that woman exists before desire" (1995: 84) Cixous reverses the traditional notion that women exist before desire, suggesting instead that feminine jouissance must be established for women to fully exist. Cixous calls for women to inscribe themselves through their bodies. Feminine jouissance and the unconscious can be written on the body, serving as a form of signification. The

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[25] See Cixous, H. (1986). *The newly born woman* University of Minnesota Press.

female body 'speaks' through its challenge to logocentrism (Cixous, 1976: 881 as cited in Fuery, 1995: 84). For Cixous, writing on the body is not an act of subjugation but of liberation, aligning her with Foucault's ideas about the body's politicization. The body, being a site of power struggles, also becomes a locus of power itself.

2.3.2 Irigaray and Feminine Desire

Fuery explains that Irigaray critiques psychoanalytic discourse, particularly its complicity in suppressing women's desire. While psychoanalysis provides a useful framework for analyzing desire, it has historically failed to develop a language that allows women's desire to be fully expressed. This suppression is evident in the way psychoanalysis prioritizes masculine desire, treating it as the norm while leaving feminine desire unspoken (1995:85).

As Fuery tells us, Irigaray critiques Freud's psychoanalytic model, noting several issues. Freud's approach privileges masculine sexuality, defining it as presence and fulfillment, while reducing feminine sexuality to concepts like penis envy. The castration complex, in particular, enforces social conditions that differentiate men and women, shaping their respective roles. Freud's theory of desire, which suggests that a woman's sexual desire is replaced by her desire to have children, ties women's sexuality to reproduction rather than pleasure.

Furthermore, psychoanalysis pathologizes those who do not conform to traditional sexual roles, reinforcing the idea that women's sexuality is unknowable (1995:86). In her critique of Lacanian theory, Irigaray focuses on the politics of feminine desire, arguing that women are consistently framed as "lack" and "other." Lacan's theory positions the Phallus as the central signifier of desire, but Irigaray asserts that his failure to critique this concept inhibits a true exploration of feminine desire. By limiting the discourse to masculine terms, Lacan prevents a fuller understanding of women's desires (1995:88). Irigaray places great importance on the idea of a woman's voice. Like Cixous, she argues that the suppression of women's desires has been partly achieved by silencing

their speech. Although *parler femme* (speaking as a woman) and *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) are distinct concepts, they both aim to create a space where women's desires—spoken and written—can be recognized and expressed. Irigaray, however, departs from Cixous by stressing the limitations imposed by Lacanian theory. She seeks to develop a new form of knowledge that allows women to know what they want and to have a language to express it (1995: 88).

Irigaray's agenda for the unconscious is twofold: political and creative. Politically, she argues that the unconscious must be freed from masculinized psychoanalytic frameworks. Masculine modes of discourse cannot fully understand or represent feminine desire, as they lack the appropriate tools for doing so. As a result, women are forced into a masquerade of femininity, shaped by a masculine worldview. This masquerade leads to the repression and misrepresentation of women's true desires (1995:88-89). For Irigaray, it is essential to dismantle the repressive structures of phallogocentrism that constrain women's desire. She advocates for a new discourse that allows for the expression of feminine "jouissance", or deep pleasure. In "When Our Lips Speaks Together" she states:

> If we continue to speak this sameness, if we speak to each other as men have spoken for centres as they taught us to speak, we will fail each other. Again… Words will pass through our bodies., above our heads, disappear, make us disappear. Far. Above. Absent from ourselves. We become machines that are spoken. Machines that speak. Clean skins enveloped us, but they're not our own. We have fled into proper names. We have been violated by them. Not yours, not mine. We don't have names. Will change them as men exchange us as they use us. It's frivolous to be so changeable so long as we are a medium of exchange. (1998: 69)

Irigaray suggests that we need to change the discourse, the language, and the symbolic order in such a way that women would be able to enjoy their bodies and develop a language that articulates their desires: We are not voids. Lacks which wait for sustenance, fulfillment, or plenitude from another. That our lips make us women does not mean that consuming, consuming, mating, or being filled is what matters to us. (1980: 73)

Central to Irigaray's thinking is the concept of "self-affection", the idea that women's pleasure comes from their physical differences from men. Unlike men, who experience pleasure through intermediaries, women are in continuous contact with their own bodies, generating desire and pleasure autonomously:

> Kiss me. Two lips kiss two lips, and openness is ours again. Our "world". Between us, the movement from inside to outside, from outside to inside knows no limits. It is without and. These are exchanges that no mark, no mouth can never stop.[…] Are we unsatisfied? Yes, if that means that we are never finished. *Ibid.*

This continuous contact informs Irigaray's metaphor of the "lips"— both the lips of the mouth and the labia. She uses this metaphor to connect women's speech with their physicality, highlighting how both are essential to desire, power, and resistance. The metaphor extends beyond sexual difference to a broader critique of how discourse is gendered (1995:89-90). Irigaray argues that women's desire cannot be fully understood or spoken until women have a language that allows them to express it.

She emphasizes that feminine discourse, or "parler femme", is characterized by fluidity and constant movement. "They neither taught us nor allowed us to say our multiplicity" *Ibid.* For desire and speech to be fully realized, the metaphorical lips must remain moist—suggesting that feminine speech and desire are inherently tied to a state of openness, flow and contact to one's self : "so that there can be some self consciousness about the women's side of the valley. Each woman has to quite freely find where she stands in relation to herself." (Irigaray, 1985: 10)   This notion challenges the rigid structures of masculine discourse, which often attempt to confine or silence women's desires (1995:90).

2.3.3. Kristeva and Tales of Revolutionary Desire

Kristeva's theorization of desire centers on the argument that desire and subjectivity are so intertwined that they cannot be thought of separately. The formations of desire are integral to the formations of subjectivity, and vice versa (1995:91). According to Kristeva, both desire and subjectivity present analysts with particular difficulties because they are constituted through a continuous process of becoming. The subject is not fixed but is in a constant state of formation, which Kristeva refers to as the "subject-in-process." This instability arises from the varied forces — cultural, temporal, psychic, political — that shape the subject.

Desire, in Kristeva's framework, occupies dual positions, being both a type and a class, and is driven by passion, drives, and instinct (1984a: 26) (1995: 91). Kristeva introduces the concept of "cura", borrowing from Heidegger's use of the term, which refers to phenomenological care. Heidegger connects human subjectivity (Dasein) with "cura", suggesting that being is revealed through the social context of care. Kristeva expands on this by arguing that desire is the praxis of "cura", meaning that desire is a form of care that shapes subjectivity.

Lacan and Kristeva both see the drive to be in the Symbolic order—the desire for the signifier—as a fundamental part of the social fabric. Since the signifier can never be fully possessed, desire becomes a process of negativity, aligning with Lacan's notion of desire as a desire for the Other (1995: 92). For Kristeva, desire is a part of the signifying process, but it also alters signification due to its ties to negativity. Desire represents the subject's entry into the signifier, transcending needs and drives. It moves beyond the boundaries of the pleasure principle, investing in a reality that includes the divided and ever-moving subject.

Kristeva describes the desiring subject as one who "lives at the expense of his drives, ever in search of a lacking object," with their praxis driven by this quest for lack, death, and language (ibid.:132) (1995: 93). Kristeva's subject type is defined by the interplay of fear, loss, and revulsion. The subject of abjection is fundamentally linked to desire, and Kristeva suggests that what we desire in abjection is not the stabilization of meaning but its collapse:

> This is to say that there are existences which are not sustained by any desire, in that desire is always a desire for objects. Such existences are founded on exclusion. They are clearly distinguished from those understood in terms of neurosis or psychosis which are articulated by negation and its modalities, transgression, dénégation and foreclosure. (Kristeva, 1982: 129)

The *chora,* the site of unstable meaning, is manifested by desire, making the connection between abjection and subjectivity one that is driven by a specific kind of desire. Kristeva contends that "jouissance" alone causes the abject to exist, as it fuels the passions and supports the relationship between the subject and the Other. This combination of "jouissance" and abjection allows the subject to exist in a self-reflexive state, continually questioning what it means to have subjectivity, to desire the object of the subject, and to occupy the space of subjectivity (1995:94). As she states in "Approaching Abjection":

> But just at this moment, when I recognise my image as a sign and begin to change in order to signify myself, another economy becomes installed. The sign represses the chora and its eternal return. Desire alone will be henceforth the witness of this 'originary' palpitation. But the desire ex-patriates the ego towards another subject and no longer admits the demands of the ego other than as narcissistic. Narcissism then appears as a regression in retreat from the other, a return towards a self-contemplating, conservative, self-sufficient. (1982:135)

For Lacan the function of the Other in the object is to return the subject's gaze and legitimize it. Kristeva distinguishes between desire and abjection, arguing that the relationship between them produces a different type of desiring language. Kristeva's notion of the semiotic as a feminine discourse of desire can be compared to Cixous' "écriture féminine" and Irigaray's "parler femme" (1995:94-95). Kristeva also connects desire to social disruption, arguing that the transgressive nature of desire plays a role in the disruption of social structures.

Desire does not merely affect meaning within texts; it opens up spaces that incorporate the subject's "jouissance" and challenge conventional understanding. This disruption is revolutionary, not

just in poetic language but also in desire and "jouissance". Kristeva contends that desire unsettles meaning, disrupts the complacency of knowledge, and forces the subject to confront questions of the self (1995:96). A type of confrontation that is highly difficult in a collectivist Muslim society where desire is relational.

2.3.4. Simone De Beauvoir and the ambiguous desire

In *Differences: Rereading Beauvoir and Irigaray* (2018), Gail Weiss discusses desire in terms of the "will to be" and the "will to disclose the world," drawing from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. I will focus on Beauvoir's perspective because it frames desire in terms of affirmation. For Beauvoir, the "will to be" refers to an individual's drive to assert their existence as meaningful and to actively shape their identity and place in the world. It is about claiming one's subjectivity and seeking self-realization, emphasizing an affirmative engagement with life:

> Beauvoir describes the will to be in explicitly Sartrean terms as a yearning to attain the coincidence of existence and essence traditionally associated with God. In short, it is the desire to "be what one is," to be the cause or foundation of one's own being- in- the- world, thereby "filling" the lack that Sartre claims lies at the heart of human existence and makes human freedom possible. (Weiss, 2018: 179)

Gail Weiss highlights that, according to Beauvoir, "it is the inevitable failure of this desire to be what we are not that makes us human" (Weiss, 2018: 179). This unattainable desire — what Beauvoir refers to as *the will to be* — represents a longing for a fixed, unchanging identity, which is ultimately impossible to achieve. In contrast, Beauvoir introduces *the will to disclose the world,* described by Weiss as "a desire to exercise one's freedom deliberately and self-consciously" (Weiss, 2018:182). In simple terms, while *the will to be* suggests a fixed identity, Beauvoir values our ability to adapt and transform in response to our engagement with the world — what she frames as *becoming.* As

70

Weiss further explains, this perspective reflects Beauvoir's emphasis on preserving the capacity for continuous self-reinvention.

> "When we desire to disclose the world, Beauvoir suggests, we are making a free choice to affirm the openness of both ourselves and the world to novel insights, unexpected discoveries, and unique transformations. […] Beauvoir presents the will to be as a desire to relinquish one's transcendence in order to anchor one's existence, once and for all, in a sphere of immanence that determines all possibilities in advance; it is thus to desire a situation in which past, present, and future are faits accomplis over which I have no control, and therefore no responsibility. (Weiss, 2018:182-183)

In simple terms, *the will to disclose the world* enables us to avoid being fixed and allows us to remain in a state of constant evolution and *becoming* through what Butler would describe as performative acts. Through this process of *disclosing the world* with performative acts, it becomes possible to alter the ways of *becoming women.* As Weiss observes in her discussion of Butler's interpretation of Beauvoir:

> This destabilization of fixed concepts of woman is ethically productive because rigid societal definitions of what a woman is supposed to be, what she is supposed to desire (if she is seen as capable of having independent desires in the first place!), and what she is supposed to do, "disclose the world" as an unwelcome and even hostile place for those who dare to transgress or who are seen as transgressing the boundaries that define acceptable feminine behavior. In short, these rigid definitions hinder individual women from being able to will their freedom in what Beauvoir calls a genuine sense, that is, to will to disclose a world that is capable of being transformed and improved through their actions. (Weiss, 2018:185)

The main takeaway from this discussion is that desire, as described by Beauvoir, exists between the *will to be* and the *will to disclose the world*. This transition from fixity to the affirmation of an otherness makes desire inherently ambiguous, transforming it into a constant act of *becoming* and the affirmation of various *modes of existence*. This resonates deeply with the understanding of desire

proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, which will be explored in greater depth later. The openness to *otherness* means that, for Beauvoir, desire is necessarily relational, ambiguous, and in a state of continuous evolution (*becoming*). This idea will also be reflected in Butler's work, where desire is discussed in terms of *recognition*.

> What makes desire ambiguous is not only that it issues from many different places and takes many different forms, but also that it is, for both Beauvoir and Irigaray, fundamentally intercorporeal, that is, it is fundamentally a creative and dynamic response to alterity, whether this be the alterity of our own bodies, the alterity of other human bodies, or even the alterity revealed through the bodies of other beings, places, and unexpected experiences. (Weiss, 2018:195)

In summary, the interplay between the *will to be* and the *will to disclose the world* reflects the inherently ambiguous and relational nature of desire as described by Beauvoir. Desire is not about achieving a fixed identity but about continually evolving through acts of *becoming* that affirm diverse modes of existence. This fluid and transformative approach to desire opens up possibilities for redefining how we engage with ourselves and others. Beauvoir's vision aligns with Butler's notion of performativity and *recognition* as well as Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of desire as relational and dynamic. Together, these perspectives reveal desire as a process of negotiation between fixity and openness, rooted in relationality and continual becoming.

2.4 Desire and Melancholia

In "Desire, Duras and Melancholia", Gorton speaks of desire after the affective turn, because of the "importance desire has on one's emotional state and the way these affects act together to produce transformation or change within the subject". Her main interests are around the process of remembering and forgetting and in the melancholia it entails. Freud's theory of melancholia, as Gorton explains, suggests that the relationship between an individual and the object of their desire is complicated by ambivalence.

Ambivalence, in this context, refers to mixed or contradictory feelings toward the object, which can either reside within the individual or emerge as a result of experiences involving the threat of losing the object. The author signals how psychoanalysis, with its focus on internal conflict, might not fully address the complexities of desire or melancholia. This highlights a limitation of psychoanalytic theory and suggests that alternative frameworks, such as work on affect, might offer a more nuanced understanding of emotional dynamics. (2001 [1957]: 256 as cited in Gorton 2008) The author argues that work on affect redefines desire, moving it beyond its psychoanalytic roots into a more dynamic register of emotions—desire to loss, anxiety, and melancholia—highlighting its relational, fluid, and transformative nature. The author believes that:

> desire creates recognition (through identification and the gaze); it marks the narrative; it
> highlights the moment when lovers' eyes meet; it affects the lives of characters; it marks
> their bodies, forcing them to move, act or react differently; and it transforms people –
> radically alters their being-in-the-world. I want to suggest, moreover, that we consider
> desire as a way of thinking and as a kind of intelligence (Thrift, 2004); as something that
> supports connections and relations and that produces an expression that is impossible to
> contain or categorize (Gorton, 2008:19)

Moreover, she later resorts to Grosz (1994a:76 as cited in Gorton, 2008) saying that desire, as a creative force, does not offer fixed plans, ideals, or end-goals. Instead, it is an experimental,

unpredictable, and inventive process. For feminist theory, this perspective is crucial, as women have historically been seen as embodying a lack—something to be desired or defined by men's desires. In this context, women are often confined to a position of "otherness," defined in opposition to male presence, reality, and fantasy. Desire, in this understanding, breaks free from these constraints and opens up new possibilities for women to redefine themselves outside of traditional gender roles and binary oppositions. Referring to the works of Marguerite Duras, Gorton says that: "Her attention to desire as a movement, to something that causes bodies to move or 'to do', sets the scene for later work that concentrates more specifically on this movement, this becoming" (2008: 21) How does desire and affect intertwine and impact each other in cinema?

> "Desire is embodied in the characters and expressed in various ways: as something that can release the past, as something that is contained in the past, as something that produces connections and forges new bonds and as something that is destructive and annihilating. Desire is about the potential to cause all these things and is foremost an unsettling affect; it is characterized by its movement, its intensity and its ability to cause change." (Gorton, 2008:23)

In this passage, the author argues that Duras' works challenge traditional views of desire as something rooted in "lack" and "acquisition," ideas commonly associated with psychoanalytic theories. Instead, Duras presents desire as a dynamic force that creates connections and builds foundations. Desire, in Duras' texts, is not merely about fulfilling a void (lack) or obtaining something external (acquisition), but is depicted as a process that can foster growth, transformation, and meaningful relational connections.

This reframing of desire opens up new ways of thinking about its potential and its role in shaping human experiences beyond conventional frameworks of need and possession. In this sense desire is productive and creates connection. Desire operates in various ways: as a means of self-definition, a transformative process, and as a force of destruction.

It also plays a role in the present, helping to reclaim and release past trauma. The connection formed through desire enables individuals to release and heal from unresolved psychological wounds. Judith Butler argues that: 'Loss becomes condition and necessity for a certain sense of community, where community does not overcome the loss, where community cannot overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as community' (2003: 468 as cited in Gorton, 2008).

2.5. Butler and Desire as recognition

Mara Montanaro in "Desiderio-Corpo-Riconoscimento nella produzione di Judith Butler" explores the philosophical, psychoanalytic, and feminist conceptions of desire as a relational, dynamic, and ultimately resistant force. Drawing on influential thinkers such as Hegel, Kojève, Lacan, Butler, Kristeva, and Deleuze, it examines how desire shapes subjectivity, power dynamics, and notions of identity. Desire is portrayed here as deeply relational. Following Hegel, Kojève, and Lacan, the author highlights that desire is not merely about wanting an object; it is fundamentally about seeking recognition. As Julie Webb states in "Who Am I? You Tell Me: Desire and Judith Butler":

> Butler argues that desire for recognition in order to live a "livable life" is our deepest desire, that like all desire, this desire is never fully satiated, and further that this livable life is always a life that comes into being in the face of the Other. In order to accept that my self-awareness is limited and reliant upon the Other absolutely means that ethics is a reflexive process, embedded in relationality, and requires me to surrender to my limited self-awareness and accept my constitutive openness. (Webb, 2016: 67)

To desire is to *desire the desire of the Other*—to be acknowledged and affirmed by another. However, this creates a paradox: while the subject strives for autonomy and individuality, it is simultaneously dependent on others for recognition. As Montanaro points out in Butler's reading of Hegel and Lacan, desire testifies to the precariousness of the self, as it reveals our inability to exist in isolation. "Mutual recognition becomes a kind of utopian goal: that I recognize you as a non-reified forming subject, and in return you do the same for me, and between us we create a common culture around the mutual recognition of alterity, i.e. our infinite otherness." (Webb, 2016: 69) When desires remain unexpressed, unrecognized, or even repressed, this relational recognition becomes impossible. The text raises a critical question: *how can there be recognition if desire is forbidden or denied legitimacy?* This reflects a fundamental tension within desire—between autonomy and alienation.

The subject, to be recognized, must in some sense alienate itself: it becomes "of the other," defined and shaped by relationality. The scholar posits desire as a subversive and transformative force. Unlike power dynamics, where desires are suppressed, codified, or consumed, desire resists categorization. It cannot be fully assimilated into fixed social or normative orders. Desire, therefore, represents a space of potential resistance—a force that moves through individuals and society, shaping human interactions in unpredictable ways:

> Desire is the desire to be recognized through the desire of another, which opposes the subject's claim to autonomy and imposes the necessity of self-alienation for recognition. Desire is what drives individuals and society, representing the ultimate subversion and a paradigm of possible resistance due to its uncodifiable, ungovernable, and irreducible nature to any social order. It cannot be identified with either man or woman but traverses sexual difference itself. [26] (Montanaro, 2010: 1)

Paraphrasing Deleuze, the author describes desire as *"revolutionary"* because it continually seeks to multiply connections and alliances (concatenations).

> Paraphrasing Deleuze, this means that desire is revolutionary because it seeks an ever-increasing number of connections and assemblages. It explicitly invokes the driving force of desire as a political testament to the inconsistency of any claim to normalcy.[27] (Montanaro 2010:15)

This reveals the futility of normalizing forces—desire exposes the limits of any claim to absolute order or stability. To desire, in this context, is political: it defies regulation and calls into question the "normal." Butler's understanding of desire as **queer** (indeterminate, non-fixed, fluid) aligns with this revolutionary quality. Desire transcends categories like heterosexuality or homosexuality and challenges normative frameworks of identity and sexuality. For feminine subjectivity, desire has an

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[26] My translation to English from Italian of "Il desiderio è desiderio di essere riconosciuto attraverso il desiderio di un altro che si oppone alla rivendicazione di autonomia del soggetto e impone la necessità al soggetto di alienarsi per essere riconosciuto. Desiderio che è quanto muove gli uomini e la società, sovversione ultima, paradigma di resistenza possibile per il suo carattere non codificabile, ingovernabile e irriducibile a qualsiasi ordine sociale, non identificabile né con un uomo né con una donna, ma ciò che percorre la differenza sessuale."

[27] My translation to English from Italian of "Parafrasando Deleuze significa dire che il desiderio è rivoluzionario in quanto vuole un numero sempre maggiore di connessioni e concatenamenti. Significa chiamare esplicitamente in causa la forza propulsiva del desiderio a testimone politico dell'inconsistenza di ogni pretesa di normalità."

essential corporeal dimension. The text draws from Kristeva to argue that desire is the hinge between the being of language and the non-being of objects. It arises through, and beyond, needs and drives, connecting the subject to language and signification. Importantly, for women, the quest for recognition is inseparably linked to the **body**, its vulnerability, and its lived experience:

> Desidero ergo sum (I desire, therefore I am) encapsulates the path I intend to follow. Desire serves as the guiding thread to explore desire itself, corporeality, and, consequently, feminine subjectivity—navigating and continually sustaining the universal-singular dialectic that underpins subjectivity itself.[28] (Montanaro, 2010:5)

The phrase *"Desidero ergo sum"* ("I desire, therefore I am") encapsulates this connection: desire is the thread linking subjectivity, bodily experience, and identity formation. It is through desire—acknowledging our relational vulnerability—that the self is continuously negotiated and formed. This interplay between universal desires (common human needs) and individual realities situates desire as central to the process of becoming:

> This recognition, then, is not recognition of a secure fixed identity – that I am what I am and so are you. Rather, following Butler, recognition here is referring to what it is to be human, and the claim that this human, as a subject, is constitutively open, and therefore my claim to being human at all, must be to meet you in awareness of our constitutive becoming. (Webb, 2016:69)

Hegel's dialectics inform much of this analysis. For Hegel, desire arises through **negativity**—it seeks fulfillment but is driven by the recognition of **lack**. The act of desiring involves consuming, negating, or overcoming its object. Desire, therefore, is not static: it is a **dynamic force** that reshapes the self and its relationships to others. However, the text argues that this Hegelian desire is ultimately a form of **power**, not pure desire: it seeks to dominate and incorporate its object rather than allow for genuine relationality: In Hegel, desire desires itself through the negation of the other; it becomes a form of

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[28] My translation to English from Italian of "Desidero ergo sum, può sintetizzare il percorso che intendo compiere, il desiderio è il filo rosso per declinare un/il desiderio, una/la corporeità e dunque una/la soggettività femminile; attraversando e mantenendo sempre viva la dialettica universale-singolare che struttura la stessa soggettività."

relationship with objects and others, an instance of consumption. In Hegel, to desire continually signifies assimilating, annihilating the object, and eliminating the other.[29](Montanaro, 2010:6)

Through Butler, Montanaro asserts that desire is inherently queer—it cannot be reduced to rigid paradigms of sexuality or gender. To say desire is "queer" is to affirm its instability, mobility, and nomadic nature. Desire refuses fixity; it thrives on flux, multiplicity, and possibility. Recognizing this queerness is not just a theoretical point—it is political. It affirms the irreducibility of desire and its role in challenging norms and systems of regulation:

> The trajectory that Butler's work must take, in my view, is how Hegelian desire—something we will revisit—can reveal its queer nature. For Butler, desire is never exclusively heterosexual or homosexual, nor is it exclusively or inherently tied to sexuality. To assert that desire is queer—meaning indeterminate, uncategorizable within established normative paradigms, but essentially fluid, unstable, metamorphic, and nomadic—not only brings Butler closer to Rosi Braidotti but also constitutes a political statement.[30]
> (Montanaro 2010:14)

Finally, the text interrogates whether desire is *productive*—and productive of what? Does it produce lack (as in Hegelian thought) or excess? While Hegel sees desire as tied to lack and temporality (always driven forward, never satisfied), the text leans toward an alternative perspective: desire as **productive of connections and transformation**. It envisions desire as a site of resistance, energy, and renewal—a force that moves societies and subjects alike, rendering every claim to order inherently fragile:

> And can desire be productive? Productive of lack or productive of excess? From a Hegelian
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> perspective, desire depends on the Other; it pulls us toward the Other and generates a sense

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[29] My translation to English from Italian of "In Hegel, il desiderio desidera se stesso attraverso la negazione dell'altro, il desiderio viene a essere una forma di relazione con gli oggetti e con gli altri, è un'istanza di consumo, desiderare in Hegel non smette di significare inglobare, annientare l'oggetto, togliere l'altro."

[30] My translation to English from Italian of "Il percorso che attraverso la produzione di Butler deve prendere forma, a mio avviso, è dunque, come il desiderio hegeliano di cui torneremo a discutere possa mostrare la sua natura queer, cioè come esso, per Butler non è mai esclusivamente eterosessuale o omosessuale, così come non è mai legato in maniera esclusiva e conseguente alla sessualità. Affermare che il desiderio è queer, ovvero indeterminato, non catalogabile all'interno di paradigmi normativi già stabiliti, ma essenzialmente mobile, instabile, metamorfico e nomade avvicina non soltanto Butler a Rosi Braidotti, ma significa anche fare un'affermazione politica."

of lack. Time becomes the space of transformation, and time itself is Desire—a time without duration, a progressive annihilation of the world by the desiring subject. [31](Montanaro 2010:11)

In Butler, a more subversive and fluid understanding of desire emerges—one that resists objectification and negation. It is this quality of desire—its resistance to power and codification—that the author foregrounds as both transformative and revolutionary and that is close through Deleuze and Guattari's politics of desire. "If I am in a continual state of assemblage, or becoming, then I am also in a constant state of undoing." (Webb, 2016:69) The free flow of desire allows us to become undone and star a process of desubjectification.

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[31] My translation to English from Italian of " E il desiderio può essere produttivo? Produttivo di mancanza o produttivo di eccedenza? Hegelianamente il desiderio dipende dall'Altro, ci trascina verso l'Altro e produce una mancanza, il tempo è il luogo della trasformazione, e il tempo è il Desiderio, tempo senza durata, progressivo annichilimento del mondo da parte del soggetto desiderante."

2.6. Paving the way for Deleuze and Guattari

Lacan's psychoanalytic framework centers on desire as fundamental to the formation of subjectivity. For Lacan, desire originates from the sense of lack that emerges when the subject enters the Symbolic order, which is governed by language and societal laws. This lack signifies that desire is always for the Other, something perpetually unattainable. Lacan argues that desire is crucial because it drives the subject's search for meaning and identity within the Symbolic structure, reflecting deeper tensions and dynamics of power and language.

Cixous builds on Lacan's ideas but extends them into the realm of gender and writing. She critiques the phallogocentric nature of traditional discourses that prioritize masculine perspectives and marginalize feminine experience. For Cixous, feminine desire, or jouissance, is a form of resistance against these dominant structures. Her concept of écriture féminine (women's writing) is aimed at creating a space where women's desires can be expressed outside the constraints of male-centered narratives.

Desire, in Cixous's view, is revolutionary because it challenges and disrupts the existing socio-cultural order and redefines subjectivity from a feminine perspective. Irigaray, like Cixous, critiques the limitations of traditional psychoanalytic frameworks but with a specific focus on how they fail to represent feminine desire adequately. She argues that psychoanalysis has been complicit in suppressing women's desires by framing them within masculine-centric theories.

Irigaray advocates for a new language to express feminine desire, one that acknowledges and embraces women's unique experiences and physiological differences. For Irigaray, desire is crucial because it represents both a political and creative force that challenges the masculine domination of discourse and seeks to establish a language that reflects women's distinct subjectivities. In fact:

> Irigaray explored the nature of the sexual difference between men and women: the first
>
> difference which she noted is that while male sexuality is centred on the single organ of the

penis, female sexuality has no single equivalent - instead of being an absence or a hole, as theorized by psychoanalysis, there are two labia which touch each other. No manipulation or mediation is required for the expression of virginal, feminine sexuality. Women's sex is not 'one', but at least two; moreover, the additional erogenous areas through which a woman can take her pleasure mean that female sexuality is multiple (Irigaray, 1985: 29). Sexual difference, therefore, is manifested in the incapacity of masculine reason to think of 'otherness' in ways which are experienced by women: the otherness of women from men, the otherness which a woman contains within herself by virtue of her sexuality, the otherness between generations of women in the form of the mother-daughter relation, the otherness of women's differences from each other in general, and the otherness of women in discourse, so that they 'never say what they mean' Women's sexual multiplicity and otherness allow them to escape oedipalized subjectivity. (Goodchild, 1995: 136)

Kristeva integrates desire with her theories of abjection and subjectivity, emphasizing the connection between desire, meaning, and the semiotic. She posits that desire is intertwined with the formation of subjectivity and is a driving force behind the instability of meaning. Kristeva introduces the concept of cura—phenomenological care—as an essential component of desire, linking it to the chora (a pre-symbolic space of meaning). Her work suggests that desire not only disrupts established meanings but also has the potential to transform discourse by incorporating the semiotic and jouissance into the text. For Kristeva, desire is a revolutionary force that unsettles the stability of meaning and confronts the subject with questions of identity and existence.

2.7. Deleuze and Guattari: The Politics of Desire

Desire is the social unconscious. Deleuze and Guattari focus entirely on the *politics of desire*, exploring how society shapes and restricts it through the social unconscious. From the beginning we can see the connection with women's movement: 'Women's Liberation movements contain, in a more or less ambiguous state, what belongs to all requirements of liberation: the force of the unconscious itself, the investment by desire of the social field, the disinvestment of repressive structures' (1984: 61). (Goodchild, 1995:136) Moreover, they speak in terms of becoming:

> For them, 'becoming-woman' is the first kind of becoming because it is the entry into a world of multiplicity, of collective assemblages of enunciation which change as they operate. Where Irigaray avoids biological essentialism, regarding the sexual difference as something which has to be constructed by the women's movement, Deleuze and Guattari regard 'becoming-woman' as a task which is necessary for both women and men (1988: 470).

Since desire naturally seeks diversity, multiplicity and creativity, they ask: why do social systems form that block desire's ability to freely produce itself? Liberation, in their view, involves removing the separation between desire and interest. The goal is to help people align their desires with their true interests, so they can desire, think, and act in ways that genuinely reflect their needs and become fully engaged with their own desires.

According to them "power operates through the construction of a certain kind of meaning that organizes social relations, shaping desire, the unconscious, and ultimately consciousness" (Goodchild, 1996:5) their aim is the transformation of society through the transformation of the social unconscious and therefore the symbolic order, just like French feminists:

> The set of immanent relations that compose a given social formation actually determine the kinds of things of which one can be conscious at any particular moment. For this reason, desire is the social unconscious: it constructs and conditions consciousness, so that images are merely products of the social relations in which one is immersed. This insight leads to

a encounter between a transcendental philosophy, concerned with the conditions of production of thought, a social theory, concerned with the immanent relations that compose society, and a politics of desire, concerned with the transformation of society through a transformation of its social unconscious. (Goodchild, 1996:5)

The reason why I decided to rely on Deleuze and Guattari's thoughts is that they are both political activists that believe that society can be transformed by collective action. (Goodchild, 1996:2) In particular, as the author would say, liberation comes from addition, from interaction, from a spontaneous connections between multiple entities. The obstacle to this spontaneous connection is power:

The liberation that Deleuze and Guattari's thought brings is less a liberation from social expectations than a liberation to enter into social relations. The obstacle that prevents social relations from developing is always the interest of some third party in the relation: conventions, values,, economic structures, and political entities, whether real or imaginary, provide a script for social agents who merely play out the roles. (Goodchild, 1996:2)

Among the many images that characterize their theory, nomadism and deterritorialisation are the main ones and they encompass their writing. To the authors nomadism is a "wandering along a multiplicity of lines of flight that lead away from centres of power." (Goodchild, 1996: 2) Their thought is a rhizome and it "differs from the operations of capital insofar as it makes deterritorialization an end in itself instead of merely a means for the increase of capital." (Goodchild, 1996: 3)

Furthermore, the authors think in terms of immanent relations,[32] social relations that are spontaneous and not influenced by a "transcendent scriptwriter" namely power. "The social space does not pre-exist the relations are formed in it; indeed, the space is only constructed by drawing the

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[32] They are understood in terms of concepts such as 'deterritorialization' (travelling in foreign areas), 'intensity' (vibrancy and vitality), 'machine' (productive assemblage of components), 'consistency' (hanging out together), 'singularity' (unique and remarkable, or limit of a process), 'actuality' (concrete presence), 'virtuality' (real potential that is imperceptible in itself), and 'inmianence' (presence alongside, ability to be affected). (Goodchild, 1996: 4)

lines that form immanent relations." (Goodchild, 1996: 3) These relations have to be multiple, in order to decentralize their production; consistent in the sense that they have to interact and lastly:

> such processes must have a tendency to come into existence, a force of actualization that drives them. Desire, a concept deterritorialized from adult sexuality while not losing its erotic character, becomes applicable in any context or relation: it is a spontaneous emergence that generates relationship through a synthesis of multiplicities, the third element of the immanent relation. Desire is the machinic relation itself, in respect of both its power of coming into existence and the specific multiplicity to which it gives a consistency. Multiplicity, creation, and desire are the principal elements of the social unconscious for Deleuze and Guattari. (Goodchild, 1996: 4)

Liberation will occur along three inseparable strategic fronts: Knowledge, Power and Desire. According to Deleuze and Guattari the recurring themes of knowledge, power, and desire in Deleuze and Guattari's work are not distinct areas but interconnected strategies that reinforce one another. Knowledge examines the types of relationships and multiplicities in society, power addresses how these relationships are created and transformed, and desire represents the force that drives creation and connection. Deleuze and Guattari's thought is highly influenced by Nietzche, especially with regards to the concept of forces and their effect on the body. Throught Nietzsche the authors are able to connect theory on the unconscious to the dimension of the body:

> Here, the body is no longer defined in terms of how it appears to consciousness, but is defined genetically in terms of the forces that give rise to it. Indeed, the body is regarded as an assemblage of forces, a site where forces act upon each other, rather than a phenomenon located in space and time (Deleuze, 1983: 40 as cited in Goodchild, 1996: 29)

When Deleuze says "the body is regarded as an assemblage of forces, a site where forces act upon each other, rather than a phenomenon located in space and time," he means that the body should be understood not just as a physical object existing in a specific place and time, but as a dynamic collection of interacting energies and influences. Deleuze's idea emphasizes that the body is a vibrant, ever-changing site of interactions and energies. It's not just a physical object in a specific location but

a dynamic, living system influenced by countless forces acting upon each other. This view highlights the complexity and fluidity of the body as an ongoing process rather than a fixed entity. When Deleuze talks about the human condition being dominated by a "negative will to power," he is drawing on and reinterpreting Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the will to power. Deleuze is saying that instead of embracing a positive, creative force that drives growth and transformation, many people and societies are driven by a negative form of this will to power. This negative will focuses on controlling, repressing, and maintaining power over others, leading to a human condition characterized by domination and limitation rather than liberation and creativity:

> A different kind of synthesis emerges: once a relation takes the form of affirmation, then forces begin to affirm each other. This affirmation is a desire for mutual interaction, relation, and synthesis: it is desire (Deleuze, 1987: 92). Where Nietzsche had applied the etemal retum at the ethical level of forces, resulting in an infinitely self-affirmative force called the 'overman', Deleuze applied it at the ontological level of relations, resulting in an affirmative mode of acting, relating, and existing which he calls desire. Forces want to act and to be acted upon, they want to give themselves and change their nature; they look for syntheses which will be able to produce something new (Deleuze, 1989: 141 as cited in Goodchild, 1996:33)

Furthermore he says that "The relation of desire is an affirmation of difference and only manifests itself in creation or production" (Goodchild, 1996:33) . It is self-generating, a power that constantly reaffirms its existence, giving coherence to the territories or forces it connects and creating a new entity by synthesizing different territories. This desiring-production is both transcendental and immanent, referring to a specific type of synthesis quality: each force influences the other to transform it. In terms of territories, each force deterritorializes the other. Deleuze reinterprets desire and synthesis through an ontological lens, contrasting it with Nietzsche's ethical application of the "eternal return." Desire, in Deleuze's framework, isn't a lack or something to be filled (as in Freudian psychoanalysis). Instead, it's the active *affirmation of relations* and a drive toward interaction,

creation, and transformation. Nietzsche applied the concept of the *eternal return* at an ethical level, exploring how forces achieve self-affirmation in the figure of the "overman" (Übermensch)—an ideal being who fully affirms life and existence without resentment. Deleuze shifts this focus to an **ontological level**, meaning he applies the concept of the eternal return to the nature of existence and relations between forces themselves. This produces an "affirmative mode" of acting, relating, and existing, which he calls *desire*.

> Desire is a purely affirmative synthesis between differing modes of existence. Deleuze discovered, implied within Nietzsche's thought, the possibility of living according to an 'affirmative will to power', a synthetic principle that affirms differences. There is no longer any need to appeal to a higher unity that joins differing conventions or impulses. Nietzsche's own philosophical writings, however, largely explore a negative will to power; for a fully affirmative philosophy, Deleuze turned to the work of Spinoza. (Goodchild, 1996: 37)

Deleuze interpreted Spinoza through a Nietzschean lens, focusing on the aspects of Spinoza's philosophy that align with the concept of eternal return. Rather than viewing "substance" as inert matter, Deleuze reimagined it as a force of production and sensibility. He reshaped Spinoza's thought while remaining true to the original texts, uncovering a plane of immanence that serves a similar role to the eternal return but can ultimately replace it. The concept of synthesis in Deleuze's work suggests that forces or territories require a "body" in which they interact.

When forces are in conflict and synthesized through a negative will to power, the relationship between them is incomplete—similar to a master imposing their own values and desires on a servant without regard for the servant's beliefs. As Goodchild explains Spinoza's *substance* is often understood as the underlying reality or essence of all things, something static and unchanging. Deleuze, influenced by Nietzsche, reinterprets Spinoza's substance as dynamic— *a power of production and sensibility*. This means that substance is active, creative, and full of potential, not inert or lifeless. Deleuze highlights the *plane of immanence* in Spinoza's thought—a concept that reality

is self-contained and self-generating, without needing any transcendent (outside) force to explain it. This is analogous to Nietzsche's *eternal return* as a test of value: only what is life-affirming persists. Deleuze reimagines Spinoza's *substance* as a dynamic and creative power, deeply connected to Nietzsche's ideas of affirmation and the eternal return. For synthesis to be meaningful, forces must interact in a way that affirms their differences and creates something new. In relationships like the master-servant dynamic, this doesn't happen because the master imposes their will, suppressing the servant's input and potential. This negative interaction fails to achieve the creative potential of true synthesis. Whenever this process takes place Deleuze and Guattari refer to it as:

> becoming or double deterritorialization: one force acts on another by lending it a fragment of its 'code', offering some of its conventions and habits. It imposes senses and values on the other force. The latter then responds by acting on the former, imposing its own senses and values. Through this exchange of fragments of code, the overall memory or territory belonging to each force is expanded, possibly in a way that overrides form codes and conventions (1988: 306-7). Each force is transformed in its essence: it is deterritorialized. The two processes gain a 'consistency'. (Goodchild, 1996:38)

Deleuze identified becoming as the model for immanent relations, which exist solely within the territories, impulses, or forces that interact with one another. The form and development of these relations are fully shaped by the modes involved. However, whether such a relation occurs depends on external factors. "The existence of affirmative syntheses depends on whether or not territories tend to relate and act upon each other; it depends on desire." (Goodchild, 1996:38) Deleuze's exploration of desire is influenced by Spinoza's distinction between inadequate and adequate ideas. When we encounter something that affects us, we form a perception-based idea of the interaction— for instance, learning from experience what is safe or harmful to consume. This allows us to organize life around maximizing positive encounters and minimizing harmful ones. However, such ideas are often flawed; we might think a meal is beneficial without realizing it has been poisoned. A more reliable type of idea emerges when we encounter something aligned with our essence or composed of similar

elements. In such cases, our essence resonates and expresses itself in our minds, enabling us to feel what we perceive. This results in a "common notion" of the relationship we experience, leading to an adequate idea. Through these encounters with similar others, we achieve greater self-knowledge. (Goodchild, 1996:38) Affirmative syntheses occur when territories (forces, entities, or systems) actively relate to and act upon one another, producing a creative and mutually transformative interaction. Desire underpins these syntheses. For Deleuze, desire is not about a lack or specific content (what happens) but the very fact that something happens—the driving force behind the interaction of forces. Desire drives our interactions and encounters with the world. Whether these encounters produce affirmative syntheses or lead to inadequate ideas depends on the nature of the interaction. Deleuze uses Spinoza's distinction to emphasize the role of desire in creating affirmative syntheses.

Chapter 3. Affirmative Politics

3.1. Subjectivity, Power and Psychic Repression

According to Deleuze and Guattari, humanity is shaped by three primary layers—biological organism, language, and subjectivity—which serve as its foundational elements. These layers are formed through social processes: the organism through organization, language through processes of signification, and subjectivity through acts of subjectification (1988: 159 as cited in Goodchild 1996:147) I argue that Arab Anglophone women's characters' subjection is constructed around the notion of Arabness and ethnonormativity, more precisely around cultural survival and social intelligibility as Ramy M. K. Aly, perfectly shows in *Becoming Arab in London: Performativity and the Undoing of Identity*:

> Butler offers an insightful addition to the debate on the theoretical difficulties with personhood. In Gender Trouble she postulates that the 'coherence' and 'continuity' of 'the person' are not features of 'personhood' per se but instead are 'socially instituted and maintained norms of social intelligibility' (1990: 17 as cited in Aly, 2015:82)

I argue that the desire for recognition as Butler describes it (Montanaro, 2010) and the consequent subjectification it entails is what makes Arab Anglophone women subjects. According to Butler desire is inherently tied to recognition, as social recognition constitutes individuals, yet this process is complicated by the fact that the criteria for recognition are socially constructed, mutable, and can grant humanity to some while denying it to others (as Butler argues):

> Desire is always a desire for recognition, and it is only through the experience of recognition that each of us constitutes ourselves as socially viable beings. However, this structure becomes more complex when we consider, as Butler continues, that the terms by which we are recognized as human are socially constructed and mutable. Often, the very

terms that confer humanity upon some individuals are those that deprive others of the

possibility of achieving such a status.[33] (Montanaro, 2010:18)

Butler as explained by Montanaro (2010) argues that maintaining one's sense of self requires

accepting the conditions of one's subordination. This means that the struggle for recognition is not

just about forming identity through mutual acknowledgment of shared structures. Instead, it exposes

how recognition, granted through subordination, underscores our reliance on power for self-identity,

as we depend on and enact socially constructed categories:

> Social categories are simultaneously a sign of subordination and of existence. In other
>
> words, the cost of existing within subjectivation is subordination. The subject pursues the
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> promise of existence inherent in subordination precisely at the moment when no other
>
> choice is possible. […] Subjectivation leverages the desire for existence, as existence is
>
> always granted from elsewhere: it highlights a fundamental vulnerability to the Other as
>
> the condition for existence..[34] (Montanaro, 2010:25)

For Butler, as shown by Montanaro (2010) subjectivation is the paradoxical effect of a regime of

power where the very conditions of existence, the possibility of being recognized as a social being,

depends on maintaining the subject in subordination. Moreover, as Montanaro contends Butler

describes how individuals are continually subjected to power even as they form their identities as

subjects. Subjectivity, particularly female subjectivity, is a paradoxical space—dislocated and

dispossessed, it is a body embodying multiple practices and discursive frameworks. As the author

states (Montanaro, 2010:26) Foucault aptly described subjectivity as a nexus of power-knowledge

relations, with power being potent not only because it represses but also because it produces positive

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[33] My English translation of: "il desiderio è sempre un desiderio di riconoscimento e che è solamente attraverso l'esperienza del riconoscimento che ognuno di noi si costituisce come un essere socialmente possibile; tuttavia tale struttura si complica se si tiene presente, continua Butler, che i termini per mezzo dei quali noi veniamo riconosciuti come umani sono socialmente articolati e mutevoli e talvolta proprio i termini che conferiscono umanità ad alcuni individui sono quelli che privano certi altri della possibilità di raggiungere tale stato"(Montanaro, 2010:18)

[34] My English translation of: Le categorie sociali sono segno, contemporaneamente, di subordinazione e di esistenza. In altre parole il prezzo dell'esistenza all'interno della soggettivazione è la subordinazione. Il soggetto insegue la promessa di esistenza insita nella subordinazione proprio nel momento in cui la scelta è impossibile. […] La soggettivazione sfrutta il desiderio per l'esistenza laddove l'esistenza è sempre conferita da qualche altro luogo: essa sottolinea una vulnerabilità primaria nei confronti dell'Altro allo scopo di esistere. (Montanaro, 2010, 25)

effects on desire and knowledge. Butler sees power as the condition of the subject's existence, distinct from the power the subject exercises. The transition to exercising power occurs through the formation of consciousness and reflection, which inherently suspends or alters desire:

> Power, therefore, does not simply lie in the repeated enforcement of norms but is formative or generative, proliferating and conflictual. The law itself is transformed through its resignifications. Butler's entire body of work thus presents, as we have shown, a co-implication and co-presence of the psychic and the social-symbolic. [35](Montanaro, 2010:40)

As we saw previously, power refers to the structures and systems (social, political, economic) that organize and control society and as Montanaro affirms (2010:30-31) power, understood as subordination, consists of a set of conditions that precede and influence the subject, subordinating it from the outside. At the same time, subjection is a form of subordination that the subject imposes on itself. As Butler emphasizes, the history of subjectivation must be traced within the realm of psychic life. These systems impose rules, norms, and expectations that shape individual behavior and desires. Deleuze and Guattari name this mechanism psychic repression (1996:82) namely how external societal forces shape the internal workings of the psyche (thoughts, emotions, and drives). It is not just about repressing desires to conform to reality but about how societal systems *produce* repression the authors argue in reference to Freud. The psyche is not a cohesive realm of thoughts and interpretations, like traditional psychology might suggest. Instead, it is made of *the same material as society*: interactions, events, and processes. It is constantly produced through encounters and relations. The psyche is made of "desiring-machines," small, interconnected processes that produce desires by linking with other machines (social systems, bodies, objects, etc.). A network of relationships that constantly generates experiences and desires:

> The psyche is composed of the same kind of material as society: bodies, relations, productions, events - Deleuze and Guattari call these 'desiring machines'. The psyche must

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[35] My English translation of: Il potere, dunque, non consiste semplicemente nell'elaborazione reiterata delle norme, ma èformativo o generativo, proliferante e conflittuale. La stessa legge nelle sue risignificazioni viene trasformata. Tutta la produzione butleriana presenta dunque, come abbiamo mostrato, una co-implicazione ecompresenza dello psichico e del sociale-simbolico. (Montanaro, 2010:40)

be produced in the same way that society is produced; it has no primacy or originality in relation to experience. It is filled with encounters and relations where anything can meet anything else. (Goodchild, 1996:82)

These encounters between desiring machines is seen as a "machine", a system of interconnected parts producing something. Machines connect and disconnect, generating desires, relationships, and effects) affect each other and produce intensities which are raw, powerful feelings or states of being, like joy or suffering, that exist without clear boundaries or forms. Deleuze and Guattari see these as fundamental to existence and to resistance, I argue. When these intensities are too much to bear desire has the tendency to repress itself:

> Any explanation of repression should therefore be considered at the level of intensities: here it is no longer an 'explanation', but a production and an experience of repression. Desire tums to repress itself because of the unbearable affects and intensities it produces; repression is ultimately a way of sheltering from unbearable affects. Primary repression is a functioning part of desire; but, when it becomes unbearable, primary repression may tum back upon itself to repress itself. (Goodchild, 1996:85)

So, how does psychic repression work and how is it connected to desire? When the intensities of desire (strong, overwhelming feelings) become too much to bear, repression kicks in to shield the psyche. This repression can turn back on itself, creating delusions or disconnecting desires from their real societal origins. When society represses desires, people might detach from the social conditions that created their suffering. Instead of addressing the root causes (like inequality), they might internalize repression as a personal flaw.

In other words, repression is not just a barrier to desire; it is produced by the same forces that create desire. Society and its structures shape both. When repression intensifies, it disconnects desire from reality. This detachment creates illusions and delusions, where people fail to see how their desires are rooted in socio-historical contexts. Deleuze and Guattari (1996:88) argue that modern human life is built on repressing desire. This happens through *fixed systems* that shape how we think,

relate to others, and organize society for example the family structure which enforces these rules, desire in families is controlled and directed toward having children. "'Inscribing itself into the recording process of desire, clutching at ever thing, the family performs a vast appropriation of productive forces; it displaces and reorganizes in its own fashion the entirety of the connections" (Goodchild, 1996:89) moreover:

> In addition, the institution of the family is regulated by the same syntheses: a fixed conjugation between individuated persons, in which desire is subordinated to reproduction, leads to the filiation of new individuals by exclusive disjunction. Gestation, birth, and growth become more than just the production and emission of a set of desiring-machines: the child is separated from the mother's body by means of the socially imposed prohibitions which found their separate identities. The same set of prohibitions then determine the possible alliances which can be made between complete, detached persons. (Goodchild, 1996:88)

As Goodchild tells us, desire is not just about individual it is part of larger systems ("desiring-machines") that produce life. Society imposes rules and boundaries that turn free-flowing desires into rigid, fixed systems. This repression helps maintain the existing social order, but it also limits creativity and the full potential of desire. In other words our current way of living is based on fixing and controlling desires, especially through rules in thinking and family life. These systems stop desire from flowing freely and create limits on how we understand ourselves and relate to others. The repression of desire, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is closely tied to structures of meaning that underpin societal power. Desire can only be subjected to a law if that law is grounded in a signifying structure that allows for representation, with the signifier being central to repressing desire. Thus, societal power operates through these structures of meaning, and a revolution of desire would require challenging and dismantling dominant systems of representation:

> desire cannot be subjected to a law unless this law is founded upon a signifying structure
> enabling representation. The structure of the signifier lies at the heart of the repression of

desire. It is therefore through structures of meaning that power operates in our society. The revolution of desire will not take place until desire has challenged dominant structures of meaning. (Goodchild, 1996:88)

The psychic and social dimensions of repression are interlinked. The psyche, structured through signifiers, is inherently repressible, but repression is only activated when a social product serves as the signified, giving life to the structure: "If the psyche is formed as a signifying structure, it is potentially repressible; but desire will not actually be repressed until a social product plays the role of the signified that will activate and produce the structure." (Goodchild, 1996:89)

For Deleuze and Guattari, freeing desire involves a process of desubjectification, achieved by reintegrating desire into the social structures that originally shaped it. This "liberation of desire" represents a form of psychic renewal that transforms both individual psychological frameworks and broader social structures. In light of the above, I argue that through the imperfect performance of ethnonormative arabness Arab Anglophone women's character reinvest desire in the psychic and embark on a journey of de-subjectification.

