

10-25-2015

Creativity and Dissidence in Jordanian Women's Literature

Omnia Amin
Zayed University, omnia.amin@zu.ac.ae

Follow this and additional works at: <https://zuscholars.zu.ac.ae/works>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Amin, Omnia, "Creativity and Dissidence in Jordanian Women's Literature" (2015). *All Works*. 1118.
<https://zuscholars.zu.ac.ae/works/1118>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ZU Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Works by an authorized administrator of ZU Scholars. For more information, please contact scholars@zu.ac.ae.

Omnia Amin

Zayed University

P.O. Box 19282, Dubai, UAE

E-mail: Omnia.Amin@zu.ac.ae

Research interests: modern and contemporary literature, women's writing, feminism

CREATIVITY AND DISSIDENCE IN JORDANIAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

Contemporary Jordanian women writers have transported the act of writing into an act of dissidence to reflect their own perspectives and priorities shaped by a distinctive cultural and aesthetic formation. Writers like Huzama Habayeb, Afaf Batayneh, and Leila Elatrash speak with assertive voices about the confinement and even the abuse of Arab women. Their works reveal an unequivocal sense of pride in overthrowing all confinements, while at the same time condemning and combating the abusive excesses of patriarchy when it appropriates and exploits religious and cultural traditions to preserve its own material hegemony. Their discourse strives, with varying degrees of militancy, for an agenda that is quite dissident and threatening to the fabric of the traditional religious and social Arab norms. Some look at the West for a substitute model of their freedom of expression, while others seek an answer within the framework of Arabic culture. Their writing represents not only a fascinating phenomenon of articulating feelings and perspectives of their own by adopting a dissident stance in their use of language and narrative, but also a promise to extend and expand their scope of focus to an apparent militant and confrontational response to the discourse produced by male-made theocracies.

KEY WORDS: Jordanian literature, women's fiction, dissidence, feminist writing, contemporary Arab writing.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, dissidence is a “disagreement, dissent, refuse to assent, think differently, express different opinion from; esp. differ in religious opinion, differ from doctrine or worship of established national, or orthodox Church, nonconformity” (Coulson *et al.* 1982: 242). This implies that anyone who goes against the current stream of thought is a dissident. Any person who dares to have a mind of his/her own that is in contradiction with religious, social, or political established doctrines is a dissident. If this is dissidence, then what is the role of art and creativity? Is it the identification of self in the current established, allowable streams of thought? If this is the case, then there is nothing to assert, nothing new to discover. Literature becomes no more than a machine that serves the prevailing authorities. However, mercifully, this is not the case as in the literary movements and especially in women's writing: to

rise above, to transcend the current stream of thought, to forge a new place, space; discourse of the mind is the essence of identity and the fulfilment of the self.

The three Jordanian women novelists: Leila Elatrash, Huzama Habayeb, and Afaf El Batayneh, depict a live social image of the problems that women face in the Arab world today. They are not experimenting with the novel, but they are deliberately using the novel as a tool to create conscious awareness about the deeply rooted and disturbing beliefs that continue to oppress and subjugate women in particular and the Arab identity in general. By exposing the lies and hypocrisy that take place on the social and political fronts in the daily lives of their characters, they open the readers' eyes to the false consciousness, upon which the modern thought and beliefs are based. They start by creating awareness of women's oppression, then through depicting the feelings and perspectives of their female characters, who are trying to understand the reasons behind their pain and suffering, they make room for the discourse. The women go through a deep and hurtful process of re-evaluation and reassessment of the beliefs, they have taken for granted as a part of their cultural and religious identity. Finally, through the courageous journeys they undertake, come to repossess themselves, and heal their wounds through acts of defiance that stem from a strong will and tenacious spirit for militancy, even if the price is their own lives. The novels create a ground for discourse, confrontation, and finding solutions for liberating a world burdened by misconceptions and misinterpretation of gender, politics, and religion to serve the minority in power.

Afaf El Batayneh's protagonist, Mona, in the novel *Outside the Body* says¹:

The reality of people's lives in the countries that I have visited is hidden like the conscience of the Arab countries. It works, subjugates, moves, dwells, and does what it wants to them without them seeing it. They know of its presence, but they refuse to look at it. The human world there is similar to the world of language, and the rules of the permissible and the forbidden are similar to the rules of grammar and spelling (2004: 445).

