

Comparing Isolation and Alienation as Themes in Five Pieces of Arabic Literature

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Themes of alienation and isolation figure prominently in modern Arabic fiction. This paper will compare treatments of these themes between Hoda Barakat's novel *The Tiller of Waters* and the following four pieces of writing, all set during the civil war in Lebanon: Barakat's book excerpt "People of Passion;" Emily Nasrallah's short story "The Miracle;" Yasin Rifa'iyya's book excerpt "The Hallway;" and Ghada Samman's book excerpt "Nightmares of Beirut."

In Hoda Barakat's novel *The Tiller of Waters* and book excerpt "People of Passion" she uses similar treatments to express themes of isolation and alienation. Protagonists in each piece suffer from mental health issues and are subsequently alienated from reality. Barakat is masterful at keeping the reader off-balance, paralleling the character's own struggles. In *The Tiller of Waters* Niqula Mitri is hallucinating from a fever, and in "People of Passion," the unnamed narrator is also in an altered state after he has killed his girlfriend. We cannot trust either narrator's perception but we are inextricably drawn into their states of confusion.

Narrator Mitri, in *The Tiller of Waters*, questions his sighting of a pack of wolves tearing apart a human head. "Had yesterday's scenes come from my disturbed dreams or been the result of the fevers flaming inside my head? I must be ill, I told myself. And in my delirium I imagined things that had no foundation in fact. But...why had I scaled this bombed-out building? I guessed that the fever had struck...seized control of my mind and body, and carried me in my senseless raving to this spot" (51). In "People of Passion" the unnamed narrator, housed in a lunatic asylum, attempts to convince himself that he is not a murderer. "Perhaps I never killed her. I doubt very much whether I held her head, then smashed it against the rocks till it gaped with wounds and she died" (852).

In *The Tiller of Waters* Mitri is living alone in the middle of bombed-out Beirut, isolated from human companionship except for his memories. His isolation is all the more so because of needing to hide periodically from explosions overhead and from the pack of wolves that stalk him. In "People of Passion," the lovers are isolated in the narrator's home, hiding from the shelling, but eventually the narrator forcibly prevents his girlfriend from returning to her husband, thus doubling her isolation. The narrator is then further alienated, this time from society, when he is committed to the lunatic asylum. Both of these stories show that the protagonists experience not only alienation from reality but from the war itself, as they are non-combatants caught in the middle.

In Yasin Rifa'iyya's "The Hallway," readers experience the isolation of war-torn Beirut through Rana, a young Christian woman, and Mahmoud, a young Muslim man. The two strangers are forced to take refuge together in a building when gunfire breaks out in the city. They are the only inhabitants of the building, with snipers positioned at the entrance and on the roof. Rana says, "We're trapped here under siege, not knowing what to do, because we don't belong to either side," illustrating the effects of both isolation and alienation on victims of war.

Unlike Mitri, alone with his hallucinations and memories in *The Tiller of Waters*, the two characters in "The Hallway" are together in their isolation. The religious differences that exist between Rana and Mahmoud would normally isolate them from one another during peace time, but now they "help and comfort one another as best they can, forging a strong bond in the process" (1023). The author deftly demonstrates how the immediacy of survival can overcome alienation between strangers. Whereas Rana is isolated from her husband and daughter, and Mahmoud from his fiancé, Niqula Mitri in *The Tiller of Waters* has no family left. His trauma was likely magnified by not having someone to live for.

Both Rifa'iyya's and Barakat's characters experience alienation from reality, although Rifa'iyya's to a far lesser degree. Rana reflects that "Chaos had crept its way in, morning and evening, sleeping and waking; because death had declared war on life, so that you could no more distinguish morning from evening, sleeping from waking" (1024), while Mitri's hallucinations are ongoing terrors of surviving alone in the bombed-out city. Rana's nightmares are also the horrors of being alone and helpless in the destroyed city which she loves. Rifa'iyya cleverly weaves Rana's and Mahmoud's thoughts together to express the shock and distress they both feel at having the community they so love alienated within itself. "How could such a city, so clean, so well ordered, be transformed to one filled with all this hatred and filth and blazing destruction? These people all worked together...They all bore the name of citizen...Their children played together..."(1023).

Emily Nasrallah's short story "The Miracle" explores alienation from reality in the character of Su'ad, similar to Barakat's character Niqula Mitri in *The Tiller of Waters*. Although the characters' mental states are caused by different circumstances, the result is that both Su'ad and Mitri are out of touch with what is actually taking place. Su'ad, mother of three children, has been living in a hospital for four years with limited parental access. On a day when the city is under fire with bullets whistling through the air, she sneaks the children out for a walk against the orders of their father and their nanny. Su'ad thinks genies are having a wedding, thus accounting for the noise of fighting all around them; Mitri believes a pack of wolves are stalking him and outsmarting him when he goes out into the streets.

"The Miracle" illustrates both isolation and imposed alienation with Su'ad mandated to living apart from her children, and the children away from her. Mother Ratiba experiences

crushing, mind-numbing isolation when she discovers the children are missing while explosions outside are fierce. The children should be with her but she has let them slip away into danger. It is her fault and she wants to die. Hers is an isolation of regret, grief and guilt. These elements are also at play for Mitri in *The Tiller of Waters* when his hallucinations summon back relationships with Shamsa and his parents. His life's regrets are stated in the last two lines of the book with, "Have I not spent my entire life tilling the water? Isn't that what we always did, father" (175)? An example of Mitri's guilt is found on page 92 when he thinks God will punish him for experiencing too much enjoyment on a beautiful day. His grief over losing Shamsa permeates the book with wistful references and passionate memories. The reader of "The Miracle" is also left feeling alienated, not knowing whether Su'ad and the children are safe, knowing only that if Su'ad had not snuck the children out they would have met certain death inside their home when the bomb hit.