3.2 The Psychic Structure of Arabness

3.2.1. Learning to Become an Arab Woman in London

Ramy M.K. Aly prefers talking in terms of Connectedness instead of Arabness, because although we cannot speak of a unified way of being Arab that is valid for every Islamic or Arabophone country, as all the countries that we define as Arabs have their differences and specific contextuality, there are values and traditions of womanhood that these countries share and that are trasnmitted in the context of the diaspora such as:

> Women also often assume primary responsibility for the culture within the home […]
> women are essential agents in the preservation and maintenance of family and cultural
> traditions (Barakat 1993; Joseph 1996). This often results in their preserving and valorising
> traditions that they perceive as being emblematic of their home societies, even if they are
> no longer retained or have been modified considerably in those countries (Das Gupta 1997).
> The importance of women's culturally "appropriate behaviour" within ethnic collectivises
> is a subject endowed with particular significance within adopted societies (Yuval-Davis
> 1999:115). Consequently, certain restrictive parameters on women's actions and modes of
> dress may serve as markers of cultural identity and its boundaries among certain segments
> of ethnic collectivises. (Ouhiba, 2017: 34)

 The psychic repression of Arab Anglophone women's desire starts very early with the gendered socialisation. With the words of Gayle Rubin (1975) gender can be defined as:

> the totality of arrangements through which a society transforms biological sexuality into a
> human activity, and in which human needs are both satisfied and transformed. The power
> of gender operates more forcefully during the childbearing years, when the means of
> controlling sexuality, reproduction and access to work are most focused and function in a
> clearer and sharper fashion. (Rubin, 1975 cited in Correa, 1997)

As Sanaa El Aji affirms we cannot separate the social and cultural context from sexuality. "Sexuality is both a natural activity and a social and cultural construct."[36] (El Aji, 2017:103) as the author states we can talk about "differentiated socialisation" *Ibid.* that makes specific values and attitudes natural. According to Glacier learning to become an Arab woman implies that (2017:10):

> "the categories feminine/masculine and women/men are defined and produced in a relational
> manner. For this reason we tend to think of gendered concepts like masculine honor depending on
> the sexual conduct of women. This kind of relational understanding of sex and gender corresponds,
> among other things with the repression of feminine sexuality, an obsession with virginity"

The author goes on by saying that the feminine, the masculine and the sex and gender hierarchy are patriarchal writings on the body created by constructing sexuality as a masculine prerogative. The masculine desires, initiates and imposes itself while the feminine is desired, follows and subordinates itself to the point that they do not own their bodies. The female body makes reference to several representations: seduction, desire, reputation, temptation but also sacrality when it is the body of the mother. It's a body that needs to be hidden to avoid "debauchery" and a body to respect and sacralize as it contains values and virtues symbolism. (El Aji, 2017:50) As Glacier (2017:21) affirms women are taught appropriate bodily behaviours, the urge to embellish their bodies, virginity as an imperative, limits on their space, isolation, limits on their freedom of movement, segregation as women's body is often considered responsible for masculine's debauchery. Women need to cover up to avoid inducing men to temptation, if something happened, they would be considered guilty of not having covered themselves up. The very fact they exist is a provocation, as Susan Bordo would put it:

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[36] El Aji, S. (2016). *Sexualité préconjugale au Maroc: représentations, verbalisation, pratiques et socialisation genrée*(Doctoral dissertation, Aix-Marseille). All the citations coming from this study were translated from French to English by the undersigned:

> Frequently, even when women are silent (or verbalizing exactly the opposite), their bodies are seen as "speaking" a language of provocation. When female bodies do not efface their femaleness, they may be seen as inviting, "flaunting": just two years ago, a man was acquitted of rape in Georgia on the defense that his victim had worn a miniskirt. When these inviting female bodies are inaccessible or unresponsive to male overtures, this may be interpreted as teasing, taunting, mocking. (Bordo, 2004:13)

For this reason for girls the process of de-sexualizing the environment is achieved with pre-marital seclusion, early arranged marriage and of course, the proof of virginity. In a context in which the definition of sex is penetrative, only male satisfaction is conceived. As Audre Lorde states in Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power:

> In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives. (Lorde, 1984:53)

Male desires are accepted and natural and women need to be aware of these relations of power at the basis of the ineligatirian construction of gender, as paraphrasing Mckinnon, sex and power are inseparable and "a woman should be wanted by her husband, not the other way around", a woman has to show modesty, as the rule of the *hshouma* (shame) implies. Good women remain virgin and need to show no interest in sex, the terminology to refer to women reinforce it.

Obermeyer (2000) provides a series of terms in Moroccan to do so: the *bint* is the unmarried woman, the *mra* is the married woman, the *hajjala* is the divorced or widowed and the *ta'trasha* belongs to no one or she belong to everyone, as a prostitute. Women, uniquely judged by the purity of their bodies with no ownership on them are stuck between two polarized roles of "angelism and satanism," portrayed respectively by Fatima and Aisha Kandisha.

As Mernissi (1982) highlight,s women's sexuality is considered a powerful forcethath may lead to fitna (seduction, rebellion, chaos). This is what Mernissi (1982) calls in "Virginity and

Patriarchy" the great tragedy of the patriarchal mal:e "his status lies in irrational schizophrenic contradictions and is vested in a being whom he has defined from the start as the enemy: women" (Mernissi, 1982:185). Virginity is the proof of men's fear of women, she who creates life. Virginity is the consequence of a social schizophrenia:

> Men transform themselves into dirt to pollute their partners, and by the same token they turn the sexual act into an act of destruction and degradation. The deflowered virgin becomes a lost woman, but the man, like the legendary phoenix, emerges from the fray purer, more virile, better respected. In psychopathological terms, this is known as schizophrenia: a contradiction so total, so all-embracing that neither individual men nor whole societies can accept it as valid without destroying themselves. For the patriarchal sexual act is childish, it is the act of a man who has never outgrown the terrible fear of his insignificance in relation to the life-giving mother, and who has never become adult enough to see sexual pleasure as a relation between equals rather than as a mechanism for establishing a hierarchy and enforcing power, domination and therefore dehumanization.(Mernissi, 1982:186)

And as Glacier (2017:21) reiterates this dehumanization is legitimated by biopower that denies self-determination, freedom of movement and liberty of expression to women normalizing the violation of their bodily integrity. Moreover, as Chafai (2017) affirms:

> Women in popular culture are regarded as causing social, moral and public disorder, their bodies, appearance act or behaviour are frequently observed in private and public space, and that is why Moroccan society encourages and values veiled females.

From a very early age girls are inculcated the word *hchouma* (shame/modesty/decency) "a complex social phenomenon claimed to regulate social conduct" (Chafai, 2017) and every member of the community around her, especially fathers, brother and male relatives have the right and duty to exercise control over them and monitor their moves. It is through the mothers that these conservative values are reproduced who educate them:

with the aim of engaging in family life to marry, satisfy their husband's (sexual) desires, raise children and be patient and obedient" (*Ibidem*) While men can freely circulate in the public space, women need to prefer the private space. In the public space they would be constantly policed. This way: The social or cultural body become transcendental, beholder of values, costumes, chastity, reputation. It's a body that carries and that could threaten the reputation of an entire family. It has to be beautiful, seductive, likeable, but it should never be transgressive (El Aji, 2017:54)

And that is how believes such as the following one are created: "Listen, sister, I am telling you. It is impossible to see this meat constantly and to retain yourself. How can you do that. It is difficult (laughs)… Do you understand? If the girl respects herself, the whole world will." Hamid, 21, Agadir. (El Aji, 2017:51) Instead of holding men accountable for their desires and behaviours, women are blamed. If a woman covers up she is considered more serious, less intentioned to provoke or seduce. But still, she will be hypersexualised. Bouhdiba (1984) argues that women are reduced to unidimensionality when segregated and their body is totally eroticized. Fatima Mernissi finds this distinction between femininity/ beauty and masculinity/sublime: the sublime is the ability to think, to elevate beyond the animal and the physical world. The sublime is masculine. (El Aji, 2017: 59) In this sense, femininity and masculinity are the expression of what Bordo (2004) calls would define the cartesian mind-body dualism. Women are invited to cover up, but at the same time they should be attractive to find a husband and once married they should take care of themselves and not let their appearance go, otherwise the husband would be authorized to cheat on them as his desire being considered more intense. Beauty should be maintained in the private space and controlled in the public space not to be a sign of *hchouma*. Again, the body is a social good and not the property of women:

Why are silence, immobility, and obedience the key criteria of female beauty in the Muslim society where I live and work? …What does beauty have to do with the right to self-expression? Why, according to the canons of beauty in Islamic literature, does a woman

who does not express herself excite desire in a man? (Mernissi/AitSabbah, 1984) (El Aissi, 2020:57)

El Aissi continues by explaining that Mernissi under the pseudonym of AitSabbah reveals "the religious erotic discourse" (Ivi.57)) according to which the woman is a source of *fitna*, disorder. A concept Dialmy (2015:276) translates as chaos and the ability of women to be seductive. For this reason, women need to be constantly monitored and controlled, otherwise it is impossible to maintain the social order:

> "In this respect, both orthodox and erotic discourses stress the Muslim woman's powerful sexual desire. As mentioned before, Mernissi suggests that female sexuality is considered active, hence sexual segregation; seclusion and the institution of marriage are made necessary to control and anticipate its destructive effects on the social order (El Aissi, 2020:58)

But even though woman's powerful sexual desire is recognized, interviews by El Aji show that both women and men confirm that it is natural that men get to have more experiences in life. Man is the initiator, the woman the one who responds positively or negatively. A woman never initiates the sexual relation. Initiation is a masculine act. Women lose value when they do so. "A woman is desired, not desiring" (El Aji, 2017:104) She cannot be direct. Sanaa El Aji talks about the sexual unconscious within everyone. It is important to stress that this unconscious is also made of cultural and social beliefs:

> "If for women the instructions they receive is to preserve their virginity until marriage (or to have sexual relationships without penetration), not to publicly explicit their sexual relationships, not to have multiple partner; for men, it is, on the contrary, about having the more sexual experience as possible in order to learn. However, it would be inadmissible for a man in the framework of a demonstration of virility, to be homosexual or to have "feminized" attitudes" (Ivi.105)

The majority of the women interviewed by El Aji talked about their sexual experience in the framework of the relations that lasts, the idea of "sex for sex" is still frowned upon, especially if it's a woman claiming it. In fact, if the virginity of a woman is lost out of wedlock and the man decides to marry her to repair the damage he will be identified as the victim that was set up by the woman. The woman is considered responsible, even if they were two. Since only women are held accountable in case of a defloration, they are considered the only responsible even when a rape is committed. This is a social construct:

> "During infancy, sexual hierarchy is established in the mind of both girls and boys. Girls are indoctrinated by their families to believe that they have no authority over their bodies or their sexuality. They are advised during their puberty to protect their bodies and their genital organs more than their own eyes, not for their own sake, but for the sake of future husbands." (El Aissi, 2020:58)

Men do not know any devalorisation. They need to be sexually active and experienced in order to teach women. Honour is feminized too: women are held responsible for the honour of the whole family, they represent the guardian of tradition of the whole community's identity. The preservation of honour corresponds to the preservation of virginity, but how is virginity constructed?

3.2.2. The construction of virginity: women as commodities

Osire Glacier describes the loss of virginity with these words:

> "It takes a man or, more specifically, a bloody deflowering, for human beings born with a vagina to become women. As Moroccan society undergoes profound transformations, transgressive behavior is all the more common. However, according to sociopolitical constructions, a girl's passage into womanhood is celebrated with joy and festivities while, in reality it is a profoundly violent experience for women. Women must bleed, and this blood must be publicly exhibited A collective ritual surrounds the wedding night because

the blood of a deflowered woman symbolizes a sacrificial act by which people born with a

vagina become a sexualized body that belongs to another." (Glacier, 2017:47)

Through these rites women are sacrificed and entirely give up their bodies to the community. In *The Certificate of Virginity: Honor, Marriage and Moroccan Female Immigration* (2011), Theresa Thao Pham affirms that being chaste for a woman, is the main pre-requisite for the realization of the marital project. Few people would dispute the fact that virginity embodies high morality, it constitutes a part of the gift women offer in nuptial alliances; a gift closely bound to the kin groups.

Women and their virginity represent a commodity to be exchanged when forming alliances between families. The reproductive immaculateness needs to be proven to guarantee that the progeny comes only from her husband. In this sense, women's chastity has a commodifying value as it builds communities and epitomizes respect and honor, ensuring patriarchal protection, therefore, control. As Gayle Rubin (1975) would put it, the transaction can be described exactly like this:

> If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them wh are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it. The exchange of women does not necessarily imply that women are objectified, in the modern sense, since objects in the primitive world are imbued with highly personal qualities. (...) Kinship systems do not merely exchange women. They exchange sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage names and ancestors, rights and people – men, women, and children – in concrete systems of social relationships. These relationships always include certain rights for men, others for women (...) men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women to not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin. (Rubin, 1975:174-177)

Virginity plays a vital part in creating the group and solidifying its cohesiveness, for this reason, it no longer belongs to women, but to social activity. It is in light of the above that the proof of virginity becomes morally and socially crucial, as a consequence women are pressured to either preserve their virginity or construct it. In Morocco virgins hold a higher bridewealth value than divorced or widowed women; "damaged" women are haunted and socially marginalized due to being considered unpredictable and difficult to control. Some women are sometimes referred to as "second-hand" or

"used women," to distinguish them from virgins. They are, in other words, "outdated merchandise." (Glacier, 2017:27)

A verification of women's chastity ensures their family's honor. For those who engage in sexual intercourse out of wedlock, marriages can be annulled stigmatizing also the unwed family members. But what is virginity constructed upon? It is generally considered that what constitutes a virgin is the existence of an intact hymen, a thin membrane that partially covers the vaginal orifice, made of elastic, fibrous tissue, whose biological function has not been discovered yet. Hymens vary in shape, size, texture, and durability making them unreliable in determining virginity. A broken hymen does not necessarily mean a loss of virginity (Thao Pham 2018). Doctors perform virginity tests by introducing their fingers in women's vaginal orifice moreover, a broken hymen may release some blood, establishing the purity on the presence of bloodstains on the sheets of the first night of intercourse. Female sexuality becomes an exclusive sanctuary for men. The virginity of women is not considered their property, but the property of the family. "The membrane of the hymen, even if it has no direct impact on women's health is considered a familial and collective good that needs to be preserved" (El Aji, 2017:319). A lot of women are trying to rebel against the double-standard according to which women need to preserve their virginity until marriage, while for men, losing virginity is almost an imperative. For example, Najat, aged 25 from Oujda, says that:

"Oh yes… Of course, men, they can do whatever they want. Nobody tells them anything. They don't have virginity. (Laughs)... I laugh about it, but at the same time, it bothers me. Do you find it normal? Your brother, he can do whatever he want... But you, you can't go out, you can't dress like that, you can't do anything... Your husband too. He can do whatever he likes, but you, you have to be a virgin. They're all hypocrites..." (El Aji, 2017: 309)

But this rebellion is only in theory, the majority tends to conform either by not engaging in sexual activity, or by using non-penetrative strategies or reconstructing the hymen to maintain an

apparent social order and avoid problems. If virginity for women is mandatory, for men it represents a sign of "lack of virility", a "problem", a proof of "hidden homosexuality", a "lie", "sexual impotence". (Ivi.311) The author goes on by saying that it is perceived a man is supposed to know and show the woman as for her claiming some knowlegde would show she is not a virgin and it would subvert the distribution of power who would not reside exclusively in the hands of the man.

If virginity is just the practice of preserving the hymen, several astuces are adopted in order to respect the social imposition of virginity and at the same time be able to have some kind of sexual life, in this sense a disparity between the real practices and the representation of feminine virginity that had originally to do with values such as purity and chastity is taking place. It is no secret that when some marriages are consummated, the virginity of the bride is artificial. Enough young women to delight the gynaecologists with the relevant skills, resort to a minor operation on the eve of their wedding, in order to erase the traces of pre-marital experience.

Before embarking on the traditional ceremonies of virginal modesty and patriarchal innocence, the young woman has to get a sympathetic doctor to wreak a magical transformation, turning her within a few minutes into one of Mediterranean man's most treasured commodities: the virgin, with hymen intact sealing a vagina which no man has touched. (Mernissi, 1982: 183) Nowadays virginity means not to lose one's hymen using palliative practices that not always have female pleasure as a priority. Virginity has thus a double meaning for people a religious one and a more conventional one. As Dialmy (2015:96) believes "nowaday virginity is reduced to an original or artificial hymen, accompanied by total, superficial, oral or anal sexual activity."

Hymen is not the only female capital anymore. A lot of them don't believe in virginity anymore especially if they have the resources to get a fake one. Some girls on the contrary, don't have other option as it is considered the source of their value. They keep it just not to have to face marginalisation. "To become m'ra, woman, before marriage (…) is a transgression of the sexual ethics, who should not be assumed, even when it's done." (El Aji, 2017:325) Even once the virginity is lost, the practice of not having sex with a man who is considered serious is very well spread,

because if some men become aware that a woman is experienced, they might abandon her and not agree to marry.

> "We are in front of a moral valorisation of claimed and declared abstinence, but not of real abstinence. It is a form of surveillance and social control of behaviours, but also a practical acceptance from the point of view of the interested parts. This acceptance is essentially based on the fear of the consequences of a sexual act (loss of the hymen, marital projects compromised, etc) that could be socially expensive and that only women are held accountable for. This way, a man can have sexual relations with a girl, but when she gives in, he could leave her because she gave in creating the possibility of having done that with someone else in the past." (Ivi.327)

This dehumanization of women by reducing them to their hymens and reducing the choice of sexual practices in order to preserve it with substitutive options is even more enhanced by men's exclusive entitlement to sexual expertise. Artificial virginity is degrading not only for the woman who buys it, but also for the man who penetrates her and for the couple which is created, a couple locked for ever in deception. One of the manifestations of the lack of understanding between the sexes is that the sexual act is considered to be the sole responsibility of the woman. Defloration, like pregnancy, is, contrary to what is sometimes thought, an act which requires two agents: a man and a woman. (Mernissi, 1982: 184)

A young man from Oujda revealed he had sexual experiences with women that did not lose their virginity during the practice making him aware of the fact that an intact hymen does not imply virginity. But this did not prevent him from wanting a virgin bride:

> "She needs to be a virgin… Because, even if she has done something… the most important things is that, that place (the vagina) hasn't been touched from someone else… yes…Because after all, she needs to pay attention. You can't marry her if she's been "trouéè"… You will always ask yourself who was it… It could be that guy, or the other… It's not a problem, but if she doesn't tell you about it… It's not possible. Reda, 21, Oujda. (El Aji, 2017: 330)

Women who lost their virginity not necessarily tell the whole truth to the partner, they often confess that the defloration took place with a man who made them believe he would have married them but then abandoned them in order for the act to look less outrageous. They often hide their expertise such as in this case:

> "I played the role of the innocent, to the point that, when we have sexual relations, I ask him to show me how to do it because I don't know anything… when in reality, I could show him things he doesn't know… a sexual practice… up until now, he's been good in our sexual relation, but there are things I would have liked to teach him. (Ibid.333)

Sexual expertise needs to be a man's prerogative as it devalues women on the marital market. Again women's desire is silenced or condemned. The institution of marriage is necessary to garantee a higher social status to women. According to Guessous (1987:64) at the basis of marriage there's a quest for security as a means to ensure an official bond with their loved one and as a means to live with no sense of guilt whatsoever or to free themselves from the influence of their family. Marriage is often a source of social promotion. For this reason women are ready to resort to hymnoplastic if necessary. Hymnoplasty is the proof that the body belongs to the community. Not everyone is ready to take responsibility of their acts in a society where it is criminalized, for this reason they maintain the patriarchal order intact by maintaining the hymen intact:

> Artificial virginity, far from being a phenomenon of only secondary importance, is the symbol of an age-old malaise which has for centuries frustrated the desire of men and women to love and respect each other. It is a malaise which stems from sexual inequality, unnatural by definition, anti-social in its workings. (Mernissi, 1982:191)

In Morocco for example, you can either buy an intervention on the night before that would cost between 2000 and 4000 dirhan or something that lasts longer for 8000 dirhams. (El Aji, 2017:336) According to Usta (2000) it does not come without worries and physicians might take advantage from it even if sometimes they do not even have the experience and have no idea how to perform the operation as it is not something they would easily find in a textbook. But other options are available

in fact, if needed a chinese hymen kit on the internet or on the open-air market of Casablanca can be bought:

> "It is a hydrosoluble pocket with a value of 120 dirhams. It needs to be introduced inside of the vagina before the sexual act (almost 30 min before penetration), with the effect of body warmth the membrane will dilate and during the penetration a sensation of defloration will be recreated, the red liquid that it contains will spill, imitating the rupture of the hymen. The husband will be convinced this way of his woman's virginity". (El Aji, 2017:337)

Before these new techologies were invented people used to invent all kind of strategies in order to justify a virginity loss. These strategies can either be seen as a sign of resistance, a negotiation with society's demands, or they can also be seen as reinforcing masculine domination by trying to conform at all costs. I personally believe that this is the proof of the pervasiveness of bio-power:

> Curiously, then, virginity is a matter between men, in which women merely play the role of silent intermediaries. Like honour, virginity is the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation in societies where inequality, scarcity, and the degrading subjection of some people to others deprive the community as a whole of the only true human strength: selfconfidence. (Mernissi, 1982:183)

If it it true that society demands that women remain chaste and men to multiply their partners, it is also true that sometimes the precocious virility demanded from boys can represent a burden. The pressure to be a man can be strong. This pressure is exemplified during the first wedding night, where the bride needs not to compromise the honour of her family, while the spouse needs to proove his virility. "Even if the purity and the masculine virginity are also recommended from the coranic and prophetic interpretation, in the practice it is stigmatized. It adds up to the construction of virility demanded from men." (El Aji, 2017: 116) The responsibility of the honour and reputation of a whole family is placed in women who are taught to give up their sense of self as subjects, in order to place the collective self of the community as a priority. A great part of this process is written on women's body that becomes a device through which the male gaze exercises control. The code of honor consists

in preserving the public reputation of a family, and the code of morality consists in preserving a socially accepted public conduct. Both codes rest on girls' and women's "good conduct": good upbringing, chastity, hard work, obedience, and modesty. The codes of honor and morality have been institutionalized by recorded history and religion and are inculcated in the family through everyday verbal and non-verbal "teaching" and behaviour. This explains the close relation between family honour and the behaviour of girls and women.

A woman's sexual purity is related to the honor of her family, especially her male kin, whereas a man's sexual purity is related to his own honor, not to that of his family or his female kin. (Sadiqi, 2008: 173) As we were able to explore, the model of desire these women inherit is what Suad would call "relational desire" which is accepted because of a desire for recognition. Ramy M.K. Aly speaks of becoming Arab in London because he studies how these meanings and this psychic repression is embodied by the Arab diaspora in London and how gender and race performativity intertwine making them undergo what Sarnou calls "dual objectification". As we will be able to see these meanings find their way to London, but the imperfect performance of Arabness allows women in particular to reconfigure them, approriate them to affirm their desire while maintaining intact their sense of themselves going from what Beauvoir would call the "will to be" to a "will to disclose the world".

3.2.3. Growing Pains and the Double Life

Ramy Aly interviews Suad, a Jordanian woman in London and Zainab born in London from Egyptian parents. The scholar discusses Suad's struggles with identity and belonging as an Arab girl in a predominantly white, middle-class English environment:

> Suad: Because everyone was English and we were 15-year-olds, like teenagers, and everybody was losing their virginity and getting drunk and sleeping over and going clubbing and I couldn't do that, and then I was bullied because of all that and, you know, so I've always had that issue. My parents weren't religious or anything, just socially conservative. I got to the point where I would just switch off and say, you know what? I'm

not going to let that bother me. I was the only Arab girl up until 6th form, actually there

was another Arab girl there but she denied it. (Aly, 2015:89)

She attempted to adopt behaviors and attitudes she associated with being "English," believing these could enable her to assimilate. However, her physical appearance and name marked her as different, making true "passing" impossible. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of flawed mimesis, (Bhabha 1989: 320 as cited in Aly, 2015:90) the text highlights how Suad's performative attempts at Englishness expose the limitations of assimilation and her position "between two performance communities"—her Arab upbringing and her desired English identity. Suad felt excluded and judged by her peers for not participating in behaviors tied to their version of womanhood, like drinking, partying, and dating—behaviors she associated with "English culture."

Despite her parents' restrictions, which she attributed to social conservatism rather than religious belief, she found it difficult to craft a space for herself within the social landscape of her school. Feeling trapped and unable to meet either set of expectations, Suad eventually surrendered to her circumstances. Drawing on Nadine Naber's (2006: 92 as cited in Aly, 2015:144) critique of how Arab women often navigate dual constructs of the "Arab virgin" and the "Americanized whore," frames Suad's struggle as a negotiation of heteronormative and cultural expectations from both Arab and English perspectives. This situation reveals how performative identities and social norms shape perceptions of womanhood across cultural divides, creating both personal and social tensions.

The narrative emphasizes that the restrictions Suad Ied could stem as much from British social conservatism as from Arab traditions. While Suad had troubles negotiating, Zainab is mastering the double life. She is mastering her performance intertwining the values she grew up with, the way she learnt how to be Arab from her family and the way she learnt how to be Arab in London. With the help of her imagination and a very thorough understanding of what both lifestyles entail and expect she was able be two different people and maybe much more than that:

"It was so difficult growing up […] I was definitely clearly two different people, until now,

not so much now because the two different people are becoming one person, but at school

110

[…] They saw the side of Zainab which was trying out this and experimenting with that […] they thought I was having this amazing social life, like this Oriental thing going on and that's how I made it out […] I didn't want to show them that because I was Arab or Muslim it was stopping me having a social life. 'Cause that's basically, that's what it was. I wanted to show them that I was normal. […] they thought I was an angel, but I really wasn't, I just hid everything and never got caught. I know how to behave here and I know how to behave there. That's the difference between me and other girls, they just get caught. […] It's the whole double lifestyle thing and the fact that you are supposed to live … like our parents expect us to live in this society and not be influenced by it. It's because of our parents, I'm gonna blame the parents." (Aly, 2015:94-95)

Zainab and Suad share stories of growing up with parents deeply concerned about the societal environment their children inhabited, resulting in strict control over their interactions both at and outside school. Their accounts reveal the complexity of gender formation, illustrating that the process extends beyond simple conformity to heteronormativity. Both face expectations to fulfill contrasting ideals of womanhood—one rooted in values of virginity and honor, and the other in sexual liberation as a marker of empowerment. These expectations are further shaped by cultural and class influences, which play a significant role in the construction of identity.

While Zainab manages to carve out a space for herself by creating a fabricated version of her social life to appease her peers and satisfy cultural norms, Suad struggles with this because she feels unable to deceive her parents. Zainab characterizes this experience as leading a "double life," acknowledging the psychological strain it entails and its unsustainability for some. Their experiences highlight how rigid definitions of identity enforce specific behaviors and performances. However, these performances, despite their imperfections, have real impacts, simultaneously imposing limits and shaping new possibilities:

"It is between the discursive, corporeal and material structures of subjection that Zainab 'finds herself' – or, as Foucault would have it, subjectivity is based on subjection. Thus the notion that she is leading 'two lives' is dismantled not only because it is part of a repertoire

of terms associated with the 'fixed yet multiple identities' but more so because they are not two sets of performances, in the doing of 'race', 'gender', 'youth' and oppositional constructions of heterosexuality, they are emphatically one." (Aly, 2015:97)

3.3. The "Third-World-Muslimwoman"[37]

In *Becoming Arab in London* Ramy M.K. Aly explores how the concept of Arabness has evolved, particularly in the context of migration and diaspora, moving away from rigid nationalist or pan-Arab ideologies toward a more flexible notion of *connectedness*. In cities like London, Arabness is redefined daily through interactions among individuals from diverse national, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The diaspora challenges the traditional homogenization of Arab identity by exposing its multiplicity, shaped by historical, political, and personal experiences. For Arab women in the diaspora, identity is often entangled with broader racialized and cultural representations. They may be stereotypically perceived through the lens of the "Third World Woman" narrative, which portrays them as oppressed and subjugated. However, this framing is reductive.

The shifting nature of Arabness, rooted in connectedness rather than a singular essence, highlights that lived experiences defy such monolithic representations. Diaspora dynamics and transnational encounters enable Arab women to assert agency in redefining their roles and challenging oppressive narratives. This perspective aligns with the argument that not all Muslim or Arab women are oppressed. The diversity of Arab identities and experiences within the diaspora spanning linguistic, cultural, and political difference illustrates the autonomy with which Arab women navigate their intersecting identities. They are neither confined by static cultural archetypes nor uniformly shaped by traditional patriarchal norms.

Instead, they engage with multiple cultural and social frameworks to create their own narratives, often challenging hegemonic structures and reshaping their positions within their communities and beyond. When it comes to the Muslimwoman – a neologism created by miriam cooke (2007) that fuses the two aspects of these women's identity (gender and religion) into one to show how their sense of self is reduced to the so-called "primary identity", making them easier to read – we risk falling into the trap of the Third World Woman vision. King explains that according

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[37] From this note onward and until the next one, the content presented is derived from a publication by the undersigned.

to the researchers Fatme Gocek and Shiva Balaghi, when dealing with the Third World, critical studies use an Orientalist approach that treats societies as static entities. The author reaffirms with the words of Edward Said that "there is a consensus on "Islam" as a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world's new political, social, and economic patterns" (Said 1981: xv, as cited in King 2005: 182).

My aim is to draw a parallelism between the neologism forged by miriam cooke and the concept of Third World Woman investigated by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) to show the process Muslim women undergo when they are categorised as submissive by the feminist gaze. As Sara Salem believes, even categorising certain women as subaltern and others as emancipated is an exercise of othering, as it is taking for granted that religion is always a patriarchal static entity: "the act of defining constitutes an exercise of power that creates certain women's experiences as patriarchal and others' as emancipatory" (Salem 2013: 1).

This approach discursively colonises "the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of these women" (Mohanty 1988: 334), therefore producing a singular muslimwoman. When speaking of Muslim women by putting them under the same category, as if there was only a single way to be Muslim, the risk is to overshadow the diversity of Muslim women as far as origins and lifestyle are concerned. These women are trapped between these two forces: either they are pitied by neo-Orientalists or they are oppressed by Islamists who want to control their bodies. As Chandra Mohanty explains, imposing the identity of a Third World Woman on religious women is arbitrary and does not examine their voices and experiences.

On the contrary, it discursively homogenises and systematises oppression, making the West the implicit referent and Muslim women the Other. The attention is placed on gender which is read as sexually constrained and being Muslim (submissive, oppressed, subaltern, passive target of male domination). Mahmood's vision of religious practice as historically and culturally specific echoes Mohanty's words. Putting these women in the same pre-constituted group, assigning them the same

characteristics no matter the context, socioeconomic class and ethnicity and assuming the reason why they engage in certain practices is oppression, structures their experiences in dichotomous terms.

Why is this vision of the Muslim woman in binary terms problematic? Because it posits the existence of two different, pre-constituted, ever-lasting categories: on the one hand, in Mohanty's words, the commonality of the Third-World Woman/ muslimwoman's struggle, no matter the socioreligious context, class, ethnicity, cultural differences, etc., and, on the other hand, the existence of a general oppressor. This vision opposes the powerful and the powerless and the risk is to overcome the subalternity by reestablishing a system based on the same binary pattern.

In Mohanty's words, the ultimate risk is that it: "erases all marginal and resistant modes of experiences" (Mohanty 1988: 352). The Muslimwoman is not a description of a reality; it is the ascription of a label that reduces all diversity to a single image. The veil, real or imagined, functions like race, a marker of essential difference that Muslim women today cannot escape. The neologism Muslimwoman draws attention to the emergence of a newly entwined religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical and even philosophical diversity. (cooke 2007: 140) As Anne Sofie Roald observes, the identity of a Muslim woman has different components that have to do with how one views oneself and not just with how one is perceived by others:

> In certain situations, self-definition might concur with others' perceptions.In minority/majority conflicts, however, others' perceptions tend to be expressed in stereotypical terms. Self-definitions also tend to change according to circumstances. For an Arabic-speaking Muslim woman living in a western European country, her self-awareness of being a Muslim would be pronounced in an environment of non-Muslims, whereas her nationality would be conspicuous in an environment of Muslims from other countries. In her own home, her identity as a woman would define her role, behaviour and work. A Muslim immigrant woman would often stress her Muslim identity in her meeting with western researchers. (King 2005: 186)

As Zine (2002) explains, marking these women as victims of Islam's repression justifies actions under "the trope of liberation". For this reason, it is important to recover their own experiences and accounts to decolonize feminist critique and oppose the imperialist view. Zine examines contemporary feminist writing to discover the paradigms imposed on Muslim women such as the "oppressed Muslim woman" and "rescued Muslim maiden", or perhaps "Muslim maiden in need of rescue" (Zine 2002: 16). Zine does so because she believes it is important to know the process through which these paradigms are created in order to act against essentialisation, as Islamic feminists try to do by engaging in decolonial practice. The decolonial practice starts by deconstructing the epitome of the Muslimwoman, putting into question its very accuracy, as Asma Lamrabet does in Women and Men in the Qur'an:

> Here, the question that begs an answer is, which Muslim woman are we talking about? The Asian or the African? The North African or the Middle Easterner? The Muslim women of the Gulf or those from Balkan states? Western Europeans or North Americans? Residents of Dubai or those living in the Egyptian countryside? The Bengali Muslim woman who liveslike a slave in the palaces of Riyadh, or the young Turkish woman living in the suburbs of Istanbul? (Lamrabet 2018: 9)

Asma Lamrabet believes Muslim women's trauma when it comes to colonialism was enhanced by the feminist "white man's burden" approach who put them all under the same category and according to which they needed salvation. She strongly believes that one of the main reasons Muslim women have been excluded from feminism is due to the effects of colonisation. The western liberation project of Muslim women was for a long time perceived as a colonialist project. But when we define these women as passive, we lose the chance to discover all the ways they express their agency, for example by exercising power over knowledge production through the interpretation of the sacred Qur'an. Islamic feminists engage in the practice of hermeneutics and hexegesis to challenge male Islamic

ideas, re-writing what Muslim femininity is, and they do so by engaging in a cosmopolitan, transnational and intersectional feminist practice:

> Muslim woman cosmopolitanism works across borders to weave a hybrid cultural system that disturbs the hegemony and desired homogeneity of both neo-Orientalism and religious extremism. To counter this instability, neo-Orientalists and Islamic extremists must constantly resort to a homogenising rhetoric that reinforces and reproduces their own dominant paradigm and asserts it to be natural, unlike the unnatural hybridity of new Muslimwoman identities and desires. (cooke et al. 2008: 98)

An example of the empowering character of Islamic feminism is Asma Lamrabet's interpretation of the creation of humanity that redefines gender roles. In The Creation of Humanity, Lamrabet presents the Qur'an's portrait of he creation of humanity. Through her interpretation, the author challenges the predominant idea of Eve as a symbol of all sins who was created from Adam. In Lamrabet's understanding of The Creation, women and men were created from the same essence through different stages: "O mankind! Reverence your Lord, Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate, and from the two has spread abroad a multitude of men and women" (Lamrabet 2018: 36).

The author explains that regardless of religious tradition, the belief that Eve, the mother of all sins, was created from Adam's rib remains ingrained in our collective consciousness. The feminist anti-patriarchal reading of the Qur'anic text, on the other hand, attests to spiritual equality, as symbolized by he creation tale of women and men from the same essence, the "original single soul", as stressed in the above verse. There is no evidence of culpability attributed to Eve for her banishment from Paradise. Eve is not perceived as a source of evil, nor as a sinner. It is the interpretation of most misogynist exegeses that assign upon her the role of temptress.

Lamrabet proceeds by saying that, according to the Qur'an, the two beings are both equally responsible for their disobedience. Their act is pardoned by the Creator as an act that signifies their first exercise of agency and choice. God teaches them to be equally free and responsible. This is a

very eloquent example of Islamic feminists' capacity to interpret the religious sacred text and build their own instruments to take control of their own narrative and seek emancipation if they believe they should, without needing any patronising interference from the West. For this reason they fight for equal access to the interpretation of the Qur'an and I consider this fight a decolonial practice, inasmuch as instead of letting the "colonizer" dictate what their liberation should look like, they build and rely on their own tool to provide multiple and self-conscious critiques as they deal with several axes of discrimination at once:

> Within the Eurocentric paradigm, liberation for Muslim women is measured by the degree to which their dress codes conform to standards acceptable in the West. This is not to deny the fact that the policing of women's dress by repressive regimes is unjustifiably oppressive. However, to accept conformity to a set of cultural codes determined by the West means that Muslim women will be subjected to yet another hegemonic worldview and will continue to be denied the opportunity to define for themselves what liberation an empowerment mean and whether or not this includes the veil. (Zine 2002: 15).[38]

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[38] From this note onward and until the next one, the content presented is derived from a publication by the undersigned.

3.4. From Performative Agency to Agentic Performativity

In *Becoming Arab in London* (2015) Ramy Aly emphasizes the performativity of race, drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity[39] as a foundation to explore how race and class function as systems of subjection. Just as gender is constructed and maintained through repeated acts and social norms, race operates similarly, producing and regulating identities through reiterative performances. Ethnonormativity, likened to heteronormativity, enforces racial identities by requiring individuals to display specific ethnic markers, such as language, food, clothing, and traditions, to gain cultural intelligibility and social recognition:

> The idea of having or possessing an ethnicity, of being part of a group, is so embedded and naturalised that we see ethnicity and ethnic groups everywhere, effectively producing injunctions to identify ethnically. The injunction to be a given race and to do an ethno-racial identity is rooted in the need to be intelligible within this economic, discursive, semiotic and institutional system of meaning. (2015:30)

This system dictates that acceptance is contingent on conforming to both ethnic stereotypes and economic and social expectations. Aly's study highlights the intersectionality of race, gender, and class as interdependent structures of power. These axes overlap to create complex forms of subjection shaped by societal and institutional norms, what Deleuze and Guattari would call psychic repression. Individuals are compelled to "recite" or embody these norms to survive and be recognized, though the inherent imperfections in these repetitions expose the instability of the frameworks that sustain them. Racialization is thus a regulatory framework where identities are constructed and performed within discursive boundaries, but the imperfect nature of repetition opens space for subversion and resistance:

> However, if these forms of hybridity are to be seen as paradigmatic at all, it should be in terms of their ability to challenge ethnonormativity and not in the fetishisation of hybridity

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[39] For more insights on Butler's theory of performativity see:

itself. There is much to be learned about racial subjection by exploring notions of identification and desire, encryption, melancholia and a project of survival, which are the theoretical terrain on which Butler's writings on performative gender rest. Thus the pervasive forces of heteronormativity and ethnonormativity bring into being that which is named – 'Arab woman' for 'British Arab woman', and imposes a set of gendered and racialising norms, discourses and practices which must be recited, albeit imperfectly, for cultural survival and social intelligibility (Aly, 2015:31)

The analysis argues that racialization is not simply a cultural or societal phenomenon but also a psychic and discursive practice. For Arabs in London, for example, identities such as "Arab woman" or "British Arab" are shaped by a nexus of racial, gendered, and class-based norms that must be continuously performed to remain socially intelligible. These identities are not inherent or fixed but are constructed and sustained through both external expectations and the individuals' own performances within these systems. Race, much like gender, is therefore a constructed and reiterated identity, regulated by institutional and cultural norms that define what it means to belong to a specific racial or ethnic category. While this imposes constraints, the imperfections in repeated performances create opportunities to challenge racial hierarchies and assumptions:

Butler adopts a Derridean reading of speech acts so that the reiteration (or repeatability) of (gendered) norms has an inevitable dualism. While reiteration is designed to reinforce and reproduce forms of authority, the imperfection inherent in repetition also makes it inevitable that the same norms will be re-articulated and transgressed. Thus even though the injunction to be a given gender is fundamentally based on a set of regulatory norms, the 're-iterability' of those norms necessarily involves 'failures', a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated. (Aly, 2015:19)

By understanding agency as the capacity to act, we can frame performance as a liberating practice that not only enables agency but also opens up the possibility of affirmatively performing desire to live a livable life:

> This 'false' knowing and performativity is not an intentional act of inauthenticity but rather a state of temporality that emerges out of norms through which we seek to make ourselves known in a way that allows us to live a "livable life": performativity as we engage in "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (Butler, 2004:1)

This involves revisiting and reworking desire within the psychic structure, allowing for a transformative engagement with power and subjectivityI will explain how here. In his ethnographic research in London, the scholar Ramy M. K. Aly explores the life of young people born or raised in London to migrants from Arab states and some of the ways in which they "do" or achieve Arabness in London. The author argues that Arabness, like all other categorical labels is best understood not as a form of authentic "being" but as repertoires of "doing" achieved through the imperfect repetition of culture over time and space. One is not born an Arab in London, instead Arabness is a process of becoming through acts, enunciations, objects, spaces, bodies and settings.

He chooses to thing about "doing" and not "being". To look at acts one must accept their implication in both individual agency and determining structures, their instrumentality, temporality and the contingent and indeterminate meanings they generate. Asking what something "means" involves assuming a position of deconstructive *différance*. What does agency mean? [40]I identify agency as the capacity to act. Saba Mahmood strongly believes that agency can be conceptualised as "the capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood 2001: 203), I argue that in this sense agency is production.

As the author affirms, "agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms." (Mahmood 2011: 15). Instead of Orientalising

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[40] From this note onward and until the next one, the content presented is derived from a publication by the undersigned.

these women's motivations, desires and goals, it is important to analyse the discourses and practices through which they affirm their desire. Mahmood explains how, according to Foucault's understanding, power is a relation of force that not only subordinates, but can also be productive, in the sense that it produces desires, objects, relations and discourse. Moreover, she adds, as subjects, we do not only produce power-relations, but we are also in a sense shaped by them: "Central to his formulation is what Foucault calls the paradox of subjectivation: the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent" (Mahmood 2006: 45). In other words, our abilities to affirm our agencies are not based on some kind of pre-constituted freedom but could be a product of power. For this reason, Mahmood believes that agency cannot be viewed as resistance, but rather as the space we have for action provided by the dynamics we navigate of which resistance and the reinvestment of desire in the psychic structure is a consequence. The author relies on Butler to reinforce the idea that even resisting the norm implies a submission to the norm itself:

> To the degree that the stability of social norms is a function of their repeated enactment, agency for Butler is grounded in the essential openness of each iteration and the possibility that it may fail or be reappropriated or re-signified for purposes other than the consolidation of norms. This makes these formations vulnerable because each restatement/reenactment can fail [...] In other words, there is no possibility of "undoing" social norms that is independent of the "doing" of norms. (Mahmood 2006: 46)

Therefore, it is possible that religious women express their capacity for agency not only when subverting the norm, but also when they consciously reproduce it. As Orit Avishai states: "To see agency, one does not need to identify empowerment, subversion, or rational strategizing. It suffices to note how members of conservative religions do, observe, perform, religion, wherever that might lead". (Avishai 2008: 429) For this reason, Mahmood dismisses the category of resistance as it inscribes the analytics of power in a progressive politics, thus, preventing us from identifying ways of being and acting that are not encapsulated by the narrative of subversion. Resistance needs to be

de-romanticised as it is inscribed in a progressive politics that does not represent the historical and cultural specificity of religious women's actions. As Elizabeth Grosz affirms, the rational and liberal idea of autonomy excludes the body. For this reason, it is important to reaffirm how a desire for freedom is always embodied and culturally and historically located: the practical setting and body in which desire is produced must be taken into account. Mahmood invites us to re-think and expand the concept of agency, or in her words to delink it from the goals of progressive politics. Moving on, in The Politics of Piety, Mahmood provides an example of how religious women affirm their role in male-defined spaces by using religious tools. Through religion, women obtain a public role. The author describes the desires of these women and their motivation(s) for participating in Islamic movements. The scholar suggests that these women might be willing participants of what we perceive as submission and docility, for example by problematizing the practice of veiling, something which in Western eyes perfectly depicts women's condition of subalternity and sexual segregation. From the Western perspective, veiling as a symbol of submission is seen as a universal rule, no matter the country and socioreligious conditions involved. However, even if the veils worn might look the same, the meaning attached to them differs in every socioreligious context. Assuming that every veiled woman is wearing it for the same reason is reductive and useless. As Bautista explains reelaborating Mahmood:

> Veiling, rather, is a practice that is constitutive of a disposition of shyness. To veil oneself is a conscious act of self-cultivation in which the body is an instrument utilised towards piety. In other words, one's body is both the potential for as well as means through which forms of interiority (such as, but not limited to, shyness) is realised and cultivated. (Bautista 2008: 79)

The veil expresses the value of modesty and in this sense, it reflects the relationship between a norm and the body, making the materiality of the body a central point of an act. As Grosz explains, examining Bergson's view, Bergson did not understand freedom in terms of choice, alternatives available or consumption, but rather in terms of action connected to an embodied subject. Mahmood's

work reflects a disappointment with the existing concepts of desire, freedom and agency that do not consider the political context in which they are inscribed or the role of the body. To expand the question of freedom and return to Mahmood's idea that freedom resides in the capacity for action, it is worth mentioning Grosz' conceptualisation of freedom. The author associates the question of freedom to the condition of, or capacity for, action in life, delinking it from a "freedom-from" and revisualizing it in terms of a "freedom to". According to Grosz, a "freedom-from" is not sufficient as it:

> entails that once the subject has had restraints and inhibitions, the negative limitations, to freedom removed, a natural or given autonomy is somehow preserved. If external interference can be minimized, the subject can be (or rather becomes) itself, can be left to itself and as itself, can enact its given freedom. Freedom is attained through rights, laws, and rules that minimize negative interference rather than positive actions. (Grosz 2010: 141)

Grosz explains further by proceeding with her analysis of Bergson, who affirms that free acts are those which come exclusively from the subject and expresses everything about that subject: "they are integral to who or what the subject is" (Grosz, 2010: 144). Even in the most difficult and constrained situations, there must be a cohesion between the subject's act and the conditions that made it possible, but only after the act has been completed can we retrospectively establish what caused a certain decision. Freedom as a pre-given condition of a subject implies that the subject is always the same, but:

> Acts are free insofar as they express and resemble the subject, not insofar as the subject is always the same, an essence, an identity but insofar as the subject is transformed by and engaged through its acts, becomes through its acts [...]. Bergson's point is that free acts come from or even through us (it is not clear if it matters where the impetus of the act originates—what matters is how it is retroactively integrated into the subject's history and continuity). (Grosz 2010: 146)

In this sense, from a non-deterministic perspective, freedom is never a pre-given condition but can only be part of a process or act. Grosz states that according to this understanding, freedom is more the exception than the rule:

> Freedom pertains to the realm of actions, processes, and events that are not contained within, or predictable from, the present; it is that which emerges, surprises, and cannot be entirely anticipated in advance. It is not a state one is in or a quality that one has, but it resides in the activities one undertakes that transform oneself and (a part of) the world. It is not a property or right bestowed on, or removed from, individuals by others but a capacity or potentiality to act both in accordance with one's past as well as ''out of character,'' in a manner that surprises. Freedom is thus not primarily a capacity of mind but of body: it is linked to the body's capacity for movement, and thus its multiple possibilities of action.
>
> (Grosz 2010:152)

As Mahmood also believes, only by analysing the corporeal and bodily practice retrospectively can we derive autonomy from an act. In Grosz's words, freedom understood as the relationship that the subject might have with the material world, instead of a transcendent inherent quality of the subject, can expand the variety of acts available to us and therefore the expressions of our agency. Mahmood analyses the role of embodied behavior in the formation of the subject, stating that the experience of Muslim women, and in particular of the women of the pious movement she studies, is highly influenced by Islamic ethical practice. The author gives an example based on her experience during the observation of the pious movement. The relationship between these women and the norm exemplifies the relationship between a performative behavior and the inward disposition. In the case of the veil, instead of an innate will causing bodily behavior, it is action that shapes desire. In this sense, in the words of Mahmood: "action does not issue forth from natural feelings but creates them.

Furthermore, it is through repeated bodily acts that one trains one's memory, desire, and intellect to behave according to established standards of conduct" (Mahmood 2006: 53). But the act

of embodying these established standards follows an intention. Performativity becomes one of the factors that influences subject formation. The pious movement uses the body as a medium for fulfilling their ethical potential. Their expression of agency is strictly related to the body. If ethics is grounded in discursive practices, procedures and exercises, as Mahmood affirms in drawing from Foucault, then the relationship between the self and the norm creates the self through bodily practices. All of these practices have as their ultimate goal modifying or transforming the subject in order to fulfill their potentialities. [41]

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[41] End of the section drawn from my own publication: https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2785-3233/16039

3.5. Nomadic Subjectivity

We have now arrived at what is, for the undersigned, the most anticipated section of this thesis—the cornerstone of its theoretical framework and the reason behind its intricate construction: the exploration of the liberation of desire. As Goodchild states:

> Deleuze and Guattari's revolution of desire is to be conducted by nomads these are the people who occupy the smooth space of the social unconscious. Whenever there is insubordination, rioting, guerrilla warfare, or revolution then a nomadic mode of social existence is constituted (1988: 386 as cited in Goodchild, 1996:172)

Who are the nomads? According to Rosi Braidotti:

> As opposed to the images of both the migrant and the exile, I want to emphasize that of the nomad. The nomad does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, suc cessive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity. (Braidotti 1994:22)

Deleuze and Guattari identify them as "the social embodiment of the polymorphously perverse sexual unconscious" (Goodchild, 1996:172) But sexual in what way? And why perverse? Nomadic subjectivity for Braidotti emphasizes fluidity, multiplicity, and resistance to the static notion of identity: "The nomadic subject is a materially embodied and historically embedded "di-vidual" in that it is a bound instantiation of a common and ever-shifting matter Each singular self is an actualized and temporarily bound expression of the ongoing process of becoming." (2016:36) By sexual uncoscious they mean an unconscious made of spontaneous assemblages:

> "Nomadic thresholds are […] always demarcated in relation to other thresholds; they are not remarkable in themselves, but only become remarkable in an assemblage relating them to others. […] Power, in the war-machine, is defined by the number of relations that any

special body might have; the site of this power is dynamic and provisional, depending on

the maintenance of actual networks of exchange." (Goodchild, 1996:173)

It is polymorphouse because of its multi-layered quality, it moves *rhizomatically* and not following

an *arborescentl[42]* hierarchical *line of flight*, but: "The territory occupied by the nomads is

imperceptible because the nomad reterritorializes on deterritorialization itself: the earth

deterritorializes itself, like the ever-shifting of dunes in the desert (1988: 381 as cited in Goodchild

1996:173) " Arab Anglophone women's literature is minor literature, as we saw previously, according

to Dallel Sarnou (2014:68) their work is a rhizome. Rosi Braidotti in "Nomadism with a difference"

speaks of Deleuze's nomadic theory as a theory that includes multiple becomings including becoming

minority(1996:306) That is why I believe that if the *war machine* has to be conducted by nomads,

then arab anglophone women's literature's protagonists which are nomads have to conduct the war.