The novel *Outside the Body* craftily presents the narrator's private experiences in the story of three women in one: Mona, Mrs. McPherson, and Sara Alexander. It is the story of a simple village girl Mona, who observes the outside world in the tiny Jordanian village, where she grows up in and realizes that she is no more than a spectator in a world of men. Due to her gender, she is forbidden from any active participation in the society, and the nature of her upbringing sheds light on a very important dimension: the deliberate exclusion of women from all the prevalent traditional power structures, which allows men to have absolute power over their lives. As Mona grows into a young woman, she realizes that her body becomes another bond and confinement. She says: "Adolescent desires awoke in me, and I lost my body, will, and decision to move. I entered the circles of fear and emaciation. They took everything from me, even the hope in tomorrow, and they only left me my will to die" (El Batayneh 2004: 5-6). In this novel, El

Bataynah addresses the issue of honour crimes, and Jordan happens to be one of the Arab countries that has the highest rates of honour crimes in the Middle East. Every year from 18 to 26 women are killed in honour crimes, and men get away with it or receive light sentences. Many of those women are found to be virgins in the report issued with their death certificate.

Mona's life, and those of the women around her, before she breaks away from the village, is no more than a long journey of suffering and endurance. She happens to be a bright young woman who is the first in her school and looks forward to going to university. One day she meets a young man with whom she goes out for a coffee. One of the local villagers spots her and tells her father, who rushes home outraged that his daughter has put his name to shame. He beats her up in a beastly manner intending to kill her, as the rest of the family watches, until her uncle intercedes. Her uncle asks her if she is willing to undergo a doctor's examination to see if her hymen is intact or not, and in this way he can save her life. Mona reflects: "The hymen determines my life? I wanted to put my fingers between my legs and rip it, and let the death be my destiny. I wanted to revenge against my father. I knew that ripping the hymen would shame him forever" (El Batayneh 2004: 44). After she goes to the doctor and gets the report that proves her innocence, Mona thinks on her way back home:

Why didn't my father deny the accusation? Why didn't he defend me in front of people? Why didn't he stand beside me instead of standing against me? I know that my mother could not oppose her husband; I know that my uncle had to accept his condition in order to avoid more trouble, but why? And what if I had really lost my virginity? Do I become less worthy of living? Is it his right to kill me? If the hymen will prevent men from marrying me, then what does this have to do with my father? Why does he give himself the right to defend my hymen, as if it belonged to him? Why is his honour and the honour of all the family tied to my hymen? How precious that hymen is! It is more precious than human life (El Batayneh 2004: 45).

After this incident, her father forces her to marry against her will. He even encourages her husband to beat her into obedience and take her by force in bed. However, she refuses to give her body away and decides to suffer death, rather than allow her husband to touch her against her will. Her decision is made, as she recognizes that she has nothing more to lose and nothing to look forward to, if she succumbs under the marriage institution. With a strong will she convinces her husband to allow her to complete her university studies and divorce her heedless of the consequences. Her father, whom she does not inform of her plans, is infuriated and decides to kill her this time. He beats her up and breaks her bones, but she bears the pain in order to free herself from a life of servitude. Divorced and disowned by her family, she seizes the first marriage opportunity that comes her way. She marries a Jordanian who lives in the UK and realizes that her freedom lies in leaving her country behind. It is in the UK that she gets rid of the veil and the traditional dress of her country and wears western clothes. However, her new husband wants a simple village girl who asks no questions and stays at home to clean and cook.

He makes a servant out of her and reduces her to an object of his sexual desires, as he ties her hands in bed and blindfolds her. However, Mona has other plans. When she gets a driving license, he becomes angry and refuses to give her money. She realizes the importance of being economically independent. After a long and bitter journey with her husband Suleiman, Mona is able to stand on her two feet and has her own business. She even possesses the courage to divorce him and move on with her life and raise her son Adam on her own.

In fact, Mona goes beyond all the confines of her culture and religion when she meets Stewart, a Scotsman, whom she falls in love with, and decides to marry him as a non-Moslem and become Mrs. McPherson. Her ex-husband, who is jealous of her success, collaborates with her family, and they decide to take her child away from her and kill her, because she is now a non-believer. Her decision to save herself and make something out of her life drives her to travel and hide her identity. She undergoes plastic surgery and completely changes her appearance and changes her name. Once she is able to erase all the traces of her past identity, she returns back to life as Sara Alexander.