"Nightmares of Beirut," as one would expect from the title, is heavy with the theme of isolation and alienation. The second sentence in the introductory paragraph places the reader in a context of alienated defencelessness: "It was an old, vulnerable Beirut house, situated right in the middle of the two warring factions" (1032). It is the position of the innocent, non-combatant, just as Barakat has developed in *The Tiller of Waters* with her character Niquila Mitri. The narrator in the introduction has become isolated as her husband has been singled out, used as a scapegoat and murdered because of religious differences. "We were like the inhabitants of the valley of lepers: no one dared approach us, not even thieves" (1032).

Nightmare 22 is also about a young man who is alienated and targeted for religious differences. Barakat does not delve into this particular topic in *The Tiller of Waters* but a similar parallel emerges when the pack of dogs is stalking Mitri because he, like the character in Nightmare 22, just happens to be there, defenceless in his isolation—an innocent bystander of war.

Nightmare 64 shows the isolation of a sniper and how, even in his cruelty, he does not want to be left alone. "He could well be the last man in the city, thinks the sniper: it would be better to spare him so as not to be left alone" (1034). Although he does not spare the man, the reader has been given a glimpse of a universal emotion.

Nightmare 65 illustrates the isolation of having to stay hidden. There are people throughout the city, but they are out of sight in their apartments, hiding from death, and isolated from their communities. A woman is shot on her balcony but her family cannot bring her body inside for fear they will also be shot. The woman's child now experiences the isolation of not having a mother, the father of not having a wife. *The Tiller of Waters* shows similar treatment when Mitri hides from explosions and planes overhead, or from the pack of dogs. As well, he is

isolated from family, although through different circumstances, and he is isolated from community members who have fled the city.

Nightmare 84 shows alienation felt by the narrator when he does not share the affection for wealth that his cousin does. He blames an “ostentatious past...for this exploding, bloody present” (1036). It is an alienation caused by beliefs that go against the norm.

Nightmare 109 parallels the first section of *The Tiller of Waters* in that it describes war-torn Beirut with its burnt shops and rubble, and narrators Shakir and Mitri lost in what was once familiar surroundings. Both characters search for their own shops to salvage what they can.

Nightmare 111 shows Shakir isolated and alienated in the driving rain with his goods set up on the sidewalk, no customers in sight and robbed daily by the same armed man. The situation is so intolerable that he is driven to become a predator himself.

Nightmare 130 illustrates how feelings of isolation and alienation can arise in people during times of trauma, when life itself is an alien thing and nothing is as it was. Instead of “familiar, homely problems such as where to spend the weekend and should they make the cheese sandwiches with radishes or tomatoes” (1041), they are faced with the disposal of a stiffened corpse but run the risk of being shot if they take it outside. Author Samman then presents the reader with a picture of “hungry refugees [with their] tents scattered along the roads that take [yachtsmen and skiers] to their playgrounds (1041), leaving us to imagine the alienation felt by the refugees.

Four authors, five works of modern Arabic fiction, and themes of isolation and alienation at the core of each piece of writing. Barakat is known for using these themes in her writing, as she explores the heart of the individual and the effect that war has on them, rather than focusing on external circumstances. The other three authors have chosen to do the same with their fiction—the reader is given insight to the common person’s experience in times of unimaginable trauma, where death is a real possibility every day. The civil war in Lebanon lasted for fifteen years and the stress imposed on innocent civilians during that time can hardly be fathomed without writings such as these.

The four writers considered in this paper have likely leaned on the tradition of author Najib Mahfuz, Nobel Laureate and founding father of Arabic fiction, who “depicted...the loving attention of one who is intimately familiar with the area [their city] and the many ways in which they were crushed by forces over which they had no control” (186). Mahfuz “move[d] away from the depiction of the community as a whole to explore the alienated world of the individual” (187). An equally influential school of thought of the same era (the 1930s), was to “explore topics of current concern” (185). This would, of necessity, include the isolation and alienation

experienced by people during the war in Lebanon which has been demonstrated in the five pieces of writing explored in this paper.

Barakat, Nasrallah, Samman and Rifa'iyya have all used, to some degree, alienation from reality to portray their characters' perspectives to traumatic events in their lives. Whether the device used is mental health issues, hallucinations or dreams, the authors show that victims of war cannot be unscathed psychologically.

Roger Allen, in his *Introduction to Arabic Literature*, says, "The intangible essence of the novel genre lies in its role as an agent of change, and thus the necessity of its susceptibility to the very phenomenon that it depicts" (191). It would be simple to shrug off the dark despondency of much of modern Arabic literature as *just the way it is*, but when viewed through the lens of Allen's astute interpretation we see more clearly. We see why reading these works can be depressing, why we are shocked at vast differences between the characters' lives and our own, at how isolated we are from trauma of war, how alienated from others' suffering. As Allen is saying, the stories *are* their themes. They provoke feeling in the reader, and there is no better path to change.

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