Minor literature is a type of literature invested with the flow of desire:

"In this respect, the weapons of the nomadic war-machine are material seeds of desire […]

all assemblages are assemblages of desire, the machinic conjunction of separate series of

expression and content that become indiscernible on the plane of consistency (1988: 69,

397, 531). (Goodchild, 2005:174)

I envisioned a connection between nomadic subjectivity and the affirmative politics of desire which

is deeply rooted in the interplay between identity, agency, and emotions in shaping lived experiences

and resisting dominant cultural and sociopolitical narratives. I see nomadic subjectivity and desire

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[42] "Another kind of line, functioning as a different type of process, is much more rigid, in fact "arborescent": it has a center, a root, and branches that form strong, hierarchical and ordered segments. This rigid line, "molar" in character rather than molecular, works through all those processes "we are all familiar with (but not always aware of) that organize our social world. Such processes include the mechanisms Foucault has described so forcefully: the organization of disciplinary societies in various locales ranging from the state to schools, to families, to work, to leisure spaces, and so on. What characterizes such organizational processes is both their production of social formations and the formation of subjects. These processes are accomplished by channeling and capturing desire into forms that give rise to the social organizations that sustain a particular society.10 Such molar processes also segment social space according to binary conceptions of subjectivity: man/woman, child/adult, white/black, and so on. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, society functions in terms of identity categories: "You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body?otherwise you're just depraved_You will be a subject, nailed down as one, . . . otherwise you're just a tramp" (Thousand 159)" (Crane, 2005:578)

as agents of change. Nomadic subjectivity, as conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari and then Rosi Braidotti, emphasizes fluidity, multiplicity, and resistance to static notions of identity. The feature of this theory I admire the most is its affirmative structure, with the words of Braidotti:

> In the complex landscape of poststructuralist philosophies of difference, Deleuze's thought strikes a uniquely positive note. His theory of nomadic subjectivity stresses the affirmative structure of the subject and therefore distances Deleuze from the more nihilistic or relativistic edge of contemporary philosophy. […] Gilles Deleuze re-inscribes the reflection on the politics of the subject within an aesthetic and ethical framework centered on affirmation, that is to say, on the affectivity and the positivity of the subject's desires.
> (Braidotti, 1996: 305)

This affirmative structure which as Braidotti states in "Posthuman Affirmative Politics" offers a multifaceted rendition of power as both restrictive or coercive (potestas) and empowering or productive (potential). aligns with my aim to challenge fixed representations of Arab women as passive and oppressed. Desire, understood not as lack but as a productive and affirmative force works within this framework by destabilizing binaries and catalyzing creative ways of being or rather becoming:

> The Deleuzian position shares the same commitment to overturning the dialectical model of intersubjectivity as the linguistic tradition of semiotics, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction, but takes a different road. It assumes the defamiliarization or relative deterritorialization of established values and habits of thought as a starting point to explore and experiment with alternative forms of subjectivity. (Braidotti, 2016:36)

Together, nomadic subjectivity and desire can counteract restrictive discourses on identity, allowing for affirmations of complexity, hybridity, and agency "from diasporic subjects "becoming-nomadic" marks the process of positive transformation of the pain of loss into the active production of multiple forms of belonging and complex allegiances." (Braidotti, 2016: 51) This process shows how subjectivity is actively constructed rather than passively assigned. Moreover, I consider affect as a

mediator of desire and politics. Affect theory — especially through the lens of Sara Ahmed— demonstrates how emotions are deeply political and contribute to the shaping of subjectivities. The affective experience (how individuals feel, respond, and connect) operates in tandem with desire to structure relationships and social bonds:

> I think we can consider the relationship between movement and attachment implicit in emotion. The word 'emotion' comes in the first instance from Latin, emovere, referring to 'to be moved, to be moved out'. So emotions are what move us. But emotions are also about attachments, […] Emotion may function as a 'contingent attachment' to the world (see Sartre 1943: 333, emphasis mine). The word 'contingency' has the same root in Latin as the word 'contact' (Latin: contingere: com-, tangere, to touch). Contingency is linked then to proximity, to getting close enough to both touch another and to be moved by another. (Ahmed, 2004: 11)

3.6. Desire, Affects and Affective Economies

By exploring how Arab women express their affective worlds and articulate their desire I foreground how emotions and bodily sensations drive their resistance, agency, and belonging. Together, Desire and Affect[43] work as Vehicles for Affirmative Politics o as teorica puts it:

> A key engagement between affect theory and literary studies is the characterization of affect theory as a critical response to post-structuralist emphasis on linguistic models of subjectivity. Rather than considering the body as peripheral to an understanding of consciousness, cognition, subjectivity, emotion, and society, affect theory makes the material and visceral central to it. Affect theory asks, "what bodies do—what they want, where they go, what they think, how they decide—and especially how bodies are impelled

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[43] In this thesis the conceptualisation of affects will adhere to Sara Ahmed's in The Cultural Politics of Emotion (2004), for more insights on this vast and fascinating topic see: Berlant, L. (2020). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press., Massumi, B. (2021). *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*. Duke University Press. Sedgwick, E. K. (2020). *Touching feeling: Affect, pedagogy, performativity*. Duke University Press. Cvetkovich, A. (2003). *Archive of feelings* (Vol. 2008). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

> by forces other than language and reason" (Schaefer, Evolution, 1, italic in original).
> Seeking to understand the forces of relation that create bodies (not only or primarily
> human) that enmesh and connect us to and within the world; theories of affect emphasize
> an embedded and embodied relationality. (Truran, 2022:27)

The affirmative politics of desire emphasizes creation over negation, focusing on the potential to transform systems rather than simply resist them. Desire and affect work together as dynamic forces that drive individuals and communities to envision alternatives to oppressive structures. In "An Affirmative Theory of Desire", Christa Crane (2003:563) argues for the liberation of desire, emphasizing its political significance. She asserts that desire underpins affect and enables agency by fostering meaningful, affective connections among people, including teachers and students. Viewing desire as a generative energy rather than a force of lack or danger transforms it into a productive and affirming force. Crane highlights the importance of addressing the complex interplay of emotions—such as passion, intensity, and becoming—particularly in teaching and learning moments, where affective relationships hold critical and political value. According to Deleuze and Guattari, what maintains nomadic subjects together, what gives them consistency are affects:

> What is exchanged in nomad bands? What gives the group their consistency? A band of
> nomads maintains consistency, as against fragmenting into a chaotic multiplicity, from the
> internal relations that take place between parts. […] The consistency of a band of nomads
> that defines its boundary is given by the affects that are exchanged with the anomalous
> individual, or the number of dimensions of the terms that exist in symbiosis. The affects
> exchanged within a nomadic war-machine are weapons - capacities for making war (1988:
> 394). (Goodchild, 1996:172-173)

As Christa Crane affirms: "desire drives bodies into affective states of resonance with other bodies" (2003:577) it is in the relation that desire and emotions acquire a political and affective meanings, as Sara Ahmed (2000) theorises in "Communities that feel: Intensities, Difference and Attachment" , emotions operate economically, circulating between signifiers in networks of difference and displacement. By exploring these affective economies, she demonstrates that emotions are active

forces that align individuals with communities, connecting bodily space to social space through the intensity of their attachments. Instead of viewing emotions solely as psychological states, we must examine how they function in specific and tangible ways to mediate the interplay between the psychic and the social, as well as between individual and collective experiences. As Goodchild tells it:

> One gains access to desire through encountering becomings expressed in other modes of existence; desire is produced when becomings are connected together. For Deleuze, there is a joy immanent in desire; but desire only exists in the relations of production that it creates. Desire produces itself, spreading by contagion; but this contagion is the real production of mutually affective and transformative social relations. To produce and know desire, therefore, is to express a politics of desire: the production of desire is inseparable from the creation of new modes of social existence." (Goodchild, 1996: 41)

Deleuze's concept of the "liberation of desire," influenced by Nietzschean and Spinozist thought, focuses on separating desire from destructive tendencies to foster a creative and affirmative existence. Rather than regressing to chaos, he envisions a culture of desire that coexists with traditional cultural structures. Desire, for Deleuze, is immanent—it arises from real, lived relationships and gains meaning through spontaneous, transformative interactions between diverse elements. This relational nature is not limited to sexuality or gender but extends across identities and contexts, creating connections through its fluid and "deterritorialized" nature. Deleuze and Guattari explore desire through codes, territories, and becomings, each representing modes of synthesis.

Their work resonates with thinkers like Elizabeth Grosz, who also examines inhuman forces as vital to understanding the dynamics of desire and seeing forces as a possibility for a: "re-articulation of subjectivity as an assembled singularity of forces. (Braidotti, 1996:305) In "(Inhuman) Forces: Power, Pleasure, and Desire", Elizabeth Grosz believes there is a fear to tackle forces because of its negative meaning associated to power and patriarchy, but as she says, identifying force with the masculine is already a way to humanise it (Grosz 2005:187) Grosz states: "Nietzsche may help

provide a way of understanding politics, subjectivity, and the social as the consequence of the play of the multiplicity of active forces that have no agency, or are all that agency consists in." She proceeds by making a long list of characteristics of these forces to Nietzche that I will briefly summarise by saying that in Nietzsche's view, force is always plural, with each force having its own specific characteristics and goals, yet they interact and affect each other. Force is never static—it is in constant "becoming," seeking expansion and intensification without a fixed goal.

It operates in terms of intensity, with differences in force generating differences in quality, such as active versus reactive. Force is inherently contestatory, leading to competition where forces struggle to overcome each other. Additionally, force creates connections and tensions, producing complex relations at different levels, contributing to the formation of dynamic systems or assemblages. (Grosz 2005:188) In this framework pleasure and desire are forces as well. Because they act as forces that produce change on the body at a visceral level. As the author affirms by referring to Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault explores how the body is both a site where forces of power are enacted and where power can be reversed but Foucault alway thinks in terms of body and opposition to power. Foucault views pleasure as a double-edged phenomenon—on the one hand, it integrates subjects into power systems, but on the other hand, it is also where resistance is born, utilizing bodily enjoyment as a strategy against repression. (Grosz, 2005: 188-190) Pleasure is something to attain in opposition to power. To Deleuze it does not work like that:

> Deleuzian desire, too, functions as a primarily mobile and mobilizing impetus, a force of connections: of those conjunctions and disjunctions that formprovisional ''entities'' and groupings, not somuch functioning ''against'' power as entwined in modes of stratification or territorialization and deterritorialization. Pleasure and desire, for both, are force, whether bodily (as in Foucault) or impersonal (for Deleuze), which can be mobilized in particular contexts (contexts that cannot be determined in advance). (Grosz, 2005:193)

As Christa Crane also believes in her interpretation of deleuzian desire a liberatory practice would recognize desire as a crucial force in shaping and reshaping culture and history. The organization and direction of desire play a vital role in producing and sustaining social structures:

> "Desire's production of affective resonances, Deleuze and Guattari term the line of flight, the "break line, crack line, rupture line" (200). But, what gets ruptured? Briefly put, social organization in our existence as human and social beings, we are always surrounded by lines that segment the spaces we inhabit. Some of these lines are affective, driven by desire, as I have sketched above. These lines are characterized by a multitude of directions, connections, and points of "origin," depending on the various ways bodies interact with each other" (2003:578)

Most importantly, her analysis highlights that no matter how rigid or self-contained a social system may seem—be it in a hospital, the military, an organized religion, or a classroom—it cannot fully suppress the surplus energy expressed through affect:

> As Deleuze and Guattari see it, in our existence as human and social beings, we are always surrounded by lines that segment the spaces we inhabit. Some of these lines are affective, driven by desire, as I have sketched above. These lines are characterized by a multitude of directions, connections, and points of "origin," depending on the various ways bodies interact with each other [...]Affect is powerful because it works incessantly and conjures up such strong sensations and connections. And, what makes affect function, what drives it, is desire. Deleuze and Guattari, who have done more than any other thinkers to understand affect, explain that desire drives bodies into affective states of resonance with other bodies; the examples of affective experiences above all bespeak of a joyous and pleasurable nature (though, certainly, affects are not always pleasurable), and what propels them is precisely desire. Desire is thus a capacity, or an expansiveness, that produces those affective connections and resonances I spoke of above. *Ibid.*

3.7. Affirmative Politics

By intertwining desire and affect with nomadic subjectivity, I propose a politics that celebrates diversity, embraces nonlinearity, and constructs meaningful alternatives to essentialist notions of identity and power. In this thesis, I want to bridge the personal and the collective by exploring the tension between the personal (the intimate, private, and embodied) and the collective (social, political, and cultural) experiences of Arab women. Nomadic subjectivity allows me to theorize subject formation without erasing individuality. Affect brings attention to the embodied and emotional dimensions of experience, while desire connects these experiences to broader political structures and possibilities for change. Drawing from Braidotti (2016:36) this Materialist vital ethics embraces Deleuze's concepts of univocity and the immanence of matter interprets events and subject formations as processes of differential becoming within a singular, affective, and embodied material reality. This framework emphasizes in subject formation processes, "assemblages", moreover:

> Affirmative politics is my answer to these challenges and contradictions. It indicates the process of transmuting negative passions into productive and sustainable praxis, which does not deny the reality of horrors, violence, and destruction of our times but proposes a different way of dealing with them. What is positive in the ethics of affirmation is the belief that nega tive affects can be transformed.This implies a dynamic view of all affects, even the traumas that freeze us in pain, horror, or mourning. The slightly depersonalizing effect of the negative or traumatic event involves a loss ofego boundaries, which is the source of both pain and potentially energetic reactions. Multilocality and multidirectional memory (Rothberg 2009) are the affirmative translation of this negative sense of loss. *Ibid.*

By placing these three concepts—nomadic subjectivity, affect, and affirmative politics—together, I want to establish a theoretical framework that explains how Arab women navigate and transform cultural constraints especially by using performativity as a tool of agency. This triad is essential for addressing the central themes of this work, particularly in challenging stereotypes, rethinking agency, and advancing a feminist, post-colonial critique of how desire and emotion function as tools of empowerment. The nomadic subject is ideal for engaging with the "war machine"

(a concept from Deleuze and Guattari signifying a force of resistance and creativity against rigid structures) because it is not bound by arboreal, hierarchical structures of identity or development.

Instead, its subjectivity is "rhizomatic"—nonlinear, multifaceted, and dynamic. This fluidity allows the nomadic subject to interact with and channel desire creatively and spontaneously. I want to highlight that affect—both the capacity to affect and to be affected—plays a central role in the nomadic subject's ability to engage with the world. Affect acts as an energetic force traversing bodies, mediating their interactions and connections. The nomadic subject's openness to being affected and affecting others enables them to resist fixed roles or identities, aligning them with a philosophy of multiplicity and becoming. Desire, in my thought process, is the generative energy that creates connections and fuels becoming. It is not about lack (as in psychoanalysis) but about abundance and creativity. The nomadic subject's rhizomatic nature makes it especially capable of channeling this desire effectively, fostering new connections and possibilities.

I have chosen affect because it represents movement, flow, and relationality—forces that traverse bodies and create change. Other scientific metaphors would not capture the same dynamic and embodied relational processes that affect theory offers. Desire, as a force that organizes and directs affect, complements this framework, aligning with my focus on the politics of creativity and resistance. The nomadic subject, being "deterritorialized," is not fixed in its identity or relations. It moves across boundaries and territories, constantly creating new possibilities and resisting static or oppressive systems. This makes it particularly suited to working with desire and affect, which also emphasize fluidity and connection. I aimed to articulate the idea that the nomadic subject, due to its rhizomatic, flexible subjectivity, is uniquely positioned to channel affect and desire.

These forces enable transformative, affirmative politics that resist and reconfigure rigid structures of power and identity. The nomadic subject thrives in fluid, non-hierarchical connections, and affect, as a force that traverses and shapes those connections, aligns seamlessly with this idea. The arguement that affect "conducts" or propels desire fits neatly with the rhizomatic and network-like nature of the

136

nomadic subject. I identify that affect and desire, working together, create not only connections but a generative force that resists oppressive structures.

This is an extension of theories by thinkers like Deleuze, Guattari, and Sara Ahmed with an emphasis on creativity and connection to favour a coherent, affirmative approach to desire—one that builds and transforms, rather than merely resists. Desire powers connection, connection manifests through affect, and affect animates the nomadic subject, enabling it to resist and reimagine power structures. My goal is making visible the forces that shape our experiences and identities, while offering new possibilities for living, thinking, and desiring to contribute to vital conversations in Arab Anglophone literature, feminist thought, and post-colonial theory. My ethical intention is to show political experiences of endurance:

> Affirmative ethics is not about the avoidance of pain, but rather about transcending the resignation and passivity that ensue from being hurt, lost, and dispossessed. One has to become ethical, as opposed to applying moral rules and protocols as a form of self-protection: one has to endure. Endurance is the Spinozist code word for this process. Endurance has a spatial side to do with the space of the body as an enfleshed field of actualization of passions or forces. It produces affectivity and joy, as in the capacity for being affected by these forces, to the point of pain or extreme pleasure. Endurance points to the struggle to sustain the pain without being annihilated by it and hence opens up to a temporal dimension, or duration in time. (Braidotti, 2016:52)

Part II. Analysis

Chapter 4. Power, Psychic Repression and Structures of Subjection

4.1. The Third World Muslimwoman

Chapter 4 explores how psychic repression and structures of subjection shape the subjectivities of the protagonists of the two novels under examination—*The Greater Freedom: Life as a Middle Eastern Woman Outside the Stereotypes* by Alya Mooro (2019) and *These Impossible Things* by Salma El-Wardany (2022)—highlighting how these forces are manifested in the texts and shape the subjective experiences of the characters. Focusing on Alya, Malak, Jenna, and Kees, the chapter examines how desire is repressed in the process of becoming intelligible Arab women within diaspora communities. Drawing on the concept of subjection as a form of internalized subordination, the chapter analyzes how external forces—such as the ideal of the "good Muslim girl," the imperative of virginity, the pressure to marry, the fear of Arab men, and the impossibility of intrafaith love—are internalized through psychic repression. These forces, while producing recognition and belonging, also limit agency. As Ramy Aly (2015) argues, becoming Arab in London involves learning to perform Arab womanhood through a complex process of double life and affective concealment. Virginity becomes a collective asset, marriage a form of social capital, and the female body a site of both visibility and discipline. Yet, in navigating two performance communities, these women also craft alternative narratives. This chapter is necessary to understand how repression operates affectively and psychically in the formation of subjectivity, and how these women negotiate and sometimes resist those terms of recognition. As discussed earlier, the works of Arab Anglophone writers frequently delve into themes of psychological and social alienation, exile, hybridity, and the search for an

authentic self-representation—often through autobiographical or semi-autobiographical forms. The authors examined in this thesis, Alya Mooro and Salma El-Wardany, continue this tradition, but from a consciously affirmative perspective. Mooro adopts the form of memoir, while El-Wardany turns to autofiction. Drawing from Bakhtin and Genette, Sarnou (2016:202) reminds us that narrative voice is not a neutral or secondary feature in literary production; rather, it plays a critical role in shaping how a text's ideological and affective dimensions unfold. Narrative perspectives range from the omniscient narrator, external to the story, to the unreliable narrator, embedded within it. This stylistic choice is deeply tied to issues of power, authority, and credibility—central concerns for writers negotiating complex diasporic identities. In Mooro's text, the use of a first-person narrator emphasizes the immediacy of experience and anchors the narrative in a subjective voice that invites intimacy and identification. In contrast, El-Wardany deploys a third-person omniscient narrator, allowing for a broader mapping of interior and social worlds, and the interweaving of multiple subjectivities. This difference in narrative strategy is not incidental; rather, it reflects the liminal nature of the texts themselves, as well as the condition of Arab diasporic womanhood they portray. The narrative voice becomes a site of liminality, where structural forms mirror psychic and cultural thresholds. The presence of multiple voices and shifting points of view within these texts highlights the polyphonic character of Arab Anglophone women's literature. It stages the diasporic experience as inherently multiple and contested—what Bakhtin terms "double-voicedness," (Bakhtin, 47 as cited in Sarnou, 2016:206) where characters and narrators do not merely reflect the author's intentions but articulate distinct, and at times conflicting, ideological positions. This polyphony allows for the representation of hybrid identities shaped by intersecting dynamics of power, culture, language, and gender. It captures the tensions between homeland and diaspora, Arabic and English, past and present—enabling characters to "answer back" not only to their authors but also to the cultural structures that seek to discipline them. In this sense, narrative form is not merely a technical or aesthetic choice, but an integral part of how these texts articulate psychic repression, negotiate subjection, and enact the possibility of resistance. In the opening of *The Greater Freedom: Life As A*

Middle Eastern Woman Outside the Stereotypes (2019), Alya Mooro recounts typing "Arab woman" into Google images and seeing only niqabs, hijabs, and belly dancers staring back at her. This moment of digital alienation—the inability to see oneself reflected in mainstream representations—sparks in her a desire to reclaim and rewrite Arab womanhood on her own terms. Mooro's reaction is not passive: she writes, "I felt my blood boil," a visceral affect that Sara Ahmed (2004) would call a feminist emotion. Anger, in Ahmed's view, is "a starting point": it "pricks the skin," shaking subjects into movement and new ways of inhabiting the world (Ahmed, 2004:175). Mooro's memoir is born of this anger, an anger she fully embraces unlike her predecessor who sometimes kept an apologetic tone (Al Maleh, 2007:5) and its accompanying desire: not merely the desire to resist stereotype, but to affirm a narrative that had been denied. As (Al Maleh, 2009:1) and Nouri Ghana(2013:3) state, Arab Anglophone women's literature has as one of its main goals to challenge stereotypes. Her complaint is not that representations are incorrect, but that they are monolithic: "there are many Arab women – just like me – who seem to be invisible" (Mooro, 2019:2). Her invisibility is not only due to Orientalist depictions of veiled women and belly dancers, but also to a double erasure—from both dominant Western narratives and internal communal expectations. "If the status of Arabs within the American context is quite ambiguous, in Britain they were completely invisible until recently." (Ouhiba, 2017:10) As Nawel Meriem Ouhiba (2017) states in her PhD dissertation *Resistance and Transculltural Dialogue in the Fiction of Anglophone Arab Women Wriiters: Towards Diasporic Arab-American and Arab-British Poetics of Identities:*

> Such uncertainties are largely created out of existing in-between cultures and of neither fully identifying with one or the other. Accordingly, the Arab diasporic identity subject's complex positioning: of the constant slippages from one temporal and spatial reference to another; of being dislocated and relocated across space, time, and culture; of racial ambiguity, which renders them invisible at one moment and visible at another. (Ouhiba, 2017:8)

Among images of belly dancers[44] and veiled women, author Alya Mooro was unable to see herself, confirming that Arabness cannot be reduced to the *muslimwoman* stereotype. The affective reaction of her boiling blood moved her to write her memoir. As we already mentioned, desire is a creative force and in "Desire, Duras and Melancholia" Gorton affirms that:

> Desire is embodied in the characters and expressed in various ways: as something that can release the past, as something that is contained in the past, as something that produces connections and forges new bonds and as something that is destructive and annihilating. Desire is about the potential to cause all these things and is foremost an unsettling affect it is characterized by its movement, its intensity and its ability to cause change. (Gorton, 2008:23)

In this case, desire is expressed by anger in such a way that it pushes Alya to write against stereotype and in particular against a reductive reading of the *muslimwoman* or as we explained earlier "The Third World-*muslimwoman"* which challenges the essentialist, monolithic representation of *Arabness*. As an Arab woman, Mooro felt the moral duty to take part in this conversation especially being born in Egypt and raised between Cairo and London:

> I was born in Egypt to Egyptian parents. We moved to London when I was eight years old and I've lived here ever since, minus one year back in Cairo when I was thirteen, and countless trips back and forth in between. I'm a hybrid. I never really thought about it growing up, but I feel it now. I am British, but I'm also Egyptian. I am both and consequently neither. (Mooro, 2019:2)

This layered invisibility situates Mooro within what Nawel Meriem Ouhiba calls the "Arab diasporic identity subject," one caught in slippages across cultural, spatial, and racial borders, "rendered

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[44] As Ramy Aly states in Becoming Arab in London: Performativity and the Undoing of Identity, belly dancing as depicted by Western media has nothing to do with the traditional village form of this dancing: The belly dancer is one of the principal symbols of Arabic culture in London; she is the trope for erotic Oriental or Arab sexuality and is used unabashedly for cultural and commercial capital at parties and restaurants around the city. Almost all the belly dancers who perform at Arabic parties and Middle Eastern restaurants in London are non-Arabs. (2015:147) Moreover, the author explains: "The traditional village form of raqs baladi (folk dance) is a solo improvisation performed to family and friends. In the everyday contexts where dance takes place, it almost never involves the revealing outfit. Instead dancers are fully clothed sometimes with a scarf wrapped around the waist to emphasise the movements of the hips." (Ibid.148)

invisible at one moment and visible at another" (Ouhiba, 2017:8). Mooro is not veiled, but is still seen as Muslim; she is Egyptian but raised in London; she is both, and neither: "I am British, but I'm also Egyptian. I am both and consequently neither" (Mooro, 2019:2). It is this **third space**, theorised by Bhabha as a space of in-between-ness and ambivalence, that Mooro occupies and claims as her site of enunciation. Writing this memoir allows her to affirm her third space of enunciation[45]:

> To subvert colonial domination, Bhabha (1994) proposes the in-between space of the cultural encounter of the colonizer and colonized which he calls the third space of cultural enunciation. This space primarily undermines "the binary thought and essentialist identities produced by colonial knowledge" (p. 276). It deconstructs the binary of the self and the other, the colonizer and the colonized, or the East and the West. Moreover, it is the space of ambiguity, uncertainty and the renunciation of colonial authority and deconstructs the authentic and essentialist oppositional polarities (Bhabha, 1990). (Bhandari, N. B. 2022:171)

and embark on a process of de-subjectification as Deleuze and Guattari would name it in *A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizofrenia* (1987:270) Her connection to Arab Anglophone women's literature pioneers can be found in this desire to articulate her own subjectivity and minor discourse, challenging the narrative that was spread after 9/11 on the so called Arab minority. (Mooro, 2019:3) As we mentioned previously, the works of Anglophone Arab writers often delve into themes of psychological and social alienation, the experience of exile, and hybridity, while also pursuing an authentic representation of the self, frequently through autobiographical narratives. Political topics are also central, as these authors seek to convey their viewpoints on critical issues impacting their homelands. As the author states: "figuring out who you are, what you want, where you belong and what it is you truly believe can be complicated by the juxtaposition and by your role as 'other'

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[45] For more information on Third Space Theory see *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha, H. 1994:37-38)

(2019:3) the process of mimicry [46] and assimilation she went through while becoming Arab in London is the very reason why she felt the need to write this book and reclaim her narrative. The process of othering she feels she is undergoing is not enacted exclusively by white people, she feels observed and scrutinised by her own people as well, experiencing a dual objectification. Wherever she turns to, people are always trying to define her in their own terms, especially when it comes to her bodily autonomy Her motivation to write, she reveals, came not only from misrecognition, but from the regulation of desire—particularly sexual desire. "Sex is ultimately what made me want to write this book," she admits. Despite being sexually active, her internalised discomfort and shame revealed to her how deeply Arab cultural scripts around honour and virginity shaped her selfhood. "Women hold the burden of a family's honour, and that honour lies between their legs" (Mooro, 2019:4). This psychic repression of desire is precisely what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe as the mechanism of subjectification in capitalist, patriarchal societies. Mooro resists this by becoming a desiring subject—one who writes, speaks, and performs outside the imposed limits of the "good Arab girl."

As we were able to see in the section on the gendered socialisation of the subject, women learn from the very beginning of their life how to embody the "good Arab girl" a result of the psychic repression of desire through discourses of relational desire: 'There are emotions that only exist for me in Arabic. Emotions relating to responsibility, honoring my family, and representing the country of my parents, of my ancestors." (Mooro, 2019:4) Her main goal will be to find her voice and write her own story in an affirmative perspective: "I've always believed that if you don't like the story, you should write your own." (Mooro, 2019:6) Alya follows French Feminism in the attempt at inscribing herself in the symbolic order to deconstruct and rewrite it. Through her narrative, Mooro destabilises the

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[46] In *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*, scholar Pramod K. Nayar writes: "In his concept of mimicry Bhabha further analyses the fractured nature of the colonial condition. Colonial power requires that the natives adopt and internalize the forms and habits of the colonial master: the native should mimic the master. The entire colonial mission is to transform the native into 'one like us' — a copy of the colonizer. For Bhabha the mimicry is a defence, fraught with the resistance of the native. The native is in a position to return the gaze of the colonial master, since he is now camouflaged. A reversal has been achieved through the mimicry of the colonizer by the colonized. Mimicry is now active resistance: it achieves something other than the purpose intended by the colonizer. On the one hand the colonial power tries to recast the native as one of themselves, and on the other tries to remember and reiterate the irreducible difference of the Other. Mimicry thus produces a subject who reflects a distorted image of the colonial thmaster." (2008:51)

construction of the "Third World Muslimwoman" as critiqued by Mohanty (1988), not by completely disavowing her cultural heritage, but by affirming a hybrid, complex, and evolving identity. This reclamation is not a rupture, but a reweaving: she acknowledges her spiritual and emotional ties to Arabness—"there are emotions that only exist for me in Arabic"—but refuses to be reduced to cultural scripts that negate her agency. Her memoir thus performs what Gorton calls an "unsettling affect": desire as an embodied force that releases the past, forges new bonds, and catalyzes transformation (Gorton, 2008:23). Mooro's choice to write, to reclaim the narrative, to inscribe herself in language, echoes the project of écriture féminine: writing the female self into the symbolic order not merely as lack or complement to man, but as a speaking, desiring subject (Dallery, 1989:54). This is not an act of resistance alone—it is one of affirmative politics. In Ahmed's terms, it is not just about "being against" but about "creating new ways of being" through affective disobedience. Mooro's memoir becomes a site of de-subjectification and becoming. It moves beyond critique toward creative worlding, reminding us that feminist desire does not only undo—it does. It writes. It rewrites. It insists.

4.2. Diasporic Virginities: Fuck Love, I wanted Sex!

Alya Mooro recounts the disorienting, painful experience of losing her virginity as a teenager—an event marked by confusion and emotional solitude. "In the same way that I can't remember my first kiss, I can't really remember the first time I had sex either; only that it happened" (Mooro, 2019:72). Her narrative illustrates the psychic repression of desire produced by what she calls "the invisible jury": the internalized voices of family, culture, and tradition that teach young Arab women that sex is taboo and honor lies between their legs. Growing up in London, Alya was caught between the hypersexualized codes of Western girlhood and the shame-based sexual morality of her Arab heritage. "To be essentially devoid of sexual desire, to refrain from sexual activity, sexual jokes and sexual

clothing," she writes, "are all requirements enforced on Middle Eastern women" (2019:73). This dual positioning renders Alya a subject in crisis—unable to identify with either world and constantly judged by both. Without adequate sex education or a supportive community, her first experience with sex becomes traumatic rather than empowering. After needing the morning-after pill, she finds herself unable to confide in her mother: "I remember wishing then that I could have just spoken to my mom… but it just wasn't a conversation I could even begin to have with her" (2019:80). Her feelings of guilt are exacerbated by the cultural silence surrounding sex and the heavy burden of reputation. Eventually, when she and her mother finally speak, the message she receives is clear: "Don't have sex until you're married or he'll think you're a whore and never love you" (2019:82). As she matures, Alya continues to battle the internalized idea that sex must always be tied to shame. Her twenties are marked by what she calls a "self-cock-block," a paralysis of desire.[47] "I have literally cried because I was so desperate to have sex and yet was unable to act on it, seemingly paralysed by the conflict raging inside me" (2019:85). The psychosexual repression she describes mirrors what Joseph Massad (1999:74) theorizes as petrification—a state in which desire is frozen by cultural guilt. Alya's emotional impasse is emblematic of the immigrant subject torn between divergent moral orders. This double bind is not just individual but structural. As Amer et al. note in "Diasporic virginities: Social representations of virginity and identity formation amongst British Arab Muslim women" premarital virginity is treated as a marker of cultural loyalty, especially for second-generation Arab women. Virginity becomes a performance of belonging: a "battle between the Arab virgin and the Americanized whore" (2015:6). Alya's memoir confronts this dichotomy by refusing to choose a side. Instead, she claims her own right to pleasure: "Fuck love. I wanted sex. And I was going to damn well make sure I got over the shame so I could get some" (2019:94). Finally, Alya recalls how she was able to deconstruct the sacrality of sex and intimacy in her first one night stand, placing the focus on pleasure. I find this attitude in line with what Adrienne Maree Brown advocates for in

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[47] With the words of the author "a cockblock is slang for an action intentional or not that prevents someone from having sex."

Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good (2019) [48], an affirmative politics of desire, a moment of liberation of desire, Through this personal transformation, Alya embodies what Adrienne Maree Brown calls pleasure activism. For Brown, "pleasure is a measure of freedom" (Brown, 2019:5) as Alya confirms: "Having respect for yourself and your body doesn't mean refraining from having sex. It means being attuned to your wants and needs and acting on them with consciousness, with enthusiastic enjoyment and without shame." (2019:100) Alya's journey from paralysis to affirmation offers a powerful framework for understanding how shame, desire, and subjectivity interlace in diasporic Arab women's narratives. Her experience is not simply a sexual coming-of-age but an act of rewriting the symbolic order—an *écriture feminine*, a *parler femme* that inscribes the self in terms of pleasure, not punishment.

4.3. Intrafaith marriage and the Arab man

The most important long-term relationship Alya narrates is the one with Courtney, a black man. Arab women are supposed to marry into the race and the faith. People would not take their relationship seriously as they knew she dated him but could never actually marry him to the point that when she talked about him to her mom, she said, "You know he's black, right? (Mooro, 2019:101) Courtney was in the hip hop music scene in London, as a huge fan of hip hop Alya met him there, it was in that scene that she started to find herself: "that I began to meet and interact with different people from different walks of life, aspiring to and aiming for different things, far removed from the private school, the Middle Eastern bubbles." (2019:102) However, Alya was very aware of the fact that in Arab

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[48] In the introduction to the book Brown states the following: "recognize that pleasure is a measure of freedom; notice what makes you feel good and what you are curious about; learn ways you can increase the amount of feeling-good time in your life, to have abundant pleasure; decrease any internal or projected shame or scarcity thinking around the pursuit of pleasure, quieting any voices of trauma that keep you from your full sacred sensual life; create more room for joy, wholeness, and aliveness (and less room for oppression, repression, self-denial and unnecessary suffering) in your life; identify strategies beyond denial or repression for navigating pleasure in relationship to others; and begin to understand the liberation possible when we collectively orient around pleasure and longing. Bonus: realize you are a pleasure activist!" (2019:2-3)

culture, women in the name of their collective responsibility ((Aly, 2015: 87) have to marry an Arab man, and intrafaith relationships, as we will see later, are not allowed. This Arab man has to be a breadwinner and provider and come from a good family. Courtney being black was a problem because of the racism that still characterizes part of the Arab community, as Alya states, talking about the people in her life hoping they would break up because he was black:

> There were many things I subsequently learned about how common racism is in the Arab world. I learned that many Arab countries had played a big role in the slave trade and in some ways still do. I learned that not just racism but also colorism, they believe that the lighter just skin tone the better, was very real and deeply entrenched. (2019:105)

For this reason, Alya never took him to Egypt with her, in fear of what the *bawab* (home guardian) would think, her mother would say "Not only are you not married, but he's black." (2019:106) Cohabitation is not allowed out of wedlock , moreover intrafaith marriages are not considered valid and children would not be considered legitimate in Arab countries:

> The conversion is often just a formality so the couple can obtain a marriage certificate, but to change your religion for someone else can be a big ask. Without a marriage certificate in countries like Egypt, however, you can't do much. It is illegal to live with someone of the opposite sex if you're not married. You can't really have children out of wedlock and there is no alternative to marriage. (2019:101)

For this reason Alya believes that Arab women in the diaspora have a very complicated checklist when it comes to finding a partner, as we observed earlier, the choices she make affect her whole family as Arab women in the diaspora preserve family honour. Even though Alya will deconstruct this narrow vision, she will eventually try to date an Arab man to explore the ease and comfort of being with someone she could introduce to her parents and family:

> I realise I liked him before I even saw him. Somehow I had bought into all the things I was supposed to want or have and I surprised myself in doing so. Minutes into her first drink, I felt at home. I didn't need to explain anything, he just knew. […] He'd break into Arabic or tell a joke. Pausing to ask if I was able to follow, he'd called me *Habibti,* which means my

love in Arabic and all sorts of other things that I had never cared about before. […] It was

definitely how at home he made me feel. All the things I didn't need to explain or even

think about because he just got it. (2019:112-13)

And then, she was ghosted. Alya knew as she will explain later that the fear of commitment due to the pressure of marrying is what makes many Arab men in the diaspora escape and disappear. Alya states that "there is a particular art to making a life – one you enjoy living, that you're living on purpose – whether that's alone or with somebody else, and whether that potential someone else shares your culture or not." (2019:16) Alya already knew, but confirmed to herself through experience that what she had learnt to be the only way you could imagine your life was not eventually the only way. Through Courtney she dove into her passion for hip hop where she found purpose. For structural reasons, namely being frequently displaced by her family, Alya was never an overachiever at school: "Between getting bullet the tension that was ongoing in the house. Moving back and forth between Cairo in London. […] excelling academically was pretty much the least of my priorities." (2019:136) Her parents, were not very open to the idea of letting her work, in Arab societies, men are the providers: "In Arab culture, having a career is regarded as a low priority for women. If I'm hard pressed, I can think of perhaps two Middle Eastern women in my circle who would be financially independent without the support of a father or husband." (2019:137) So between not being allowed to have a job and not having real examples of career oriented women in her family the first opportunity that she had to learn how to prioritise passion in her life was when she met Courtney:

"Dating Courtney opened up a portal that led into a whole new world, one in which people

my age, women especially, knew what they wanted to do with their lives. The people I was

meeting threw him off and very driven and extremely hard working." (2019:141)

 Through affect, following her desire, along with her love for Courtney and her unstoppable will to become and disclose the world she created her particular art to make a life, an affirmative politics of desire, again:

"Working isn't just about money, it is also about contributing to something more substantial than the family income. It is about self worth. It's not that there's anything wrong with being fulfilled by your family, but I can't deny it's wonderful to have a choice and to have something you do for yourself. For me and many of the Middle Western women I spoke to, seeing our moms not working actually encouraged us to strive harder, to make a different sort of life for ourselves. (2019:144)

Moreover: "My argument is not about choosing work over family or marriage over independence. It is about the importance of autonomy, of having room to dream of choice, real choice, not just a route you take when you think there is no alternative" (2019:148)

4.3.1 Eid Sex in Spite of the Tribe

Since the age of seven, Jenna, Malak, and Kees have been inseparable best friends. In the opening of *These Impossible Things*, now college students, the three young British Muslim women sit together beneath a campus tree. Jenna, still a virgin, engages in a conversation about sex and romance with Malak and Kees. They are soon joined by Malak's boyfriend, Jacob, and Kees's boyfriend, Harry. While Jenna expresses her fondness for Jacob and Harry, she explains her decision to avoid dating white, non-Muslim men. She is unwilling to keep a relationship secret from her family, as Malak and Kees have chosen to do:

> "Do you think Eid sex is a thing? Like birthday sex, but just the Muslim equivalent?" […]
> For example, what do you and Jacob do on Eid day? It's a day of celebration and he's always really involved." Before Malak can answer, Kees interrupts again, snorting with laughter. "Yeah, and by celebration they mean go to the mosque, pray, and eat food with your family, not gag on the end of your boyfriend's dick." […] "Malak turns to Jenna, who's waiting patiently for her answer. "Babe, you haven't even had sex yet. Eid isn't for ages and, not that I like to point out the obvious, you're not even with anyone. Unless there's something you want to tell us?" […] "Jenna sits up in indignation. "Ha! You see, it

149

is a thing." Malak sighs. "He's not even Muslim, Jenna." "And you're a virgin," says Jacob, frowning in confusion. "Yes, thank you both for pointing out the obvious," replies Jenna, elaborately gesturing with her hands for what, Malak imagines, is dramatic effect." (El Wardany, 2022:1)

From the opening scene we can witness how the three friends create a redefinition of a religious practice in a secular perspective. An oppennes in talking about sexuality that does not make the protagonists look like pious sterotypical *muslimwomen* at all. In Salma El Wardany's book *These Impossible Things*, Jenna, one of the main characters opens the discussion by asking if her friends think that *Eid sex* is a thing. There is something witty, fun and controversial (but in an interesting, positive and constructive way) in this expression. The author takes such a serious, religious term, event, historical tradition and associates it with something that is so taboo in Islamic practice such as sex. *Eid* is a collective experience, sex is considered private.

The implication of this expression are so many: first of all, pre-marital sex is forbidden in Islamic practice, let alone with a non-Muslim man. The expression could be considered blasphemous. This expression is so relevant in terms of agency, but also in terms of integrating different cultures together and challenging taboos.

By introducing a topic as bold as "Eid sex," Jenna demonstrates a form of agency that asserts her right to question, joke about, and engage with cultural and religious traditions on her own terms. Talking about taboo subjects like sex, especially in the context of a sacred celebration like Eid, disrupts the cultural expectation of silence and modesty, empowering women to confront these norms. Eid is a public, collective celebration deeply embedded in Islamic tradition, while sex is viewed as private, even more so in cultures shaped by Islamic values. By combining these two spheres Jenna challenges the binary between what is public and sacred versus what is private and forbidden, creating a space where these boundaries blur. This forces a conversation about who gets to decide the rules governing women's bodies, desires, and behaviors—particularly in diasporic contexts where young women may feel torn between inherited values and personal autonomy. The phrase acts as a

microcosm of the broader negotiation of identity and values faced by second-generation Arab or Muslim women.

Premarital sex, especially with a non-Muslim partner, is not just taboo but considered sinful in Islamic practice. In the framework of psychic repression this is a redefinition of the symbolic order. Jenna shows how she constructs her own *third space of enunciation*, she affirms her own way of negotiating her identity. By voicing what is often left unsaid, the expression opens up space for dialogue about topics that are otherwise silenced, such as sexual agency, desire, and the complexities of faith in the modern world. By inserting sex into a sacred event like Eid, the phrase situates women's sexuality as something to be discussed and celebrated, not hidden or shamed. For second-generation Muslim women like Jenna, the phrase reflects the tensions and reconciliations that come with living at the intersection of multiple identities. It is not just about challenging Islamic taboos but also about creating a hybrid cultural identity where sacred traditions and modern experiences coexist, even if they seem contradictory. This integration is an act of resistance against both cultural essentialism (which dictates how "authentic" Muslims should behave) and Western stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed or voiceless.

The expression "Eid sex" is powerful because it encapsulates a rebellion against silence and shame while also reflecting the nuanced ways second-generation Muslim women negotiate faith, culture, and personal freedom. A decolonial approach would resist framing the phrase as merely provocative or transgressive within a Western lens. Instead, it would situate the discussion in a way that respects and reimagines Muslim women's relationships with faith, culture, and their bodies. In this sense we witness an affirmative reading and an affirmative politics of desire in the framework of spirituality.

Historically, colonial narratives have portrayed Muslim women as oppressed, hypersexualized, or devoid of agency, often using these stereotypes to justify colonial domination. In Eid sex, Salma El-Wardany reclaims this narrative by showing Muslim women discussing sexuality on their own terms. For Jenna, her faith and her sexuality coexist, and her humor about them is a way

of navigating and integrating both dimensions of her identity. She's not rejecting Islam but creating space for her personal experiences within it.

> "Have we ever had it, Keesy?" Harry asks, looking at her. "It's not a thing, Harry," sighs Kees. "Plus, when have I ever even seen you on Eid? I'm always captive to the human samosa-making chain my mum insists on every year." "Shall we make it a thing this year?" he asks. "I'd like to direct your attention back to the samosas, Harry." "Well, I could come and help make them. Your mum would love me," he replies with a grin. They all laugh and he looks slightly hurt before muttering that he'd like to try. " (El Wardany, 2022:3)

This passage is also very important because it highlights that Harry and Kees cannot see each other on Eid. Kees's parents have no idea that Harry exists because their relationship is an intrafaith one that must remain hidden.[49] At the same time, the passage hints that they are both sexually active, something implied through their shared laughter. However, they are fully aware that Kees's mother would never accept seeing Harry—a white, non-Muslim man—either on her wedding day or during Eid, both of which are deeply significant religious and cultural occasions. As Siham Yahya found out and wrote in *The Right to Love in Spite of The Tribe: The Interaction between Culture, Religion and Social Pressure, on Interfaith and cross-cultural Dating and Marriage*:

> "While interfaith and cross-cultural marriages continue to rise, heterogamous couples still facediscrimination as a result of their relationship (e.g., ostracism, rejection from family). Thus, a significant amount of change is needed in order for heterogamous couples to be treated as equally as homogamous couples. Unlike other relationships, interfaith and cross-cultural relationships are not only affected by the authorities overruling their right to choose their life partner, but most cultures generally tend to disdain the notion of interfaith and

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[49] As Siham Yahya informs us in his PhD dissertation "The Right to Love in Spite of The Tribe: The Interaction between Culture, Religion and Social Pressure, on Interfaith and cross-cultural Dating and Marriage" the religious rule on Interfaith marriage in Islam is the following: In Islam the religious rules towards men and women differ. Under the Shari'ah and all modern Islamic laws, both for Sunni and Shi'ah, a marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man totally null and void—it is not recognized as a marriage at all, despite whatever valid solemnization may have taken place regarding it within a non-Muslim country. The man would have had to convert to Islam at the time of the contract if it were to be valid under Islamic Law […] For a man however, the rules are different. He may enter into a marriage with a non-Muslimwoman, provided she is a Christian or a Jew, or, according to the Shi'ahs, a Magi (fire-worshiper) (Nasir, 2009 as cited in Yahya, 2014:55-56)

cross-cultural relationships (Hollingshead, 1950; Harris & Kalbfleisch, 2000; Leeman, 2009; Cila & Lalonde, 2013; Marshall & Markstorm-Adams, 1995; Brown, McNatt & Cooper, 2003; Joyner & Koa, 2005). Due to the social and religious barriers that heterogamous couples may face, they may consequently be more prone to emotional and psychological distress. For example, a study by Gaines and Brennan (2001) found that heterogamous couples are more likely to break up as compared to homogamous couples. As a result of the increased amount of social pressures that heterogamous couples face, a systematic shift towards a more tolerant society and approach towards interfaith and crosscultural married couples is needed." (Yahya, 2014:25)

The following passage serves to highlight the importance of their bond, their close connection, and how they all must navigate the complexities of being Muslim women in England. This quote provides a profound look into Jenna's role in creating and sustaining an emotional bond between herself and her two closest friends, Malak and Kees, through the lens of Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*. Ahmed's framework emphasizes that emotions are not simply personal experiences; they are deeply relational and tied to cultural and social contexts, shaping and being shaped by the structures around us. Diasporic subjects are often faced with dual expectations: to maintain ties to their cultural and familial heritage while also adapting to the norms and pressures of their current environment. Jenna, Malak, and Kees find in their friendship a refuge and a safe emotional space that allows them to navigate these challenges collectively rather than in isolation.

Ahmed's argument that emotions mediate the boundaries between self and other becomes evident here, as the girls' close-knit group reflects their efforts to bridge these boundaries together. This insistence on emotional interdependence can also challenge the cultural prioritization of familial over platonic bonds, affirming instead the significance of friendship and mutual care. Through the lens of Ahmed's cultural politics of emotions, it becomes clear that feelings are not merely reflective but productive, actively constituting social and cultural relationships. This highlights the

transformative power of emotional bonds, especially in the diasporic and gendered realities experienced by the three friends:

> "Hey!" laughs Jacob. […] "You're two of the best men I know—my favorite, in fact—but you're still not Muslim and you're still white, and no matter how great you are, it won't make you less white and more Muslim, and I see the way it splits the four of you in half. [....] You love in secrets and whispers and in made-up university trips just so Kees and Malak can spend a weekend with your family. […] I won't condemn myself to fall in love with someone I can never be with. My mum would kill me if I brought home a non-Muslim […] The silence lasts a minute before Malak quizzes, "But your mum wasn't Muslim when […]your dad brought her home, surely she'd understand better than most?" Jenna rolls her eyes and shrugs. "Osmosis, babe." (2022:9)

Here we can see the layered tensions of intrafaith relationships, particularly for second-generation Muslim women navigating love, familial expectations, and their own sense of identity. By closely reading this text, we can uncover the nuanced challenges faced by Jenna, Malak, and their non-Muslim partners as they attempt to reconcile love with religious and cultural imperatives. Jenna's words, "you're still not Muslim and you're still white," highlight how immutable identity markers—faith and ethnicity—shape relationships, regardless of love or individual qualities. Jenna's acknowledgment of Jacob and Harry as "the best of men" suggests that their worth as individuals is not questioned. However, her blunt reminder underscores that in her world, love alone does not erase these differences. This tension reflects the impossibility of these relationships not because of any lack of affection or compatibility, but because they are rendered socially and culturally untenable. Jenna's reflection on secrecy ("you love in secrets and whispers") emphasizes the dissonance between the open, free love they experience privately and the hidden, compartmentalized existence they maintain in public. The image of "made-up university trips" encapsulates the mental and emotional labor involved in sustaining relationships that must remain hidden. Jenna's decision to resist the possibility of falling in love with a non-Muslim partner stems from her desire to be true both to herself and her

154

familial expectations. Her declaration that her "mum would kill [her]" if she brought home a non-Muslim reflects the weight of family and community expectations.

Yet, this is not simply Jenna bowing to pressure—her resolve represents a conscious choice to avoid emotional pain and cultural alienation for both herself and her family. Interestingly, Jenna's use of "condemn myself" suggests a perception of emotional and social entrapment that would result from pursuing a relationship doomed to fail in the eyes of her family and community. By deciding not to engage, Jenna is asserting her agency, navigating the intersection of her love life and religious fidelity through pragmatic self-preservation. Malak's question about Jenna's mother—who, as implied, converted to Islam later in life—is a poignant counterpoint, questioning whether love across faiths is inherently impossible. However, Jenna's flippant response ("osmosis, babe") reveals both the limits of individual experience in shaping collective cultural attitudes and the assimilation of religious and cultural norms over time. Jenna's mother's past acceptance of religious difference no longer applies in their contemporary reality. This points to how assimilation into the Muslim diasporic community reinforces traditional boundaries even within contexts that may seem more progressive or flexible. This passage indirectly reveals the gendered double standard in how intrafaith relationships are perceived.