However, Mona does not forget her past. She believes in her ability to change things and make a difference in the lives of the other women in Jordan. It is only because of the identity that is far away from her own name and body that she is able to fulfil herself and go back to her village in Jordan and speak about women's rights as a foreigner. Mona, on becoming Sara Alexander, evaluates her country, her people and the world around her saying:

I listen to the news. I read the papers and books.... I look at schoolbooks and university specializations. I feel that these countries have become a heavy burden on the world and that people are obstructing one another and fishing for each other's mistakes. The country is filled with mould and so are the souls of the people... Every time I speak with those who have freed themselves from the programming of their societies, their past, history, their narrow horizons, I find myself in the middle of a big family who love me, and I love them. ... I get close to them, and I feel that the mercy of thought and relief is shortly coming to my country. I dream of a day in which my country belongs to the children of my country, and I cherish the hope (El Batayneh 2004: 445–6).

Outside the Body shows that dogmas, political or religious, arise out of erroneous beliefs that encapsulate reality or the truth. These socio-political and cultural ideas become collective conceptual prisons for both men and women, and people cling on to them because they give them a false sense of knowledge and identity (Tolle 2003: 17). Mona and the other protagonists in the two other novels discover that identification with the thought is the basic delusion that Arab societies suffer from. In fact, the whole world seems to be immersed in following the compulsive thinking. Compulsive thinking gives the illusion of what it is, and the only escape is the awakening from the dream of thought. It is only the dissident in society who awakens from what the rest of the human condition is lost in: thought. Most people spend their entire lives

imprisoned within the confines of their own thoughts (Tolle 2003: 13). This is what Mona in *Outside the Body*, and Nadia to a less accentuated degree in *A Woman of Five Seasons* discover and deliberately choose to change their lives and go beyond their confining thoughts.

Leila El Atrash in *A Woman of Five Seasons* presents a very different protagonist who seeks an answer to the subjugation of women from the cultural fabric of the Arab society itself, not from the outside and the West in particular. Nadia is presented through the eyes of Hisan Natour, her husband, as he tells her: “My lovely kitten – this perfume suits you better” (El Atrash 2003: 1). His first step into subjugating her is making her a tool of his desire, an object of jouissance. He chooses her clothes, perfume, the colour of her hair and tells her how to behave in society and what to say. He even prevents her from finishing her studies at the university by demanding the birth of one child after another, as he could not tolerate having a wife more knowledgeable and educated than himself.

For Ihsan, the businessman, the only value is in the material objects, the wealth. He does not see that he has mistreated Nadia in any way, after all, this is how all the women live in his society. He thinks of his sister and remembers: “It was money that enabled Faris marry your sister Afaf, even though your mother had never stopped cursing relatives, calling them scorpions. She didn’t even give Afaf time to finish her studies. She married her off to him as soon as she’d finished preparatory school” (El Atrash 2003: 8). Meanwhile, Nadia sees herself as the product of a long and burdensome history of subjugated women: “I spring, don’t I, from that Bedouin woman long ago, whose advice to her daughters has been passed down through generations of women? ‘Do whatever he tells you. Keep all his secrets. Let him find only the purest fragrance in you’” (El Atrash 2003: 33).

Nadia’s rebellion against her situation surges every now and then, but she ends up succumbing to her husband’s wishes. Despite the life of luxury that he offers her, she is not content, as she feels that she has no identity of her own: “It made her feel ill when he called her his ‘kitten,’ but nothing would stop him from doing it. It hurt her, too, that he could never see her as anything but his woman. She didn’t understand. Hadn’t it occurred to him, just once, that she might have feelings beyond the ones he wanted from her?” (El Atrash 2003: 13).

The confusion and lack of communication between the two genders is presented clearly in the relationship between Nadia and Ihsan that reflects the lives of the others as well. In *A Woman of Five Seasons*, the physical violence is not a part of the lives of the families presented in this novel; there is a level of psychological violence and subordination going on due to the hypocritical and false consciousness that the society encourages. Nadia sums it up as she looks at the women around: “Every one of those women wears a set of different masks, changing from one to another the moment you turn away from her. Their minds are split,” and she adds as she

looks at Ihsan, “Do you know what it means, to have to be someone you’re not?” His answer is: “The things in those books have taken you over. All these impetuous, cultured people and their rebellious ways!” (El Atrash 2003: 36).