While the text does not focus on male experiences, it is significant that it centers on women—Malak and Jenna—as carriers of their family's cultural and religious expectations. The phrase "my mum would kill me" illustrates the acute policing of daughters' romantic lives, a recurrent theme in many diasporic contexts. The boys' silence and physical actions ("their hands reaching to fill the spaces words can't") represent an acknowledgment of these barriers. Despite their love and involvement in the lives of Jenna and Malak, their inability to challenge these cultural expectations reinforces the societal structures that center women as negotiators of familial and religious fidelity. Jenna's decision to avoid falling in love with a non-Muslim partner highlights an active and practical form of agency. She is not passive or powerless in the face of cultural constraints; instead, she chooses to align her personal desires with her sense of familial and cultural belonging. This is agency within

structure: Jenna exercises her will, but her choices are shaped by the constraints of her religious and familial responsibilities. That night, Jacob will break up with Malak.

4.3.2 The Invisible Jury

Alya started to feel the intrusive scrutinizing gaze of the invisible jury and of the vocabulary associated with the control such as for example:

> The word '3aib', which starts with a guttural sound present in much of the Arabic language (and is almost impossible to say, let alone spell out, if you're not Arab), can be pronounced sort of like 'ahhyb'. It became a familiar word in my vocabulary; a catch-all term used to describe behaviour that is 'shameful' and frowned upon by society. It's often used interchangeably with 'haram', which means 'forbidden'. It's a real, almost tangible thing, the judgement, and it lays thickest at the feet of women. (Mooro, 2019: 42)

In general, Alya started to become very familiar with the language of prohibition employed by the invisible jury that include what I like to call the "3H complex": haram, hshouma, hudud.[50] Namely whatever is forbidden, shameful and limits that cannot be trespassed which Fatima Mernissi talked extensively of in her *Dreams of Trespass.* Mernissi states it in 1982 in her article "Virginity and Patriarchy", men's honour resides between female legs and Alya confirms it when she writes: "it's a heavy burden I am well familiar with, and one that is placed on Middle Eastern women everywhere: to be a 'lady' and ultimately the guardian of a family's honour; a well-raised, respectable, 'good' Arab girl." (2019:43) what Ramy Aly describes as the *misaal* [*Mithaal* – example/ role model] (Aly, 2015:95). Furthermore Alya makes reference to Rawan Ibrahim and how he explains that "Family members have a collective responsibility for protecting the unity and honour of the family" (2019:43)

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[50] I identify the "3H Complex" as a system of control born and enacted in Islamic culture that regulates the conduct of women. *Hshouma* in Arabic means shame, *Haram* is the forbidden and *Hudud* are limits or borders, physical or metaphorical imposed on women. These concepts are impressed on women's bodies from a very early age. For more information on Hshouma see Zainab Fasiki's graphic novel *Hshouma*: *Corps et sexualité au Maroc* (2019)

The type of society Alya grew up is a type of society which is collectivistic. Ramy Aly explains how Arab women while learning to become Arab develop a collectivist sensibility (Aly, 2015: 87).

> Gender segregation and the policing of female sexuality are central regulatory ideals for Arab and Muslim womanhood, albeit accorded different degrees of adherence. Suad narrates all the components of an idealised discourse of Arab femininity: the ability to socialise in mixed-gender groups, but at the same time maintain her honour and reputation as a good 'Arab Muslim girl' by not drinking too much or being seen to have too much freedom and importantly seeing the world in terms of kinship ties. Suspicion regarding the nature of her mixed-gender friendships is neutralised by presenting male friends not as potential sexual or romantic partners (which they may or may not be) but as protective brothers (see Joseph 1993, 1994, 1999). Sex and sexuality are central concerns, yet must be consistently renounced. The consequences of being seen to transgress these gendered 'Arab' and 'Islamic' regulatory ideals is the stigma of being seen as sexually available and therefore disreputable and ultimately unfit for marriage. (Aly, 2015:141-42)

Of course this narration is full of double standards, this is a type of pressure men do not feel at all. The only pressure they feel is to excercise surveillance over women, especially members of their family. Brothers have this responsibility to police the sisters so that they do not harm family honour, in fact Alya explains how some women she talked to before writing the memoir told her that "their parents often allowed them extra freedoms if they were with their brothers or male cousins, considering them safe and protected" (Mooro, 2019: 44) Brothers act as guardians, Alya says in fact that "the same cocooning safety you get from the fact that everyone knows everyone and has done so for generations is the same thing that can make you feel stifled […]Wherever you are there is someone watching you and judging your conduct. (2019:45) This costant surveillance acts as a form of repression of desire. Another supervisory figure is the *bawab* namely the doorman who acts like the guardian of the house and at the same time of your purity when it comes to women: "The bawab is part of this invisible jury. Just the knowledge of his presence and scrutiny is enough to impact how you live your life and the sorts of things you do (or don't do)." (Mooro, 2019:45) Alya moves on to

explain that Chastity is often framed in ways that degrade women's worth, using metaphors like: "A woman is like a piece of candy; if it falls on the ground, would you still want to eat it?" (Mooro, 2019:45)

While slut-shaming and sexual double standards are widespread globally, they are particularly intense in Arab culture, where the expectation for women to suppress their sexuality is overwhelming. In Egypt and many other Arab countries, premarital sex is not only socially condemned but also illegal, with strict enforcement by the law, the media, and local gossip. As we saw in the section on gendered socialisation, men are encouraged to be sexual in order to perform during the first night of the wedding and act as initiatiors, while women are expected to be virgin until marriage. Sex in many Arab countries is considered *zina*[51](fornication). In fact young people tend to engage in *halal dating*[52] alternatives in their sexual lives in order not to lose their virginity as:

> For women, losing your virginity before marriage can have dire consequences – although, of course, many do. In the most extreme examples, husbands are urged to display the bed sheet after their wedding night, to prove their wife was actually a virgin and had therefore bled (even though it is largely a myth that you bleed when you lose your virginity), while gynaecologists are also often asked to provide certificates of virginity to a bride's future husband prior to the wedding. While these sorts of extreme bloody requirements are these days not practised so much outside of rural villages and in the more conservative sectors, the after-effects of the ideologies behind the practices still linger. Sex is cloaked in a degree of shame, even when you are having it. (Mooro, 2019:46)

Despite the strict rules, Alya and her friends always found a way to perform their Arabness, in a strategic, agentic manner that could serve both the purpose of protecting family honor and at the same time their desire, even though it meant living a double life. Alya was very aware, with her own words, of the underbelly of debauchery (Mooro, 2019:47) that characterizes Arab countries. Although

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[51] In Morocco pre-marital sex is punished by the 490th article of the penal code (Slimani, 2017:7)

premarital sex and displays of affection were illegal, she always found a way for "sneaking around" (2019:49), a practice that could avoid the moral police. A type of police that you could easily "bribe" using wasta if you were wealthy enough (Mooro, 2019:53). Debauchery was okay as long as you were not a woman and had money, abiding by moral rule is a matter of class.

The moral police is everywhere, however Alya describes how the party culture, alcohol, drugs, although illegal are effortlessy bought behind closed doors. As long as nobody sees you and you are not too loud everything is allowed. (2019:53) For women the *hudud* are not clearly defined and it's easy to fall into behaviour deemed unacceptable "For example, if you have a boyfriend, you are automatically expected to start behaving in ways that "respect him". (2019:53) And this does not simply include not cheating on him, but it also includes not talking to other guys too close, stop smoking. Acting in such a way that protects his reputation because his reputation is in your hands as a woman. Alya highlights the fact that having Arab friends is necessary in order to survive. There is a common language of emotions. Because they were born in the same environment. However, that does not entail that the bond is only positive and beneficial for the people involved: "There is a certain family bond and loyalty inherent in Arab culture that plays out in the most beautiful ways in its friendships. […] But it simultaneously made me all the more aware of the invisible jury, the one that to this day informs me what Egyptian society expects of me." (2019:53)

4.3.3 Don't Okbelik me: the pressure to wed

However the pressure to marry is real. Alya shares that her mom believes that she would now find it more difficult to find someone who would not want to marry her. Because of her strong opinions. However, Alya doesn't believe you should have to be subservient to be loved. (2019:117-18) She is aware and conscious of power dynamics and inequality of gender roles. She is not simply a pious woman. She finds it problematic "that a woman's worth is intrinsically …] bound up in marital status." (2019:134) Alya enjoys being single. But she knows that a lot of people married in the Arab world to

159

make the family proud. A lot of people need to respond to the question, "Don't you want your dad to be proud of you?" (2019:121), moreover "Whenever I go to Cairo, I increasingly want to scream. In the middle East the pressure to wed at it at a young age is rife and in opposition to fast changing attitudes in the West." A lot of people admitted to her dad. If it wasn't for sex and the possibility to have sex, they would have never gone down the road of marriage. (Ivi.123)

Marriage is important to a lot of women for the simple reason that it makes them citizens but it also makes them responsible if their husband cheats, it makes them their caregiver who need to anticipate their desire, they have to "keep their side of the deal". And it also makes them very vulnerable when it comes to divorce "divorce laws across the region are unequal for men and women, with women discriminated against in child custody and guardianship decisions." (Ivi.121). Apparently the pressure to wed is something you cannot escape infact, whenever she attends one:

> "With each wedding comes a tide of ever loud voices saying och belek? The expression
> essentially means, God willing, you're next. […]the weight of the word comes with its own
> Burdens, namely the expectation that to live a good life you have to be married. In this
> subsequent question of you, of why you are not yet. I hate it." (Ivi.123)

As we will see later Salma El Wardany states in *These Impossible Things*, that marriages are not for the kids, marriage are for the parents, to show the community that you were raised well. Marriage are a way to secure arab daughter in the diaspora a future and protection. This protection comes with duties:

> of course it's both out of care that families placed them these pressures children out of love,
> out of the assumption that's that's what is required to be safe and happy. That's part of the
> problem, the assumption that abiding by tradition, cocooned in your culture, is what is
> required to be safe and happy. It plays into the absurd notion that women are helpless
> without a husband. (Ivi.128)

Marriage tends to be more important than career, where career is considered important if it can get you a husband "without marriage, the rest of it doesn't matter. That is the message Arab women over

the world receive" Ivi.129 Women need to be marketable and marriageable material, otherwise they end up becoming *ahnes*, spinsters and when you become a spinster, it is never by choice, it's always contingent. "Language is always revealing the word for a single woman in Arabic. Is a nurse, meaning a branch that Withers and becomes useless." Ivi.129 Alya struggles to connect emotionally because she has been conditioned to see feelings as a sign of weakness—something irrational and dangerous, especially for women raised in Arab cultural contexts that privilege practicality and social conformity over emotional authenticity. In this framework, love is not something you follow blindly; instead, there are clear criteria for what kind of man is marriageable, respectable, and suitable.

But without a rigid prescription for who the man of your life should be, how are you supposed to let yourself be guided by feeling? There is always the risk that your feelings will not conform to the norm: that you might not fall in love with a "standard" Arab man, or that you might be queer. Queerness, like premarital sex and dating, remains illegal in many Arab contexts, deeply stigmatized and treated as grounds for ostracism, disownment, or worse. The same stigma applies to rejecting the nuclear family model—being a single mother, for instance, is seen as a failure of womanhood. Single mothers are often not seen as full adults, and their children are socially unrecognized. This is why Alya understands her personality as a reaction—a form of resistance—to all she was taught to believe. When she writes, "True happiness is achieved when we are true to ourselves. […] It's the only way I think to make a whole real engaging life with another: two complete individuals come together of their own volition" (Mooro, 134), she signals a process of desubjectification—a breaking away from the psychic oppressions imposed on her as an Arab woman in the borderlands. Her vision of love as an affective assemblage between two complete individuals expresses her commitment to an affirmative politics of desire.

4.3.4 The Good Muslim Girl and the Double Life

Kees's return home is not just a physical journey but an act of strategic self-performance, she " tries to pull the sins out from between her teeth before she gets there. […]she needs time to find the version of herself that will please her mother the most. […] Diligent. Studious. Ambitious. Serious" (El Wardany, 2022:12-13) a familiar act of self-censorship rooted in psychic repression, a psychic negotiation of desire and duty. "other sides of herself have crept in over time. Rebellious. Loving. In love. Sexual. Things that you don't talk about around the dinner table or even within the four walls of a home that has wrapped itself in silence." (El Wardany, 2022:12-13) This moment sets the tone for what Deleuze and Guattari call desiring-production—a form of creative energy constantly shaping and reshaping subjectivity in relation to external structures.

Kees embodies a split subject who lives in the interstices between familial recognition and personal truth much like many of the women interviewed by Ramy Aly (2015:97)   The important point in this section is that whenever Kees goes home, she must adopt a version of herself that aligns with her parents' expectations. This process is not automatic; it requires her to consciously navigate the dual life she leads. On one hand, she needs to embody the role of a "good girl," a good Muslim woman who adheres to her family's cultural and religious ideals. On the other hand, she is also a sexual, desiring individual with her own autonomy. This ongoing negotiation is how she manages to live with the internal conflict she has faced her entire life. The same people who raised her, cared for her, and instilled in her the ambition and discipline to excel—the qualities that will help her become the determined, diligent lawyer she aspires to be—are also the ones she knows might reject or hurt her for not conforming to their ideals. Her passion, shaped by her upbringing, extends to love and sexuality. However, as highlighted in the theoretical framework, sexual desire and premarital sex are not acknowledged or accepted within her cultural context. Her family remains unaware of this hidden aspect of her life, forcing Kees to perform a particular version of herself in

their presence to preserve the harmony of her relationships. This tension reveals the emotional and psychological labor involved in maintaining these two identities: the dutiful daughter and the sexual, autonomous woman. It underscores the complexity of navigating cultural expectations while staying true to oneself.

> "Some people are careless with words. Use them often and recklessly In this family, things were said differently. There was a mug of tea that was always waiting for her father. It said, here, I love you. The family meals that were always on the table said, here, we care about you. Love came under the guise of anger and rough voices, which didn't make it less loving, it[…]"(El Wardany, 2022:13)

The author aims to emphasize how communication is often implicit rather than explicit, a phenomenon tied to the relational nature of desire. Desire is frequently conveyed through indirect expressions and nuanced interactions, as there is no straightforward or fluid mode of communication for emotions and feelings. This idea resonates with Leila Slimani's *Parole d'honneur* (2017) where communication reflects deeper relational dynamics. For instance, when Bilquis' father asks about her journey, and she replies with a comment about the train being canceled: "They need to put someone better in charge of running the country, and maybe the trains would be on time." (2022:14) Her father jokingly suggests that she should run for prime minister, with him as her campaign manager.

This lighthearted exchange shifts when her mother intervenes, chastising Bilquis for bringing up politics, fearing it might further involve her father in contentious political matters. Bilquis' father and Kees respond to the mother's concerns with an eye-roll, illustrating a family dynamic where humor and subtlety carry the weight of unspoken tensions. The narrative moves to Kees thinking about Harry, her white, non-Muslim boyfriend, whose existence her parents remain unaware of. However, this internal reflection is interrupted by her father's questions about current political developments, leading to a humorous discussion about Kees' limited engagement with politics.

Although they are immigrants, Bilquis' family remains deeply invested in English politics and aspire to be part of the country's decision-making processes. They place their hopes on Bilquis, seeing her as capable of acting and making impactful choices. This belief in her potential gives her a sense of empowerment, even as it creates internal conflict. The tension within her life—marked by her family's expectations, her romantic relationship, and her own desires—highlights the complexities of her identity and agency. Her mother's indirect expressions of care—"Beta, you look tired and skinny. Why aren't you eating?"—are affective economies of familial love (Ahmed, 2004). Love comes "under the guise of anger and rough voices" (2022:13), complicating Kees's understanding of emotional safety. There is no direct affirmation of desire or difference, but a network of expectations that shape what kinds of futures are possible, or even speakable. The family becomes both the site of recognition and its denial. Her struggles to reconcile these conflicting aspects are exacerbated by the familial focus on marriage, sexuality, and cultural expectations. Bilquis embodies a spirit of independence and defiance that cannot be dismissed, making her choices even more fraught as she navigates the divide between loyalty to her family and her own personal aspirations."

> As usual, her mother insists that Kees makes the roti when she's home […]In these light balls of dough is a heavy tradition of women who have come before her. Her mother once stood just like this with her mother and her mother before her, and in the passing down of something so simple, Kees has always found great comfort. (2022:16)

This passage reveals that she comes from a lineage, or "tribe," of women who shape her understanding of relationships and community. It highlights the genealogy that influences her search for an affective community, one that she finds in the bonds with her friends. Through the mundane and seemingly trivial tasks of daily life, significant conversations and exchanges occur, emphasizing the depth and importance of these relationships. The passage also illustrates the care and affection her family shows her, which deepens the emotional complexity of her choices. This tenderness and familial support make it even more challenging when she contemplates leaving them to be with her partner. Such decisions reflect the core struggle these young women face: navigating the tension

between familial love and expectations and their personal desires and aspirations. Meanwhile Saba, Kees' 19 years old sister calls her to announce her her upcoming wedding: "I'm in love," blurts out Saba, ignoring her older sister's reprimands. […]"Well, you see, we're not all heartless, cold, and devoid of emotion like you." Saba, announces her love and forthcoming marriage with the full blessing of the family, evoking in Kees a bitter awareness of what she cannot have. Saba desires what is socially intelligible: "someone who's Muslim and Pakistani and good and kind and who our parents approve of" (2022:20). Her desire is structured around what Mahmood calls pious agency: the ability to choose submission, to act within norms as a form of self-realization. This is not passivity—it is a form of affirmative action within prescribed limits.

By contrast, Kees's desires are deviant, not just sexually but socially. Her love for Harry, a non-Muslim, cannot be narrated within the familial grammar of marriage and honor. Her silence is not a void but a tactical invisibility. She has "kept her boyfriend hidden too well" and wonders if she's built a false persona to protect herself (2022:19). Her secret is not simply a transgression of cultural boundaries, but a profound form of psychic repression and fear of exclusion from her affective community. Kees feels deeply unsettled by her sister's announcement, primarily because her sister is getting married at a very young age and, more importantly, because she is marrying before Kees herself. This triggers a fear of being perceived as a spinster or, in the words of Alya Mooro, *ahnes*. In their family's eyes, it is unusual and even problematic for a woman of Kees' age not to be married, and her sister's decision only intensifies this stigma. Adding to her unease, Kees reflects on how she has constructed a false persona, projecting herself as aloof and indifferent, when in reality, she is deeply in love with a man she cannot marry. Her sister, in contrast, is considered a "good girl" for adhering to family and cultural expectations by choosing to marry a Muslim.

Kees' situation highlights the stark contrast between their choices and the social consequences attached to them. Despite her frustrations, Kees refrains from confronting her sister or challenging these perceptions. She tells herself it isn't the right time to do so, which speaks to a recurring pattern in her behavior: she prioritizes her family's well-being and harmony, even as she remains critical of

165

their values and decisions. This internal conflict underscores the tension between Kees' individuality and the collective expectations imposed by her family and culture. As a Muslim woman, Saba is expected to marry a Muslim man. She views marriage as a potential pathway to achieving personal fulfillment and self-actualization. With this in mind, she turned to a matchmaker, believing that matchmakers are best equipped to introduce her to Muslim men who can meet her expectations and provide the stability and support she seeks.

Kees expresses concern for her sister. "When it's just you and him and you don't have a career. You're going to just sit at home and wait for him while learning to cook dhal?" (El Wardany, 2022:21) Because she is afraid that this choice will make her give up other aspects of her life that could fulfill her even more. This shows how Kees is oriented towards an affirmative life. This is also an example of how her sister is well aware of the options that she have, but she chooses to marry"I'm not really interested in a career. I want to have babies and kiss their fat little feet and feed up the people I love.". (El Wardany, 2022:21) This is a legitimate desire that shows a capacity from Sabah to be responsible for her own choices and show agency in the way she wants to plan her future. Once again, we see her parents' concern about the fact that her sister is getting married before her. "But we also wanted to check if you're okay with Saba getting married before you." They worry about how this reflects on her and, particularly, her mother believes that focusing on her career has made her incapable of falling in love. Of course she's okay with it. She has her head in charities and politics all the time. However, she knows she cannot tell them the truth about her situation right now, which makes the entire situation even more frustrating for her.

4.3.5 Saba's wedding:

Weddings, as Malak observes, are rarely about the bride and groom themselves. Rather, they function as public spectacles: "an opportunity to show the rest of the world what you have, what you're about to have, and what they can no longer have" (El Wardany, 2022:32). They exist for the aunties, the

uncles, the grandparents, and the long-married couples who need reminding why they married in the first place. Above all, weddings become proof of good parenting—"a triumphant parade of their offspring to help validate their parenting skills" (2022:32). In this economy of public display, the couple's happiness is secondary to collective recognition. Malak, watching Kees' sister Saba celebrated by the community, wonders bitterly if she herself is now "classified as a fuck-up," a disappointment in comparison. This moment captures the extent to which marriage, in this context, is not an individual or romantic decision but a performance of cultural intelligibility. It is an enactment of Arabness, Muslimness, and filial duty. It affirms one's legibility within a symbolic order structured around patriarchal and communal norms. The aunties and uncles operate as extensions of what Sara Ahmed would call the affective community, regulating emotions and behaviors through informal social surveillance. In this setting, to marry "appropriately" is to reaffirm the family's moral standing and avoid shame.

Desire, here, is not absent—it is present, but subordinated to social scripts. Individuals, especially women, are expected to redirect their desire toward outcomes deemed acceptable by their families: marriage to a suitable Muslim man, domesticity, and social conformity. As theorized by Judith Butler and further articulated through Saba Mahmood's work, agency in these settings becomes complex: women may choose compliance, but within a highly structured field of permissible actions. Desire becomes relational, not only because it is shaped by others, but because it is in service of maintaining relations, often at the cost of the self. The desire to be celebrated—to be wrapped in *henna*, fed *jalebi*, and praised as a "good girl"—is not superficial. It is deeply embedded in a longing for belonging and for the validation of one's life choices. As Malak shows, the fantasy of communal joy is seductive, even when it means giving up a love that would not earn that celebration. And here lies the cost: a woman might leave behind a man who treats her with love and respect in order to preserve a fantasy of cultural continuity. Yet what is sacrificed is not only the relationship, but her own desiring self, the one that cannot be spoken within the limits of social respectability. The

wedding, then, becomes a site of subjectification—a public ritual through which women are made legible, valuable, and acceptable. But for Malak, as for Kees and Jenna, this comes at the price of internal fracture. The symbolic order demands submission to its rules. The result is a "frustrated self," where desire does not disappear, but becomes repressed, redirected, or buried. This disjuncture between internal longing and external performance is the wound at the heart of the novel.

Ultimately, El Wardany shows how weddings are not ends, but staging grounds for the social production of gendered, moral, and communal identities. By highlighting the tension between private desire and public expectation, she exposes the cost of belonging—and the longing, in turn, for a form of affirmation that might allow desire, love, and faith to coexist without shame.Jenna arrives drunk—not only drunk but also carrying a flask, bringing alcohol to a Muslim wedding. Her actions seem like an act of rebellion, a stark contrast to the rigid norms that have governed her life, these girls are always redefining what it means to be a practising Muslim in Britain.

> "I'm drunk," Jenna giggles "Are not most of the Muslim community here?" […] You know they're all going to be trying to get us married to their deadbeat sons.[…] It's vodka, so you can't even smell it. Practically drank a bottle of mouthwash on the way and I haven't stopped chewing gum all evening. (El Wardany, 2022:35)

This part is very important because the girls are absolutely aware of the hudud, the boundaries that the Muslim community and being at a Muslim event entail, but they are constantly redefining them. "The music suddenly stops and the athen rings […] "Fuck, I need to go help Mum," mutters Kees. "Babe, you really shouldn't swear when the athen is going off," says Jenna, shaking her head." (El Wardany, 2022:35) They are absolutely aware of what is wrong and what is right and they act on it. Sometimes they respect it, sometimes they do not, but they are independent in their way of thinking. Their agency can be seen as a capacity to act as Saba Mahmood (2001: 203) and Elizabeth Grosz (2010: 146) would say.

Another important part is the one where drunk Jenna talks about how they all want to marry them to their "deadbeat" sons and she sees being drunk as a way to resist. She wants to scare them in a way. They are not naive. They never act as if they did not know what they were doing, they know exactly what they are doing, and they found their way express themselves. Malak's prayers are more regular than they've been in years, yet she "feels further away from God than she's ever been." She hopes to feel the "gentle wave" that once accompanied prayer—"a kind of softness"—especially when joined in communal worship, when voices rise together to say ameen. "It felt like a kind of softness [...] as if her body knew there was a better way to live." But now, she finds only hollowness. Her connection to God feels absent "when she needs it the most." (El Wardany, 2022:36) This moment encapsulates the role of affect and desire within spiritual practice. Malak's longing for spiritual closeness is deeply bodily and relational: it is not only about belief, but about a sensuous, affective connection sustained through the communal rhythms of faith. Her previous experiences of softness while praying reflect a form of embodied desire—a yearning for wholeness, peace, or belonging— that becomes disrupted when she finds herself alienated, emotionally and spiritually. Here, desire is not reduced to sexuality, but is instead broadened into a Deleuzian conception: a force that drives her toward connection, transcendence, and becoming.

The affective experience of praying in congregation, of saying ameen in unison, is a moment where desiring-production is collective—her body knows "a better way to live," even if her heart feels distant. Her disconnection is not a failure of faith, but a reflection of the misalignment between her internal struggle and the communal norms that shape religious experience. Her desire for God becomes entangled with a desire for recognition, for safety, for affirmation—affective states that are co-produced with others. Ahmed (2004) teaches us that emotions do not simply belong to individuals, but circulate and stick to bodies in specific contexts. Malak's experience illustrates this: prayer used to "soften" her precisely because it tethered her to a broader affective economy of care and faith. Now, that softness is gone—not because her faith is weaker, but because she finds herself adrift from the structures of recognition that used to sustain her. Her body still remembers the ameen, the joy of

being surrounded by believers—but her mind feels the absence of meaning. In this scene, we witness how religious desire is not inherently repressive, but instead can function as an affective and communal source of sustenance. It is when religious observance becomes disconnected from affect, reduced to duty or performance, that the desire to connect—to God, to community, to self—falters. This sets the stage for what follows in the narrative: when Malak, Jenna, and Kees navigate prayer, drinking, and rebellion, they are not rejecting spirituality, but rather redefining the boundaries of piety, desire, and connection.

They are desiring-machines not because they rebel, but because they seek new assemblages—spiritual, emotional, bodily—that might allow them to reinhabit faith on their own terms, As they turn toward the dining room, Malak and Jenna are intercepted by Aunty Najma, who enthusiastically embraces them before launching into the inevitable interrogation: "When are you two girls getting married?" In practiced unison, they reply: "Inshallah, Aunty, inshallah." The phrase is echoed like a chorus among nearby women—a collective invocation of hope and pressure. Malak offers a half-smile while internally seething, later venting to Kees: "If I have to have one more conversation about why I'm not married, I'm going to lose my shit. I even got told I should look for a husband in the lift." (El Wardany, 2022:40–41) This moment exemplifies what Suad Joseph refers to as patriarchal connectivity: a system of relational obligation and emotional interdependence that structures women's desires within family and communal networks (Joseph, 1999).

Here, desire is not merely personal or erotic—it is *relational*, circulating through social expectations and enforced by familial actors like Aunty Najma. As Jenna and Malak echo "Inshallah," their automatic response performs gendered piety and collective desire, even as they privately resist its terms. This *inshallah* isn't just hopeful—it is regulatory. It functions as a boundary-marking gesture, one that aligns the girls with culturally legible paths toward femininity, propriety, and heterosexual fulfillment. Yet the irony is not lost: their bodies tense, their words are rehearsed, and Malak is visibly annoyed. Their double consciousness is palpable—they perform compliance even as they inwardly revolt. This is why the girls' friendship matters so deeply: they know the grammar of

their own repression. Having been "raised by a village," (2022:38) as Malak will say, they also understand that this village "comes without boundaries"ibid. —intimate care blurs into surveillance. Their bond, then, becomes a space of shared irony, resistance, and emotional solidarity.

They are desiring subjects not in spite of this context, but because of it: their refusal to disavow desire—even when forced into scripts of domestic destiny—is an act of affirmative politics. They do not deny the community's pull; instead, they navigate it with a subversive awareness, turning the very tools of compliance into methods of critique. The result is not outright rebellion, but a careful, ironic performance of belonging that preserves their right to desire differently—to delay marriage, to refuse "deadbeat sons," to drink vodka in a prayer hall, to pray and swear in the same breath. Their complicity is strategic. Their *inshallah* is laced with knowing. Desire will always be structured around duty, responsibility, hierarchy of race and gender, and reciprocity. This is also what makes the girls' bond so strong. They know about this because they were raised and cocooned by a village as Malak says, but at the same time this village comes with no boundaries. Malak reflects on her spiritual distance, confessing:

> "I've talked to God more over the last few weeks than I have in my whole life. Bent my spine five times a day in prayer, stayed sober, and definitely haven't had sex—yet I've never felt further away from Him. But all the times I've gone out, drunk, ended up at the bottom of a bottle—I swear I've seen God. Felt Him right there in my chest. Or even naked in bed with Jacob." (El Wardany, 2022:43)

This confession crystallizes the disjuncture between normative religiosity and felt spiritual connection. By adhering to religious expectations—sobriety, sexual abstinence, ritual prayer—Malak expects to feel closer to God. Yet these moments are marked by absence, not presence. Paradoxically, her most intense sense of the divine arrives in moments culturally coded as haram: intoxication, sex, transgression. This tension speaks directly to the Deleuzian concept of jouissance—a form of pleasure that is *beyond* or *in excess of* socially sanctioned enjoyment. Unlike conventional pleasure, which is regulated and contained within structures of propriety, jouissance breaks through boundaries. In

Malak's experience, this overflow is spiritual, erotic, and affective all at once. Her pleasure is not simply carnal; it is a site of encounter with the divine, an embodied surplus of sensation that makes her feel *most alive*.

Here, we see how desire and spirituality are not oppositional but entangled. Malak's experience challenges the binary between religious piety and embodied enjoyment, suggesting that connection to God may emerge through affective intensities rather than prescriptive rituals. This is what Deleuze and Guattari describe as "desiring-production": the idea that desire is not a lack, but a generative force—a life-affirming, world-making energy. Malak's spiritual yearning is not met through obedience but through the assemblages she creates in acts of love, risk, and abandon. Her recollection also exemplifies the affective economy of faith—how emotions (love, longing, shame, intimacy) circulate and stick to certain practices or people. Malak's frustration reflects the dissonance between what she is told *should* feel sacred and what *actually* does.

Her body becomes a site of contestation between inherited scripts and lived experience. Ultimately, Malak's relationship to God is not lost—it is *reconfigured* through her desiring body. And this is not blasphemy, but an act of **affirmative politics**: claiming spiritual intimacy on her own terms. Through transgression, she articulates a feminist re-mapping of the sacred—one that does not rely on purity but on presence, not on obedience but on affective truth. Kees challenges Malak: "Is it worth it? Is it worth it to act like the good Arab girl?" Malak, torn between her love for Jacob and her longing for communal belonging, replies:

> "Look at your sister, Kees. Look at the way the aunties are all smiling at her… Who's going
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> to celebrate us?… I want the sweets and the flowers wrapped around my hands. I want to
>
> be covered in blessings… I don't want to get married in secret and embarrassment. I want
>
> my love to lift my father's head, not hang it in shame." (El Wardany, 2022:44)

Malak's words reveal the depth of her affective investment in recognition, not only from her parents but from the broader community—the ummah—whose blessings confer legitimacy. Her desire, here,

172

is not simply erotic or romantic, but relational and symbolic: a longing to be seen, celebrated, validated. Even though she is fully aware of the contradictions—how the community will embrace any man "as long as he's Muslim," no matter how flawed—she still craves the scripted rituals of communal approval. This moment powerfully illustrates how desire is not autonomous but relational, formed within and against collective structures of meaning. As Amer et al. (2015:25) explain, women in Arab and diasporic contexts are socialized into knowing that their personal behavior directly reflects on their families' reputations. Malak's inner conflict exemplifies this: she desires Jacob, but she desires even more the social and familial affirmation that only marrying a "suitable" Muslim man can offer. Her speech also crystallizes how subjectivity is produced within affective economies. Drawing on Sara Ahmed (2010:30), we see how "happiness" and "love" are not neutral ideals, but directions—paths we're told will bring us closeness, celebration, belonging. Malak's submission to the community's cardinal rule isn't passive; it's the outcome of a deeply emotional calculus, where choosing personal joy means risking estrangement. As such, her decision marks a form of strategic agency, one that prioritizes cultural continuity and affective security over personal fulfillment. Ultimately, this exchange between Kees and Malak stages a central tension of the novel—and this thesis: how young Arab women negotiate desire within a matrix of familial duty, cultural scripts, and political visibility. Malak's choice is not an abdication of agency, but a testament to the powerful forces that shape what women can desire and what it costs them to act on it. Kees responds that there is a way out of her, an affirmative way to act, an agency to them that they shouldn't underestimate:

> "But that only exists as long as we buy into it," says Kees. Malak laughs even though it
> isn't funny."This isn't one of your causes. Activism won't help now." The dig straightens
> Kees's shoulders, she lifts her chin and with a flash in her green eyes she replies, "Activism
> is the only way we change our activity and your reluctance to do anything at all doesn't
> change shit. […] Malak carries on, "It's going to end, Kees. Do the right thing and end it
> now. You two don't have any kind of future together." (El Wardany, 2022:46)

This conversation captures the tension between Malak and Kees as they navigate their desires and familial expectations, while reflecting larger themes of agency, resistance, and the interplay between tradition and change. Kees challenges Malak's adherence to cultural norms, framing it as a passive acceptance of a system that stifles autonomy and limits possibilities for change. Kees embodies a critical form of agency, as theorized by Saba Mahmood, attempting to subvert the cultural expectations imposed on them by imagining a new mode of being—one that refuses the binary of compliance or rebellion and seeks to transform tradition itself.

Her invocation of activism positions her struggle as not merely personal but as part of a broader framework for disrupting entrenched norms. Malak's response, however, reveals a different form of agency, one grounded in negotiation and survival rather than overt resistance. By highlighting Kees's own secrecy about her non-Muslim partner, Malak exposes the layers of complexity inherent in navigating diasporic identity, religious adherence, and familial loyalty. Her reluctance to confront her parents about Jacob reflects the emotional and practical calculations that diasporic Muslim women must undertake to preserve familial relationships while living lives that may transgress cultural expectations. Malak's assertion that "activism won't help now" underlines her belief that the costs of defying tradition outweigh the benefits, situating her in a position where maintaining harmony is prioritized over individual desire.

Her eventual command to "do the right thing and end it now" expresses the profound internalization of community standards and a protective instinct—not just for herself but for Kees, whom she sees as headed toward inevitable pain. Malak's actions are informed by shame, fear, and a desire for acceptance, while Kees's response draws on frustration and hope. Together, they illustrate the emotional economies that sustain cultural norms and also hint at possibilities for disrupting them:

Kees explodes at Malak, challenging her choice to sacrifice her relationship with Jacob in exchange for community approval:

"You've cut yourself up into these tiny pieces for those aunties and uncles… So someone can smile at you on the one day of the year they turn up at your wedding? … You've broken your heart and left a good man for a community that doesn't give a shit about you… They're not going to be there the other 364 days of the year… whoever you end up with is the man you have to sleep with every night… They don't have to lie next to him. You do… And here's something they never tell you: they won't love you more for it." (El Wardany, 2022:47–48)

Kees's outburst lays bare the cost of Malak's self-disciplining. Her metaphor of fragmentation—cutting oneself "into tiny pieces"—captures the psychological violence of performing respectability for a community that offers only conditional belonging. The henna, the flowers, the community blessings are temporary performances of affection, contrasted with the long-term emotional labor of making a marriage work—labor Malak will have to carry alone. This moment is more than personal: it speaks to the affective economy of shame and duty described by Sara Ahmed (2004:106), where emotional investments in family and community structure the limits of one's autonomy.

Kees doesn't just reject the performance of the "good Arab girl"—she refuses the political economy that rewards compliance with momentary approval while denying sustained care. Her words also resonate with Ahmed's feminist killjoy: Kees is willing to "ruin" the moment—if not the entire fantasy—by voicing the cost of upholding it. Her demand is not just for romantic love but for the right to desire outside prescribed scripts. Malak's defensive reaction, walking away in anger, only underscores how deeply internalized and painful these cultural mandates are. This confrontation therefore stages a clash between two models of agency and desire. Malak seeks safety through conformity and relational validation; Kees claims an affirmative politics of desire, even at the cost of community approval. What's at stake is not only love, but livability.

4.3.6. *Ahnes*: beware of the spinster

When Kees visits her family, she finds her mother, Abida, in tears. Alarmed, Kees quickly learns that the reason for her mother's emotions isn't distress but sentimentality—Abida has been looking at Saba's baby pictures and is overwhelmed by the thought of her younger daughter's upcoming wedding. Despite her initial concern, Saba laughs it off, saying it's nothing serious. Abida is thrilled to have Kees home, although she had been hesitant to let her move away for university. She ultimately agreed with her husband, Hakim, because she valued marital harmony, even though it went against traditional expectations that an unmarried Muslim woman should stay in her parents' home. Pursuing higher education, however, gave Kees a sense of independence that might not have been possible otherwise. Saba and Hakim explain to Kees that Abida has been especially emotional as the wedding approaches:

> "But…" Kees pauses momentarily, looking for words that won't hurt Saba. "You're only
> getting married," she finally says, at a loss. Thankfully Saba laughs. "Try telling her that.
> She keeps talking about the first one in the family." "Well, it was never going to be you,
> was it?" laughs Hakim, hands in his pockets, grinning with the pleasure of sparring with
> the older sister he has yet to outdo. (El Wardany, 2022:151)

The next day, Kees is swept up in countless pre-wedding errands, leaving her no time to focus on the work she had planned to accomplish. The day after, she decides not to attempt any work at all, instead choosing to spend time with her family. She feels a pang of regret for having missed so much of the wedding preparations and quietly scolds herself for harboring jealousy over her sister's happiness— a happiness that fits neatly into their parents' expectations. As Kees prepares to leave, her father drives her to the train station, expressing his love in his quiet way by waiting until she safely boards the train before heading back home. Beneath it all, Kees feels the subtle sting of being judged as the

older sister who remains unmarried[53], a source of silent shame in her family. This short but telling exchange between Kees, Saba, and Hakim highlights the unspoken social pressure placed on women who do not conform to normative timelines of marriage. Kees's discomfort—masked in laughter and deflection—reveals the emotional toll of being implicitly marked as *ahnes*, the spinster, the woman left behind. Hakim's teasing isn't just sibling banter—it reflects a broader cultural expectation that places a woman's value in her marriageability, particularly in traditional or diasporic Arab communities. This judgment operates subtly: Kees isn't openly shamed, but the silence surrounding her singleness is its own form of discipline. It constructs her unmarried status not just as a private choice, but as a *collective problem*—a deviation from the expected life script. This moment connects directly to relational desire and the structure of subjectification: Kees is rendered intelligible as a woman primarily through the potential of being a wife. Without that role, her subjectivity is marked by lack—*ahnes* becomes a warning more than a label. As such, this line performs a kind of **symbolic violence**, reinforcing a hierarchy of desirability and cultural legitimacy that is deeply gendered. The joke, then, isn't innocent. It's part of the affective life of social norms—a casual utterance that transmits an entire economy of expectations and exclusions. In Kees's quiet reaction, we see the cost of nonconformity, and in that cost, the motivation for resistance. To conclude, this chapter has examined how the protagonists of The Greater Freedom and These Impossible Things come to embody subject positions shaped by psychic repression and internalized structures of subjection. From the demand to be the "good Arab girl" to the fear of spinsterhood, these norms operate not only externally but within the very affective and psychic lives of the characters. Desire becomes a site of both repression and recognition, and subordination is paradoxically what grants visibility and legibility within their social worlds. Yet, even within these constraints, the protagonists begin to negotiate and challenge the meanings imposed upon them. This ambivalent terrain, where submission

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[53] Talking about being *ahnes*, a spinster, the author Alya Mooro states: "language is as always revealing. The word for a single woman in Arabic is "ahnes", a branch that Withers and becomes useless. The English language is no better for describing unwed women: Wikipedia attests that spinsters have a reputation for sexual and emotional frigidity, lesbianism, ugliness. Frumpiness. Depression. A stringent moral virtue and overly pious religious devotion." (Mooro, 2019:129)

meets resistance, lays the groundwork for the next chapter. Chapter 5 will explore the complexities of hybridity, narratives of otherness, and the politics of shame. It will trace how these women grapple with displacement, class, and race, how they negotiate privilege and forge unlikely alliances—while remaining critically aware of the fractures that shape their identities. If Chapter 4 focused on how psychic repression is internalized, Chapter 5 will delve into how these women inhabit and resist the interstices of identity, where multiplicity becomes both a burden and a source of power.

Chapter 5. Hybridity, (In)visible Otherness and Shame Before Others

5.1 When You Can't See Yourself

Chapter 5 moves from the psychic interiority explored in the previous chapter to the social, spatial, and political dimensions of identity. Here, I examine how the protagonists navigate displacement and deterritorialization, while simultaneously negotiating the pull of nativism—the desire to return, reclaim, or re-anchor oneself in a fixed cultural identity. This chapter explores the complexities of living between worlds, where questions of class, privilege, and belonging come into sharp focus. The characters form strategic alliances that reflect both solidarity and tension, shaped by intersecting forms of otherness, racialization, and cultural expectation. Through these layered experiences, I investigate how hybridity becomes not only a condition of being, but also a site of negotiation, resistance, and possibility. The first chapter of *The Greater Freedom* is not called "When you can't see yourself" by chance. Feeling like the invisible other, Alya wants to write herself into the symbolic order in an attempt to define herself in her own terms, growing up in a world where "much of what you first learn about yourself comes from how others perceive you" (Mooro, 2019:7) having to perform according to processes of subjection accepted because of a desire to be validated by a community and therefore be socially intelligible and recognisable. Little Alya might have not been able to see herself, but the mean girls of the school she attended saw her very clearly when they told her "Why would he even like you anyway . . . you're brown!' (Mooro, 2019:7)

For the first time Alya realised she was different, that her body was cause of disgust. Just like in the case of Suad, as described by Ramy Aly she tried to adopt behaviors and attitudes she associated with being "English," hoping this would help her assimilate. Yet, her physical features and Arabic name continued to mark her as different, making complete "passing" unattainable. Drawing on Homi

Bhabha's notion of flawed mimesis (Bhabha 1989: 320, as cited in Aly, 2015: 90), the narrative reveals how Alya's performance of Englishness ultimately underscores the limits of assimilation. She exists between two performative communities—her Arab cultural background and the English identity she aspires to. Among her peers, she often felt judged and excluded for not engaging in behaviors tied to their construction of womanhood, such as drinking, partying, and dating—acts she perceived as distinctly part of "English culture." She felt ashamed, and shame can have a very traumatic impact on a young girl. In the chapter "Shame Before Others" of *The Cultural Politics of Emotions,* Sara Ahmed describes shame by saying that shame feels like an exposure. Another sees what I have done that is bad and hence shameful. One is visible and not ready to be visible. […] To be witnessed in one's failure is to be ashamed. […] In experiences of shame, the bad feeling is attributed to oneself." (2004:103) The inability to see herself was also due to having spent the first eight years of her life in Egypt.

The displacement, dislocation she experienced made her vulnerable to being reterritorialized by the mean girls. "As a child, there's really nothing you want more than to fit in with those around you, and so when you don't, it's felt far more acutely." (Mooro, 2019:7) Alya explains how growing up in London as part of a minority made her aware of her difference, although she could count on some degree of passing[54], at the cost of being invisible (2019:9) As she states:

> Because regardless of how 'invisible' you may be or may feel, the 'universal' is still white,
>
> still the standard against which everything else is measured […]there's a certain colour
>
> blindness involved; a lazy cultural stereotyping and caricaturing of anyone who doesn't fit
>
> into a neatly predefined box. It's a caricaturing that erases differences, making you
>
> interchangeable for any and all other ethnic minorities."

In this passage, Alya Mooro directly challenges the false idea of universality by exposing how whiteness continues to be the standard against which all other identities are judged. What she

describes resonates with Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, where Western thought constructs the "Other" through simplification and stereotyping. But Mooro doesn't just point to external representations—she highlights the lived, everyday experience of this dynamic, revealing how it feels to navigate spaces where so-called neutrality is, in reality, shaped by whiteness. Her reference to "colour blindness" reflects exactly refusal to truly see difference, which results in a quiet but violent form of erasure. Mooro's mention of "lazy cultural stereotyping" and being placed in a "predefined box" recalls an idea of fixity, where identities are reduced to rigid, repetitive images. By saying that this process makes her "interchangeable for any and all other ethnic minorities", she draws attention to what Kimberlé Crenshaw (1990) defines as the danger of ignoring intersectionality—the way different aspects of identity, like race and gender, interact and create specific forms of marginalization. Through this reflection, Mooro is not just describing a problem; she's actively resisting it. By naming these mechanisms, she performs what Ahmed (2023: 6) calls a *feminist killjoy moment*—refusing to stay silent in the face of normative expectations. This act of narration becomes a form of agency, where Mooro reclaims space for a complex, nuanced subjectivity that cannot be flattened by stereotypes. In doing so, she participates in what I define, throughout this thesis, as an affirmative politics of desire—where speaking out against structures of exclusion opens possibilities for reimagining belonging, identity, and visibility on her own terms. Alya explains how at school she was always confused with the other brown kids and often orientalised [55] as in London two stereotypes of the Arab were prevalent, "the Edward Road cliche and the Knightsbridge clichè.[56]" (2019:12) In

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[55] "In 1978, Edward Said coined the term 'Orientalism', defined as 'the exaggeration of difference, the presumption of Western superiority, and the application of clichéd analytical models for perceiving the "Oriental" world'." (Mooro, 2019:13-4) For more information on Orientalism see Said, E. W. (1977). ORIENTALISM. The Georgia Review, 31(1), 162–206. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41397448

[56] What comes to mind when most people think of Knightsbridge is an image of a wealthy, often fat individual, usually from the Gulf, who trails a smell of Oud behind them while buying up the entirety of Harrods. The Edgware Road stereotype is often that of a man in sandals and a galabiya, sitting outside a shisha café and puffing away on his water pipe while sleazily ogling the passing girls. Neither is particularly favourable or (entirely) accurate. Add Ramy Aly's history of Arab English migrants (Mooro, 2019:12-13)

order not to fall into either one of this categories Alya felt the need to *learn how she was supposed to look* [57]:

> In a highly gendered Arab culture, there is a profound and all-encompassing emphasis on being 'well put together', and a very specific version of what this might look like. Women in the region and its diaspora are often held to high standards: straight hair on our heads and smooth, virtually hairless bodies. In addition, there is an expectation to be manicured and well dressed, not to mention in good physical shape. It's an interesting contradiction – one of many in the Arab world. […] Some of my earliest memories are of my mother wrestling with my hair on Sunday evenings, trying to blow-dry it into submission in order for it to look 'presentable' at school the next day. (2019:20)

In this passage, Alya Mooro reflects on the embodied pressures faced by women within Arab cultures and diasporic contexts, highlighting how femininity is constructed through rigid beauty standards. Her description of the expectation to be "*well put together*" reveals how gender norms operate not only socially but also materially, through the daily disciplining of the female body. This resonates with feminist critiques of the male gaze and the internalization of patriarchal aesthetics, where women are taught to desire themselves as objects of acceptability and control. The insistence on straight hair, hairless skin, and manicured appearances points to a form of biopolitical regulation, where femininity is not innate but continuously performed and corrected to align with culturally sanctioned ideals. Mooro's personal memory of her mother "*wrestling with [her] hair*" becomes a symbolic moment that illustrates how these norms are transmitted across generations, often under the guise of care and preparation. This act of "*blow-drying it into submission*" speaks to the violent tenderness embedded in practices of beautification, where the natural body is perceived as something to be disciplined in order to be "*presentable*" .This scene captures the emotional labour involved in conforming to gendered expectations, blending feelings of belonging, love, and constraint. Moreover, Mooro names

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[57] The second chapter of Mooro's book is called "When You Learn How You're Supposed to Look" (Mooro, 2019: 19)

this dynamic as an "*interesting contradiction*", pointing towards the broader tensions within Arab societies where modernity, tradition, and patriarchy intersect. This aligns with postcolonial feminist discussions around performing Arabness, where women's bodies become sites of cultural negotiation—required to embody both respectability and desirability, but always within narrowly defined parameters. The pressure to maintain a specific aesthetic standard can also be read through the lens of sexual politics, where controlling women's appearances functions as a way to regulate not only gender roles but also sexuality and honour. By narrating these intimate experiences, Mooro exposes how beauty standards are far from superficial concerns; they are deeply connected to structures of power, subjectivity, and the regulation of female agency. Her autobiographical voice transforms a personal memory into a critique of how femininity is shaped, controlled, and performed within specific cultural frameworks. This reflection, therefore, contributes to an understanding of how Arab women navigate imposed ideals, negotiating between conformity and resistance in their everyday practices. Despite being warned from a very early aged that they should be modest and cover their bodies, women are at the same time placed this very high standards of beauty which are the result of the colonial era. For this reason, Alya had to endure from a very young age the taming of her curly hair and she is aware of the impact this racist standards have on women:

> For Middle Eastern women, many of these ideals go against what our biology naturally allows. The hair on our heads usually grows curly, on our legs and elsewhere dark and thick; our bodies are often pear-shaped, bigger on the bottom. These are the shapes our mothers gave us with one hand and, with the other, tried to change (Mooro, 2019:21)

In this reflection, Mooro highlights the tension between biological reality and cultural expectation, revealing how Middle Eastern women's bodies are sites of constant negotiation and correction. By stating that these beauty ideals "*go against what our biology naturally allows*", she exposes the violence embedded in normative aesthetics that demand women erase or alter the very features that

183

mark their ethnic identity. The description of curly hair, dark thick body hair, and pear-shaped figures points to how racialized femininity is positioned as something to be **disciplined**, aligning with feminist critiques of Eurocentric beauty standards imposed globally, and internalized within Arab cultures. Mooro's poignant observation—"*these are the shapes our mothers gave us with one hand and, with the other, tried to change*"—captures the paradoxical role of maternal figures in reproducing these norms. It reflects how systems of patriarchal control are not only enforced externally but also transmitted through intimate, familial relationships, often framed as care or preparation for social acceptance. This dynamic resonates with **affect theory**, where emotions like love, protection, and pride become entangled with practices of bodily regulation. The maternal gesture here is both affectionate and disciplinary, illustrating how women are taught to view their natural bodies as **inadequate** and in need of correction. From a biopolitical perspective, Mooro's narrative shows how female bodies are shaped—quite literally—by cultural expectations that seek to erase markers of racial and ethnic difference in favour of a standardized ideal rooted in whiteness and thinness.

This connects to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (2004), where femininity is not an essence but a continuous performance shaped by social norms. In Mooro's case, this performance is further complicated by the intersection of race, gender, and postcolonial identity, where embodying the "acceptable" woman requires a disavowal of one's natural, inherited features. Moreover, this passage speaks to the broader theme of agency under constraint. While the act of modifying one's body might appear as a personal choice, Mooro reveals how such choices are conditioned by deep-rooted cultural pressures. The interplay between desire and discipline becomes evident—women are taught to desire a version of themselves that aligns with external ideals, even when it means rejecting the very traits passed down through generations. Through this intimate reflection, Mooro not only critiques these oppressive standards but also invites readers to question how beauty norms function as tools of social control, particularly for Middle Eastern women

navigating both internal cultural expectations and external Western ideals. Her narrative thus contributes to a critical understanding of how subjectivity, power, and performance intersect in the construction of Arab female identity. Alya suffered from not seeing herself represented anywhere. In fact she states:

> Growing up, it was alienating to not see myself or anyone who looked like me reflected in the world around me, neither in or out of the classroom. This feeling of being 'other' grew as my body started to develop into a shape that was not widely catered for in the high-street stores I liked to frequent with my friends. Fashion and make-up brands the world over, the advertisements that promote them and the stores that stock them have long perpetuated narrow, Westernised beauty ideals. (2019:33)

Mooro captures the deeply affective experience of **growing up unseen**, highlighting how the absence of representation shapes a sense of alienation from an early age. The fact that she "*did not see [herself] or anyone who looked like [her]*" both inside and outside the classroom points to the pervasive influence of Western-centric norms, where whiteness dominates not only media but also educational and social spacesMooro's narrative becomes even more pointed as she describes how this feeling of *otherness* intensifies with the development of her body—an intersection of race, gender, and capitalist consumer culture. The inability to find clothes that accommodate her natural body shape in mainstream stores reveals how fashion operates as a site of disciplinary power, reinforcing narrow definitions of desirability rooted in Westernized beauty ideals. These industries not only reflect but actively **produce** norms that marginalize racialized and non-conforming bodies, aligning with Foucauldian notions of biopolitical control through market forces.Her critique of fashion and makeup brands underscores how global capitalism perpetuates these standards, exporting a homogenized vision of femininity that leaves little room for bodies outside of Eurocentric ideals. This reflects postcolonial feminist critiques of how cultural imperialism extends beyond politics and into the intimate sphere of self-perception and embodiment. Mooro's experience illustrates how young

women of Arab descent are positioned as outsiders within consumer spaces that claim universality but in reality, cater to a very specific, racialized image of womanhood.Moreover, this passage highlights the role of **desire**—not only the desire to be seen and represented but also the conditioned desire to fit into these exclusionary frameworks. The act of shopping with friends becomes a moment where social belonging is mediated by one's ability to conform physically to the standards imposed by the fashion industry. Here, Mooro's personal reflection exposes how **subjectivity** is shaped by both visibility and invisibility, as she navigates the tension between her embodied reality and the unattainable ideals promoted around her. By narrating these experiences, Mooro resists the silent normalization of these oppressive standards, transforming her alienation into a critical lens through which to question the intersections of power, culture, and identity formation. Her voice challenges the reader to reconsider how beauty, consumption, and representation function as mechanisms of exclusion, particularly for women occupying racialized and gendered positions within both Western and Arab contexts.

5.1.1 Displacement: being Othered at home

When Alya is twelve her family moves back to Cairo, where she has to start all over again. (2019:37) Although feeling very angry and being very resistant in front of the decision her mother took, Alya had a possibility to feel a sense of hope and belonging she hadn't felt in a longtime. She finally felt like she could see herself in others the way she could not in England. The returning home trope is an important feature[58] of Arab Anglophone Women's literature and it is one of the bridges that still connects the pioneers to the new generation of arab anglophone women's literature:

> I remember feeling immediately struck by a sense of home as soon as I walked into the
>
> British school in Cairo […] Walking through the gates of the school, I looked around to see

> a playground filled with hundreds of kids, all of whom looked a bit like me. In London, I
>
> had almost grown accustomed to looking likean anomaly; I hadn't realised how nice it
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> might be not to feel like one. (2019:39)

In this passage, Mooro captures the profound affective impact of **belonging**, articulated through a sudden shift in spatial and cultural context. Her description of feeling "*immediately struck by a sense of home*" upon entering the British school in Cairo highlights how identity is not only shaped by who we are, but by the environments in which we are either **visible** or rendered **anomalous**. This moment speaks directly to the emotional weight of racialized subjectivity, where the experience of *not standing out* becomes a source of unexpected comfort. Mooro's reflection reveals how, in London, she had unconsciously internalized her position as the "*anomaly*", embodying what Sara Ahmed (2007) describes as the phenomenology of whiteness, where bodies that do not align with normative whiteness are constantly made aware of their difference through spatial and social interactions.

The simplicity of "*how nice it might be not to feel like one*" underlines the affective burden of everyday **otherness**—a burden so normalized that its absence feels almost foreign. This scene also engages with postcolonial notions of diaspora identity and the fragmented relationship to belonging. Although the British school in Cairo represents a colonial legacy, it paradoxically becomes a space where Mooro momentarily feels a sense of cultural familiarity, surrounded by children "*who looked a bit like [her]*". This highlights the complexities of performing Arabness within transnational contexts, where feelings of home are not necessarily tied to nationhood, but to shared visibility and recognition. Moreover, Mooro's narrative emphasizes how **subjectivity** is formed through these subtle, affective encounters with space and community. The playground becomes more than just a physical setting—it transforms into a site of affective relief, where the constant negotiation of identity in predominantly white spaces momentarily dissolves. This aligns with Ahmed's (2004) concept of "affective economies", where emotions circulate in ways that bind individuals to social norms or, in this case, release them from the constant tension of being marked as different. Through this personal

memory, Mooro illustrates how power operates not only through overt exclusion but also through the quiet, persistent experience of being "the other" in Western societies. Her reflection exposes the desire—not to assimilate—but to exist without the continuous awareness of difference. This moment of comfort in Cairo underscores how visibility, recognition, and shared embodiment play crucial roles in shaping one's sense of agency and belonging within diasporic and postcolonial realities. In Egypt she felt like she could count on an affective community. However this affective community came with no boundaries as many rumors were made up about her and her community what she calls the "invisible jury" (2019:40) would shame her. Alya highlights how either she could be a good arab girl, or an Americanised whore. There was no space in the middle for her to express herself, it was always others that had to define her and she came to know this as her own identity. This is commonly called in sociology the problem of the second generation[59] where you are not here, nor there.

Alya explains how the experience of Ramadan in Cairo "was also particularly illuminating and alienating for me. My family don't fast, nor do we celebrate Eid (or Christmas, for that matter)" (Mooro, 2019:40-41) this problem was particularly accentuated since even though she defines herself as technically Muslim, she also states she comes from a pretty secular home. The type of alienation she felt was so exhausting she started telling everyone she was Christian (2019:41) Having learnt how to perform her Arabness in London, made her unable to fit the standards of Arabness in Egypt. She was a very atypical Muslim and this capacity to act in a way to protect herself is an expression of her agency and of how mimicry is of course an expression of power, but at the same time, failing to reproduce the norm in a precise way challenges it. Alya eventually moved back to London and new challenges expected her. She went to an all girl's private school (Mooro, 2019:56) The displacement she experienced affected her subjectivity deeply, she had to reconstruct herself again and be another type of other. She spent months crying until she eventually made friends, bonding over being Middle Eastern. Maintaining a social life was difficult, her parents were very strict, invested by moral panic,

she had a rigid curfew to prevent "bad behaviours" (2019:57) She states: "As the hours ticked by, I would begin to feel the pressure of my parents deadline. I could never outpace it; It was always there, lurking at the back of the enjoyment." (2019:58) She was constantly on the verge of an anxiety attack and recalls feeling physically ill whenever her father called, fearing he was trying to detect the scent of cigarettes or alcohol on her. Her body was under constant surveillance, as was her behavior. Over time, she began to live a double life—even in England—driven by her need to remain socially intelligible and avoid judgment. She would tell her parents she was spending time with her Middle Eastern friends, with whom things felt easier, as there was no need for explanations or justifications. While writing her memoir, she began speaking with other women, uncovering shared experiences of navigating similar tensions and silences. "Many of the Middle Eastern women I spoke to told me that their fathers were also predominantly the scary authority figure." (2019:59) But the double life she started to live in London, did not really feel like the one she started to live in Egypt. Because in Egypt, people would experience the same kind of restrictions and obstacles to their social lives. While here she felt lonely. In fact, she states:

> "I had drunk and smoked in Egypt before, and I had even kissed a couple of boys, but something felt different about doing those things so openly in London. In Egypt I had always felt safe. I had felt like I was constantly surrounded by people who - regardless of whether they were friends or strangers - were basically my family and would have my back […] no matter what. I didn't feel like that in London […]"(2019:60)

In Egypt everybody knew each other and protected each other. Even though this mostly felt like an obstacle, now that she was in London, she started to miss that collectivistic, relational connectivity. She felt out of place, somehow like no matter what she did she would always be different. In fear of missing out, she would be very rebellious and this rebellion would be met with grounding, violence.

In Egypt for a long time corporal punishment was normalised because of a structural lack of communication between family members (Mooro, 2019:64-65)

She speaks of herself as "something of a master liar" (2019:63) Everytime she tried to defy the strict rules her parents imposed to her, she was met with the narrative of the East vs West dichotomy: "The choices are often made to feel like "East" versus "West" rather than "right" versus "wrong". Being an Arab growing up in the West, therefore, your Wonsan behaviours are constantly set in opposition to the supposedly immoral "other"."(2019:66) In this double life she was leading, she was still not able to live at least one fulfilling life. One of the reasons why Ramy Ali wrote *Becoming Arab in London* is the fact that his sister was unable to fulfill the requirements the community seemed to expect from her. She failed to perform. In fact when he speaks about his sister he refers to her inability to:

> master and embody the female, middle-class, Egyptian, Arab and Muslim 'identities' (not necessarily in that order) that she was expected to grow into, or as Butler (1990) following de Beauvoir (1997 [1949]) would described it, she failed 'to do' or 'to become' those things. She was neither passive, feminine or studious enough, nor had she mastered the art of living two lives, one in and one beyond the home and family. She was unable to make those desires, aspirations and behavioural norms her own, ultimately casting her as an anomaly and unintelligible, drawing her into constant conflict with those around her. (2015:2)

Whenever Alya would get caught making mistakes her mum would alway say "we don't do these things" (2019:67) whether it was boyfriends, clubbing, sleep-overs or cohabitation, Alya grew with this struggle and had to find ways to circumvent it. Eventually she learned that identity is the *hudud* you are put and that: "It's ultimately very difficult craft and identity and gauge your own moral compass when faced with all this burdens of external perception., and when each of your decision seems to carry so much weight." (2019:69) Alya's recurrent feeling of being a *fraud*—stemming from her perceived inability to perform according to the normative expectations of her Arabness—reveals the intricate entanglement between identity, performativity, and power within diasporic and hybrid contexts. Her internal struggle illustrates how Arabness, particularly for women, is not simply an

inherited cultural identity but a performative construct, constantly policed and reaffirmed through gendered expectations. As Judith Butler argues, identity is produced through repeated acts within a regulatory framework, and for women like Alya, failure to conform to these acts risks disqualification from cultural belonging. This tension becomes even more pronounced in what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) terms the *borderlands*—the liminal spaces where conflicting cultural, familial, and societal demands intersect. Within these spaces, the crafting of subjectivity is constrained by the necessity to choose between personal agency and collective acceptance, a dilemma uniquely gendered and exacerbated by patriarchal structures. While the women Alya interviews emphasize the centrality of family—a recurring pillar in Arab socio-cultural narratives—there remains a conspicuous silence surrounding the *claustrophobia* and *frustration of desire* engendered by such affective attachments.

This silence, as Sara Ahmed (2004) suggests in her theory of affective economies, is not merely absence but a product of circulating emotions—such as duty, shame, and love—that sustain social cohesion by regulating women's desires and movements. Furthermore, this affective policing illustrates what Saba Mahmood describes as the paradox of agency, where compliance and endurance are often misread as passivity rather than complex negotiations within power-laden structures. The repression of desire in this context transcends the sexual sphere, encompassing the yearning for self-determination, multiplicity, and the freedom to inhabit a fluid subjectivity without fear of cultural alienation. Thus, the unspoken frustrations Alya and her interlocutors experience underscore how affect, desire, and agency are intricately woven into the fabric of power, rendering even the articulation of dissatisfaction a radical gesture in contexts where women's identities serve as the custodians of cultural authenticity. While Alya Mooro's narrative is marked by a sense of dislocation—othered in London yet never fully belonging in Egypt—her experience also reveals the comforting pull of a community that, despite its constraints, offers a sense of rootedness and collective care absent in the diaspora. This ambivalence between estrangement and belonging echoes in Malak's story, yet takes a different trajectory. For Malak, the return to Cairo is not merely a reconnection with familiar spaces but a symbolic reawakening of her nativist identity—a reclaiming

of herself as a "daughter of the desert." Unlike Alya's oscillation between two worlds, Malak's homecoming is framed as an affirmation of origin, where Egypt becomes both a geographical and existential anchor, allowing her to embody a sense of belonging that transcends the fractures of displacement.

5.1.2. Returning to Nativism: Becoming Daughter of the Desert

If Alya Mooro's journey is shaped by the tension of navigating between two worlds, constantly negotiating belonging and otherness, Malak's path takes a decisive turn towards rootedness. When she announces to her parents her intention to move to Cairo, it marks not just a geographical shift, but a conscious embrace of origin—a return to a homeland that promises a sense of identity and belonging that the diaspora could never fully offer. In Ahdaf Soueif's Arab Anglophone women's pivotal work, *In the Eye of the Sun*, (1992) Asya, the protagonists expresses a deep longing for home and family in Egypt—an Egypt that is often romanticized or idealized in her imagination. Similarly, in *These Impossible Things*, Malak longs for Egypt to provide her with a sense of identity and belonging. For both women, movement—whether physical, emotional, or narrative—is not simply a passage through space but an active process of shaping and making meaning. Just as Asya's journey involves constructing her sense of self across borders, Malak, too, seeks to reclaim authorship over her own story and define herself on her own terms. Malak joins her family in the kitchen for their comforting Sunday brunch, a cherished weekly tradition. Seeing her parents' affectionate interaction stirs her emotions, and she begins to cry, overwhelmed by her heartbreak and a longing to feel more connected to Egypt, her parents' homeland. When her parents express concern, Malak blames her tears on a general sense of restlessness "There is something in her that knows it's not only heartbreak splitting her open. That something has been growing roots in her for years, and her broken heart is

breaking open the thing that kept all her wants stuffed quietly inside." (El Wardany, 2022:58-59) As the family discusses ways to lift her spirits, Malak suggests the idea of moving to Cairo:

> "She cannot stop running her fingers over maps, and the desire to be more Egyptian than English is swallowing her.[…] The family responds positively, and she starts to consider the move as a serious possibility. Loss has made her brave […] She mentions better Arabic and more time with the family and her parents' faces light up. […] You're a daughter of the desert, hayati," he says. "Egypt will always call you home." (El Wardany, 2022:58-59)

While packing, she pauses over a photograph of herself, Kees, and Jenna, remembering a past conversation about Harry and Jacob converting to Islam and whether faith inspired by marriage could be considered genuine: "Jenna, with the enthusiasm and bright-eyed view she always employed, had said: "Look, I think maybe this is just how we do our Jihad these days." (El Wardany, 2022:61)

Malak's impulsive decision to return to Cairo emerges as a response not only to personal heartbreak but also to the deeper tensions of navigating a fragmented identity. Her desire "*to be more Egyptian than English*" reveals how affect—particularly loss and dislocation—acts as a catalyst for re-negotiating subjectivity within the framework of diasporic identity. As Sara Ahmed suggests, emotions move individuals, orienting them towards certain spaces, people, or imagined versions of self. Here, Malak's grief does not paralyze her; instead, "*loss has made her brave*", propelling her towards Egypt in search of a coherent selfhood that feels unattainable in the liminal space of the diaspora. This return, however, is not merely geographical—it reflects a common **narrative trope** in Arab Anglophone women's writing, where "home" is idealized as a site of **authenticity** and cultural grounding. Yet, El Wardany complicates this trope by showing that Malak's longing is less about Egypt itself and more about escaping the emotional weight of performing a double life in the West— a life marked by the constant negotiation of cultural, religious, and gendered expectations. The notion of relational selfhood becomes central here. Cut off from the emotional support of her girlfriends, Malak seeks intelligibility and belonging within the familiar structures of family and nation. This reflects Judith Butler's idea that recognition—being seen within social frameworks—constitutes the

very possibility of subjectivity. In Malak's case, returning to Egypt symbolizes a retreat into spaces where her identity feels less fractured, even if that sense of wholeness is illusory. Jenna's remark—"*maybe this is just how we do our Jihad these days*"—adds a critical layer to the narrative, framing the women's struggles as a form of spiritual and existential resistance. By invoking Jihad, not in its reductive Western interpretation, but as an internal struggle towards alignment with one's authentic self and faith, El Wardany situates these women's experiences within a broader discourse of Islamic feminism. Navigating intra-faith relationships, balancing religious devotion with personal desire, and resisting both Western stereotypes and patriarchal readings of Islam, becomes their modern Jihad. Moreover, this shared struggle underscores the importance of female solidarity and community in crafting spaces of agency. While Malak momentarily turns to family and homeland for stability, Jenna's perspective highlights a collective effort to redefine what it means to live authentically as Muslim women in contemporary contexts. Their conversations about **redemption** reflect not submission to normative frameworks, but an active search for strategies to inhabit their identities fully—across religion, culture, and personal desire. Thus, El Wardany weaves a narrative where affect, displacement, and faith intersect, illustrating how Arab Muslim women negotiate subjectivity and agency in a world that constantly demands performance, compromise, and resilience. About Jihad, Kees feels differently:

> "Kees snorted in disbelief. "Considering we're having sex with these men before marriage, I think that might cancel out our sainthood." "Not necessarily," said Malak. "Redemption has to count for something." "Well, the Catholics do it all the time. Commit a sin, confess, and then there's redemption and everyone is fine. "Exactly," said Malak, with a grin. […] "But we're not Catholic," argued Kees. "Oh please," interrupted Jenna. "It's all the same God. If he's forgiving Catholics, he's definitely forgiving Muslims." "So why haven't you had sex yet, then, Jenna?" asked Kees […] "Jenna shrugged. "God might be forgiving but Arab men aren't." ." (El Wardany, 2022:62)

This dialogue between Kees, Malak, and Jenna exposes the complex interplay between religious morality, female sexual agency, and the pervasive double standards enforced by patriarchal norms within Arab societies. Through a tone that oscillates between irony and pragmatism, El Wardany captures how these women navigate their desires within frameworks that simultaneously condemn and control them. The casual reference to "*redemption*" and comparisons with Catholic practices highlight a playful yet critical reflection on how religious doctrines are interpreted—and often selectively applied—when it comes to women's sexuality. Jenna's final remark, "*God might be forgiving but Arab men aren't*", distills the heart of the issue: it is not solely divine judgment these women fear, but the **social** consequences imposed by a patriarchal culture obsessed with female purity. This aligns with findings from Sanaa El Aji and Ramy Aly, whose interviews reveal how **gendered socialization** in Arab contexts constructs a deeply hypocritical sexual morality—where male premarital sexual experience is tolerated, even expected, while women are held to rigid standards of chastity, with **virginity** positioned as a prerequisite for marriage. El Wardany uses this exchange to critique the moral double bind in which Arab women find themselves—expected to embody both modern, sexually liberated subjectivities and traditional ideals of honourable femininity. This tension reflects what Fatema Mernissi identifies as the control of women's bodies as a cornerstone of maintaining patriarchal order within Islamic societies. The women's conversation, filled with sarcasm and resigned humour, becomes a site of resistance, where they expose and mock the contradictions they are forced to live with. Furthermore, this passage highlights how these women are actively engaged in reinterpreting religious concepts like sin, confession, and redemption, not in submission to dogma but as a way to carve out spaces of agency within restrictive moral frameworks. Their dialogue illustrates a form of everyday feminism, where negotiation, humour, and solidarity become tools to cope with, and subtly challenge, oppressive norms. Jenna's pragmatism in abstaining from sex is not a sign of passive acceptance but rather a calculated response to the realities of **social surveillance** and the limited margin of error allowed to women within these cultural contexts. It reflects an acute awareness of how desire must be constantly negotiated against the backdrop of

reputational risk—a theme central to the lived experiences of many Arab women, both within the region and in diasporic settings. Through this interaction, El Wardany foregrounds the ways in which power, religion, and gendered expectations intersect, shaping the contours of female sexual agency. The women's candid discussion underscores the dissonance between personal faith, communal norms, and individual desire, revealing how Arab women must navigate a landscape where forgiveness may come from God, but rarely from society.

5.1.3. Holy, Godsent Love in the desert

Malak starts her day early to enjoy the rare calm of Cairo mornings. She's settled into a routine of eating the same type of sandwich each day while gazing out over the city, reflecting on its contrasts with England. Though her Arabic is limited, she's learning to interpret the tones and rhythms of Egyptian speech, which helps her navigate interactions more easily. Her job teaching at an international school is straightforward, as classes are conducted in English. Afternoons are spent at a local pool, while evenings are divided between socializing with family and community members and going out to clubs or restaurants with her roommates, Nylah and Rayan, with whom she's developed a close friendship. Living in Cairo allows her salary to stretch much further than it ever did in England. Despite feeling slightly guilty about drinking, Malak rationalizes it by reminding herself that she ended her relationship for her faith and deserves some leniency. After discussing their shared guilt, Nylah suggested they visit the mosque together, leading to a weekly prayer ritual. Malak thinks back to her first meeting with Nylah and Rayan, sisters raised in Italy who came to Egypt to master Arabic. She sees them as part of the "rich Arab crowd," much like Jenna. Malak often reminisces about her friendships with Jenna and Kees, sometimes pulling out a hidden photo of the three of them, though she avoids discussing these relationships with her current roommates. During one of their visits to the mosque, Malak meets Ali, a fellow Brit who, unlike her, was born in England. Their

playful banter quickly turns flirtatious, though Malak fibs about attending a different mosque during her first months in Cairo. By the end of their conversation, they exchange phone numbers:

> "She is stubbornly moving forward, every step in this new life taking her closer and closer toward the woman she has always imagined herself to be. She has become a person with roots. […] So when Malak finally meets him, […] and he says, "Hi, I'm Ali," she feels like all the steps she's ever taken have been leading her to this very moment. And here, in the courtyard of one of the most famous mosques in the world and, in her opinion, one of the most beautiful, she feels like she's arrived.[…] this journey has been God sent because how else could she be here, in the land of her ancestors, underneath the minarets, palm to palm with a man who's so beautiful she is suddenly lost for words?" (El Wardany, 2022:105)

Malak starts believing in the fact that every step of her painful breakup from Jacob and Kees and the departure led her here to this Holy God sent type of love. Malak is in the process of becoming the good Arab girl she has always longed to be:

> she understands the importance of shared faith and how God can create something holy between two people because falling in love with Ali has been the most divine experience of her life. It has been worship; approached with the same intensity and fever of religion the rewards almost transcendental[…] here on the hot streets of Cairo, in marble mosques that outshine the churches of England, God has pulled the world into a perfect pattern that keeps them both at the heart of it, and believing that God has brought you together is perhaps the most powerful aphrodisiac she has ever taken. (El Wardany, 2022:144)

Malak's relocation to Cairo and her ensuing romance with Ali mark a pivotal moment in her journey of self-construction, where desire, faith, and identity become deeply entangled. El Wardany crafts a narrative in which romantic love is not merely personal but elevated to a **divine experience**, framing Malak's emotional fulfillment as "*Godsent*." This association between love and spirituality reflects how women's desires are often legitimized when aligned with religious or culturally sanctioned narratives. Malak doesn't simply fall in love—she experiences love as an act of **worship**, a sentiment

she describes with "*the intensity and fever of religion*," revealing how the sacred is mobilized to give meaning and moral weight to her choices. Many women, during prayer or when they connect with God, experience emotions similar to those one might encounter in a romantic relationship. El Wardany thus exposes the subtle mechanisms through which **faith and desire** co-produce a sense of purpose and belonging for Arab women navigating between Western individualism and Arab-Muslim cultural frameworks. Malak's belief that "*God has pulled the world into a perfect pattern*" demonstrates a retreat into **teleological thinking**, where personal hardships are retrospectively justified as part of a divine plan leading to romantic and spiritual fulfillment. This echoes traditional narratives of fate and predestination, but El Wardany complicates this by showing how Malak actively seeks to embody the role of the "*good Arab girl*" she has "*always longed to be.*" Her agency operates within—and is shaped by—the desire to conform to a culturally intelligible model of womanhood, one where love, faith, and sexuality are harmonized under the banner of divine approval such as the women encountered by Saba Mahmood (2004), The eroticization of shared faith—"*the thrill of being able to thank God with the man you're sleeping with*"—highlights how religious discourse can serve not only as a tool of constraint but also as a space where desire is sanctified. This reflects an Islamic feminist perspective, where women reinterpret religious practices and meanings to carve out spaces of agency within patriarchal structures. However, Malak's narrative also reveals the ambivalence of this process: while she finds empowerment in this holy framing of love, it remains anchored in a culturally idealized script where legitimacy comes through alignment with God's will. Moreover, Malak's physical and emotional immersion in Cairo—the "*hot streets*" and "*marble mosques*"—positions the desert not merely as a backdrop but as a symbolic space of spiritual awakening and erotic fulfillment. The Orientalist trope of the desert as a site of mysticism and transformation is re-appropriated here, but El Wardany is careful to show that this transformation is driven by affective needs: the longing for rootedness, coherence, and recognition within familiar cultural and religious landscapes. Through Malak's journey, El Wardany critiques and simultaneously navigates the fine line between self-realization and cultural conformity, illustrating

how Arab women negotiate agency by embedding personal desire within frameworks of faith and destiny. This "*holy, Godsent love*" becomes both a source of empowerment and a reflection of the social narratives that dictate which forms of desire are acceptable, celebrated, and intelligible.

5.2. Locked Doors: a Matter of Class

Yet, while Malak envisions her love as a divine blessing—*holy*, *God-sent*, and harmoniously aligned with her sense of self and belonging—the experience of Kees stands in stark contrast. For Kees, love does not arrive as a liberating or sacred force, but rather as a complicated negotiation with cultural, religious, and familial boundaries. Her relationship with Harry becomes a site of anxiety and prohibition, where the impossibility of cohabitation before marriage and the weight of parental disapproval transform desire into a source of internal conflict rather than spiritual fulfillment.

"She has picked up her father's habit of checking doors to see if they're locked. […] Kees thinks it's something to do with living in this country. If closed doors are all that's offered, you learn to push against them, even when you know they don't move." (El Wardany, 2022:85-86) Kees has fully dedicated herself to her demanding job at a law firm supporting refugees, asylum seekers, and marginalized communities. Despite the long hours and low pay, she finds fulfillment in helping clients who arrive fearful and, when successful, leave with hope. Her commitment has distanced her from her family, but her parents remain proud, with her mother continuing to show care by sending homemade curries, despite Kees' concerns. In this passage, El Wardany uses the recurring motif of locked doors to symbolize the structural barriers Kees faces as the daughter of immigrants, a woman, and an activist operating within intersecting systems of class, race, and gendered power. Kees's compulsive habit of checking doors—an inherited behavior from her father—functions as both a literal act of vigilance and a metaphor for the psychological imprint of living within a society where opportunities are limited and access is conditional. The reflection that "*if closed doors are all that's offered, you learn to push against them, even when you know they don't move*" encapsulates the

embodied experience of systemic exclusion, a persistent theme in narratives of marginalized subjectivities. El Wardany situates Kees within a framework of affective labour, where her dedication to supporting refugees and marginalized groups becomes a form of resistance against the very structures that have shaped her family's existence. Yet, this commitment comes at a personal cost—distancing her from familial rituals and emotional intimacy. The detail of her mother sending curries by mail, despite safety concerns, highlights how love and care in immigrant families are often expressed through pragmatic, material gestures, rather than open emotional dialogue. These non-verbal exchanges reflect what the circulation of affect within familial and cultural economies, where emotions like guilt, duty, and care structure relational dynamics. Kees's internal conflict—torn between professional activism and familial obligations—is further intensified by the expectations tied to **class mobility** and cultural norms. Her guilt over missing her sister's wedding preparations reveals how success in activist spaces does not exempt women from the gendered expectations of domestic and familial participation, particularly within Arab and South Asian diasporic contexts. This tension aligns with postcolonial feminist critiques of how women are positioned at the intersection of public resistance and private conformity. Moreover, Kees's anxiety surrounding her secret relationship with Harry foregrounds the persistent negotiation between **personal desire** and the moral codes imposed by her community. The precariousness of this relationship, coupled with her growing estrangement from friends like Jenna, underscores the emotional burden of living a fragmented identity—where visibility in one sphere necessitates concealment in another. El Wardany uses moments of silence, doubt, and emotional fatigue to illustrate the affective toll of navigating these invisible boundaries. The narrative's oscillation between Kees's professional achievements and her private insecurities speaks to the complexities of subjectivity formation under conditions of cultural surveillance and class-based pressures. Kees is not simply a figure of resilience; she embodies the contradictions of seeking agency within a framework that continuously demands compromise. Her reflection that "she is happy, apart from the moments she feels like she's going to die of sadness" (2022:88) encapsulates the duality of empowerment and exhaustion—a dynamic central to affect theory, where emotions are

both a source of movement and a site of constraint. In this context, Kees's story becomes a critique of the myth of meritocracy and the illusion of linear progress often associated with activism and class ascension. The locked doors she pushes against are not just personal obstacles but represent entrenched systems of exclusion that shape the lives of racialized, working-class women. El Wardany thus foregrounds how agency is negotiated through everyday acts of endurance, where moments of resistance coexist with emotional vulnerability, highlighting the broader politics of belonging, identity, and survival within diasporic communities.

5.2.1 Guilt, Otherness, White Priviledge

Kees likes going to Harry's house because everything is less serious. However it is also a context where she feels the difference between her and Harry are enhanced. The family jokes about an affair and Kees feels out of place: "For a moment she considers her father coming home and joking about his wife and the postman and she feels momentarily sick." (El Wardany, 2022:89) She remembers she is in love with a rich white man. Kees feels even more out of place when she is offered a drink and says no. For a while Harry hasn't drunk and eaten pork, and Kees feels guilty for the things he had to give up for her. In this scene, El Wardany deftly captures the subtle yet pervasive dynamics of **racial and classed otherness** within Kees's relationship with Harry. While Kees appreciates the light-hearted atmosphere of Harry's home—"*everything is less serious*"—this very ease becomes a site of discomfort, highlighting the stark contrast between Harry's privileged, carefree existence and Kees's own cultural and socio-economic background. The family's casual joke about infidelity, which triggers Kees's visceral reaction—"*she feels momentarily sick*"—serves as a narrative device to expose the cultural dissonance she experiences. For Kees, such jokes are not innocent banter but evoke a world where familial stability is tied to honour, reputation, and far stricter social codes. El Wardany uses this moment to illustrate how white middle-class privilege manifests not only in material comfort but in the freedom to treat serious matters lightly—a freedom Kees cannot fully

access. The awareness that she is "*in love with a rich white man*" sharpens her sense of otherness, as Kees becomes hyper-conscious of the cultural, racial, and classed boundaries that separate her from Harry's world, even within the intimacy of their relationship. The offer of alcohol further reinforces these boundaries. Kees's refusal, contrasted with Harry's temporary abstention from drinking and eating pork, introduces a nuanced exploration of guilt—not imposed by Harry, but internally generated by Kees as she reflects on the compromises he has made for her. This dynamic reveals how Kees navigates a complex emotional terrain shaped by both her own cultural values and the unspoken expectations of assimilation within a white, Western context. Her guilt is symptomatic of what Sara Ahmed describes as the affective burden of diversity (2012:270) where the presence of the racialized subject in normative white spaces demands constant negotiation, adjustment, and emotional labour. Moreover, Kees's discomfort highlights the **power asymmetry** inherent in interracial relationships marked by class difference. While Harry can "choose" to abstain from certain practices as a gesture of solidarity, Kees's cultural and religious boundaries are non-negotiable aspects of her identity. This asymmetry places Kees in a position where gratitude and guilt intersect, reflecting the invisible pressures placed on women of colour to manage not only their own subjectivity but also the emotional balance of cross-cultural relationships. El Wardany's portrayal of these micro-aggressions and internal conflicts speaks to a broader critique of white liberal tolerance, where surface-level acceptance often masks deeper structural inequalities. Kees is not confronted with overt racism, but with the quiet alienation that arises from existing within a space where her difference is both accommodated and subtly highlighted. Her sense of unbelonging, even in intimate settings, underscores the persistent reality of otherness in contexts shaped by white normativity and class privilege. Through this narrative, El Wardany exposes how love does not dissolve the complexities of race, class, and culture, but rather becomes another arena where these forces are negotiated. Kees's experience reflects the emotional costs of navigating such intersections, where desire, guilt, and identity are constantly entangled within the politics of privilege and marginalization. During a conversation with Harry's parents, Nathaniel and Vivian, they subtly suggest that Harry and Kees

should consider moving into a larger property they are planning to buy, implying that Kees's apartment is too small for both of them. Although they try to be polite, referring to her place as "*lovely*," Kees fixates on their use of the word "*little*" and reflects on the stark contrast between their privileged lifestyle and her own background. The mention of a "*three-bedroom*" property highlights the class divide, leading Kees to wonder how Harry's family would perceive the true meaning of "small" if they ever saw her family home. Kees starts comparing their economic condition. Harry is white, rich and privileged. She is brown, from the lower class and daughter of immigrants. They have different standards for what little is. Kees is confronted with the stark contrast between her socio-economic background and Harry's privileged, white, middle-class reality. The casual use of the word "*little*" by Harry's parents becomes a subtle reminder of the **class divide** that separates their worlds. What is deemed "*small*" in Harry's family—referring to a three-bedroom property—stands in sharp opposition to Kees's lived experience as a brown woman from a working-class, immigrant family, where spatial constraints carry a very different meaning. This moment highlights how **privilege operates invisibly** for those who possess it, while Kees remains acutely aware of the disparities that shape her sense of self. The comparison is not simply about material conditions, but about the **emotional weight** of navigating spaces where her identity is continuously marked by difference—of race, class, and cultural capital. Through this reflection, El Wardany subtly critiques the everyday language of privilege, exposing how class and racial hierarchies are reinforced through seemingly innocent interactions. Even though they do agree on one thing, that she should not be pregnant before marriage and that feels like relief for her, that makes them religiously close in a way, but a very small one:

> "Could also be a great place to start a family," he finishes.Kees feels her neck snap toward
> him and hears Harry say, "Dad, no one is starting a family just yet.""Well, of course not,"
> exclaims Vivian, looking equally shocked. "You'd have to be married first."For the first
> time, Kees feels like their worlds have taken a small step toward each other as she's silently
> as shocked as Vivian at the suggestion of babies before marriage. (El Wardany, 2022:92)

Kees recognizes her intersectional identity—brown, Muslim, and less financially privileged—as something Harry's family will never fully grasp, deepening her sense of difference. Yet even amidst these tensions, there is a faint common ground in their shared aversion to the idea of a child outside of marriage, a momentary reprieve from cultural dissonance. Kees's guilt over the compromises Harry has made—abandoning alcohol and pork—is tied to her sense of responsibility in their relationship. This guilt compounds as she refuses the offer to move in with him, her steadfast adherence to cultural expectations at odds with the DuVaughns' casual approach to cohabitation:

> "It's really not about rent," Kees says, smiling back. "I wouldn't move in with Harry before
>
> we were married and my family certainly wouldn't be happy with that, nor would I." […]
>
> "There's nothing to discuss. It's important that I'm married before I officially move in with
>
> anyone. That's just how it works in my culture." (El Wardany, 2022:94)

Her invocation of "culture" forces the conversation into an uncomfortable space for Harry's family, revealing how such invocations create a performative scramble for respect while underscoring their lack of true understanding or accommodation of her needs. Ultimately, Kees feels caught between the expectations of her culture and her desire for self-determination, aware that these tensions not only shape her relationship with Harry but also her internal narrative of belonging and resistance. This tension resonates deeply with the thesis's focus on agency, power, and affect, revealing how emotions—guilt, alienation, love, and duty—become the battlegrounds where Arab Muslim women like Kees assert their subjectivity. Kees's careful navigation of these spaces reflects the broader negotiation of identity, power, and resistance that shapes her world. Cariello (317-320) explains that In The Map Of Love by Arab Anglophone woman writer trailblazer Ahdaf Soueif, the dynamic between the protagonist and her white lover reflects a colonial relationship marked by an insurmountable distance between the two disparate cultures, leading to cultural and even linguistic barriers that make Asya feel disoriented. In Kee's case, although many differences will be equally insurmountable, she is able to express and fulfill her needs in an affirmative sense.

5.2.2 Strange Encounters

Kees, now used to the lively disorder of her law office, works alongside her friend Addy, who slowly becomes her only support system, his queerness, the fact that he is brown and that they share numerous axes of discrimination and are aware of systemic injustice makes them bond. "Adnan is Pakistani and by day insists on being called Addy because it is just easier for everyone to pronounce, while occasionally by night he becomes a drag queen named Nana who performs eighties classics, but mostly just Madonna hits." (El Wardany, 2022:109 Noticing her low spirits after dinner with Harry's family, Addy asks what's wrong. Kees confesses that she's been avoiding conversations about the flat purchase, hoping the problem will resolve itself. Addy gently reminds her that this approach is unlikely to work and empathizes with how hard it is to love someone her family would not approve of. Later, at work, their conversation is interrupted by a colleague, Emily, who criticizes Kees's decision not to "officially" live with Harry before marriage, calling it hypocritical. Emily's dismissive tone about Kees's situation leaves her feeling frustrated and more aware of her otherness. At that point Emily Fortridge will tell her that her parents will eventually understand just like hers accepted that she is vegan. As if the conflict inside of her as a borderlands[60] woman were not loud enough, Kees found herself in the position to have to explain to a white judgemental nosy woman how her culture works, exposing herself to the violence of white priviledged narrow minds. In this passage, El Wardany stages a confrontation that exposes the pervasive **cultural insensitivity** and

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[60] Gloria Anzaldùa when speaking of being at the border, namely inhabiting a frontier between two cultures states that: "The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy." (1987:6)

entitlement often exhibited by individuals operating from a position of **white, secular privilege**. Through Emily's intrusive questioning and dismissive remarks, the narrative reveals how Kees is forced into a defensive position "Because I'm Muslim, Emily, and we don't live with people before marriage." compelled to justify deeply personal aspects of her identity—her faith, her relationship choices, and her moral boundaries—in the face of casual yet insistent interrogation. El Wardany's use of **dialogue** here is significant; the sharp, escalating exchange captures the everyday microaggressions that Muslim women endure, particularly when their values conflict with Western liberal norms. Emily's tone—ranging from faux curiosity "Oh, you're buying a property, Kees? Congratulations." […] "No, I'm not; my boyfriend's parents are buying one for him." "Oh right. So, you're moving in there with him?" she asks. (El Wardany, 2022:115-117)to outright accusation— "Well, that's a little hypocritical, isn't it?"[…] It's just a little two-faced, isn't it?"illustrates what Sara Ahmed would describe as the affect of being made strange, where the burden of explanation is placed upon the racialized or religious "other." In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed examines how emotions do not reside in subjects or objects, but rather "move between bodies" and play a crucial role in the production of social boundaries—such as the distinction between insiders and outsiders, or nationals and foreigners. The affect of being made strange refers to how racialized, queer, or migrant bodies are made to feel out of place, and how this process is charged with emotion— such as fear, disgust, or anxiety. Moreover in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* Ahmed suggests that "it is the processes of expelling or welcoming the one who is recognised as a stranger that produce the figure of the stranger in the first place." (2000:4) Emily's insistence that Kees's choices are "*hypocritical*" or "*two-faced*" reflects a profound misunderstanding of cultural nuance and religious practice, filtered through a lens of Western moral superiority. Kees's growing impatience and internal fantasies of resistance (she has the recurring thought of throwing her coffee) highlight the emotional labour required to navigate such interactions without escalating conflict. This tension between outward composure and internal frustration exemplifies how power operates in subtle, everyday exchanges—forcing marginalized individuals to manage not only their

own emotions but also the discomfort of those who question them. The conversation also underscores the invisibility of privilege. "Well," says Emily, "why don't you get married?" Emily's inability to grasp why Kees cannot simply "*get married*" or "*break up*" reveals a worldview where cultural and religious frameworks are dismissed as inconvenient obstacles to personal freedom. This reflects broader postcolonial critiques of how Western secularism positions itself as universal, while framing non-Western practices as irrational or regressive. Moreover, El Wardany highlights the intersection of gender, religion, and race. Kees's relationship is scrutinized not just because of personal choices but because, as a Muslim woman of colour, her autonomy is constantly policed—both by her own cultural norms and by external, often hostile, secular perspectives. The irony lies in Emily accusing Kees of hypocrisy, while failing to recognize the double bind Kees inhabits: navigating a relationship that transgresses both Islamic expectations and Western assumptions about modern femininity and freedom. "Because," replies Kees, breathing in deeply and hoping to stifle the overwhelming feeling of being washed out to sea, "he's not Muslim." Emily looks blankly at her. "So?" "So, I can't marry someone who isn't Muslim, Emily. It's against our religion."

The metaphor of being "*washed out to sea*" poignantly captures Kees's sense of disorientation and exhaustion—a recurring affective state for individuals caught between conflicting cultural demands. El Wardany uses this imagery to emphasize how such moments are not isolated incidents but part of a continuous negotiation of subjectivity within oppressive social frameworks. Ultimately, this passage critiques the violence of liberal individualism, where personal choices are expected to align with Western ideals of consistency and transparency, leaving no room for the complexities, contradictions, and negotiations inherent in diasporic, religious, and racialized identities. Kees's restrained response, "*It's complicated,*" becomes an act of both survival and resistance—refusing to simplify her reality for the comfort of those unwilling to understand it. Meanwhile, Jacob visits Kees at work, immediately making her anxious that something might have happened to Harry. Speaking cryptically, he asks to talk privately and insists she not tell Harry. Confused and uneasy, Kees agrees to meet him for a drink after work and spends the rest of the day worrying. When they meet, Jacob

reveals that Harry plans to propose. Kees is taken aback, not just by the news but also by how close Harry and Jacob seem to be—a sentiment Jacob notes Malak had also expressed with amusement. Jacob goes on to explain that Harry is hurt by Kees's refusal to ever introduce him to her parents. When Kees begins to argue about white privilege, Jacob cuts her off, saying that while Harry acknowledges his privilege, it doesn't invalidate the emotions he's feeling. Jacob admits that he found it deeply painful when Malak, despite loving him, never envisioned a future together. He urges Kees to "get [her] shit together" before Harry proposes, so she can "give him the right answer". Emphasizing that this conversation is for Harry's sake, Jacob warns her not to mention it to him. When Kees admits she's unsure if she'll accept Harry's proposal, Jacob finds it surprising given how long they've been together. He advises her to avoid making a decision she'll regret, sharing how much his breakup with Malak still hurts—a pain he believes will always linger, reminding her that agency is the capacity to act: "I can't fucking magic away my religion and ethnicity, Jacob," she interrupts. "We don't have that privilege."[…] "You can't do any of those things. But you can make a choice, and that's all there is (El Wardany, 2022:125) As Jacob talks about his breakup with Malak, the narrative shifts to reveal that Malak, in Cairo, experiences a sudden pang and finds herself thinking of Jacob. Meanwhile, in England, Kees is struck by how heartbroken Jacob appears while talking about Malak and her quest for an Arab man that could reconcile her desire with the desire of her community:

> She wants everything that comes with the Muslim man. The culture, the family, the traditions," he leans forward toward Kees,[…] And the funny thing is, this life she's now living is the real lie. Sure, it's part of her, but it's not all of her. And one day, she's going to remember that (El Wardany, 2022:126)

For the rest of the week, Kees reflects on Jacob's heartbreak, feeling increasingly nauseous. The discomfort lifts only when she accepts Harry's proposal. As she kisses Harry, feeling grateful and content, she acknowledges that if she hadn't talked to Jacob and witnessed the pain of his breakup, she might have turned down the proposal. The emotions the encounter with Jacob and the proposal

created in her moved her into accepting. As Harry slides the ring onto her finger and kisses her long and deep, she thinks of Jacob's face […] That was the day she learned that the way a heart breaks can change the course of a life." El Wardany, (2022:128) In this passage, El Wardany stages a rare reversal of perspective, allowing Jacob—a white, Western man—to articulate the emotional toll of being rendered invisible within a relationship shaped by cultural and religious boundaries. His frustration highlights a key tension in interracial relationships: while Kees carries the burden of navigating familial and societal expectations tied to her identity as a Muslim woman of colour, Jacob voices the pain of being **excluded** from her private world. His accusation—"*wanting to build a life with someone who keeps you hidden is brutal*"—reveals a form of emotional vulnerability often overlooked in discussions centered on privilege.

However, El Wardany carefully frames Jacob's outburst within a context of awareness. Jacob pre-empts Kees's critique of "*white boys and privilege*", demonstrating that while he intellectually recognizes his position of social advantage, he still demands recognition of his emotional suffering. This moment exposes the complexity of affective dynamics in relationships marked by unequal cultural stakes: while Kees must manage the fear of community judgment, Jacob wrestles with feelings of rejection and invisibility, albeit from a position where his identity is never under threat in the broader societal context. El Wardany's narrative here invites a nuanced reflection on intersectionality—showing that while privilege protects Jacob from systemic oppression, it does not shield him from personal pain. Yet, his assertion that "*we can't say anything to you guys because it's harder for you*" subtly reinforces the imbalance: Kees's silence is not a weapon but a survival strategy within a cultural framework where openly dating a non-Muslim man could lead to significant familial and social consequences. The passage also critiques the emotional labour expected from women like Kees, who must constantly balance the emotional needs of their partners with the weight of cultural preservation and familial duty. Jacob's demand for visibility, though understandable, ignores the broader structures that force Kees into this position of concealment. His framing of the situation as "*heartbreaking*" centers his own affective experience, reflecting how even well-meaning individuals

can reproduce entitlement when their emotional needs clash with the realities of marginalized partners. Ultimately, El Wardany uses this exchange to explore how love becomes politicized when it crosses boundaries of race, religion, and class. The personal is never just personal for Kees—it is embedded within a web of expectations, prohibitions, and negotiations that Jacob, despite his awareness, cannot fully grasp. This scene highlights the limits of empathy across privilege lines and underscores the silent burdens carried by women navigating these intersections. Chapter 5 has shown how the protagonists live in the interstices of multiple systems—navigating race, class, and displacement while negotiating fragile alliances across difference. The encounter between Jacob and Kees marks a pivotal moment: Kees recognises not only the limits of her own social power, but also the emotional vulnerability of those who are shaped by privilege. This awareness does not erase structural inequality but deepens her understanding of how subjectivity is relational, affective, and always in motion. With this expanded view of hybridity and relationality, we are now equipped to investigate how power operates more concretely within the narrative structures of the novels—how it coerces, regulates, and disciplines desire itself.

Chapter 6. The Tools of Power: Forced Break-ups, Sexual Assault, Domestic Abuse and Ostracism

Chapter 6 explores how desire—particularly feminine, Arab, and diasporic desire—is systematically blocked, injured, and coerced through concrete mechanisms of power. In the lives of Jenna, Kees, and Malak, desire does not simply falter under social pressure—it is actively broken by forced breakups, sexual assault, domestic abuse, and the threat or reality of ostracism. These are not incidental experiences, but calculated forms of affective control that operate within patriarchal, cultural, and racialised structures. Desire, here, is not only sexual but also affective, relational, and existential: the desire to love, to belong, to imagine otherwise. As these protagonists are isolated from one another, separated from the possibility of community and care, their capacity to desire freely is diminished. This chapter examines the intimate workings of power that seek to silence, contain, and punish unruly or non-normative desires—revealing how power does not only prohibit, but wounds the very structures through which desire is lived and made possible.

6.1 Breaking Up in the Name of Love[61]

Malak and Jacob have broken up. Both of them knew that their relationship could not have a happy ending. "When she'd asked him why he'd brought it up in that moment, he had said, "It's just hard."
[…] "It hurts to love you this much and know it doesn't end well for us," he said." (2022:26) To avoid

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[61] This paragraph makes reference to chapter 6 "In the Name of Love" in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* by Sara Ahmed where she writes that "love' is narrated as the emotion that energises the work of such groups" (2004:122). Ahmed explains how love can be used to justify exclusion — where hating or rejecting the other is framed as an act of love for one's own. Malak's breakup with Jacob is framed similarly: as an act of love for her community and faith. Yet this is not love in the name of desire, but its repression. As Ahmed argues, love circulates within affective economies shaped by power. In this context, Malak's choice reveals how the language of love can mask the silencing of female desire.

prolonging their pain and making things more complicated, they decided to end it, even though they had already invested deeply in each other. This is the moment where Malak reflects on heartbreak as something constrained by the rules and logistics of secrecy. She cannot tell her parents that she is heartbroken because they have no idea she ever had a boyfriend—let alone that he was white and non-Muslim.

> But he was wrong about that. They had ended many things together and done it so well. Ended days in each other's arms. Ended each other's sentences. No. They definitely knew how to end things. […] She got up then, kissed him goodbye, and took a taxi over to Kees's house. She couldn't go home as she'd already told her mum that she was staying the night with Kees and heartbreak still had to abide by the rules and logistics of secrecy." (2022:27)

This passage is a poignant reflection on how even the most intimate emotions—such as heartbreak—are not free from external constraints when lived within the boundaries of cultural secrecy and social norms. El Wardany plays with the concept of "ending" by transforming it from a moment of loss into a narrative motif that defines Malak and Jacob's relationship. The repetition of "ended" emphasizes how their love story was always shaped by a sense of temporariness, fragility, and foreseen closure.

Love, in this context, is precarious by design, conditioned by the impossibility of a future due to religious and cultural incompatibilities. The bittersweet irony in "they definitely knew how to end things" reveals how Malak internalizes the inevitability of loss—not as a failure, but almost as a skill, a coping mechanism learned through navigating a relationship that was always shadowed by its unsustainability. This highlights how affect—particularly love and heartbreak—is shaped not only by personal dynamics but by structural forces like cultural taboos, familial expectations, and the unspoken rules governing female behaviour in diasporic Arab Muslim contexts.

The final sentence—"heartbreak still had to abide by the rules and logistics of secrecy"—is where El Wardany delivers a critical commentary on the politics of visibility and invisibility. Malak's emotional pain cannot be openly expressed because her relationship was never allowed to exist publicly. This reflects how women's desires, particularly when they transgress cultural or religious

boundaries, are forced into silence and invisibility, even in moments of vulnerability. Heartbreak, typically framed as a universal human experience, becomes here a regulated emotion, one that must be managed discreetly to maintain the façade of compliance with communal norms.

From a theoretical perspective, this passage resonates with Sara Ahmed's notion of how emotions are shaped by social norms and circulate within power structures. Malak's heartbreak is not just personal—it is political, because it exposes the emotional cost of navigating love within a framework where desire is policed through mechanisms of secrecy, honour, and cultural preservation. Furthermore, this moment speaks to the negotiation of subjectivity. Malak cannot fully inhabit the role of "the heartbroken woman" because that would require acknowledging a relationship deemed unacceptable by her cultural environment. Thus, even her pain is subjected to the same constraints that shaped her desire—illustrating how agency is continually negotiated in the private sphere. El Wardany's use of simple, almost rhythmic prose in listing the things they've ended mirrors the repetitive, cyclical nature of relationships constrained by external forces. It also subtly critiques the way women like Malak must become experts in managing endings, not because of personal incompatibility, but because cultural and religious boundaries leave no space for alternative outcomes. "She completes her morning prayer. Bends down and touches forehead to mat."Ibid. In the aftermath of her breakup, Malak turns to prayer in an attempt to anchor her emotional turmoil within a framework of spiritual meaning. El Wardany portrays this return to faith not as a source of immediate comfort, but as a complex space where desire, grief, and spiritual disillusionment intersect.

The act of prayer—traditionally associated with solace and submission—is here depicted as a site of frustration and existential questioning. When Malak "submits to God and wonders where the fuck he is and why he isn't making this easier" (El Wardany, 2022:26), El Wardany subverts the expected narrative of religious refuge, exposing the emotional rawness that underlies Malak's spiritual practice. This candid, almost irreverent internal dialogue highlights the dissonance between ritual submission and the absence of divine intervention, reflecting a crisis where faith becomes a hollow routine rather than a source of clarity. Malak's reflection that "for all the times she's bowed

213

down these last few weeks, the creeping sensation that it might not be worth it is still there" (2022:26) underscores the affective weight of this disillusionment. Her repeated prostrations—acts meant to bring her closer to God—only reinforce her sense of spiritual distance. Malak's persistent sadness and frustration reveal how religious devotion, when entangled with personal loss, can become a performative act—an obligation to maintain spiritual discipline even when the emotional resonance is absent.

The ambiguity of Malak's grief becomes even more apparent when she questions whether her turmoil is truly spiritual: "Maybe she's just sad and misses Jacob. Maybe it isn't about God after all" (2022:26). Here, El Wardany blurs the lines between human longing and spiritual doubt, illustrating how Malak's desire for emotional resolution is projected onto her relationship with God. This moment of self-awareness exposes the fragility of using faith as a coping mechanism for affective experiences that transcend religious doctrine. Malak's heartbreak is not simply a private emotional wound—it is framed within the logistics of secrecy, cultural expectation, and the search for divine justification, reflecting the broader struggle of women whose desires conflict with religious and familial norms. The final line—"another prayer down. Still no closer to God"(2022:27)—cements the portrayal of prayer as a repetitive act devoid of immediate spiritual fulfillment.

Rather than offering catharsis, Malak's ritual reinforces her sense of hollowness, emphasizing how religious practice can sometimes function as a disciplinary structure rather than a source of liberation. From an Islamic feminist perspective, this highlights the tension between personal agency and prescribed forms of devotion. Malak is not passively submitting to faith; she is actively wrestling with it, questioning its role in her emotional survival and its capacity to accommodate her desires and grief. Through this nuanced depiction, El Wardany critiques simplistic representations of Muslim women's relationships with faith, showing instead how spirituality becomes a contested space where affect, desire, and subjectivity are negotiated. Malak's experience illustrates that submission to God does not erase emotional pain nor resolve the conflicts between cultural expectation sand personal

longing. Instead, it reveals the emotional labour required to reconcile heartbreak within a framework that demands both silence about forbidden love and endurance through spiritual discipline.

This passage, therefore, exemplifies how El Wardany uses the interplay of faith and affect to explore the politics of belonging, visibility, and the constrained forms of agency available to Arab Muslim women navigating love, loss, and devotion. Like Jenna's exploration of *eid sex*, which is a way for her to challenge and redefine traditional concepts, these women also use their faith to redefine their relationship with God. Still, her connection to God remains sacred, a vital coping mechanism, and a source of support. This spiritual connection is something she will hold onto, even in times of heartbreak.

> "The only times she's managed to feel better were when Kees came and got into bed with her, laptop balanced on cushions, relentlessly studying while Malak, on her phone, idly zoomed in and out over different countries on the map, wondering what it would be like to exist in another place. Or when Jenna dragged her to the spa" (El Wardany, 2022:27-28)

In this passage, El Wardany highlights how Malak's moments of relief from heartbreak are not found in solitude or through traditional coping mechanisms, but through the quiet, intimate presence of her female friends. The image of Kees studying beside her, and Jenna pulling her out of her sadness with a spa visit, reflects the importance of female solidarity as a form of emotional survival. These friendships are not incidental; they function as an affective community—what Sara Ahmed (2004) might describe as a space where emotions circulate in ways that sustain marginalized subjects navigating complex identities. For Malak, Kees and Jenna are more than companions—they embody a shared experience of being Muslim women in London, negotiating the intersections of gender, faith, race, and diasporic identity. Their presence allows Malak to momentarily step outside the isolation imposed by cultural secrecy and personal grief. The act of "*zooming in and out over different countries on the map*" while Kees studies beside her symbolically contrasts escapism with grounded resilience—Malak dreams of elsewhere, while Kees represents the persistent effort to endure within

the existing socio-cultural framework. El Wardany subtly frames these friendships as a counterbalance to the pressures of both Western society and internal community expectations.

In a world where romantic relationships are fraught with cultural constraints and secrecy, it is the female collective that offers Malak a space of recognition, care, and emotional legitimacy. This resonates with feminist theories of sisterhood and communities of care, where women create informal networks of support to resist and survive patriarchal and cultural oppressions. Moreover, these moments highlight how agency can manifest through relational bonds rather than individualistic narratives of empowerment. The shared silence with Kees, or Jenna's insistence on self-care, reflect forms of quiet resistance—refusing to let grief or cultural constraints isolate them completely. El Wardany presents these friendships as a form of everyday activism, where simply being present for one another becomes an act of defiance against a world that demands emotional containment and silence from women like them.

In this way, Malak's friends are not just emotional crutches; they are part of a collective negotiation of subjectivity, where identity, faith, and desire are processed within a safe, understanding network. El Wardany's portrayal of these interactions underscores the political significance of female friendships in diasporic Muslim contexts, where solidarity becomes both a sanctuary and a subtle form of resistance. Her brother steps in as her guardian, urging her to stop displaying her sadness so openly because her parents are becoming concerned. Once again, she is forced to hide her emotions and pain in order to avoid drawing attention and, ultimately, to prevent revealing the underlying issue. Furthermore, her brother suggests that she spend time with him and his girlfriend if she wants to feel better. The problem, however, lies in the privilege he holds as a man—nobody will question or

scrutinize his romantic life before marriage, while, as a woman, she is expected to safeguard the family's honor.[62]

In this confrontation between Malak and her brother, El Wardany exposes the intersection of gendered expectations, emotional repression, and the tensions between faith and secular coping mechanisms within diasporic family dynamics. When her brother bluntly states, "*You're a mess and, honestly, it's disgusting*" (El Wardany, 2022:30), Malak's visible grief is framed not as a legitimate emotional response, but as a failure to maintain composure—reflecting societal discomfort with women's public expressions of vulnerability. This harsh judgment reveals how **affect** is regulated within both patriarchal and familial structures, where emotional suffering must be contained to avoid disrupting normative expectations of female resilience. Malak's pointed response—reminding him that "*you're too busy out there with your girlfriend, who, can I remind you, you don't have to break up with*" (2022:30)—highlights the pervasive double standard governing gendered experiences of love and desire.

While her brother enjoys the freedom to pursue a relationship without consequence, Malak's romance was constrained by religious and cultural prohibitions, forcing her into secrecy and, ultimately, heartbreak. This exchange underscores how Arab Muslim women's desires are policed, while men navigate these same cultural frameworks with relative impunity—an imbalance that El Wardany critiques through Malak's frustration. Further, her brother's dismissive invitation—"*I know you're on a whole no-drinking, read-the-Quran-all-the-time, trying-to-be-a-good-Muslim thing or*

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[62] "There is a double standard in which men in Muslim and/or Pakistani or South Asian heritage families and communities are left more room for freedom than women to explore premarital sexual possibilities. Even though neither group is overtly encouraged to form premarital relationships, the different rules for menand women are well documented (see Ouis, 2007).[…] This secrecy and silence has mixed effects. When it is possible to say one thing anddo another, as some Muslims do when they enter into same-sex relationships (Yip, 2004), it is also possible to contain contradictions between cultural and religious conventions on the one hand, and desires and lived experiences on the other. Butthis silence and secrecy can be damaging " (Amer et al, 2019:8)

whatever, but why don't you come out with us?" (2022:30)—reveals the **secular-religious divide** often present within diasporic identities. His trivialization of Malak's spiritual turn reflects a broader cultural tension, where Westernized modes of coping, such as distraction through socializing or alcohol, are privileged over introspective, faith-based approaches.

El Wardany uses this moment to critique not only patriarchal expectations but also the fragmentation within diasporic communities, where differing relationships to religion and modernity create further isolation for women like Malak. Through this layered exchange, El Wardany illustrates how Malak's grief is not merely personal but embedded within a network of power relations, where gender, faith, and cultural identity dictate the acceptable boundaries of emotional expression. The scene highlights the emotional labour required of women navigating these intersections, forced to justify both their pain and the ways they choose to process it. In doing so, El Wardany foregrounds the limited spaces available for Arab Muslim women to exist authentically within both their private and public lives, reinforcing the centrality of affect, subjectivity, and constrained agency in the negotiation of love, loss, and identity. In particular El Wardany shows the loneliness of it all. A loneliness Malak shares with Jenna.

6.2. Jenna's Loneliness and the Sexual Assault

Lewis tells Jenna that he has fallen in love with a woman named Zee, whom he first met online. She is a Muslim woman from Liverpool, though Lewis considers her less religious than Jenna. Jenna attempts to support Lewis's happiness but struggles with jealousy, feeling sidelined as she is no longer his top priority. When Lewis heads off for a phone date with Zee, Jenna reaches out to two friends—whom she occasionally sleeps with—to join her. When they're unavailable, she turns to Mo instead. Jenna asks Mo to meet her but changes her mind and takes a cab home without letting him know she's leaving. At home, she watches a movie with her parents, unaware of the numerous missed calls from

Mo, who had been waiting for her as planned. Despite her academic achievements and beauty, Jenna feels a deep loneliness that she likens to physical pain:

> "She's been in pain for months and thinks it started around the time of Kees's sister's engagement party, but, lately, it has become unbearable. Like most body parts that ache, you can distract or sedate it, and so she busies herself with classes, studying, rehearsals, and an obsessive desire to be around other people, just so she doesn't have to think about how alone she is." (2022:139)

She traces this feeling back to the conflict between Kees and Malak, which has only grown worse with Lewis's new relationship. She blames herself for not valuing Mo, who has lost interest after she stood him up. While she craves a romantic connection, she can't seem to find anyone she feels close to. Instead, she engages in casual sexual encounters with people she meets on dating apps, though she avoids penetrative sex. One night, she meets up with a man met online, named Mark who rapes her by having penetrative sex without her consent. Jenna, who has always been very aware of her boundaries, who was always so capable of asserting her desire, without her community around her to support her enters a deeply vulnerable state of depression or *antiproduction*.

El Wardany offers a profound exploration of affective vulnerability through Jenna's descent into loneliness, framed as a form of grief without closure. Jenna's reflection that "*the sudden absence of those people from her life feels a lot like grief*" (El Wardany, 2022:139) reveals how emotional pain, when left unacknowledged and unsupported, becomes a lingering wound—one that resists resolution because it lacks the social rituals typically associated with loss:

> "She imagines people feel like this when somebody dies, except this is worse because no one has died. There is no finality to it. You couldn't grieve people who were busy falling in love because what kind of person did that make you? But the sudden absence of those people from her life feels a lot like grief and she resents not being able to cry at funerals for the people she has lost. "(2022:139)

El Wardany's choice to liken this state to mourning emphasizes how affect—particularly abandonment, jealousy, and isolation—can manifest as a psychic and physical burden, destabilizing Jenna's previously assertive sense of self. Jenna, who once embodied sexual agency and confidence in navigating her desires, finds herself slipping into a state of anti-production, where emotional exhaustion and disconnection erode her capacity to assert boundaries. The context of her growing alienation—first through the rupture between Kees and Malak, then through Lewis's romantic relationship—highlights how the disintegration of her affective community leaves her exposed to the violence of loneliness.

Without the affirming presence of her friends, Jenna's desire transforms from an empowered force into a desperate search for connection, leading her to seek solace in casual encounters that lack emotional safety. El Wardany's depiction of Jenna "*busying herself with classes, studying, rehearsals, and an obsessive desire to be around other people*" (2022:139) illustrates the mechanisms of distraction often employed to mask deeper emotional fractures. However, these efforts fail to address the core of her isolation, as symbolized by the stark image of "*the lights eventually come on and people couple up to walk home and she feels like the only person left in the world*" (2022:139).

This metaphor of being left alone under harsh lights underscores the performative nature of Jenna's social existence—where visibility on stage or in public cannot substitute for genuine emotional intimacy. From a theoretical standpoint, Jenna's experience reflects, once again, Sara Ahmed's concept of how emotions are shaped by social structures and how the absence of belonging can generate profound affective disorientation. The erosion of Jenna's support system demonstrates the critical role of affective alliances in sustaining subjectivity and agency, particularly for women navigating intersections of gender, religion, race, and sexuality. Without her community, Jenna becomes vulnerable to external forms of violence, culminating in the sexual assault by Mark—an event that starkly contrasts with her prior control over her sexual boundaries. This narrative trajectory also speaks to the dynamics of desire and power within patriarchal contexts. Jenna's retreat into casual

sexual encounters is not framed as a liberated choice but as a symptom of her emotional disconnection and longing for affirmation. Her avoidance of penetrative sex signifies a lingering attempt to maintain control, but as her emotional resilience weakens, so too does her ability to safeguard her autonomy, leading to a catastrophic breach of consent.

El Wardany thus presents Jenna's story as a commentary on the fragile balance between agency and affective dependency. When communal bonds fracture, the individual is left exposed to both internal collapse and external exploitation. Jenna's depression and loss of agency are not merely personal failings but are depicted as the consequence of navigating a world where female desire is constantly at risk when stripped of collective support and recognition. In this light, Jenna's experience becomes a critical reflection on the necessity of community, sisterhood, and affective networks in sustaining women's autonomy in environments that otherwise render them vulnerable to both emotional and physical forms of patriarchal violence. El Wardany powerfully illustrates that in the absence of these protective structures, even the most self-assured women can find themselves spiraling into states where desire, once a site of empowerment, becomes entangled with harm, isolation, and loss of self.

6.3. The Cycle of Abuse: Lovebombing, Control, Slut Shaming

In her grounbreaking article "Who Are the Battered Women?" Lenore Walker identifies the cycle of the phases of the violence women go through when they experience domestic abuse, the author speaks of "battered women", I prefer the term "survivors":

> The battered women interviewed report that all kinds of violence occurs during battering
> incidents. From their reports, it appears that there is a cycle that repeats itself rather than
> constant or random levels of battering. The first period that is described is one in which
> tension begins to rise and the woman can sense the man becoming somewhat edgy and

more prone to react negatively to frustrations. This can include little episodes of violence which are quickly covered. Thus, he may begin to lash out verbally3 at her for some real or imagined wrongdoing and quickly apologize or become docile again. Like firefighters dealing with a brush fire, many women have learned to catch these little outbursts and calm their men down for a short period of time; this gives the women a feeling that they really have control over the batterers' behavior. This part of the cycle supports the myth that if a woman behaves better she won't be beaten. Thus, the woman's responsibility is to be alert con- stantly to her man's moods and to put his needs above her needs at all times. (Walker, 1977:53)

In Malak and Ali's relationship, the warning signs are present from the beginning. At first, Ali seems remarkably attentive and thoughtful, quickly tuning into Malak's needs. She feels happy and seen because he notices everything. However, what initially appears as affection—his intense attention to detail and constant gestures—soon reveals itself as a form of love bombing, which gradually shifts into controlling behavior. Malak values how Ali pays attention to the little things about her. After dating for six weeks, he asks her to meet his grandmother. While she feels a bit uneasy about the pace of their relationship, she agrees, appreciating the comfort and simplicity they share. "I know how I feel about you. It's not soon for me, but if you're not comfortable, then maybe you can meet her another time, there's no rush. Whatever you want, hayati. (El Wardany, 2022: 129-130) Malak and Ali are extremely happy in their relationship, with Malak feeling especially content due to their shared faith and cultural background.

However, when they talk about their sexual pasts, Malak initially lies, saying she has only been with Jacob, but later confesses that she had been with four men. "The air around them had turned colder and something in his eye had shifted. His shoulders had changed and in a rush, she felt sick and in danger of losing something rare and precious." (El Wardany, 2022:147)

She despises the idea that the lie might change how Ali views her, and though he quickly assures her that his feelings for her remain unchanged, Malak continues to feel uneasy about the conversation for years, though she is unsure of the reason behind her discomfort:

> "Malak had heard about men like this. The ones who liked to believe that they were the first to settle here. The ones who could conveniently ignore how the women who brought them to the edge of their greatest pleasures knew how to do it. Men like that told themselves that it was in fact because of them, they brought it out of the women opposite them, and they were showing them a whole new world.Kees and Jenna had called this the Aladdin complex and they all laughed whenever they had come across men like this, mercilessly pulling them apart. But here, opposite a man she cared too much about, she could barely swallow down the rising need to vomit and she could feel the sweat pooling in her palms.
>
> Ibid.

Malak believes this holy love is worth all the sacrifices she has made. For this reason she is unable to realise the first steps that will lead her to the cycle of abuse Ali will inflict on her. It starts with the "Aladdin complex", he wishes he was her first. El Wardany masterfully depicts the sudden shift in power dynamics that can occur within intimate heterosexual encounters, particularly when women's sexual agency becomes reframed through the lens of male entitlement and cultural stereotyping. Malak's immediate physical reaction—"*she felt sick and in danger of losing something rare and precious*" (El Wardany, 2022:147)—signals a visceral awareness that the space of mutual desire has been contaminated by a deeper, structural force: the reassertion of patriarchal control masked as romantic or sexual connection. El Wardany's invocation of "*men like this*" and the so-called Aladdin Complex exposes how certain men claim to be women's initiators in sex and love. This dynamic is steeped in the sacralised, angelist fantasy (El Aji, 2017; Glacier, 2017; Mernissi, 1982), where the woman's sexual expression is not recognized as autonomous but is instead reimagined as something *awakened* by the man's influence. The "*whole new world*" reference is a deliberate intertextual nod to Disney's *Aladdin*, itself a product of sexist tropes, where the woman is

romanticized as an innocent angel, awaiting for a man to show her new territories. While Malak and her friends, Kees and Jenna, previously mocked this dynamic—"*mercilessly pulling them apart*"—the tone shifts dramatically when Malak finds herself vulnerable within this scenario, facing not a caricature but a man she genuinely cares for. This moment reveals the precarity of female sexual agency: even when women engage in desire on their own terms, the ever-present risk is that male partners may reinterpret that agency through patriarchal or orientalist frameworks, thereby stripping it of its autonomy. The affective response—nausea, sweating palms, a choking sense of danger—demonstrates how power operates not only at the discursive level but also through the body. Malak's embodied reaction aligns with affect theory, where emotions are not merely internal states but responses to external structures of oppression and dominance. Here, El Wardany shows how desire, once a site of empowerment, can be swiftly transformed into a site of fear and dispossession when male entitlement emerges. Furthermore, this passage critiques the myth of mutuality in heterosexual desire, especially within interracial or intercultural relationships where latent colonial imaginaries can resurface. The man's shifting gaze and posture—"*something in his eye had shifted*"—signal that Malak is no longer a partner in pleasure but is being repositioned as an object within his narrative of conquest and discovery. El Wardany's use of sharp irony—through the reference to the Aladdin Complex—reveals how women like Malak, Kees, and Jenna possess a critical awareness of these dynamics, yet awareness alone does not shield them from experiencing it firsthand. This highlights a key tension in this thesis: the gap between knowing and feeling, between intellectual critique and the lived affective experience of negotiating desire within structures of power. Ultimately, this scene encapsulates how subjectivity and agency are constantly at risk in intimate spaces, especially for women navigating intersections of gender, race, and cultural identity. El Wardany reveals that even within consensual relationships, the specter of patriarchal narratives can reassert themselves, destabilizing the fragile autonomy women carve out through desire. Malak believes the stories her parents told her about Cairo, which made the city feel like "half fantasy, half hope" (2022:186), were true. At a restaurant with Nylah, Rayan, and Ali, she finds herself falling even more in love as she

watches Ali connect with her friends. However, when they move to a bar, Ali becomes uncomfortable. He doesn't drink and feels that the men there are looking at Malak "disrespectfully." Although Ali insists he's fine with her staying and brushes off her suggestions to leave with him, Malak senses that something is wrong. Malak is a problem solver and all she wants to do is pick up the phone and call Ali to fix whatever has suddenly bubbled up between them. (El Wardany, 2022:171-172) When she speaks about it with her friends, Malak manipulates herself into thinking she is not into clubbing "Well, you love it," says Nylah. "I don't love it," she replies. […] Rayan and Nylah don't say anything more the rest of the night and Malak doesn't dance the way she normally does (El Wardany, 2022:171-172) Malak believes that whatever happened is her fault and was tricked into thinking she was the problem. After returning home, she calls Ali despite the late hour. He expresses frustration, saying "I can't look after you in those environments, Kookie." (El Wardany, 2022:173) He criticizes women who wear revealing clothes, which, according to him, invites men to look at and "disrespect" them. He tells her that Malak is "[his] life," and she reassures him that she won't visit such places again. Malak feels a mix of panic and relief, glad she managed to convince him to let her stay in his life. She sinks to the floor, her back against the wall, still in a dress that she now thinks is a little too revealing. She makes a mental note to ask Nylah if she wants it. "Yeah, I know," she mumbles. "Honestly, I really am sorry about tonight. It won't happen again. You won't ever have to worry about that again, okay? Okay, habibti. She nods." (El Wardany, 2022:173) He floods her with love, that is how lovebombing works and she ignores the degrading comments he makes on other women. Malak compares her gradual love for Jacob with the immediate attraction she felt for Ali. She views Ali as the ideal Muslim man with whom she can have a culturally approved relationship, which makes her fear losing him. This fear leads her to lie about her past, including her use of alcohol, though she feels it's worth it if it means keeping him. When she tells her roommates that she feels she's "outgrowing" clubbing, they accept her reasoning without acknowledging that Ali is likely the one influencing this shift in her attitude. In this passage, El Wardany captures the insidious nature of

patriarchal control when it is framed as affection and protection. The male character's comments, couched in tender language, reinforce restrictive notions of female virtue, subtly policing Malak's behavior under the guise of care. His distinction between "some women" who "wait for men… to disrespect them" and Malak, who is "too precious" (El Wardany, 2022:173), relies on a classic debauchery vs sacralization (El Aji, 2017:50) dichotomy, where women's value is determined by their adherence to modesty and their avoidance of spaces coded as morally suspect. Malak's instinctive response—"Obviously not"—illustrates how women are often compelled to disavow any association with sexual autonomy or visibility to maintain male approval. El Wardany shows how desire for affection becomes entangled with the need for validation within patriarchal frameworks. The warmth Malak feels when called *hayati*—"my life"—exposes the emotional seduction of being idealized, even when that idealization comes at the cost of her agency. The term of endearment operates as both an expression of love and a linguistic reinforcement of possession, subtly reminding Malak of her place within his worldview: cherished, but constrained. This scene exemplifies how power operates most effectively when it is masked by tenderness. The man's protective tone disarms Malak, making it difficult for her to recognize the underlying disciplinary logic. This aligns with Foucault's (1976) notion of soft power, where control is internalized not through overt force but through the normalization of certain behaviors and desires. Malak's silence—choosing not to reject his framing—reveals how women often negotiate moments of discomfort by prioritizing emotional intimacy over asserting autonomy, especially when patriarchal expectations are delivered wrapped in affection. Furthermore, El Wardany critiques the pervasive influence of respectability politics within both Arab and broader patriarchal cultures, where women's moral worth is linked to their visibility, dress, and public behavior. By depicting Malak's emotional response—feeling "warm" rather than resistant—El Wardany highlights the affective complexity of such encounters. Malak is not naïve; she is aware of the dynamic, but the human desire for love, safety, and affirmation complicates her reaction. This moment also speaks to the politics of desire in this thesis. Malak's desire is not only sexual or romantic but also directed toward being recognized as valuable within a framework that

inherently limits her freedom. The tension between craving affection and resisting control encapsulates the lived reality of many women negotiating intimate relationships where love is conditional upon conformity to idealized femininity. Ultimately, El Wardany exposes how patriarchal narratives infiltrate even the most intimate spaces, where women's subjectivity is subtly shaped by the need to remain "precious" in the eyes of men who conflate protection with possession. Malak's warmth, rather than being a sign of empowerment, reveals the emotional cost of existing within a system where love and control are inseparable.

6.3.1 Devaluation, Slut shaming

Malak moves in with Ali, although she hides this from her family because cohabitation out of wedlock is forbidden El Wardany's portrayal of Malak's cohabitation with Ali is a nuanced exploration of how desire, initially experienced as liberation, becomes entangled with patterns of emotional subjugation and quiet concessions of agency. Malak's decision to move in with Ali, while concealing the truth from her family, reflects a familiar strategy for women navigating the tension between personal autonomy and cultural expectations. The complicity of her friends, Nylah and Rayan, reinforces the role of affective alliances in enabling these transgressions, yet El Wardany subtly hints that this freedom is precarious—dependent on secrecy and constant negotiation. The description of their first major fight— " a *loosening of the seams, a stretching of the fabric*"— (El Wardany, 2022:216-217) functions as a metaphor for the slow unraveling of idealized love. What begins as "*blissful*" quickly reveals underlying power dynamics. "Malak has learned that if she apologizes enough, is gentle and helpless enough, she can bring him back round to softness. Ali has learned that she won't leave." Ibid, where Malak learns that appeasement—"*if she apologizes enough, is gentle and helpless enough*"—is the key to restoring harmony. This reveals how once again emotional

labour becomes gendered within the relationship, as Malak adopts a posture of submission to maintain peace. Meanwhile, Ali learns a more insidious lesson: "*that she won't leave.*" Here, El Wardany exposes how patterns of attachment can harden into quiet forms of control, where love becomes a site of endurance rather than mutual empowerment. From a theoretical lens, this dynamic speaks to Foucault's (1975:93) concept of power relations, where domination is not always overt but embedded in the routines of intimate life—negotiated through gestures of softness, apology, and the silent acknowledgment of emotional hierarchies. Malak's behavior reflects a gradual loss of agency, masked by the illusion of romantic stability. She often scrolls through his Twitter when he isn't there or is taking a shower, walking down the corridor of his brain, a secret thrill at being privy to his thoughts, even though 4,367 other people are also watching. He never retweets ordinary things " (El Wardany, 2022:216-217) This passage shifts to a modern form of relational surveillance—Malak scrolling through Ali's Twitter feed. This act of digital voyeurism—"*walking down the corridor of his brain*"—highlights how intimacy in contemporary relationships extends into virtual spaces, where partners seek emotional reassurance through access to each other's curated public personas. The "*secret thrill*" Malak feels suggests both fascination and insecurity, as she navigates the blurred lines between closeness and obsession. The fact that "*4,367 other people*" also witness his thoughts underscores the paradox of digital intimacy: what feels private is, in reality, performative and exposed. El Wardany uses this detail to critique how modern relationships are mediated by technology, amplifying anxieties around emotional transparency and control. Malak's need to monitor Ali's digital life reflects a deeper instability within their relationship—her growing dependence on small signs of affection, both offline and online, to sustain her sense of security. Together, these narrative elements reveal how Malak's initial pursuit of love and freedom transforms into a complex entanglement of secrecy, emotional dependency, and surveillance. El Wardany illustrates that, for women like Malak, desire is often negotiated within frameworks where agency is gradually compromised—whether through cultural pressures requiring silence, or through intimate dynamics that reward submission and emotional labour. The digital layer adds a contemporary

dimension to this critique, showing how modern tools can reinforce traditional insecurities and power imbalances rather than alleviating them. Ultimately, this passage reflects the affective cost of sustaining love under these conditions—where the fantasy of autonomy gives way to subtle forms of entrapment, and where subjectivity is shaped by both cultural norms and the unspoken rules of romantic endurance. One evening, they sit together on the couch while Ali debates politics on Twitter. Malak feels upset that he's been tweeting about politics during their romantic time, though she tells Ali she doesn't mind. Out of the blue, Ali announces that he's angry about Malak messaging Jacob to wish him a happy birthday a few weeks earlier. Despite having previously said it didn't bother him, he becomes furious, yelling and pacing (El Wardany, 2022:220) In this passage, El Wardany captures the moment where affection in Malak's relationship with Ali is replaced by a raw display of patriarchal power, articulated through uncontrolled male anger. Ali's sudden outburst over a previously dismissed issue—Malak's brief message to Jacob—reveals the underlying dynamics of possessiveness, jealousy, and a need to assert dominance. His rhetorical question—"*Did you, or did you not, message him?*" (El Wardany, 2022:220)—reduces Malak's agency to a binary of guilt, denying her any space to contextualize or defend her actions. This tactic reflects classic patterns of emotional abuse, where control is exercised through intimidation and the reframing of harmless behavior as betrayal. El Wardany juxtaposes this violent emotional shift with Malak's memories of her parents' arguments—conflicts grounded in material concerns and mutual exhaustion, not dominance. The contrast emphasizes that Malak is encountering, for the first time, a form of masculine aggression that is not about negotiation but about submission. The metaphor—"*the first time she learns what it is like to drown at sea and still live*"—is a powerful affective image, illustrating how fear can become a suffocating, living state. Here, the affectivity becomes crucial: Malak's emotional and physical reaction to Ali's anger demonstrates how fear operates as a disciplinary force, constraining her subjectivity and silencing resistance. This moment also marks the collapse of the fragile agency Malak believed she held within the relationship. Earlier dynamics of negotiation and emotional labour give way to a clearer structure of domination, where Ali's anger is not just a reaction

but a performance of power designed to instill compliance. El Wardany reveals how quickly romantic relationships, especially those idealized as "*Godsent*" or spiritually meaningful, can devolve into spaces where desire becomes entangled with coercion and fear. Moreover, Ali's possessiveness is tied to cultural narratives of male entitlement over women's emotional and social lives. His fury at Malak's harmless message reflects a belief that her past, her connections, and even her digital interactions fall under his jurisdiction. This resonates with patriarchal control mechanisms, where women's autonomy is policed not only through explicit rules but through emotional volatility that keeps them in a constant state of self-surveillance. El Wardany's depiction critiques the normalization of such behavior within both private and cultural contexts, showing how women like Malak are often unprepared for the emotional violence embedded in romantic relationships because it masquerades as justified jealousy or protective instinct. The scene underscores the emotional toll of navigating love when it becomes a terrain of power, where women are forced to shrink themselves to avoid triggering male rage. Ultimately, this passage exemplifies how El Wardany dismantles the myth of romantic love as a sanctuary for women's desires. Instead, she exposes how love, when shaped by patriarchal expectations, can become a site of emotional captivity, where fear replaces affection, and agency dissolves under the weight of male control.In order for him to be happy, Malak has to anticipate his expectations and desire. He tries to manipulate her. He is not solution oriented, he just wants her to feel bad and guilty. Because he wants her to be submissive. (El Wardany, 2022:221) El Wardany exposes the full force of patriarchal violence, articulated through Ali's tirade, where the discourse of "disrespect" replaces any semblance of emotional dialogue. Ali's rhetorical assault— "*Tell me which man you know who would be happy for their girlfriend to message her ex-boyfriend?*" (El Wardany, 2022:221)—reveals how deeply embedded notions of male honour and ownership are in his understanding of relationships. His anger is not framed as hurt or vulnerability but as a reaction to a perceived violation of his authority, highlighting how patriarchal masculinity equates control over a woman's past, present, and emotional connections with personal dignity. El Wardany demonstrates how this logic leaves no room for Malak's subjectivity. Her attempt to de-escalate—

"Baby, I never meant to upset you"—is met not with reconciliation but with further aggression: *"I'm not upset, Malak. I'm disrespected"* (2022:221). The imagery of Ali *"pacing,"* *"stepping on the shattered phone,"* and books *"crashing onto the floor"* serves as a narrative representation of escalating chaos and destruction—both literal and symbolic. The phone, a tool of communication, lies broken beneath his feet, signaling how Ali's control extends to silencing Malak's connections beyond him. The destruction of objects around them transforms the domestic space into a site of fear and instability, reflecting how emotional abuse often manifests physically without direct physical harm to the victim. Malak's silence—"s*he doesn't try to interrupt and slow him down*"—reveals her internalization of this dynamic. El Wardany poignantly illustrates how women in abusive relationships often retreat into passivity as a survival mechanism, navigating the volatile emotions of their partners in an attempt to minimize further harm. This aligns with feminist analyses of coercive control, where domination is maintained not through constant violence but through unpredictable outbursts that train victims into submission and self-censorship. The repeated accusations—*"You have no fucking regard for me"* and *"I would never dream of making a fool out of you"*—underscore how Ali's conception of love is inseparable from possession and reputation management. His focus is not on emotional betrayal but on the idea that Malak's independent actions reflect on his masculinity. This reflects the broader cultural narratives where women are seen as bearers of male honour, and any deviation from expected behavior becomes a personal affront to the man's identity. El Wardany's depiction critiques these toxic frameworks by showing how quickly affection can morph into entitlement, and how women's emotional landscapes are suffocated under the weight of male ego. Malak's experience here is not just a personal tragedy but a reflection of systemic patterns where love, once idealized as redemptive or *"Godsent,"* becomes a mechanism of domination. Ultimately, this relationship exemplifies how affect, power, and patriarchal logic converge to dismantle female agency within intimate relationships. El Wardany lays bare the emotional terror embedded in everyday domesticity, revealing the psychological scars inflicted when love is weaponized in defense of masculine pride. Now, she is the one expected to take full responsibility—

for everything that happened. She has to apologize, to admit fault, and to become once again the submissive figure he wants her to be. The mere fact that she had a life before him feels like a form of disrespect to him. He wants to be her first and only, yet paradoxically, he hides her from public view and keeps their relationship in the shadows. This contradiction raises questions about his own behavior—perhaps he is the one being disrespectful. Perhaps he has something to hide. Yet he projects guilt onto her, manipulating her into silence and compliance. Ali calls her a "whore" for "giving [herself] away" to Jacob (2022:24); he then calls her "disgusting" and storms out: "She feels his breath wash over her and then hears what he has shouted: "WHORE." "You're a whore, Malak. For being with this man in the first place. For giving yourself away like that. And then you go around messaging the same man. It's disgusting." (El Wardany, 2022:224)

Malak anxiously waits for Ali's return, crying as she hastily deletes Jacob's contact information from her phone and social media. The following day, she goes through her Facebook contacts and removes all the men she has ever considered as romantic possibilities. She erases herself from every platform, as if she no longer exists, doing so in an effort to avoid provoking Ali's jealousy. She deletes both her past and her online presence to conform to his desires and demands. When Ali finally returns, he apologizes while Malak cries. They have sex, vowing not to leave each other. While Ali now shows tenderness towards her, she wonders if he feels the need to hurt her first before he can offer her kindness. Malak wishes she could discuss her concerns about their relationship with Jenna and Kees. Here, El Wardany lays bare the emotional complexity of abusive relationships, where moments of aggression are followed by overwhelming displays of affection, creating a disorienting cycle of harm and healing exactly as described by Walker's cycle of violence (1977:53) (Ali's "*low and gentle*" voice, paired with declarations of loyalty and destiny, reflects a classic pattern of post-abuse reconciliation, where the abuser reasserts control not through fear, but through carefully curated tenderness. Each "*kiss*" and whispered compliment acts as an erasure of violence, soothing Malak's physical and emotional wounds while deepening her emotional dependency. El Wardany captures how affect operates as both a salve and a weapon in this dynamic. Malak's reflection—"s*he has never*

known a softness like it"—reveals the tragic irony that the most profound tenderness she experiences emerges only after being emotionally shattered. This highlights how power in abusive relationships is not sustained solely through aggression, but through the manipulation of desire—the abuser becomes both the source of pain and the only perceived source of comfort. The line "*Didn't think you could ever make a man this tender*" (2022:229) exposes the internalized belief that such intimacy must be *earned* through suffering, reflecting the dangerous normalization of abuse as a pathway to deeper love. El Wardany further complicates this portrayal by introducing Malak's fleeting, almost subconscious awareness of the dynamic: "*somewhere… she wonders if a man can only ever be this soft once he's broken a woman.*" Ibid. This moment of critical distance signals that Malak's subjectivity is not entirely erased—she retains a glimmer of awareness—but it is buried beneath layers of emotional exhaustion and longing for stability.

The desire to confide in Kees and Jenna—"s*ure that they would have the answers*"Ibid.— underscores the isolating effect of abusive relationships, where disconnection from one's affective community leaves women without the external validation needed to fully recognize and resist cycles of harm.From a theoretical perspective, this passage exemplifies how patriarchal power operates within intimate spaces by blending control with care. Ali's behavior aligns with feminist theories of coercive control, where unpredictability—oscillating between aggression and affection—ensures compliance through emotional confusion rather than constant violence. Malak's pleasure in "*ending up with someone capable of such exquisite love*" illustrates how desire is weaponized to bind women to their abusers, transforming moments of reprieve into false affirmations of relational security. Moreover, El Wardany critiques the cultural romanticization of "destiny" and "fated love," exposing how such narratives can mask toxic dynamics by framing suffering as a necessary component of deep, passionate relationships. The invocation of "*there is nothing more powerful than that*" Ibid. reveals how love, when intertwined with patriarchal expectations, becomes a justification for endurance rather than liberation. Furthermore, this passage highlights the emotional toll of navigating love under conditions where affection is conditional and cyclically withheld. Malak's fleeting critical insight is

overshadowed by her craving for tenderness, illustrating how **agency** is not simply taken but gradually eroded through affective manipulation. El Wardany's portrayal challenges idealized notions of romantic love, revealing how, for women like Malak, desire is often inseparable from control, and intimacy becomes a carefully constructed prison, padded with moments of softness that make escape emotionally and psychologically complex.

6.3.2 First broken plate: Normalising the violence

With the words of Lenore Walker, the second part of the cycle works like this: "tensions build and finally explode in an acute battering incident. The acute battering incident is the second period in the battering cycle. It is usually impossible to predict exactly how long the first period of tension-building will take before the explosion occurs." (Walker, 1977:53) Malak recalls the time when Ali threw a plate at her, only to later claim that he wasn't himself in that moment. He apologized, telling her that she makes him "a better man." From that point on, Malak focuses on keeping Ali happy, adjusting her life to accommodate his wishes. She begins attending female-only gatherings, as mixed-gender events cause Ali to feel suspicious and hostile. She opts for modest swimwear and deletes old social media photos of herself in revealing outfits. However, at Ali's insistence, they refrain from following each other on social media. Malak's memories of other instances of physical abuse blur together. She rationalizes these occurrences, convincing herself they were rare. She regrets the moments when she responded angrily to his abuse but never becomes physically violent herself. Despite this, she finds Ali's tender apologies addictive. She acknowledges that his behavior is abusive but remains unsure of how to react.

> "They never teach you how to leave. Women are taught to stay. To love unconditionally. To only pack suitcases for husbands but never for themselves. She has watched the aunties and uncles she knew since childhood stay exactly where they were, frozen like pieces on a chessboard.Now she is on the board with nowhere to go. She may not know how to leave, but she has learned other things. How to shrink into a shadow on the days he is unhappy."
>
> (El Wardany, 2022:285)

In this powerful reflection, El Wardany addresses the deeply ingrained socialization that teaches women not how to leave, but how to endure. Malak's realization—"*they never teach you how to leave. Women are taught to stay*" (El Wardany, 2022:285)—exposes the core of patriarchal emotional

education, where love is framed as unconditional endurance rather than mutual respect or autonomy. This critique speaks directly to the cultural scripting of femininity, where women's value is tied to their capacity to remain, to tolerate, and to prioritize relational stability over personal safety or happiness. The metaphor of life as a chessboard, where aunties and uncles remain "*frozen*" in place, reinforces the idea of generational stasis—a learned immobility passed down through cultural norms. El Wardany suggests that women are positioned within structures where movement, escape, or refusal are not part of their repertoire; instead, survival is enacted through strategies of adaptation, such as Malak "*shrinking into a shadow on the days he is unhappy*." This imagery reflects how women internalize the need to become invisible, to diminish themselves emotionally and physically in response to male moods, a clear manifestation of affective discipline.

This passage illustrates how emotions like fear, duty, and conditioned love operate as regulatory forces that maintain patriarchal power within intimate and domestic spaces. Malak's inability to conceive of leaving is not a personal failing but the result of a lifetime of emotional and cultural training that frames endurance as virtue. This aligns with critiques of romantic ideologies, where women are celebrated for their sacrifices and demonized for acts of self-preservation. El Wardany also subtly critiques the myth of female resilience when resilience is equated with silent suffering. The knowledge Malak acquires—"*how to shrink*"—is not empowering but indicative of how agency is redefined under oppressive conditions: not as the ability to act freely, but as the ability to endure strategically. This reflects a form of coerced subjectivity, where survival depends on becoming less, on managing male emotions, and on anticipating harm without ever challenging its source. Moreover, from a postcolonial perspective, women in diasporic and patriarchal cultures are often caught between traditional expectations and modern discourses of empowerment, yet lack the structural or communal support to enact departure. Malak's entrapment is both literal and symbolic— she is "*on the board with nowhere to go*," highlighting how cultural narratives of loyalty and duty confine women within emotionally abusive relationships. Ultimately, El Wardany dismantles the

romanticized notion of staying as a noble act, revealing it instead as a consequence of systemic disempowerment. This passage serves as a profound commentary on how love, when framed by patriarchal logic, becomes a tool of containment, where women are celebrated for their silence and stillness rather than for reclaiming autonomy. As we were able to see in the accounts of Alya Mooro, in Arab culture, when men cheat and beat, women are taught to stay and take responsibility for not respecting their part of the deal. In fact she learns how to do so: "Sometimes she is rude to other men because the thought that they may take her politeness as flirtation makes her blood turn to ice in her veins. She has a choice: friends of friends may think she's rude, or she can be called a whore later" (El Wardany, 2022:285) She learns how to cancel herself not to bother him even if that means falling in the hole of depression, post-traumatic stress, loneliness, anxiety and the inability to sleep:

> She finds everything more difficult lately. She is less motivated. She doesn't visit her aunties as much. She purposely misses Haytham's calls and later texts back apologies with no further conversation. She is tired all the time. The hardness of a city that houses seventeen million people is beginning to wear her down" (El Wardany, 2022:29)

In this passage, El Wardany subtly illustrates how emotional exhaustion and affective fatigue manifest as a form of quiet disempowerment. Malak's growing disengagement—"l*ess motivated*," "*missing calls*," "*tired all the time*" (El Wardany, 2022:29)—reflects a shift from active negotiation of her roles and relationships to psychic passive withdrawal. This is not dramatic collapse but a slow unraveling, where everyday actions—visiting family, maintaining connections, navigating the city— become increasingly difficult, signaling a deeper internal crisis. El Wardany connects Malak's emotional state to the oppressive environment of Cairo, where "*the hardness of a city that houses seventeen million people is beginning to wear her down*." Here, the urban space is not neutral; it becomes an extension of the emotional weight Malak carries. The city's vastness, density, and relentless pace mirror her sense of isolation and fatigue, despite being physically surrounded by people. This shows the affective charge of environments, where space itself contributes to emotional

strain, particularly for women navigating social expectations within patriarchal cultures. Malak's avoidance of familial duties further emphasizes how cultural obligations become suffocating when layered onto personal emotional distress. El Wardany critiques how women are expected to sustain social and familial ties regardless of their internal state, highlighting the emotional labour embedded in maintaining appearances and fulfilling duties even when one is unraveling. This portrayal of exhaustion is significant. It demonstrates how emotions like fatigue and demotivation are not merely personal failings but responses to cumulative pressures—romantic disillusionment, cultural expectations, and the overwhelming demands of urban life. Malak's tiredness becomes a metaphor for the depletion of agency, where the constant negotiation of desire, identity, and societal roles leads to a form of emotional paralysis. This quiet depiction of decline challenges narratives that associate female resistance only with overt acts of rebellion. Instead, El Wardany presents a more insidious form of power—one that wears women down through the everyday, through the expectation to endure without acknowledgment of their emotional limits. Malak's disengagement reflects how subjectivity can be eroded not just by singular traumatic events, but by the relentless accumulation of minor affective stresses within both private and public spheres. Ultimately, this passage highlights how affective exhaustion serves as a tool of social regulation, where women, overwhelmed by intersecting pressures, retreat into passivity—not out of choice, but as a survival mechanism. El Wardany's narrative invites reflection on the politics of burnout, particularly within patriarchal and postcolonial contexts, where emotional depletion becomes both a symptom and consequence of systemic oppression. When the 25 January Revolution erupts in Egypt, Ali becomes distracted, and his violence against Malak temporarily lessens. She stays with her cousins while Ali joins the political protests. Malak reassures her family and friends in England, downplaying the situation and convincing herself that the violence isn't as severe as it appears in the media—until she witnesses a man die during a protest. She tries to comfort him, and as a result, is late getting home. Ali reacts with anger, shouting over her explanation, making Malak long for the comfort of Jacob. Later that day, she learns of Kees's nikah, and the loneliness intensifies. As life in Cairo returns to normal after the revolution, Malak

finds teaching even more unfulfilling, especially as her students lose interest in her lessons. Ali's abuse becomes physical once more. Eldin, an older colleague and friend, notices Malak's emotional distress and, after hearing her symptoms, suggests that she might be pregnant. Despite Malak's insistence that she uses birth control, Eldin points out that she had been on the same pills when she became pregnant with one of her sons. When Malak takes a pregnancy test, the result is positive. Her immediate reaction is to consider an abortion, but this is complicated by its illegality in Egypt and the uncertain gestational age. Eventually, a doctor informs her that she is three months pregnant.

6.3.3 The cycle of abuse: Jenna, Isolation, Giving Up Her Dreams

Meanwhile, Jenna values the privacy she has, especially when it comes to making changes for Mo. She quits the play and conceals her bisexuality, suspecting these aspects might upset him. She justifies this by reminding herself that she's spent her life trying to please her parents, so this doesn't feel any different. When Mo asks if she and Lewis have ever been sexually involved, she lies, claiming they've only ever kissed. Mo remains disapproving of their friendship, explaining that he cut off contact with anyone he dated once he and Jenna decided to be official. He insists, despite Jenna's protests, that Lewis must secretly have feelings for her. He then confesses his love for her for the first time and urgently asks if she loves him back. She responds that she does.

> Throughout their relationship, she has learned what Mo does and doesn't like and has bent accordingly. Not that he applies pressure or insists. He makes gentle comments, seemingly offhand and random, and Jenna is happy to comply, all in the name of pleasing your partner. The way his face lights up makes her happy, anyway." (El Wardany, 2022:192)

In this depiction of Jenna's relationship with Mo, El Wardany explores how affective dynamics in intimate heterosexual relationships can lead to the gradual dismantling of a woman's autonomy—not through explicit demands, but through the internalized desire to please. Jenna's decision to "*quit the play*" and "*conceal her bisexuality*" reflects a pattern of self-erasure, just like the one embarked on

239

by Malak where she willingly suppresses core aspects of her identity to maintain emotional stability within the relationship. El Wardany is careful to note that Mo "*doesn't apply pressure or insist*," highlighting how power in such dynamics often operates through suggestion, expectation, and emotional cues rather than overt control. Jenna's justification—"s*he's spent her life trying to please her parents, so this doesn't feel any different*"—exposes how patriarchal conditioning extends from familial structures into romantic ones. Having been socialized into affective labour from childhood, Jenna seamlessly transfers these learned behaviors into her relationship with Mo, where compliance becomes a form of love. This aligns with feminist critiques of how women are taught to equate emotional sacrifice with relational success, framing submission as care rather than as a loss of agency. El Wardany's portrayal of Mo's "*gentle comments*" functioning as cues for Jenna's behavioral adjustments demonstrates the subtle mechanisms of coercive control that are often invisible within romantic narratives. Jenna is "*happy to comply*," not because she is forced, but because the affective reward—"*the way his face lights up*"—becomes a form of emotional currency.

This reflects how desire is weaponized within patriarchal relationships, where women's longing for affection, validation, and harmony leads them to voluntarily limit their own freedoms. Jenna's concealment of her bisexuality is particularly significant within the context of this thesis. It reflects the erasure of queer desire in favor of conforming to heteronormative expectations. By giving up both her artistic ambition (quitting the play) and suppressing her sexual identity, Jenna embodies the cost of navigating love within frameworks that demand assimilation to patriarchal norms. Her relationship with Mo becomes a site where subjectivity is negotiated through subtraction—where being loved requires being *less* of herself. The conversation about Lewis further underscores Mo's possessiveness disguised as concern. His insistence that Lewis must secretly have feelings for her and his disapproval of their friendship reflect a common patriarchal narrative where women's social connections—especially those involving men—are policed under the guise of protecting the relationship. Jenna's lie about her past with Lewis shows how she begins to manage Mo's emotions

preemptively, another layer of emotional labour that reinforces her position within a dynamic of quiet control. El Wardany critiques the romantic ideal of "compromise" by revealing how, for women like Jenna, compromise often means unilateral concessions. The absence of explicit demands makes it harder to identify the relationship as oppressive, yet the cumulative effect is the silencing of desire, ambition, and identity. Ultimately, Jenna's experience illustrates how **love**, when framed by patriarchal structures, becomes a site of self-negotiation where agency is gradually surrendered in exchange for emotional security. El Wardany challenges readers to recognize that domination does not always come through force—it often arrives through affection, suggestion, and the deeply ingrained belief that to love is to shrink oneself for the sake of peace. Just like Malak, Jenna manipulates herself into thinking that she is doing this for herself as well, but that is not true, she does it because she likes the fact that someone has claimed her and that someone is an Arab, Muslin man. Especially now that she has lost her virginity against her will and feels less worthy (in the context of pre-marital sex in Islamic culture); being in a very traumatised, vulnerable position, she gives up her dreams to please him. "You're friends with a man whose lips have been on yours, Jenna." (El Wardany, 2022:197) He says this in the same tone he uses to talk to his six-year-old niece when she doesn't understand something. "Do you not think he is waiting for the day it happens again?" Ibid. Once again, she has to regulate and change herself in order to please him and not threaten his ego. Mo believes he knows her relationship to Lewis better thant she does. He is paternalistic and jealous, but she is in no position to question him. "I love you and I hate the idea of anyone else touching you. It makes me feel physically sick. And I know this guy is your friend, but I don't trust him. I don't trust anyone with you but me." (El Wardany, 2022:199) In this passage, El Wardany captures how declarations of love can serve as vehicles for possessiveness and emotional control. Mo's statement, similar to Ali's words to Malak—"I *don't trust anyone with you but me*" (El Wardany, 2022:199)— is framed as an expression of deep affection, yet it reveals a troubling dynamic where love is conflated with ownership. This kind of jealousy, presented as instinctual and protective, reinforces patriarchal notions that a woman's body and social interactions are subject to male jurisdiction once she enters

a romantic relationship. El Wardany critiques how such expressions, while normalized in heteronormative romance, subtly erode female agency. Rather than confronting Mo's possessiveness, Jenna redirects her focus to the inevitable changes in her life and relationships, illustrating how women often **ab**sorb and normalize emotional control by contextualizing it within broader narratives of transition and adulthood. Jenna measures Mo's jealousy not against her own autonomy, but against the backdrop of her shifting social world—Lewis's growing absence, her impending career, and the dissolution of youthful freedoms like *"movies until 3 a.m."* This resignation *"the deeply uncomfortable feeling that this is what it means to be an adult"*—reveals how patriarchal expectations become internalized as markers of maturity.

El Wardany suggests that part of "becoming an adult" for women is learning to accept restrictions on their social and emotional lives, particularly within romantic relationships where control is reframed as care. Mo's jealousy operates as a form of affective regulation—limiting Jenna's social interactions under the guise of emotional vulnerability (*"it makes me feel physically sick"*). This emotional blackmail positions Jenna as responsible for managing Mo's insecurities, again women are tasked with soothing male anxieties, often at the expense of their own freedoms. Moreover, El Wardany highlights how desire becomes constrained within possessive frameworks. Mo's fear of *"anyone else touching you"* reduces Jenna's sexuality and relational autonomy to a site of male control, reflecting broader cultural narratives where women's bodies are policed through romantic attachment. Jenna's passive acceptance of this, focusing instead on the natural drift of friendships and life changes, illustrates how affective fatigue and resignation can suppress resistance, especially when framed within the inevitability of growing up. Ultimately, this passage exposes the dual pressures Jenna faces: the emotional constraints imposed by her romantic relationship, and the societal expectation that adulthood for women involves sacrificing personal freedom and friendships for stability, career, and relational conformity. El Wardany critiques the quiet ways in which

patriarchal power infiltrates emotional life, not through overt demands but through normalized expressions of love that disguise possession as devotion.

> She thinks she does. Does some quick calculations in her head. Lewis has a girlfriend and is around less. She is with someone now and is around less. He's spending most of his time in Liverpool and they both know he's looking for jobs there. It's only a matter of time before he moves. Life is moving on. She will be a doctor soon and who will then have time for movies until 3 a.m.? She has the deeply uncomfortable feeling that this is what it means to be an adult. (El Wardany, 2022:199)

Jenna finds herself compulsively exercising, enjoying the peace it brings as she focuses on the challenge of the workout. It serves as a brief escape from the intrusive memories of her rape. She longs to return to the time when she was close with her friends—Malak, Kees, and Lewis. She and Mo become engaged without much fanfare. Although Jenna isn't sure if she ever formally agreed to marry him, she's not surprised when the engagement is arranged through their parents. She feels detached from the process, like a bystander, as the wedding preparations unfold. Neither Malak nor Kees can attend her engagement party, but when she posts a picture of her engagement ring on social media, both respond.

6.4. Blood Doesn't Matter Anymore[63]

The way power operates to annihilate Kees is slightly difference, but still, Kees' experience here encapsulates the internalization of religious and cultural norms, where shame becomes an embodied response to transgressing those norms—especially around desire, sexuality, and faith. Since accepting Harry's proposal, Kees wakes up every morning feeling "angry at God" and refuses to perform her morning prayers. She becomes fixated on the concept of sin, particularly focused on which ones, according to Islam, result in "immediate banishment to hell". Ashamed and sinful, she avoids sex with Harry and wonders how to tell her parents about their engagement. El Wardany offers a compelling portrayal of how shame operates as an internalized force of discipline, particularly for women navigating the intersection of faith, desire, and cultural expectations. Following her

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[63] This title makes reference a moment from Kees's past in which her family embraces a child born out of wedlock, justifying their acceptance through the sanctity of blood ties. ""Kees has always believed family was code for excusing the mistakes and actions of people you could keep close without having to interrogate your own moral code. Like when Mamo Imran brought home a blond-haired toddler and called him son, everyone had spoken about blood and how their collective blood now ran in the veins of a little boy […]"Her mother had hated her brother then but loved his son more than anyone else, and when Mamo had asked them all to arrange a match with their fourth cousin twice removed from the same village as Grandma back in Pakistan, they had loved him for being traditional and adhering to his parents' wishes. Then, they spoke about what a good son he was and how Islamic the arrangements had been. While peeling okra one evening, Kees had casually remarked that surely it was a little too late for him to be respecting anyone's wishes since he'd got a woman pregnant, refused to marry her, and then had the luxury of someone else sorting out his marriage for him without having to lift a finger, all while expecting his new wife, who was significantly younger than he was, to take on the role of stepmother to his fair-skinned child […] Her mother had snatched the basket of okra off her, not before landing a slap across her arm, telling her that blood mattered and just because Kees had started going to the debating club at "school, it did not mean she could talk to her parents, or about her elders, like they were her friends, and how she was too young to understand everything that was going on.Blood matters. Blood matters. Blood matters. Blood doesn't matter anymore. No one mentions the importance of family. Childhood nostalgia evaporates." (El Wardany, 2022:201-202) The community forgives the male relative's transgression, framing it within cultural and religious narratives of tradition, masculinity, and familial duty. Yet when Kees — a woman — expresses her desire to marry Harry, a non-Muslim man, those same blood ties lose their power to protect her. The once-revered concept of kinship becomes conditional, revealing a stark gendered double standard. Her declaration, "blood doesn't matter anymore," becomes a moment of painful clarity: family loyalty and cultural values are not applied equally but are weaponized to control women's choices. This rupture underscores how desire, especially when expressed by women outside patriarchal norms, threatens the very structures that once claimed to uphold unconditional familial love.

engagement to Harry, Kees becomes consumed by the emotional weight of sin, her fixation on "*immediate banishment to hell*" (2022:179) reflecting not only religious fear but the deep-rooted affective conditioning that links female sexuality to moral corruption. El Wardany's narrative aligns with Sara Ahmed's theorization of shame as an affect that "sticks" to bodies, marking them as deviant when they deviate from socially sanctioned paths. Kees' withdrawal from prayer—"*five times in a day she wonders what to do with her body instead*" (El Wardany, 2022:179)—highlights how shame disrupts not only spiritual practice but also her relationship to her own embodiment. Her body becomes a site of conflict, where desire is no longer a source of pleasure but a constant reminder of transgression. The metaphor of the "*red-hot feeling of sin*" suggests that sin is not merely a concept but a **felt experience**, one that contaminates her sense of self and her physical interactions with the world—"w*hich she thinks must leave a mark on everything she touches.*"

El Wardany's image of Kees wrapping her hands in a scarf to avoid touching the Quran— "a*fraid that it might dissolve into ash at her very fingertips*"—perfectly illustrates Ahmed's (2004:108) argument that shame turns the subject inward, forcing self-surveillance and bodily discipline. Kees' fear of polluting the sacred text reflects how religious and cultural narratives construct female bodies, particularly sexually active bodies, as inherently tainted once they step outside prescribed moral boundaries. This resonates with Islamic feminist critiques of how patriarchal interpretations of sin disproportionately burden women, especially regarding sexual agency. Furthermore, Kees' avoidance of sex with Harry—"c*omplains of tiredness or cramps… without it being about him*"—demonstrates how shame not only mediates her relationship with herself but also reshapes her intimacy. Her desire is suppressed not because of a lack of affection but because affective regulation has transformed physical closeness into a trigger for guilt and fear. El Wardany thus shows how affect, particularly shame, functions as a tool of self-disciplining, where Kees polices her own actions to align with an internalized moral code, even in the absence of external enforcement. This passage also critiques the broader socio-religious structures that instill these emotions. Kees' "*anger

at God" suggests a disillusionment with a system that offers no space for reconciling love, faith, and desire without invoking punishment. Yet, despite this anger, Kees remains trapped in a cycle of shame, reflecting Ahmed's (2004) notion that shame doesn't simply alienate—it binds individuals to the very norms they feel oppressed by, reinforcing their power through emotional attachment. Ultimately, El Wardany uses Kees' experience to reveal how subjectivity is shaped and constrained by affective economies of sin and shame, particularly for Muslim women negotiating romantic relationships outside culturally accepted frameworks. Kees' body becomes both the site of pleasure and the site of punishment, illustrating how desire, when framed by patriarchal-religious narratives, leads not to liberation but to a profound sense of contamination and self-alienation. On the morning of Saba's wedding, Kees tries to push back her own sadness, resolved to remain upbeat for her sister's special day. The busy atmosphere in the house helps keep her occupied, but she still becomes emotional when she sees how stunning her sister looks in her wedding attire. Kees wishes she could offer her sister more insight about marriage. Overcome with emotion, she cries, ruining her makeup, which has to be fixed. She feels distressed, knowing her own marriage won't receive such a joyful display of familial support. After all, her desire for recognition speaks to her:

> "The agony Kees feels is the realization of how much she wants her family around her when her time comes and the knowledge that it won't happen. Malak's face always swims into her head when she thinks this but stubbornly she pushes it away. […] Her mother is constantly surrounded by a swarm of congratulations and mashallahs from various relatives and, apart from occasionally checking that she is actually eating, she leaves her mother to glow over her daughter, who sits on the podium, beaming down at them all, occasionally wiggling her fingers in a wave to friends from university. (El Wardany, 2022:185)

In this passage, El Wardany poignantly captures the affective dissonance experienced by Kees as she navigates her sister's wedding—a celebration steeped in cultural tradition and familial pride—while internally confronting her own impending exclusion from such rituals. The "*agony*" Kees feels is not

merely envy but a profound yearning for recognition, a desire to be embraced by her family within the same frameworks that now threaten to **ostracize** her because of her transgressive choice to marry outside religious and cultural expectations. El Wardany uses the festive atmosphere—"a *swarm of congratulations and mashallahs*" (El Wardany, 2022:185)—to highlight the stark contrast between communal joy and Kees' private grief. This moment reflects Sara Ahmed's notion that emotions are shaped by social norms, where happiness is distributed unevenly based on adherence to accepted paths. Kees' pain stems from knowing that love, in her case, will not be met with celebration but with silence or rejection. Her desire is not only for romantic fulfillment but for social intellegibility—to have her love story recognized, validated, and woven into the fabric of family honour. The image of her sister "*beaming down at them all*" while Kees quietly falls apart underscores the affective economy at play. Kees is emotionally disoriented, positioned on the margins of this cultural performance because her own choices place her "out of line"—to borrow Ahmed's concept "To be out of line is to be out of place in a world organized around lines, to be seen as misaligned or misdirected." (Ahmed, 2006: 15–16) She recognizes that her life trajectory no longer aligns with the community's expectations, and this misalignment generates a deep sense of loss—not of identity, but of belonging. El Wardany also gestures toward the internal conflict Kees faces through the recurring image of Malak—"M*alak's face always swims into her head*"—suggesting that Kees is haunted by the example of another woman who also strayed from cultural norms and paid the emotional price. This connection reinforces the theme of female solidarity in absence, where the only people who might understand her pain are those similarly excluded from communal affirmation. Furthermore, Kees' emotional breakdown—"cr*ying, ruining her makeup*"—can be read as a moment where affect becomes visible, disrupting the polished surface of the wedding ritual. Her sadness leaks out, quite literally, despite her efforts to "*remain upbeat*," signaling how emotions cannot always be contained within socially acceptable scripts. El Wardany uses this moment to critique the pressures placed on women to perform happiness, even when they are being emotionally erased by the very structures demanding their compliance. This passage also speaks to the politics of family honour, where

celebrations like weddings become public affirmations of cultural continuity. Kees' awareness that her marriage will never receive this treatment highlights how female desire is only celebrated when it conforms to heteronormative, religiously sanctioned frameworks. Love, for Kees, becomes a source of shame rather than pride in the eyes of her community—not because of its lack of depth, but because of its deviation. Ultimately, El Wardany reveals how the desire for recognition—to be seen, celebrated, and embraced by one's family—is a powerful affective force. Kees' suffering illustrates the emotional violence inflicted when patriarchal and cultural norms dictate whose happiness is worthy of public affirmation and whose is condemned to silence. This moment encapsulates the affective cost of pursuing authentic desire in defiance of communal expectations, where love leads not to belonging, but to a deepening sense of alienation. When Kees sends Harry a picture of her outfit, he compliments her beauty but doesn't mention what she might or might not wear for their own wedding. Jenna, who hasn't seen Kees in months, attends the wedding. Kees confides in her about her engagement to Harry, finding reassurance in Jenna's joyful response. Jenna insists on a photo of the ring, while Kees asks for a picture of Mo. However, Kees soon becomes preoccupied with other duties, and the two don't have a chance to reconnect for the rest of the event. Kees's mother remarks that Kees will never marry, as she's too committed to her job:

> "Aunty Bushra walks back into the room, setting herself heavily into the armchair, patting her arm as she walks past. "Bilquis, you have to be next, huna? You can't let Hakim get married before you."[…]"She's married already, Bushra, to her career. I've given up with her. She doesn't care about love. She's going to be a famous lawyer and buy a big house and we'll all live together in that. She can help look after her sister's children." (El Wardany, 2022:189-190)

In front of her mother believing she is an asexual, a romantic robot married to her career and social justice and the pity in the eyes of the invisible jury, Kees impulsively reveals that she is engaged. The family is initially excited, but their happiness fades when Kees confesses that Harry is white and Catholic and has no intention of converting to Islam. In her process of desubjectification Kees takes

the risk of losing her family in the name of the will to become and disclose the world. After Kees announces her engagement to Harry, her family remains in stunned silence for an extended period. This scene from *These Impossible Things* is a watershed moment for Kees's character—one that encapsulates the emotional cost of asserting personal desire in the face of familial and cultural expectations. Her mother's sarcastic commentary—"s*he's married already, Bushra, to her career*" (El Wardany, 2022:190)—frames Kees as asexual, emotionally sterile, and socially deviant, not because of who she is, but because of what she has chosen *not* to perform: marriage within the community, the romantic ideal of love tied to religious and cultural continuity, and heteronormative domestic femininity. This portrayal of Kees as a career-focused automaton serves to erase her sexual and emotional subjectivity, casting her as someone who has opted out of femininity as the family understands it. The assumption is that if a woman is not visibly pursuing heterosexual, culturally sanctioned love, she must not care about love at all. Here, El Wardany reveals how non-normative desires, when not made legible to the community, are rendered invisible or pitiable. It is in reaction to this erasure that Kees "*impulsively reveals*" her engagement—a disclosure not only of fact but of subjectivity. In that moment, Kees attempts to reinsert herself into the family's narrative of womanhood and relationality, yet on her own terms. This disclosure is a double-edged act: it both claims desire and risks rejection. The family's initial joy—brief and surface-level—vanishes once the cultural and religious unsuitability of her partner becomes clear. The silence that follows her revelation signals not just disappointment but moral disorientation: Kees has stepped outside the bounds of what is culturally recognizable as legitimate love. The term desubjectification is especially poignant. Kees's act is paradoxical: in order to claim her full subjecthood (as a woman who loves, chooses, and desires), she must undergo a form of estrangement—a shedding of the relational identity that her family grants her. In Ahmedian terms (2006) she is no longer *in line* with the family's orientation. The world they recognize as good, moral, and proper no longer contains a space for her. And yet this very estrangement is also a form of becoming—what Beauvoir beautifully described as *"the will to become and disclose the world."* This scene is a crystallization of what it means to risk

one's position in the family in order to become more fully oneself. The stunned silence of her family is not just disappointment—it is a refusal to recognize, an act of emotional negation that enforces the boundaries of belonging. Kees' courage is not in confronting disapproval—it is in choosing to articulate a truth that might permanently sever her from the only community she's known. This is what makes the moment not only painful but also radically political. Her father quickly responds to the shocking news: "Then you must tell him and his family that you cannot marry him and return any rishta they have given you. […] You cannot marry this man, Beta." Her father doesn't break his gaze, […] "Why not?" she asks. "Beta. He's not Muslim. There is no way." (El Wardany, 2022:203)

Her father eventually demands that she end the engagement. When Kees refuses, her mother reacts angrily, telling her that she will no longer be welcome at home if she marries Harry. That night, Kees writes a letter to her mother, explaining her feelings and love for Harry, but her mother burns it without reading a word. Kees departs on an early train, and, unlike usual, her father does not offer to take her to the station:

> "But I love him," she replies. It is at that moment that her mother breaks her silence. Throwing her head back, she laughs and laughs. […] "Love. LOVE. What has love got to do with anything?" The next fifty minutes last for the rest of her life as her mother strips the paint off the walls with the things she tells her daughter. (El Wardany, 2022:203)

This moment marks the final collapse of Kees's affective connection to her family as she asserts a desire that exceeds what is culturally, religiously, and socially permissible. Her simple declaration— "*But I love him*"—is not just a plea for empathy; it is a final attempt to render her relationship intelligible within the moral economy her parents inhabit. But love, as she discovers, is not a valid currency in this space. Her mother's response—manic laughter followed by the violent rhetorical dismissal, "*Love. LOVE. What has love got to do with anything?*" (El Wardany, 2022:203)—exposes the emotional gulf between generations. For her mother, love is meaningless when it disrupts the structures that organize kinship, honour, and belonging. The laughter is not joy—it is rage, disbelief,

and scorn, erupting all at once in a moment that redefines the limits of maternal intimacy. The phrase "*the next fifty minutes last for the rest of her life*" is devastating in its temporal affect. It situates this confrontation as not merely traumatic, but permanent. El Wardany shows how affective violence—especially when enacted by a parent—is not just felt in the moment; it reverberates through time, shaping memory, identity, and the body itself. The image of her mother's words "*stripping the paint off the walls*" evokes destruction not only of a home, but of the symbolic space that once held the possibility of care, forgiveness, or understanding. Kees is not just disowned—she is emotionally annihilated. This moment can be understood through Sara Ahmed's theory of disorientation (2006:6) and the *affective economies* that circulate within families. Love, in this economy, is not unconditional—it is offered only when the child remains aligned with communal values. When Kees asserts a love that steps out of line—heterosexual, yes, but interfaith and intercultural—she is no longer emotionally recognizable to her family. As Ahmed writes, "*love becomes conditional on proximity to an ideal*," (2004:128) and when that proximity is broken, the subject is cast out. The burning of the letter—Kees's last attempt to bridge the emotional and ideological chasm—is particularly telling. It is a symbolic act of silencing, an obliteration of the daughter's voice and her interior world. In refusing to read the letter, her mother rejects not only Kees's choices but her very **right to articulate** them. This is what makes the moment so violent: it is not just about disagreement, but about **the** negation of speech and subjectivity. Kees's departure—alone, without her father's usual accompaniment—is the final stage of her exile. What had once been a routine act of parental care is now denied. The absence is painfully symbolic: she is no longer accompanied, protected, or seen as belonging. She leaves as an outsider to the family structure, not because she has ceased to love, but because her love is no longer compatible with the framework that once defined home. Ultimately, this moment crystallizes the central stakes of the novel: that for women like Kees, love and desire are never simply personal. They are always already political, entangled in religious, cultural, and gendered systems of power that demand allegiance and punish deviation. To love in one's own way, then, is not only an act of autonomy—it is an act of rupture.

6.4 Weddings are for the Aunties and Uncles

Jenna talks to Lewis on the phone, and he expresses his concerns that Mo isn't right for her. He encourages her to discuss the night of her sexual assault, but Jenna dismisses it, calling herself "an idiot". Lewis insists it wasn't her fault, but she quickly ends the call. She views the assault as something that happened to someone else, which helps her cope with the events, especially Mark's strange politeness after raping her, when he acted as though nothing had occurred, and she simply went along with the conversation. She feels "disgusted" with herself for not confronting Mark and for showing up at Lewis's house in tears. Lewis reassured her all night, distracting her with stories from the past. Jenna struggles in the aftermath because the way the assault occurred doesn't align with dominant cultural ideas of what constitutes rape, which typically imagine it as happening outside of a consensual sexual encounter. However, Mark's violence toward Jenna happened within a sexual situation she had agreed to. While others in the novel properly identify Mark's violation of Jenna's consent as rape, she grapples with the definition—she questions whether it was truly rape since she had consented to the encounter. Even more so, she battles with self-blame, calling herself "an idiot" for being in a situation where such an attack could happen. The novel rejects this blame; Lewis, and later Malak and Kees, repeatedly tell her she isn't to blame for the violence against her. However, because she views her experience through the lens of the dominant cultural narrative about rape, Jenna struggles to accept her friends' perspectives on the violent event. Afterward, Jenna decides to be more responsible, which leads her to reach out to Mo:

> "She deleted the apps and canceled the social plans she'd made for that week. Told friends that actually she had too much studying but, really, she was done with alcohol and didn't want to be in environments where she'd have to explain why she wasn't drinking.[…] She mostly remembers how that was the night she decided to get her shit together and stop being so irresponsible, because that's all it was. Her recklessness had finally gotten her into a situation she couldn't undo […] (El Wardany, 2022:166)

Jenna's experience of sexual violence destabilizes her sense of self, not only because of what happened, but because of the way she struggles to categorize it. The assault does not fit the dominant script of rape—violent, external, unambiguous—and as a result, Jenna internalizes a framework of responsibility, recklessness, and self-blame. The narrative powerfully shows how rape culture functions not just through the act of violation, but through the discursive and affective aftermath, where victims are left to question whether their pain "counts," and whether their bodies, in some way, consented to being harmed. Jenna's coping mechanismis a form of affective disassociation, a defense against the shame that follows from an inability to fully reconcile what occurred with socially legible narratives of violence.

This is precisely what Sara Ahmed names as the affective force of shame: it "sticks" to the body that deviates from the norm, and in doing so, it restructures that body's relationship to itself. Jenna's disgust at herself demonstrates how survivors often take on the affective labour of reframing their assault as a personal failure, rather than naming the violence for what it is. El Wardany is deliberate in presenting Jenna's internalized rape myths—the idea that because she consented to *part* of the encounter, what followed cannot be rape; the belief that politeness or absence of confrontation implies complicity. Even though Lewis, and later Malak and Kees, affirm that what happened to her was rape, Jenna cannot internalize that recognition. She continues to describe herself as irresponsible, "*an idiot*", even as the narrative gently but clearly exposes the injustice of that framing. The contradiction is not hers—it is imposed on her by a culture that only recognizes violence when it is overt, and only accepts victims when they behave in specific, passive, and visibly traumatized ways. The quote—"s*he mostly remembers how that was the night she decided to get her shit together and stop being so irresponsible*" (El Wardany, 2022:166)—is devastating because it captures how survivors often seek to regain control by blaming themselves. Rather than holding the perpetrator accountable, Jenna holds herself accountable, because culturally, that is what has been made available to her. This is not empowerment—it is disciplinary affect, where shame transforms into a moral

253

lesson: don't drink, don't hook up, don't let your guard down. This, too, is the work of patriarchal power: it turns victims into subjects of self-regulation. Jenna's experience is a crucial example of how subjectivity is fractured under the weight of violence that is not recognized as violence. Her failure to find a clear category for what happened to her leads to an ongoing tension between her own affective truth and the dominant cultural narratives that render it unintelligible. Her pain is real, but it has no name she can comfortably speak. In this way, El Wardany powerfully critiques the epistemic limitations of rape discourse, and shows how survivors often live in a suspended state of affective ambiguity, unable to grieve or move forward because the world refuses to confirm that anything happened at all. Ultimately, this moment in the novel speaks to the emotional cost of surviving sexual violence in a culture of ambiguity and silence. Jenna's choice to "get her shit together" is not a moment of clarity—it is a moment of resignation, of turning pain inward, of choosing self-surveillance over communal rage, precisely because the cultural script leaves her no other path. Mo is coming to dinner at Jenna's house, and Jenna's mother has put in a lot of effort to prepare for his visit. After Jenna stood him up, she made an effort to win back his trust, and they gradually began dating. They were together for three months before she invited him to dinner with her parents, during which time they saw each other almost every day. Jenna finds loving Mo "laborious," but she chooses to commit to the relationship after he reveals that, although he has been sexually active in the past, he now plans to wait until marriage to have sex again, citing his moral beliefs. Being with Mo, Jenna feels that the part of her life where she explored her sexuality and the part that aligns with her family's values are increasingly coming together, which makes her happy.

> At least, they never used to. Life has been different recently and she has become a different creature, and beside Mo her transformation is complete. The slate wiped clean. Nothing exists before, only an open road ahead. He is romance and absolution rolled into one delicious man. The reality, that he is a man and things are different for him, hangs between them delicately, neither of them willing to break it by interrogating it or looking too closely.

If she is honest with herself, she would have argued that point once upon a time, but now

she lets things go and it feels nice. (El Wardany, 2022:160)

This passage marks a turning point in Jenna's attempt to reconcile previously disjointed parts of her identity: her desire for sexual freedom and her longing for cultural and familial approval. In choosing to recommit to Mo after his declaration of abstinence, Jenna finds herself drawn to the possibility of absolution—not only in his eyes, but in the eyes of her parents, her community, and perhaps even God. Mo becomes, quite literally, "*romance and absolution rolled into one delicious man*" (El Wardany, 2022:160). Through him, she imagines a narrative of cleansing, a metaphorical wiping of the slate that allows her to re-enter the fold of cultural respectability without publicly confronting her past. Yet beneath this fantasy lies a web of unresolved contradictions. Jenna admits that "*loving Mo is laborious*," suggesting that this relationship is not grounded in mutual ease or emotional reciprocity, but in the effort required to maintain alignment between love and acceptability. Her commitment to Mo is not driven by uncontainable passion but by a desire for order, safety, and recognition. The affective labour she performs—both in sustaining the relationship and in keeping her past at bay—is a form of **self-regulation** that secures her intelligibility within her family and community. El Wardany draws attention to the gendered double standard operating beneath this narrative of mutual redemption: "*The reality, that he is a man and things are different for him, hangs between them delicately, neither of them willing to break it.*" Jenna is aware, if only fleetingly, of the asymmetry—Mo's past is not erased or condemned, while hers must be. His declaration of waiting until marriage grants him moral authority; hers must manifest in silence, retreat, and behavioural change. Yet, Jenna chooses not to challenge this imbalance. "*If she is honest with herself, she would have argued that point once upon a time, but now she lets things go and it feels nice.*" This decision not to interrogate, not to fight, is a deeply gendered one. It reflects a weariness with confrontation, but also a resignation to the affective economies in which women are rewarded for compliance and punished for resistance. Jenna's transformation into "*a different creature*" is thus not only a

transformation of values but of self. El Wardany underscores that the subjectivity she performs beside Mo is a curated one—detached from her previous experiences of desire, disassociated from her trauma, and shaped by the fantasy of beginning again. However, this transformation is not liberatory. It is contingent on forgetting, on erasure, on narrowing her life into a version that fits more comfortably within normative bounds. What is left unsaid—her ambivalence, her labour, her silence—is what sustains the relationship. This moment reflects how affective attachments can operate not only as sites of intimacy but as structures of containment, particularly for women who seek safety and coherence in a world that has previously punished their deviance. Jenna's happiness is real, but it is also strategic: it is the product of letting go of the desire to interrogate asymmetry, of embracing emotional quietness over critical friction. In this way, El Wardany critiques the cost of normative reconciliation, where love and respectability are offered—but only in exchange for silence, compromise, and forgetting. In this chapter, we have seen how power does not merely operate through laws or abstract norms, but through the intimate and everyday experiences of emotional coercion, abandonment, violence, and the severing of ties. These are the material and psychic mechanisms through which desire is blocked and injured—tools that ensure not only submission but also disorientation, shame, and affective exhaustion. Jenna, Kees, and Malak are not simply hurt by individual men or isolated events; they are wounded by a larger system that punishes feminine desire when it refuses containment. The breakdown of their community, the very space that once held the potential for affective repair and shared resistance, deepens the damage. Without a collective structure of recognition and support, their desire is rendered unintelligible—disqualified. But even in this fragmentation, the cracks in the system become visible. In what follows, we will explore how, from within this wounded space, the protagonists begin to reassemble themselves and their desires—not by returning to normativity, but by imagining otherwise.

Chapter 7. Resistance, Desubjectification and the Affirmative Politics

7.1. Technically Muslim

In the aftermath of rupture, silencing, and psychic injury explored in the previous chapter, this chapter shifts the focus to the practices of resistance and refiguration enacted by the protagonists—particularly Jenna, Bilqis, and Alya Mooro—as they begin to reclaim their subjectivity through affective alliances, embodied practices, and a radical reorientation of desire. Here, resistance is not framed as loud opposition but as a subtle, persistent disobedience: a desubjectification from imposed norms and a reclaiming of agency on one's own terms. Crucially, religion is no longer portrayed solely as a tool of repression but becomes, in the hands of these women, a resource to be reinterpreted, repurposed, and woven into emancipatory practices. Jenna, as a pleasure activist, redefines her relationship to Islam, asserting that spirituality and sexual agency are not mutually exclusive but can coexist within a reimagined framework of Muslim womanhood. Through this process, she subverts inherited structures of control while affirming her faith in ways that liberate rather than contain. Together, Jenna, Bilqis, and Alia Moro form an affective and political coalition that functions as a desire machine: a nomadic war machine in the Deleuzian sense, one that generates new figurations—such as the killjoy, the anti-hero, and the pleasure activist—capable of disorganizing dominant codes. Their feminist attachments, grounded in shared emotional intensities and lived experiences of repression, become sites of potentiality. These attachments not only sustain them but also generate an affirmative politics of desire: one that insists on the right to feel, to imagine, to want otherwise, and to construct alternative futures outside of prescribed scripts. It is through this collective force that desire begins to move again—not toward conformity, but toward transformation. Alya dedicates a

chapter of her memoir to her relationship to feminism, what Sara Ahmed would call the development of her Feminist Attachment (2004:171), namely, the emotions that made them feminist. Alya confesses she was not a feminist all her life, that being a feminist was a bad label and it implicated a lot of negative connotations. Mostly she was afraid of being seen as emotional. Learning to be an Arab Woman in London she came into contact with different levels of gender discrimination, the one that came from British people that intersected with race imbued with orientalism and the one she was raised with in her family and in Egypt. For her talking about inequalities in her own culture is tricky because of the risk to enhance the stereotype, however she is the living proof that no matter where you come from and wherever you are at if you are a woman you will be discriminated:

> The first time I remember being made to feel acutely aware of my gender was in a nightclub in Miami where I was on holiday with some of my girlfriends. We had joined our friend who was on the Superstar Rappers payroll at Saint Rappers table. By that stage I had interviewed some of the rappers interage for work and my friends and I. Were intelligent, successful women. We had been invited to the club as friends, not high candy, but as soon as we walked in. That's what we were reduced to because we were women. It was a heartbreaking wake up call for me, big hip hop fan that I am, to realise that when the rappers really gave their views on women in your songs, they actually meant them. That was actually how they live their lives. (2019:168)

This episode impacted Alya deeply, who started thinking about how in the Middle East she went through similar scenes based on the fact that: "Arab women were traditionally hidden from view ultimately so as not to incite the uncontrollable desires of men. […] This also turned women into not much more than disposable sex objects reduced to the sum of their body parts." Ibid. Alya's experience shows the dual objectification that Arab anglophone women go through. Alya makes reference to Egyptian feminists Nawal El Saadawi[64] and Leila Ahmed[65], advocating for an

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[64] See El Saadawi, N. (2015). *The hidden face of Eve: Women in the Arab world*. Bloomsbury Publishing. El Saadawi, N. (2024). *Woman at point zero*. Bloomsbury Publishing. El Saadawi, N., & Moghissi, H. (1998). The Nawal El Saadawi Reader. *Resources for Feminist Research*, *26*(3/4), 227.

[65] See Ahmed, L. (2017). A border passage: from Cairo to America—a woman's journey. In *Women's Studies in Religion* (pp. 35-47). Routledge; Ahmed, L. (2021). *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. Veritas Paperbacks.

intersectional feminism that takes into consideration the numerous axes of discrimination that Arab women in the diaspora experience. In Alya's view religion and culture are often confused with one another (2019:175) but thanks to Islamic Feminism the patriarchal component of the Holy text can be differentiated from the religious message. Islam has a very egalitarian message as we were able to see with Asmaa Lamrabet. In order to be able to access gender equality, it is important for women to be able to access their sexual desire. Although Islamic Feminism rarely makes reference to pre-marital sexual rights to pleasure, Leila Slimani in *Sex and Lies: True Stories of Women's Intimate Lives in the Arab World* (2017) does and in Alya's memoir this right is echoed in an affirmative perspective. For her feminism is about choice as she states "it's about having the freedom to act on those choices" namely what Saba Mahmood would call the capacity to act of which Alya is a great example in her trajectory between two cultures negotiating *hudud* and affirming her desire.

When it comes to the spiritual aspect of her life, Alya affirms that she is technically muslim "that's how it works in Islam, you take your father's religion" 2019:149 Even though she comes from a secular family, she identifies as culturally muslim. She believes in God and has her own relationship to him, this passage is an ideal opportunity to explore the fluidity of spiritual subjectivity in Alya Mooro's work, especially through the lens of cultural Islam, individualised faith, and post-secular affect. "I believe in God. I've just always had my own relationship with him and I speak to him in my head. Sometimes I go to church where all recite the Fatiha followed by the Lord's Prayer. It doesn't bother me which language I use or whether I call him God or Allah It's the same God. There is only one. (2019:148) Alya Mooro's autobiographical reflection on faith offers a nuanced portrayal of spiritual subjectivity as something deeply intimate, culturally inherited, and resistant to orthodoxy. When she says, "technically I'm Muslim—that's how it works in Islam, you take your father's religion" (Mooro, 2019:149), she gestures at the automatic, almost bureaucratic assignment of religious identity through patrilineality. Yet, her tone is both ironic and self-aware: she neither fully embraces nor disavows this label. Instead, she situates herself within what can be understood as a cultural Islam—a positionality that affirms her connection to a Muslim identity while also resisting

its institutional and often patriarchal enclosures. Mooro's articulation of her spirituality—"I believe in God. I've just always had my own relationship with him"—speaks to a deeply personalised and affective form of faith. Her relationship with God is not mediated by religious authorities or rituals, but through intimate, internal dialogue. Religion is not rejected but re-appropriated, on one's own terms, outside of patriarchal or communal regulation. She constructs a spiritual self that is both grounded in her Muslim upbringing and open to other faith traditions, stating that she sometimes attends church and comfortably recites both the Fatiha and the Lord's Prayer (Mooro, 2019:148). This affective flexibility—her indifference to "which language I use or whether I call him God or Allah"—reflects a syncretic spirituality, where what matters is not the doctrinal distinction but the felt connection. Her emphasis on God's singularity—"It's the same God.

There is only one"—undermines the binaries that often govern interfaith or inter-religious discourse, particularly in diasporic and postcolonial contexts. In doing so, Mooro proposes a universalist framework of belief, one that allows for multiplicity and hybridity without loss of specificity. What makes this articulation particularly significant in the context of Arab Anglophone women's writing is how agency is exercised not through the rejection of religion, but through the reworking of it. Mooro's spirituality is an act of reclamation—she chooses when and how she engages, constructing a faith that is dialogic, emotional, and sovereign. This disrupts both Western secular narratives that frame Muslim women as oppressed by religion, and internal community pressures that demand conformity. Her comfort with multiple traditions—ending both prayers with "Amen," "albeit with different pronunciation"—suggests a belief in the shared emotional resonance of prayer rather than its dogmatic content. This gesture of affective convergence is powerful; it reflects a spirituality that is relational rather than rigid, intuitive rather than institutional, emotional rather than imposed. In doing so, Mooro refuses both secular liberal assimilation and fundamentalist reduction. She claims the right to a spiritual intimacy that belongs to her alone. In *The Greater Freedom*, Alya Mooro explores how her spiritual identity as a Muslim woman is shaped by cultural affiliation, personal practice, and a persistent tension between visibility and legitimacy. She notes that

although she was not directly targeted by Islamophobia, she often felt scrutinized—both by non-Muslims and by practicing Muslims. "They are the cause of my imposter syndrome: I'm constantly waiting to be called out for being a 'bad Muslim' […] I am culturally Muslim, and there are many of us" (Mooro, 2019:150). This feeling of religious imposture stems from a deeper desire for recognition, a need to be socially intelligible within both secular and religious frameworks. Always feeling the pressure to embody a certain kind of Muslim, Mooro recalls contacting a young British imam to ask whether someone like her—sexually active and a drinker—could still be considered Muslim. The imam reassured her: "The Quran states that God is the almighty, wiser and better than all and that no one can judge us other than Him" (Mooro, 2019:152). This moment is emblematic of what happens repeatedly in Mooro's memoir—and in Arab Anglophone women's literature more broadly: a redefinition of what it means to be a Muslim woman. Her invocation of Khaled Beydoun's call to "reject the 'moderate' Muslim label" underscores her resistance to reductive binaries that pathologize Islam by implying that any unqualified form of it must be extreme.

As she writes, "qualifying Islam with 'moderate' implies that the religion is inherently extreme or violent. It's an inherently Islamophobic label" (ibid.). Mooro does not consider herself a practicing Muslim, yet she identifies strongly as culturally Muslim, expressing deep respect for the tradition that shaped her and advocating for plural interpretations of faith. Her stance resonates with Islamic feminist thought, which holds that there is no single or monolithic way to practice Islam. Mooro states, "I've always felt the pressure to be a certain kind of Muslim in order to feel free to be Muslim at all" Ibid. This reveals the deeply affective and social dimension of religious identification: one's relationship to Islam is shaped as much by community pressures and external gazes as by private belief. Growing up in London, Alya initially attributed her imposter syndrome to her minority status. But, as Deleuze and Guattari might argue, Alya is not an imposter—she is a deterritorializing force, unmaking the dominant cartography of what it means to be Muslim. Her position is both hybrid and fraught: she feels the shame, the stigma, and the otherness of being Muslim in a Western context, as Sara Ahmed theorizes. As we observed shame, in Ahmed's view, is not simply about deviation from

norms, but about being made aware of that deviation by the social gaze. Mooro writes: "Even invisible immigrants like me have felt the effects. Whether that's simply by being called on to distance ourselves from terrorists. Or be deemed their sympathisers. Or in a really heartbreaking wake-up call that although we may feel British, many still consider us other" (Mooro, 2019:158). This double position—both hypervisible and invisible, assimilated and othered—produces a complex and painful tension. Mooro admits to having internalized some of the Islamophobic scripts she grew up surrounded by. She recalls being on a plane and fearing other passengers because they "fit the media stereotype of what a terrorist looks like" (Mooro, 2019:159). In that moment, she searched for white complicity, hoping to distinguish herself as a "good immigrant," distancing herself from the imagined "bad Muslim." This moment of self-awareness is both painful and critical: it reveals the internalized racism and the pressure to perform legibility under white gaze. In conclusion, when it comes to spirituality, Alya Mooro offers a powerful redefinition of what it means to be a Muslim woman in contemporary diasporic life. She calls for "the freedom to and the freedom from" (Mooro, 2019:163) in relation to religious practice, affirming that "there is no one way to practice religion, and the narrow and reductive lens through which Islam is currently viewed is damaging both for those within the religion as well as those outside" (Mooro, 2019:162).

In advocating for this spiritual multiplicity, Mooro affirms a politics of desire and becoming, in line with the affirmative ethics that run through this thesis. Her desire for a flexible, affective, and self-determined form of Islam is not a rejection of the tradition, but an act of reclaiming it on her own terms. Alya expresses a profound desire to be recognized as Muslim on her own terms. Her imposter syndrome stems from being caught between two gazes: the Western gaze that sees her as suspect (too Muslim) and the internal communal gaze that sees her as insufficient (not Muslim enough). Her question to the imam—"Am I still Muslim if I drink and have sex?"—is not only about faith, but about longing for legitimacy, for the freedom to desire, choose, and name herself without being erased. As Judith Butler argue, recognition is a form of desire: the desire to be seen, known, and affirmed within a social world. Alya's narrative is saturated with this desire: to reconcile her cultural

262

identity with her individual practices, to feel at home in her body, to belong without performing obedience. Alya's definition of her relationship to God is deeply affective and individualized—"I speak to Him in my head." This is not a rejection of religion, but a desire to relate spiritually without patriarchal mediation. She desires freedom from institutional judgment and freedom to construct her own relationship with faith. This is aligned with feminist theorizations of desire as not merely about pleasure, but about world-building, autonomy, and self-determination. In Deleuzian terms, Alya's narrative is an example of desire as becoming—a force that deterritorializes fixed identities and opens up new configurations. She is not trying to arrive at a final definition of "Muslim woman," but instead desires the freedom to be in flux, to move between cultural, religious, and personal frames without being reduced to any of them. This is desire not as lack, but as generative force—as a creative process of shaping a livable identity. Mooro's critique of the "moderate Muslim" label shows her desire to resist externally imposed narratives and reclaim her own spiritual and political voice. The call to reject this Islamophobic binary is a desire for liberation—not just individually, but collectively. It's a desire for affective solidarity, for being able to say: I am Muslim, and I am enough.

7.2 Reinterpretation of the Islamic Text and Nikah

Kees turns to religious texts "It occurs to her that if she can find loopholes in the law, a solid concrete of legislation, then she can find loopholes in a faith which has been mostly open to interpretation as opposed to absolute conviction. The scholars could barely agree on anything, let alone the big topics. (El Wardany, 2022:114) that might help her family accept her relationship with Harry, "someone, somewhere, must have written something about marriage and how she as a Muslim woman might be able to hold on to her faith, her heart, and her family." (El Wardany, 2022:114) what she is doing can be identified with the practice of interpreting sacred text in order to find their egalitarian meaning, performing *ijthihad* [66] like Islamic Feminists teach. Kees tries to create her own way of reconciling

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[66] Independent consultation of religious sources.

her spirituality, her desire and her community in a moment where she feels anxious about her first major case, and her family's silence heightens her anxiety, even her siblings ignore her calls and messages. She throws herself into long hours at work, while Harry, though feeling the strain of their growing distance, remains quiet. Their new flat is ready, but Kees prefers to wait until they are married to move in together. While Vivian envisions a grand wedding, Kees pragmatically proposes having an Islamic marriage—a nikah—soon "I don't want to do the whole big wedding that your mother has planned, but I'd like to do a nikah and be married Islamically before we move in. (El Wardany, 2022:257-261) allowing them to live together before the wedding and be recognized as married under British law. "It is only a formality. A nikah is not a wedding. Rather, a ticking of boxes. Kees has never dreamed of weddings anyway. you cannot long for something you never wanted. This is a small affair. […] A practicality, just in case her mother ever decides to visit her home in the future. (El Wardany, 2022:257-261) Vivian helps plan the nikah, but Kees isn't sure whether her enthusiasm stems from genuine affection for her future daughter-in-law or relief that Harry doesn't plan to convert. The event quickly grows larger than Kees intended, and while she feels conflicted about inviting Jacob out of loyalty to Malak, Harry insists. At the nikah, Kees tries to downplay its significance in her mind to suppress her disappointment over her family's absence. Although she appreciates Vivian's enthusiasm, the inaccuracies in the details Vivian organizes leave Kees feeling both sad and embarrassed. The imam performing the ceremony was difficult to find, as others refused to conduct an interfaith nikah, often criticizing Kees for her decision, and she dislikes the one she eventually located. Jenna arrives, brushing off Kees's apologies for being out of touch. Jenna is excited to do Kees's makeup and listens sympathetically when Kees confides her disappointment with how things are turning out. When Kees blames herself for creating these problems by falling in love with Harry, Jenna dismisses this, saying Kees has been brave, while Jenna feels she has been a coward. Before Kees can ask what she means, Harry's sisters-in-law interrupt, shifting the conversation. Just as the ceremony is about to begin, Kees's father unexpectedly arrives, looking frail, which makes Kees worry she's responsible for his condition. "He seems to be shrinking in front of

her and later that night she will cry to Harry and insist that she is the reason her father is fading away. (El Wardany, 2002:269) He explains that he came without her mother's knowledge and cannot stay long. "Assalamualaikum, Abaji." She doesn't know if she can still use the word "Father." "Wa-Assalamualaikum, Beta." His use of the word "Daughter" makes her feel weak at the knees. […]. "Bilquis, I cannot stay." (El Wardany, 2002:269) He brings her an ornate gold bangle that he and her mother had purchased for her wedding day when she was a child. Kees cries "The idea that her father, the man whose spine is bending in front of her, is standing before her to apologize for having less brings all the grief up into her chest and out of her eyes. Self-disgust burns in her throat." (El Wardany, 2022:270) and he hugs her, but he still asserts his disapproval of her choice. When Kees tries to explain that she and Harry worship the same God, her father remains unconvinced, leading to Kees's frustration. Harry enters to introduce himself to Kees's father but reveals that the imam has backed out last minute, despite being paid. Harry begins calling other imams, and Kees's father offers to use his contacts to help find someone willing to conduct the ceremony. Although he cannot stay to show support openly, he wants to ensure the nikah can happen. Kees's father eventually finds an imam who agrees to perform the ceremony. Before leaving, he asks Kees if she continues to pray, and she truthfully says yes. Harry pulls Kees's father aside to apologize for the pain he caused their family. Before departing, Kees's father gives Harry's father money for the wedding. Harry's father expresses that organizing the ceremony for Kees is a "blessing" and an "honor." Kees's father waits on a nearby bench until the imam later calls to confirm that the nikah has been completed. After the ceremony, Kees feels relieved that the imam didn't mention Harry's religion.

7.3 The Pious Whore

Regarding the redefinition of the Muslim woman, Jenna makes a significant contribution.

In one of their wittiest conversations, Jenna and Lewis, one of her many flirts who happens to be one of her best friends discuss her being a virgin whore. "Considering you're waiting until your wedding night to have sex […] Jenna, I hate to be the one to piss on your parade here, but you're essentially a virgin whore. […] I've never known a woman to get so much dick without ever actually having sex." (El Wardany, 2022:75-76) Jenna is the absolute master when it comes to conduct the double life and make her needs coexist, she carves out a space for desire that subverts binary logics of female sexuality. Jenna's exchange with Lewis—where he jokingly calls her a "virgin whore"—exposes the cultural contradictions that govern how Arab Muslim women's sexuality is regulated, surveilled, and misunderstood. Rather than being offended, Jenna defends her choices with clarity and poise: "Why do you even care? I have fun. By medical standards, I'm virginal and no one gets hurt. What does it matter if it's penetrative or not?" (El Wardany, 2022:76). This response is more than witty—it's radically political. Jenna refuses the dominant dichotomy of virgin or slut, modest or immoral, religious or sinner, and instead reclaims a position of agency that exists in-between and beyond these reductive labels. The term "virgin whore", while laced with irony, captures the social impossibility women like Jenna must inhabit. Her choices challenge the hegemonic logic of virginity as value and penetration as the definitive threshold of sexual transgression. Jenna is deeply aware that sexuality does not begin or end at the hymen—this awareness allows her to explore and perform desire while maintaining the affective and moral legibility that her cultural context demands. Her comment—"no one gets hurt"—is a powerful ethical claim: it reframes her sexual subjectivity not through shame or transgression, but through consent, agency, and care. Jenna is the absolute master of the double life, not in the sense of duplicity, but in her ability to hold contradictions together—to inhabit both desire and respectability, freedom and restriction, performance and sincerity. She chooses to engage sexually on her own terms, but sets clear boundaries around penetrative sex, not because she is confused or conflicted, but because she is in control. Her subjectivity is not fractured—it is strategically composed in relation to the constraints around her. In this way, Jenna does not simply negotiate the virgin/whore binary—she performs its impossibility, and lives in the very space that

refuses the binary altogether. In my humble opinion, Jenna's sexuality is not an act of rebellion—it is a form of pleasure activism (Brown, 2019). She curates her sexual and religious life around her own needs, not around what counts as "sex" in patriarchal or Islamic frameworks. In doing so, she reframes the taboo of pre-marital desire not as a fall from virtue, but as a site of self-expression. She is not waiting passively for permission—she's writing her own script. Her pleasure is measured, intelligent, and negotiated, which makes it all the more radical in a context where women are expected to either comply or abstain. This moment in the novel also reflects the broader politics of desire and performance in diasporic Muslim femininity. Jenna's ability to hold multiple truths about her body and desires—without dissolving under the pressure to simplify them—makes her one of the most affectively complex characters in the novel. Her strategic play with purity is not hypocrisy—it's survival. It is the queering of heteronormative Muslim womanhood, where she maintains cultural legibility while rewriting what it means to be muslim, sexually active, to feel pleasure, and to stay whole. Jenna's character complicates Western liberal assumptions that desire must always be understood in opposition to religion.

While she is capable of navigating sexual and emotional pleasures through calculated negotiation—as seen in her performance of the "virgin whore"—she is also deeply rooted in her spiritual life. Prayer, for her, is not an act of guilt or repentance, but a space of comfort, community, and identity. She attends the mosque every Thursday, taking her place among women who read the Quran in a circle of shared ritual and emotional resonance: "She slips into the sisters' room in the mosque, the way she has done every Thursday night, and takes her place in the circle of women reading the Quran. She feels a homecoming of sorts" (El Wardany, 2022:82–83). Here, the mosque is not a site of moral policing, but of affective restoration—a temporary home in a life marked by emotional dislocation. This moment exemplifies what Saba Mahmood (2004) refers to as the desire for piety—a form of agency that is not oppositional, but rooted in the cultivation of virtue, where religious practice is not imposed from outside but pursued through a deep, embodied aspiration to live ethically. Mahmood reminds us that feminist analysis must remain open to forms of agency that

do not conform to liberal, secular frameworks of resistance. Jenna's relationship to prayer is precisely this: a negotiated, meaningful pursuit of spiritual intimacy, in which she is both devout and self-aware. She does not feel the need to abandon pleasure or faith; instead, she lives the tension and finds a way to let both desires coexist. The passage in the mosque is also affectively powerful. El Wardany's description—"bodies swaying ever so slightly as the word of God vibrates from a woman's throat so beautifully that at one point or another, it brings them all to tears" (ibid.)—foregrounds the sensual and communal dimensions of spiritual experience. The women's bodies are close, touching, folded into one another; they cry not out of guilt, but out of a shared, vibrational affect, an embodied relation to the divine that is also a relation to each other. In this sense, the mosque becomes a space of queer intimacy, not in terms of sexuality, but in its disruption of heteronormative isolation. Jenna's desire here is not for a man, but for a feeling of anchoring, of being seen, of belonging—what Ahmed might call an affective orientation toward home. (2006:9-11) Jenna's relationship to faith is not static—it is in constant negotiation.

But what remains clear is that her desire to be close to God does not contradict her desire to live freely. Instead, it exists alongside it. As she moves through moments of sexual exploration, trauma, guilt, and loneliness, prayer becomes a reliable site of grounding. The *Umma* (muslim community) offers her a form of recognition that is not about moral surveillance, but about affective inclusion. In the rhythm of collective recitation, she feels not judged—but held. Relational desire, while functioning as a site of subjectification, also contains within it the potential to destabilize and dismantle the very structures that produce it. As Butler, Foucault, and Deleuze & Guattari all affirm in different ways, power is not merely repressive but productive—it creates subjects, modes of desire, and fields of intelligibility, while simultaneously enabling forms of resistance, escape, and transformation. In this sense, the affective and social entanglements between the three protagonists—and their community—can be understood as assemblages, to borrow from Deleuze and Guattari, through which they learn not only who they are, but what they need in order to affirm themselves in the world. This dynamic is particularly visible in Jenna's relationship to prayer and spirituality. At

Saba's engagement party, despite being intoxicated, Jenna is drawn toward the prayer lines, moved by a desire for communion with God that transcends religious prohibition. Kees tries to stop her: "Jenna, you're drunk; you can't pray to God now," but Jenna replies simply and powerfully: "Trust me. This is when I need him the most" (El Wardany, 2022:35). In that moment, the lines between purity and transgression, piety and intoxication, are blurred. Jenna's desire for God does not vanish in her state of drunkenness—in fact, it intensifies. Her faith, as lived and embodied, is not governed by dogma, but by need, intimacy, and affect. It is in these contradictions that Jenna locates her spirituality—not as a stable identity, but as an ongoing negotiation. Throughout the novel, Jenna repeatedly redefines the boundaries of hudud (limits), agency, and what it means to be a Muslim woman. She refuses the binary logics that define religion and modernity, submission and liberation, and instead insists on a coexistence of pleasure, ethics, and belief. Her choice to remain technically a virgin is not dictated by religious morality, but by a strategic navigation of Arab patriarchy—a fear not of God, but of the masculine surveillance and double standards imposed by her cultural environment. Jenna's agency lies in the way she orchestrates her life—modulating her behaviours to avoid punishment while still pursuing her desires, her faith, and her autonomy. In this sense, Jenna's journey illustrates how relational desire can be both productive and antiproductive: it produces attachments, structures, and recognitions, but also opens up points of rupture, disobedience, and becoming. Her desire for God, like her desire for pleasure, is not linear, pure, or compliant—it is messy, intuitive, and generative. It is precisely through this messiness that new subjectivities are born.

7.3.1 Pleasure Activism

Jenna, who is a passionate theatre kid before meeting Mark and Mo, attends a university drama club meeting, rehearsing her lines as Catherine for an upcoming production of *Wuthering Heights*. The director, Sarah (whom she dated) is so impressed with her performance that she jokingly suggests Jenna should give up her plans of becoming a doctor and pursue acting instead. Flattered but firm,

Jenna assures her that acting is merely a hobby. After rehearsals, Jenna and Ola, her Black co-star playing Heathcliff, walk to the parking lot together, exchanging playful banter about their casual sexual relationship. here she discuss power structures Jenna invites Ola into her car, where they kiss, and he uses his fingers to make her orgasm:

> I'm a Black man, Jenna. The power structures don't support me either." "Ahhh well, you're still a man though. You have dick privilege." […] when I'm on my knees it's questionable as to who's the privileged one." […] You're never on your knees. You always sit and make me stand." "Well, consider it my way of redressing the power balance. I'm deeply against women being on their knees in front of a man in any capacity. We've knelt for decades and so I'm ending it. (El Wardany, 2022:50-51)

Feeling pleased with the encounter, Jenna considers sharing the experience with Malak and Kees. However, since their argument at the engagement party, Malak and Kees no longer speak, and their group chat has fallen silent. This passage is important because desire here is involved in the fact that as a Muslim Arab woman, she should have been thought to anticipate men's desire. Nevertheless, she tries to change the narrative and assert herself, affirming her own need. Excercising agency, in the sense of the capacity to act, claiming her desire and pleasure, being empowered by it. Moreover, this scene offers a sharp and playful but politically loaded exchange about power and pleasure, where Jenna insists on renegotiating sexual dynamics in a way that affirms her own agency. The man she is with—a Black man—reminds her that the power structures do not benefit him either, invoking racialized vulnerability. Jenna agrees, but points out that gender still shapes the sexual script: "You're still a man though. You have dick privilege […] when I'm on my knees it's questionable as to who's the privileged one (El Wardany, 2022:50) but Ola says: "You're never on your knees. You always sit and make me stand." With precision and wit, she insists: "Consider it my way of redressing the power balance. I'm deeply against women being on their knees in front of a man in any capacity. We've knelt for decades and so I'm ending it" (ibid.). In this moment, desire becomes a site of reclamation and resistance. For Jenna, being on her knees—both literally and symbolically—is

associated with historical submission, especially for women who have been culturally taught to prioritise men's pleasure. Her refusal to kneel is not about rejecting sex, but about refusing asymmetry. It is an embodied, affective act of feminism, one that insists on sexual reciprocity, dignity, and presence. This is where desire meets agency: she is not passively responding to male desire, but actively asserting her own. She is not performing for the gaze—she is crafting the terms of engagement. This is particularly significant for Jenna as a Muslim Arab woman. Within her cultural framework, female sexuality is often regulated through discourses of modesty, honour, and control. To assert sexual need—without shame, without apology, without submission—is a radical act. Jenna's stance disrupts the assumption that desire must be oriented toward male pleasure. Instead, her pleasure is self-directed: she chooses when, how, and with whom to enact it. She acts—not just in the sense of performing, but in the deeper philosophical sense of having capacity to act.

This is sexual agency that refuses to be coded as deviant or shameful; instead, it becomes a source of power, humour, and joy. Her satisfaction with the encounter—and her brief desire to share it with Malak and Kees—reveals the affective dimension of pleasure as something that is not just physical but relational, something that might be witnessed, celebrated, and made intelligible within a community of care. Yet, the silence of the group chat, caused by the rift between Malak and Kees, isolates her. Jenna's agency is powerful, but it is also situated in a landscape of affective fragmentation, where shared joy is no longer possible. The pleasure of sexual autonomy exists alongside loneliness and disconnection, showing how even empowered desire does not escape the emotional complexities of gendered, racialized, and spiritual lives. This passage is about Jenna's passion the one she has for theatre, her being the lead role in every play at university; but mostly the one she has for dating in her unique, assertive and absolutely not pious but quite, here she discuss power structures with one the other leading actor of the play, Ola, who happens to be one of her many flirts. Jenna is committed to keep her virginity before marriage, that's a choice she made, or at least to maintain her hymen intact, as hypocritical as it can sound, but that's her commitment to herself and her culture, she drew a line and she wanted to respect. That never prevented her to enjoy her

sexual life and express her sexual desire in her own way, showing agency and a reinterpretation or mainly readaptation at her convenience of the norms she was taught. "It always pleases her when she hasn't touched or done anything to the men who have worked so hard to make her come. Some people would say it was selfish, but Kees called it closing the gender orgasm gap" (El Wardany, 2022: 52-53 In "Halal dating: Changing relationship attitudes and experiences among young British Muslims," Amer et al. (2019:2) describe how young Muslims in the UK are increasingly claiming control over their personal and romantic lives by redefining previously taboo concepts such as dating. Through social media, literature, and everyday practice, they articulate the distinction between halal (permissible) and haram (impermissible) forms of dating, allowing them to exercise autonomy without necessarily renouncing faith or community belonging. As Amer et al. argue, "there is limited agreement about the permissibility of many cultural practices, including those related to dating, and this leaves scope for individuals to make and argue their own choices." Ibid.

Jenna is one of these individuals: she reclaims dating and desire as meaningful aspects of her identity, without abandoning her spirituality or ethical compass. Her sexual self-expression is not framed as rebellion, but as a negotiation—strategic, embodied, affective—rooted in her own desire for pleasure, connection, and recognition. Jenna's choices, such as engaging in non-penetrative sexual experiences while maintaining her virginity, reflect a personal moral logic rather than fear of God. As she notes, her boundaries are shaped not by divine judgment, but by the patriarchal masculinity of Arab men, who demand virginity while benefitting from sexual freedom. Her agency lies in her capacity to act from within these constraints, much like the forms of pious agency discussed by Saba Mahmood. As Amer et al. (2019) point out in dialogue with Mahmood, agency in Muslim contexts—whether in Egypt or among Muslim minorities in the UK—must be understood as gradated and culturally embedded, not always oppositional to normativity. Jenna's agency, like that of many Muslim women, is located in the selective adaptation and redefinition of norms rather than their outright rejection. This framework becomes especially salient when Jenna begins dating Mo, a Jordanian Muslim man. Their interaction is charged with implicit expectations around modesty,

suitability, and marriage. Despite lacking chemistry, Jenna tries to make the dynamic work—she is momentarily seduced by the idea of cultural compatibility, of choosing a partner her family and community would approve of. However, her encounter with Mo also heightens her awareness of the emotional disconnect and longing that mark her personal life. Her reflections on her parents' romantic bond, once a source of irritation, now become a standard against which she measures her own loneliness. The pain of this realization is sharpened by the silence between her and her closest friends: "It's funny, the things you do when the women in your life are suddenly absent" (El Wardany, 2022:55). Desire, in this moment, becomes relational not only in a romantic or sexual sense, but in terms of affective infrastructures—friendship, intimacy, collective witnessing. But Jenna's longing is not reducible to lack. Her sexual and emotional life is animated by a politics of becoming—by a fierce hunger for joy, creativity, and sensual connection. In this sense, I argue that Jenna enacts what Adrienne Maree Brown calls pleasure activism. As Brown writes, "Pleasure activism is the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression" (2019:5). Jenna's relationship to her body, her lovers (Lewis, Ola, Sarah, and others), her refusal to see sex and religion as mutually exclusive, her passion for theatre and her appetite for life all point toward an embodied, ethical, and joyous form of activism through pleasure. Jenna does not seek liberation by rejecting religion or culture wholesale; she claims the right to interpret, transform, and expand them in ways that make space for her multiple desires. Her choices reveal a commitment to building a life that reflects both spiritual belonging and erotic agency, and her desire to disclose the world on her own terms makes her a distinctly affirmative figure within the novel's ethical landscape. She refuses to sacrifice one part of herself to preserve another—her subjectivity is layered, performative, and political. In this way, Jenna is not only a character negotiating desire— she is a woman practicing pleasure as a form of power.

7.4. Friendship: Affective Desiring-Machines

7.4.1. Malak, the Anti-hero

Under certain circumstances, failing, losing, unmaking, or unbecoming can offer more creative and surprising ways of existing in the world. As Jack Halberstam writes, "failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well [...] it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success" (2011:15). In this sense, Malak must fail in her attempt to become the "perfect Arab girl" in order to deconstruct her subjectivity and rebuild herself on her own terms. She embodies what Halberstam would call the queer art of failure: her story is not one of triumph or moral redemption, but of collapse, rupture, and survival. She is not a heroine in the conventional sense—she lies, dissociates, submits to abuse, and makes difficult decisions that defy communal norms. Her anti-heroism lies in her refusal to be heroic, her refusal to uphold a normative arc of virtue rewarded. Malak is messy, ambivalent, and full of contradictions—precisely because she is real.

Sara Ahmed, in "Happy Objects," argues that happiness is often linked to certain objects and ideals—marriage, success, heteronormativity—that circulate as social goods (2010:30). We are taught to pursue these objects, and when we fail to derive pleasure from them, we risk alienation from our affective community (2010:37). Malak's affective community, especially the "Invisible Jury," (Mooro, 2019) taught her that happiness lies in marrying a respectable Arab Muslim man. Yet that promise of happiness fails her. At 4:15 a.m. in Cairo, Malak wakes early and begins searching online for information about pregnancy and abortion options. Her anxiety about raising a child with Ali, who has become increasingly abusive, is palpable. She reflects on how alone she is in this situation and how urgently she needs support. Her decision to reach out to Kees comes just as Ali returns home. "She has one minute to send this message," the narrator tells us, and she writes simply: "Can you come? It's urgent" (El Wardany, 2022:305). What follows is a disturbing sexual encounter with Ali, where his domination is emphasized through degrading language. He calls her his "bad, bad girl" and

uses her body in a way that renders her voiceless. Her only response—"Yes, God yes"—is performative, as we are told she "stares out across the city," dissociating from the act itself (2022:305). Despite what seemed to be irreconcilable differences, Malak turns to her old friend Kees—a feminist, a lawyer, and a crucial figure in her life. This speaks to the enduring bonds of female friendship and the importance of what Sara Ahmed calls "affective economies." Derrida's words in *The Politics of Friendship* reinforce this idea: true friendship exists not only in the present but in a shared past and a mutual promise of recognition (1997:636). Malak collects Kees from the airport and drives five hours into the desert, where they stay at a camp. Before they lose signal, she texts Ali, telling him she is pregnant and that she is leaving Cairo. Once isolated, Malak tells Kees about the abuse: how Ali yelled the word "whore" so loudly she feared the neighbors would hear, how he smashed a plate against her elbow, and how the resulting scar still runs up her arm. "She doesn't shudder or blink," the narrator observes, "even though Kees feels nauseous at the thought of it" (El Wardany, 2022:321) As Malak continues, the depth of her trauma becomes clear.

She recounts how Ali called her "dirty" and "secondhand" for having had a previous partner, how he made her shower after sex, and how he hit walls, kicked furniture, and once smashed a phone against her head. "She lifts the right side of her part to show a faint white scar," the narrator notes— "almost invisible. Almost, but not quite" (2022:322). This visible mark of abuse becomes the material evidence of a relationship that was emotionally and physically devastating The breaking point came when Malak discovered Ali had been drinking—the very act he condemned in her. His hypocrisy cemented her decision to leave. Despite her self-blame, Kees supports her unconditionally. Their reconciliation happens not through grand gestures, but through shared witnessing and embrace. Kees goes into action, coordinating flights, contacting Jenna for financial support, and preparing for Malak's safe return. Back at Ali's apartment, as Malak packs, Ali returns. Initially calm, he turns cold when Malak announces her departure and the abortion. Malak's cousin Haytham arrives just as tensions rise. Kees shatters a plate in a moment of fury—an act that shocks Malak into fully seeing the abuse for what it is. This moment of shock mirrors the earlier violence Ali inflicted on her and

marks a rupture in Malak's denial. As Kees's rage materializes, Malak is able to face what she had tried to normalize. Later, Malak admits to Kees: "You made me believe that if I wanted to, I could have had it all [...] I wasn't brave enough. I didn't have your courage." She confesses that her desire to conform to the expectations of family and community—the Noras and Zaynebs already married to perfect Muslim boys—pushed her into Ali's arms. "And then I met Ali and finally I had it, was living the dream," she says, "and the night he smashed the plate off my arm I wondered: where were they?" (2022:326-327). It is in this moment of mutual recognition that the friendship between Malak and Kees is repaired. As Webb (2016:74) writes, "my possibilities of becoming are reliant upon my encounter with the Other." Kees becomes the witness that Malak needs in order to reclaim herself. Having defined herself in the terms of others—her family, Ali, Jacob, the Invisible Jury—Malak finally acts in her own name. She decides to terminate the pregnancy and leave Ali.

Malak is the antihero because she fails to be what others expect. She fails to uphold the myth of the "good Muslim woman," she fails to make her relationship work, and she fails to keep her suffering invisible. But in doing so, she becomes something else: a woman who tells the truth, who leaves, who reaches out, who begins again. This is not redemption in the traditional sense—it is survival, transformation, and resistance to normativity. Just like Salma, in *My Name Is Salma* (2007) by Fadia Faqir, Arab Anglophone women writers' pioneer, Malak reacts. Salma, actively resists oppression by taking control of her fate—such as turning herself in to the police for protection after becoming pregnant, rather than submitting to tribal punishment. As Shaffira Gayatri (2015:69) notes, Salma exercises agency despite enduring violence, humiliation, and cultural repression. Her resistance, however, ultimately fails due to systemic forces: while patriarchy dominates her life in her homeland, she also faces racialized, capitalist, and imperialist oppression in the UK. Salma politicizes her body—a site of repression—turning it into a site of resistance, even though she is denied refuge. This highlights the resilience of Arab Anglophone women protagonists, who navigate the vulnerabilities of liminal existence with agency, paving the way for the affirmative politics of desire examined in this thesis. While Salma will die, Malak survives. As Bazzano (2016:110) argues, the

assemblage formed by relationships like Malak and Kees's has "a highly subversive and transformative potential." Malak is now ready "to endure, to cut through, to make anew" (Webb, 2016:74). Her symbolic death—the end of the "good Muslim girl" dream—makes space for a different kind of life. Desire, as Bazzano (2016:110) writes, is not personal but machinic—it flows through connections. Malak's desire for safety and selfhood can only emerge in the presence of Kees's care and recognition.This is not a rescue narrative. It is a story of co-becoming. Through each other, Malak and Kees find a way to speak, act, and survive—a refusal of silence, shame, and submission. Malak's antiheroism lies precisely in her refusal to be exceptional. She is not saved by virtue, but by action, friendship, and the willingness to begin again. Desire is central to Malak's trajectory—it is the force that structures her subjectivity, guides her undoing, and ultimately enables her transformation. From the very beginning, Malak is driven by a deep, internalised desire to be intelligible to her community, to be recognised as good, respectable, worthy.

This is not simply romantic or erotic desire, but an existential yearning to be affirmed through the gaze of her family, her peers, and the Invisible Jury that polices the boundaries of acceptability for Arab Muslim women. In this sense, desire functions, as Deleuze and Guattari would suggest, not as a symptom of lack, but as a machinic, productive force: it assembles identities, attaches itself to ideals of happiness, and replicates dominant social formations such as the image of the "perfect Muslim marriage." Yet, as Sara Ahmed argues in *The Promise of Happiness*, the desires we are taught to have—the ones attributed to "happy objects"—may not lead us to fulfilment. Instead, they often produce alienation. For Malak, the promise of happiness attached to marriage with a respectable Muslim man fails her entirely. Her desire, initially channeled into normative scripts of success and respectability, traps her in a cycle of performance, self-erasure, and abuse. This is particularly evident in the disturbing sex scene with Ali, in which Malak performs pleasure—responding with "Yes, God yes"—while emotionally absent, staring out the window. Her body is present, but her desire is not. It has been captured, shaped, and scripted by patriarchal expectations. In this moment, desire becomes a performance of submission rather than a lived expression of agency or intimacy. However, the

narrative begins to shift when Malak reaches out to Kees. Her message—"Can you come? It's urgent"—is also an act of desire. Not for romance or sex, but for recognition, care, and solidarity. It signals a turn toward relational, affirmative desire: the kind of desire that feminist affect theory identifies as vital for survival and becoming. Reaching out to Kees is not only an act of desperation; it is also a form of self-assertion. It marks the beginning of a new assemblage—one that allows Malak to reconfigure her attachments and begin to imagine an exit from her current state. The reunion between Malak and Kees, framed by the desert landscape and the intimacy of friendship, allows for a moment of mutual recognition that is profoundly transformative. In sharing her story, Malak is not only recounting trauma but reclaiming the narrative of her own life. She begins to see herself not through the lens of the Invisible Jury or the abusive gaze of Ali, but through the witnessing presence of a friend who affirms her pain and believes her truth. In this encounter, desire becomes a tool of undoing and re-formation. It is no longer tethered to shame or submission but becomes oriented toward escape, autonomy, and redefinition.

Malak's decision to terminate her pregnancy is the culmination of this shift. It is not a failure, but a refusal—a refusal to continue living according to the desires imposed upon her by others. In choosing to leave Ali, to reclaim her body, and to seek safety and care, Malak enacts a desiring force that is no longer captured by normative scripts. This act of refusal, made possible through her assemblage with Kees, marks a symbolic death and rebirth. As Bazzano (2016:110) writes, desire is not personal but machinic—it flows through connections, through what he calls assemblages. Malak's desire to live differently can only emerge through this reconnection with another woman, another witness, another survivor. Malak is not a hero in the conventional sense—her journey is not one of triumph, moral clarity, or redemption. She lies, she submits, she survives. Her story is full of contradictions, ambivalence, and messy affective decisions. But it is precisely in these failures that she becomes legible as an antihero. Her antiheroism is grounded in her refusal to uphold the myth of the virtuous woman who is rewarded for obedience. Instead, she breaks down, reaches out, and chooses herself. In doing so, she reclaims desire—not as submission, but as the will to survive, to

278

change, and to begin again. This is desire not as individual longing, but as relational force. Not as lack, but as life-making. Their friendship becomes a desiring machine precisely because it operates outside normative scripts and enables the production of something new—new subjectivities, new possibilities, new modes of survival. In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, a desiring machine is not a metaphor, but a literal configuration: desire doesn't belong to individuals; it flows between bodies, through assemblages, through relational circuits that connect people, affects, and institutions. It is a productive force, not an expression of interior longing. When Malak and Kees reconnect, they form such a machine. Their interaction doesn't merely represent emotional support—it produces transformation. Kees doesn't save Malak; she co-becomes with her. Through Kees's witnessing and action, Malak is able to exit the paralyzing loop of shame, fear, and submission.

At the same time, Kees's ability to act, to care, to affirm, gives her own life a renewed ethical direction. Their encounter is charged with affect—it moves them, literally and symbolically. It makes Malak possible again as a subject. This machine—this assemblage—generates affect, action, rupture, and escape. It enables Malak's "symbolic death" (as you rightly call it) and her rebirth through the act of choosing abortion, leaving Ali, and rejecting the ideological promise of patriarchal happiness. In affect theory and Spinozist-Deleuzian thought, desire is life's immanent tendency to connect, to create, to resist entropy. The friendship re-routes the desiring force that had previously been captured by normative expectations (marriage, virtue, submission) and liberates it into a space where Malak can desire differently—can become otherwise. They are not desiring machines because they want something; they are desiring machines because their connection produces change. Their friendship is not restorative—it's generative.

7.4.2 Jenna, the Pleasure Activist

Desire—when shaped by fear, shame, and isolation—can lead to devastating choices. Jenna's decision to marry Mo is not born from love or passion, but from a loss of faith in her own ability to want. Following her rape, Jenna is stripped of the confidence she once had in her body and her agency. The absence of her affective community—Kees and Malak—deepens this disorientation. Desire, once a site of self-expression and experimentation for Jenna, is now entangled with trauma, silence, and the pressure to become respectable again. When Malak and Kees arrive at the airport with their partners, the reunion is not only logistical—it is affective. Lewis, who had once been close to Jenna, reveals to them that she was raped, and that her sudden decision to marry Mo is rooted in fear and shame rather than love. He tells them, "it's like someone has reached inside her and turned off all the lights." (2022:343) The image strikes Malak immediately—Jenna, once vibrant and assertive, has dimmed. Despite the urgency of Malak's own appointment, the two women decide to crash Jenna's wedding. The confrontation is immediate and emotional. "Do you even love him?" Malak asks. "You don't marry someone because of what happened," Kees adds. Jenna's mother, confused, asks simply: "What happened?" In this moment of rupture, all of Jenna's suppressed feelings rise to the surface. The text describes her finally breaking down: "it is only when she feels Kees on one side of her and Malak on the other that she sinks to her knees [...] she folds in half, face buried in her wedding dress" (El Wardany, 2022:347). The image of three women—kneeling together—is more than dramatic; it is symbolic. This is the moment when Jenna's desiring self is reactivated. Not through romantic love, but through the return of her friends. Without her community, Jenna internalised her trauma and punished herself by aligning with expectations of purity, modesty, and submission. "Because then everyone would know," she tells her mother, "That I wasn't a virgin, and who would marry me then?" (El Wardany, 2022:362). Jenna's fear is not only about personal loss but about being rendered socially unintelligible—being a woman who wants, but should not. The return of Kees and Malak interrupts this trajectory. Their presence functions as a desiring machine—not because they tell Jenna what to

do, but because their arrival reactivates the conditions of her becoming. Their friendship doesn't restore her virginity or erase the trauma. It reorganises her affective landscape, reconnects her to her own will, her own feeling, and makes her refusal possible. Jenna doesn't say no to Mo because she suddenly becomes strong. She says no because desire begins to flow again, not toward submission but toward self-reclamation. This is where the power of their friendship lies. Deleuze and Guattari remind us that desiring-machines are not metaphorical—they are relational assemblages that produce subjectivity. The moment Kees and Malak kneel beside Jenna, they form a circuit of desire: one that breaks the logic of shame and reactivates the logic of becoming. Jenna reclaims the right to be loved, to be broken, and to choose again. What follows is not a return to normal, but a beginning. Jenna tells her mother everything. Unexpectedly, her mother supports her. The wedding is off. The friends are reunited. The desiring machine reassembles—not around purity, but around mutual recognition, support, and survival. Jenna, like Malak, is not a heroine. She is not healed. But she has chosen a different story. And that, in itself, is desire becoming something else entirely. This choice, however quiet, is an act of affirmative politics. It does not negate the pain or undo the trauma, but it asserts the possibility of becoming otherwise. Affirmative politics, as theorised by feminist and post-structuralist thinkers mentioned in this thesis, is not merely reactive—it is productive. It insists on life in the face of negation, on relation in the face of isolation. In the moment Jenna kneels between Kees and Malak, a new ethical terrain is made possible. Their presence reactivates her capacity to feel, want, and act, not in reaction to shame but in pursuit of something more livable. This is not redemption, but reorientation—one that affirms the political value of desire, care, and refusal as forces that make new futures imaginable.

7.4.3 Bilquis the Killjoy

The confrontation between Kees and her mother at Jenna's non-wedding is one of the most affectively charged moments in the novel. In this brief but potent scene, religion, love, family, shame, and

feminist resistance collide. Kees's return is not only physical—it is ideological. Her refusal to perform submission or regret places her in the position of the feminist killjoy, as defined by Sara Ahmed (2023: 6): the one who refuses to "go along to get along," who dares to speak truths that fracture the illusion of harmony. "Another dinner ruined," Ahmed writes; in Kees's case, it is a wedding:

> You become a feminist killjoy when you are not willing to go along with something, to get along with someone, sitting there quietly, taking it all in. You become a feminist killjoy when you react, speak back, to those with authority, using words like sexism because that is what you hear. There is so much you are supposed to avoid saying or doing in order not to ruin an occasion. Another dinner ruined, so many dinners ruined!" (Ahmed, 2023: 6)

When Abida appears, Kees immediately confronts her: "The wedding isn't happening. She doesn't love him, and unlike you, we happen to think love matters when you're picking the person to spend your life with." (El Wardany, 2022:356) Kees's sharpness shocks her mother, marking a rupture in their dynamic. What follows is not simply a quarrel, but a political declaration. Kees accuses her mother of hypocrisy, refusing to accept religious justifications for her family's rejection of Harry. "This isn't Islam," she says, tears finally surfacing. "So don't tell me it's because he's not Muslim and then tell me it's about God when my uncle brought home a baby boy and refused to marry the mother and you still talk to him." Ibid. Her words reject not just her family's judgment, but the entire apparatus of selective morality that polices women's choices while excusing men's failures. Her outburst is an act of desiring refusal. It is driven not only by grief and love but by a desire to be seen as whole, complex, and still faithful—just differently faithful. Her anger is not anti-religious; it is directed at the misuse of religion to justify exclusion. She is fighting for her own version of a meaningful life, one anchored in love and commitment, even if it does not align with community expectations. When she cries, "I came back with a ring on my finger and a man who loves me," she is asking to be read as good, as whole, as deserving—not in spite of her choices, but because of them. Harry's intervention, gentle but firm, shows the limits and risks of allyship. He says: "Don't talk to

your mother like that. Not ever. And never on my behalf." His presence is complicated—both protective and paternalistic. But his restraint, and his quiet respect for Abida, offer a contrast to Kees's emotional volatility. Together, they form an assemblage that is not about agreement, but about mutual holding. His support does not diminish Kees's agency; it affirms it, even as it complicates the scene. This moment exemplifies affirmative politics. Kees is not merely rejecting her family; she is articulating another model of faith, love, and dignity. She affirms her right to love outside the bounds of community-sanctioned narratives. And though her mother does not embrace her, Kees does not bend. The feminist killjoy is not just the one who ruins a party—she is the one who names what others refuse to name, who insists that desire must be aligned with truth, and that love without integrity is not worth having. As with Malak and Jenna, it is through Kees's desiring refusal—her unwillingness to be erased or silently disciplined—that the politics of desire become visible. Her desire is not simply for Harry; it is for a life where love, religion, and dignity can coexist without shame. The affective and ideological dissonance of this scene reveals the cost of becoming, but also its profound necessity. Kees's rage, grief, and resistance mark her as a desiring machine—one that runs not on harmony, but on confrontation, relation, and refusal.And in that refusal, something new begins.

7.5 The Politics of Figurations: Nomadic War Machine and Affirmative Politics

The following morning, Jenna reminisces about their teenage years, teasing Kees, who grumbles about Jenna's boundless energy so early in the day. The three women—Jenna, Malak, and Kees—share a warm embrace. Kees jokingly accuses Jenna of orchestrating the wedding just to reunite them. They spend the entire day sprawled on Kees's bed, catching up on the events and emotions of the past year. Jenna hesitates to confront Mo about her decision, while Kees admits the deep pain of her family's rejection but acknowledges feeling a sense of belonging again with her friends' support.

Malak opens up about her conflicting emotions over her pregnancy, admitting she wanted the baby but feared the impact of raising a child in an abusive relationship. She confesses privately that part of her decision to terminate the pregnancy might have been an act of defiance against Ali. Meanwhile, Abida, Kees's mother, notices her daughter's wedding bracelet is missing and silently appreciates her husband's actions in helping Kees, despite her outward disapproval. Elsewhere, Jenna's parents are relieved and thankful for their daughter's safety and happiness, even as Mo grieves the loss of their relationship, crying over his dashed hopes. At 4:15 am, Kees wakes for morning prayers. Jenna joins her, while Malak listens silently nearby. Across the globe, Muslims face Mecca as dawn breaks, proclaiming "God is great!" It feels as though the friends, reunited in faith and solidarity, are healing the wounds inflicted by the forces around them. They share in an unspoken understanding that true healing is impossible without an affective feminist community—a collective that shares the same cultural politics of emotion. Together, they confront and defy oppressive power structures, undergo a process of redefinition and becoming, and affirm their lives despite moments of hardship and disconnection. The Arab Anglphone women's affirmative politics of desire is made of a (virgin-whore) pleasure activist, a killjoy and an anti-hero. These are the nomads that constitute the war-machine that will liberate desire. In "Difference, Diversity and Nomadic Subjectivity" speaking of figurations[67] Braidotti states that:

> we need to learn to think differently about our historical condition; we need to re-invent ourselves. This transformative project begins with relinquishing the historically established, habits of thought which, until now, have provided the 'standard' view of human subjectivity. We'd be better off relinquishing all that, in favour of a decentered and multi-layered vision of the subject as dynamic and changing entity, situated in a shifting context. The nomad expresses my own figurations of a situated, culturally differentiated

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[67] "A figuration is no mere metaphor but a politically informed cognitive map that reads the present in terms of one's embedded situation. Based on Adrienne Rich theory of "the politics of location", it has been redefined with the insight of poststructuralist notions of discourse – to evolve into Donna Haraway's idea of "situated knowledges"- as embodied or enfleshed accountability." (Braidotti, 1998:7) On "situated knowledges" see Haraway, D. (2013). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective 1. In *Women, science, and technology* (pp. 455-472). Routledge.

understanding of the subject. […] Nomadic subjectivity is about a simultaneity of complex

and multi layered identities.[…] The nomadic subject is a myth or a political fiction that

allows me to think through and move across established categories and levels of

experience. (1998:7)

Rosi Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjectivity offers a compelling framework through which to read the fragmented, shifting, and multilayered identities explored in Alya Mooro's *The Greater Freedom* and Salma El Wardany's *These Impossible Things*. In calling for a relinquishing of historically sedimented modes of thought and a rethinking of subjectivity as decentered and situated, Braidotti challenges fixed and essentialist conceptions of the self. Her figuration of the nomadic subject as "a myth or a political fiction" that allows movement across established categories resonates deeply with the trajectories of Mooro, Jenna, Malak, and Kees — all of whom navigate the affective tensions between Arab and Western cultural scripts, religious expectations, and feminist desire. Mooro's autobiographical journey exemplifies a nomadic politics of becoming, as she actively resists binary logics that oppose freedom and Arabness, sexuality and morality, or tradition and agency. Similarly, El Wardany's characters — though shaped by a shared cultural context — each inhabit divergent paths that reflect situated and relational negotiations of selfhood. Jenna's pursuit of sexual and emotional autonomy, Malak's recommitment to faith following rupture, and Kees's complex sense of loyalty and silence within the group reveal not static identities but mutable, performative subjectivities in motion. Their affective entanglements — charged with desire, rupture, care, shame, longing, and joy — constitute a collective nomadic assemblage, one that functions as a feminist war machine in Deleuze and Guattari's sense: not a violent mechanism, but a mobile, decentralized force that resists capture by dominant power structures. Together, they form a war machine for the liberation of desire — a disruptive and generative formation that pushes back against the territorializing logics of patriarchy, religious moralism, and colonial modernity. Here, affect theory — particularly through Sara Ahmed's lens — helps illuminate how emotions and desires are not only felt but socially conditioned, distributed, and contested. Desire, in this context, is not reducible to

sexuality; it becomes an affective orientation, a movement toward alternative modes of being and relating. The women's desires — for autonomy, intimacy, divine connection, or sexual freedom — do not align with the normative affective economies assigned to them; instead, they produce friction, disorientation, and ultimately potentiality. In resisting the moral boundaries imposed on their bodies and pleasures, they reclaim desire as a political force, reimagining it not as dangerous excess but as a vital energy for subject formation and collective transformation. In this sense, their interconnected stories do not merely depict personal struggles; they enact an affective feminist politics that uses the liberation of desire as both method and goal.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I tried to trace the trajectory of the politics of desire in Arab Anglophone women's writing through an analysis of two novels by contemporary authors that have yet to receive scholarly attention. These works mark a shift from a literature where desire is predominantly represented as petrification toward an affirmative expression of desire. To achieve this, I first clarify what I mean by "desire," presenting a literature review rooted in psychoanalysis, post-structuralist feminism, and intersectional feminism. I also provide an overview of the development of Arab Anglophone women's literature to contextualize the starting point of these writers. I situate these authors within the specific literary canon that Deleuze and Guattari characterize as "minor literature."

The pioneering authors in this field have acted as bridges between cultures, creating a transnational thread among Arabophone nations while fostering a feminine and feminist consciousness—one that is inherently intersectional. As trailblazers, these writers often narrated the stories of first-generation women whose experiences were shaped by the conservatism of their homelands and the racism they encountered in host countries. I argue that between the first and second generation of authors, there has been a narrative shift. While earlier works fit predominantly into a

postcolonial framework, emphasizing the need to defend one's identity against colonialism, contemporary authors expand this focus.

Although themes like hybridity and otherness remain central, second-generation authors, shaped by anti-racist consciousness and influenced by Islamic feminism (itself a branch of intersectional feminism), offer narratives less confined to displacement and deterritorialization. Instead, their works explore desire—not solely as a defense against oppression but as an active creation of new ways of existing in modern contexts. The impetus for this dissertation stems from my struggle to reconcile Islamic feminism and Western feminism in relation to the politics of the body. I was uncomfortable analyzing the body solely through a Western feminist lens, as it disregarded the specific forms of racialized, colonial, and class-based oppression faced by these women. At the same time, I lacked the language to discuss sexual rights in terms of pleasure rather than reproduction— rights encompassing abortion but also the freedom to experience and explore one's sexuality and body.[68] However, I knew my ambivalent experience regarding desire was valid and shared by others. This thesis contains autobiographical elements, reflecting my own upbringing across multiple cultures and the ways in which I internalized diverse systems of psycho-social oppression before crafting a "third space" of enunciation.

Through reading these authors, I realized how much our experiences intersected. Like me, they affirm their desires and fight tirelessly for the dimension of pleasure in their lives, striving to reconcile spirituality, identity, and cultural origins with authentic practices meaningful to them. Their works demonstrate that agency is not solely about resistance or struggle against oppression but also encompasses subtle, alternative forms of resilience, even if these do not align with Western

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[68] "To some degree Islamic feminism has failed to include, and perhaps even support, the Muslim LGBTQ community in its discourse, something that is both perplexing and complex at the same time. This is not necessarily because Islamic feminists do not acknowledge the LGBTQ struggle (although some Islamic feminist might), but in some instances it may be a matter of convenience. Some Islamic feminists "pick and choose" only issues that they conceive of general interest to all Muslim women (i.e. marriage laws, veiling, and mosque spaces among others). The assumption being that "women's issues"can be more easily conveyed to traditional sectors within Muslim communities and therefore can be straightforwardly addressed." Cervantes-Altamirano 2013:79)

frameworks of resistance and emancipation. I explore the concept of power and its role in shaping the subjection of bodies and minds, focusing on how it invests desire.

Deleuze and Guattari describe the psychic repression of desire, which translates into physical impediments implemented through structures of subjection. These include intersections of Arabness, being Muslim, being female, and being a "border woman" (mujer frontera, mestiza). The obligations to be a "good Arab girl," maintain virginity, marry, and conform to motherhood—all intersect with the discriminatory pressures of minority status. This interwoven discrimination is precisely what lends Arab Anglophone literature its affirmative quality. Following Deleuze and Guattari's insights, minor literature is not "minor" due to inferiority but because it diverges from major discourse. Its peculiarity lies in crafting alternative narratives rather than conforming to hegemonic norms. From foundational works like *The Prophet* to *My Name is Salma*, Arab Anglophone literature continues to challenge the pervasive, reductive stereotypes surrounding Arab women—persistently exoticized as victims of war and oppression. This literature also reflects the realities of third- and fourth-generation Arabs who occupy influential positions in contemporary society, making active, conscious decisions about their bodies. The politics of pleasure is key to this discourse. Growing up, I internalized the belief that pleasure was not a right—a reality mirrored in the experiences of these authors and the characters they depict. For earlier generations, this was an almost inevitable condition due to the overwhelming struggles they faced. Constant exotification and the inability to see themselves through anything other than the eyes of others prevented them from shaping a self-determined vision of their desires. In contrast, contemporary authors create strategies for living love and embracing transformative experiences that are integral to personal growth, even if this means never fully belonging anywhere.

For example, Rami Al-Ali was deeply influenced by his sister's inability to fit the "Good Arab Girl" ideal, which ultimately forced her separation from her family. This narrative resonates with the experience of many women who grapple with reconciling identity, belonging, and desire while navigating second-generation subjectivities. As with many issues, the politics of desire profoundly—

and often negatively—impacts women's bodies. While Arab men may also endure cultural and psychological subjugation, the consequences are far less severe for them. Women, by contrast, carry the weight of their personal choices while also bearing the responsibility of family honor.

The trajectories of the women in these texts consistently affirm desire as central, even when the pursuit is fraught with difficulty. Malak yearns for true love, ultimately choosing Ali, despite the personal compromises this entails. Such narratives illuminate the enduring struggle to affirm pleasure and autonomy within oppressive frameworks, embodying the politics of desire as a continual negotiation between personal and collective identities. One of the aspects that resonates deeply with me in the works of contemporary Arab Anglophone writers is how their characters translate their emotions into acts of political expression and how they hold on to their spirituality, redefining it constantly but being forever in touch with it. I find that their spirituality is a perfect blend of their emotional, political, religious, cultural and desiring affectivity. I believe it is a manifestation of them being desiring-machines. As Anzaldua defines it:

> Spirituality is an ontological belief in the existence of things external to the body (exosomatic), opposed to the belief that material reality is merely a projection of mentally created images. The answer to the question, "When a tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound if no one is there to hear it?" is yes. Spirituality is a symbolic system, a philosophy, a worldview, a perspective, and a perception. It represents a different type and mode of knowledge. It aims to expand perception, to attain consciousness even in sleep, and to reach an awareness of the interconnections between all things by acquiring a total perspective. There is a source of reality, from which both physical and non-physical worlds emanate, forming a secondary reality. When you catch a glimpse of this invisible primary reality and understand that you are connected to it, feelings of alienation and resignation fade away. Engaging with the spirit means coming into harmony with the world within and around you. Each person finds their own path to the spirit—through wounds, through nature, through reading, through actions, through the discovery of new approaches and challenges.

289

> Through spirituality, we seek balance and harmony with what surrounds us. (Anzaldua, 2022: 97)

The characters' emotions—rage, pain, depression, ambition, guilt, and shame—become vital sources of information, pushing them to forge new paths. These emotions may initially appear dysfunctional or oppressive, but the characters do not let them simply be forms of suffering. Instead, they transform them into tools for living affirmatively. This process of emotional transformation aligns closely with the feminist and intersectional work of Sara Ahmed (2004) particularly her theory of "the politics of emotions," where emotions serve not just as individual experiences, but as political acts in the negotiation of identity, agency, and resistance.

This theme of emotional resistance is reflected in the characters' journeys, each of them negotiating the intersection of desire, identity, and social constraints. In their actions, we see them engage in what Ahmed might term a 'dissident desire,' carving out spaces for themselves that defy dominant narratives. The first example of this is the "pious virgin" figure, who, on the surface, seems confined by traditional expectations of purity and obedience. Yet, the character's movement from conformity to resistance embodies a third space of enunciation, a space where she resists both external oppressive structures and her internalized constraints. This negotiation represents a deliberate act of self-determination, part of an ongoing process that Deleuze and Guattari may describe as becoming minor[69]—where one navigates the contradictions of larger systems without completely adhering to them. Furthermore, the notion of pleasure activism, as central to the feminist texts, underlines the emotional journey these women take in constructing their subjectivities.

One character's declaration of intent to marry a white Catholic man, for instance, seems like an act of liberation, a release from imposed restrictions. She acts with the certainty of peeling off a metaphorical bandage, yet the emotional aftermath—shame—captures the complexity of such a

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[69] See Deleuze, G., Guattari, F., & Brinkley, R. (1983). What Is a Minor Literature? *Mississippi Review*, *11*(3), 13–33. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20133921

choice. Here, the intersectionality of her identity as Arab, Muslim, and female comes into play, as she must navigate the dualities of familial and cultural expectations, while also negotiating the internalized weight of "honor" imposed by both her heritage and the wider societal context. In another example, Malak embodies the "people-pleasing" persona, caught in the expectation to satisfy both her parents' and her own desires simultaneously. Her early attempts at balancing these two forces, and her belief that she could achieve both, are deeply emblematic of the intersectional pressure that women in postcolonial contexts face, as their choices are continually shaped and constrained by both their cultural background and their positioning in a dominant society. Malak's eventual realization that she must make painful choices illustrates the limitations of this imposed duality, marking her journey toward an understanding of her agency in terms of personal, sexual, and political desire. As the narrative unfolds, Malak's story parallels a typical postcolonial narrative of self-discovery—a move toward rejection of imposed ideals and the embrace of one's own desires, yet it also complicates the notion of postcolonial agency by showing how multiple intersecting oppressions complicate such liberation. She is not simply fighting for identity, but constantly reshaping her position in a social system that does not fully accept her. Finally, the notion of the "antihero" that emerges in the figure of Malak holds important relevance for this intersectional analysis. Her journey provides a nuanced representation of resistance that extends beyond the typical framework of postcolonial fight for national identity or anti-colonial struggle. She represents an emotional, embodied resistance—the rejection of the roles imposed on her as an Arab woman, a process that uncovers new understandings of selfhood and sexuality.

Through these complex, overlapping tensions—identity, desire, cultural pressure—Malak's internal evolution reflects not just an individual reckoning with herself but also a larger reconfiguration of what it means to be Arab, Muslim, and feminist in contemporary society. Desire, as Goodchild (1996) asserts, is an affirmation of difference, something that only manifests in creation or production. It is self-generating and constant, creating coherence within the forces it connects. It synthesizes different territories, influencing and transforming them. Desiring production is both

transcendental and immanent, a type of synthesis where forces affect each other, catalyzing change. This notion links well with the concept of the *desiring machines*, coined by Deleuze and Guattari. As Goodchild explains, the psyche and society are composed of the same material: bodies, relations, productions, and events.

These components are *desiring machines*—produced in the same way society is—indicating that both are interconnected systems, which can mix and affect each other, creating intensities that are often raw, powerful, and without clear form, like joy or suffering. These forces within our subjectivity are crucial to the possibilities of resistance and transformation. At times, however, the intensity of desire can overwhelm, leading to repression, as Deleuze and Guattari (1996) suggest. Repression manifests when the intensity of desire becomes unbearable. This tendency toward repression, or in Ramy Aly's terms, the "undoing of identity," allows for a release from fixed expectations and pre-conceived identities, offering the potential to reinvent and rebirth the self. This process is crucial in nomadic subjectivity, as exemplified by women like Alya. Alya reconnects with her desire and authentic self through her memoir writing. In reflecting on her journey, she traces the deconstruction of the identities that others projected onto her, choosing a more flexible, authentic self that resists fixed categorizations.

Alya's experience is a vivid example of the third space of enunciation, as identified by writers like Homi K. Bhabha and Amin Maalouf[70]. Alya exists between Egypt and Britain, refusing to align with either culture fully. As she acknowledges, she is *homeless*, part of her belongs wherever she goes—her memories and encounters shape her concept of home. She becomes what Bhabha might call a "third culture kid," not merely navigating the dichotomies of culture but finding a space between them that belongs uniquely to her. This process of constantly shifting between identity markers and blending both cultures allows her to embrace a nomadic, flexible subjectivity.

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[70] Maalouf, A. (2011). *On identity*. Random House.

Her memoir opens with a quote from James Merrill: "Freedom to be oneself is all very well. The greater freedom is not to be oneself." This resonates with the Deleuzian idea of deterritorialization: the undoing of the old structures of identity in favor of a new, more open-ended mode of being. In closing her memoir, Alya expresses her affirmative politics of desire: "May we all be able to act and love and be and grow and flourish with the greatest of freedoms." Her words echo a desire not for stasis but for *becoming*, for finding ways of self-expression that disrupt conventional categories. This view of freedom aligns with the idea of the *rhizome*[71], a concept from Deleuze and Guattari that captures non-hierarchical, decentralized growth. Alya's narrative illustrates the power of moving away from psychic repression to a process of desubjectification—actively *becoming* and affirming her multiplicity. Desire, therefore, is not simply a personal matter; it is embodied and extended through interaction. In the context of cinema or literature, as Gorton (2008) describes, desire operates as something alive and dynamic, producing connections that are sometimes harmful but also creative and transformative. Desire can break down the past, form new bonds, and even be destructive—characterized by its unsettling affect. It disrupts, unsettles, and causes shifts, just as it does in the lives of the characters in the texts we are studying. Sara Ahmed (2004) and many other feminist thinkers argue that anger is a necessary emotion in feminist frameworks, particularly when tied to collective consciousness-raising. Ahmed emphasizes that the repression of pain and anger in individual women's lives must be articulated for any liberation to take place.

As the girls come together, their disparate stories and experiences provide a collective vision—a shared language that makes sense of their oppression. The solidarity they build enables them to finally confront the systemic structures that have hurt them. As Ahmed states, "To move away from attachments that are hurtful, we must act on them." Ivi.173 In this way, the collective powe of feminist activism is linked to the articulation of pain and anger, transforming individual experiences

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[71] See Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. "2 'INTRODUCTION: RHIZOME'". *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pp. 226-231.

into a shared platform for resistance. As we see in Jenna's narrative, it is only through solidarity that her story and pain find a way out of isolation.

The connection to others enables her to process trauma and begin the healing journey. It is the collective understanding of pain that facilitates transformation, as Ahmed argues, stating, "Feminism is also about the pain of others… a collective project…responding to pain depends on speaking about pain." Ivi.174 The formation of community—a group of individuals in shared struggles—is foundational to resistance and liberation. The relationships forged between these women become the bedrock of their survival, a place where love, despite all odds, remains a liberating force. A significant moment of affirmation comes when Malak, Kees, and Jenna connect their pains. They confront what society has imposed on them. They name their affliction and take ownership of their suffering, crafting their resistance not through silence but through speech, as Ahmed (2004) contends: "Through the work of listening to others, of hearing the force of their pain and the energy of their anger, of learning to be surprised by all that one feels… a "we" is formed." Ivi.177 This affirmation of solidarity, understanding, and liberation empowers them to act in the face of immense structural injustice. Wonder, as an emotional force, is inextricably linked to resistance and the reaffirmation of life. In line with the works of Deleuze and Guattari, as cited by Sara Ahmed, *wonder* is the constant rethinking and redoing of everything. It pushes against the notion of stasis, advocating for perpetual movement and transformation in every encounter and situation.

This is at the heart of what makes resistance possible: an openness to what may come, a connection with others that disrupts previous identities, and the courage to continue evolving. Deleuze speaks of a body that *does not know beforehand* what it can do when it encounters another. Ivi.183 This lack of knowing, this uncertainty, becomes the fertile ground for desire, growth, and collective action. For Alya and the other women in the narrative, desire and affect are what propel them forward—not as static identities but as a *becoming*, a continual unfolding of self and community, endlessly re-creating themselves in response to both individual and collective needs. Endlessly desubjectifying themselves. Endlessly affirming new assemblages and conjunctions. This

relationship between desire and affect in literature mirrors the feminist call for collective engagement with pain, anger, and wonder, ultimately pushing us toward a world that defies past constraints. Together, the girls start a process of "derailing something, displacing the social fabric" (Webb, 2016:74) in the delirious way Deleuze and Guattari imagined and designed it to be. Throughout this thesis, I have sought to demonstrate how desire, in its many forms—erotic, spiritual, relational, narrative—functions not simply as a private impulse but as a deeply political force within Arab Anglophone women's literature. By focusing on the works of Alya Mooro, Salma El-Wardany, and others, I have argued that these narratives do not merely depict desire, but use it as a tool of disruption, reclamation, and world-building. In doing so, they offer us alternative grammars of becoming—ones shaped not by compliance or redemption, but by risk, intimacy, contradiction, and refusal.

Desire, here, is not the opposite of faith, nor the enemy of tradition. It is the terrain where women test the boundaries of what they have inherited, reworking the lines between pleasure and shame, between silence and speech, between obedience and choice. The women in these texts do not always win. They are not always healed. But they insist on the right to feel, to want, to grieve, to act—even when those actions go against the grain of communal expectation. They do so through friendships that act as desiring machines, through conversations with God that don't promise clarity but hold space for complexity, and through bodily experiences that refuse purity as the only marker of value.

The contribution of this thesis lies not only in its literary readings, but in its methodological position: to treat desire as both a lens and a subject, and to engage Arab and Muslim women's narratives outside of the binary of victimhood and liberation. Drawing on affect theory, feminist theory, and poststructuralist thought, I have shown that these stories unfold desire as a creative, ambivalent, and insurgent force—one that disorients normative timelines of success, marriage, and faith, and offers instead a landscape of becoming that is uneven but possible.

In doing so, this thesis attempts to return desire to Arab and Muslim women not as a scandal, but as a right, a method, and a future. It is a call to read their stories not for evidence of suffering alone, but for evidence of life: life that persists, resists, and reinvents itself at the very edge of what is speakable, permissible, and imaginable.

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