The readers can see a woman who has achieved a high level of awareness and reflects it in her words and actions through the character of the Palestinian activist Najwa Thabit. Najwa visits the Gulf to speak about the plight of the Palestinian people. As she stands before a dinner table laden with seven grilled lambs and many other dishes, she refuses to touch the food and speaks out:

In the name of the revolution, I should like to thank Her Highness, and her people here, for having always been with us. Here in Barqais you eat lambs, while our people live in camps that are often demolished over their heads. They suffer poverty and want. If each of you would stop for a moment, reflect on the people’s plight there, many families could live, and scores of young people have an education. We need support, financial support. And those who strive with their money are equal to those who strive with their lives. ... “There’s no strife,” Her Highness broke in, “like the strife of the spirit” (El Atrash 2003: 38).

As Nadia hears this, she tells herself: “And I, Nadia al-Faqih, felt the person inside me rebelling, kicking, revolting against all this falsehood. Here our homeland was a song, a dress, a hanger” (El Atrash 2003: 29). Najwa becomes a voice that offers a wakeup call for Nadia. She opens her eyes to the falsehood of her personal life, topped with the falsehood of her husband who pretends to be working hard and making money to help the Palestinian people. She admits the lie she is living, as she recognizes: “I’m no different from others. I left everything I loved when the man came for me, and I became his wife. Marriage filled my mind, pushing me to the tunnels of the unknown. ... Only once we’re flung into these tunnels, can we come to know the experience the law allows” (El Atrash 2003: 40).

In *A Woman of Five Seasons*, the personal is never separate from the political, especially as the characters are Palestinians who are witnessing the distressing political situation of their own people, as they live in the wealth and luxury of the Gulf countries. Nadia exposes the hypocrisy of her husband and his brother Jalal’s usage of the political situation of Palestine to magnify their wealth. She confronts Ihsan with his reality, and he becomes indignant and attacks her saying:

Sometimes you talk the way ignorant women do. They can’t face danger just like that, without a roof for protection. There are people who do the planning – politically and educationally, through information and finance. Gaining support in these fields is a struggle too. It needs abilities as important as fighting ones. ... There’s nothing to equal the real fighting. Or have you forgotten that, Ihsan? Still, a person looking for justification can always find some way of convincing himself. Is the one who stands in the firing line equal to the one who just sits at his desk or donates money (El Atrash 2003: 153–2).

Over the years Nadia decides to regain possession of herself. When Jalal, Ihsan's brother, whom she loved before she got married, comes to her and tries to force himself on her, she says: "I don't know when and how I lifted my palm and slapped him. The giant in my depth was surging furiously out, with boundless strength – my inner being forked in my limbs, turned to a giant liberating itself from the corridors of fear and weakness I pushed Jalal over the sofa with a strength I never knew I had. I was screaming as my hot tears washed away all that ugliness" (El Atrash 2003: 107). It is at this moment that she decides "I'm not their woman. Not anyone's woman!" (El Atrash 2003: 108). From that day onwards Nadia becomes a different person. Although she is not in need of money, she sets up a real estate business and becomes an extremely successful businesswoman to the extent that she saves her husband's business by making decisions on his behalf, while he is away. For the first time in their lives he tells his manager: "When I'm away, Mr. Black, refer in the future to Mrs. Natour" (El Atrash 2003: 136).

As she comes to a better awareness of herself, Nadia reflects: "Ever since my inner, rebellious being had burst out, I'd been running, panting, along tracks and side tracks, seeking a self I'd wanted, dreamed of, shaped" (El Atrash 2003: 136). She continues her dreams by resuming her studies, and Ihsan gives in to her, as he stands powerless in front of her strong will. Over the years, Ihsan separates from Nadia, but he fails to realize that what separates them is an ideological gap, not a physical one. When his brother Jalal divorces his wife Najwa Thabet, he tells him: "The differences were ideological, Ihsan, not about small things. Feelings can't change ideology. It isn't subject to bargaining" (El Atrash 2003: 147). Jalal is supposed to be the educated and cultured man in the novel, but he as well turns out to hold hypocritical values, as he does not live up to the ideals he calls for and is least of all respecting women. He tells Ihsan:

I swear, Ihsan, a woman's always a woman, even those who work with us. It's the upbringing of generations, complexes piled up along the passage of time. You can't change that so easily, no matter what ideologies or causes lie behind. The human mind's a terrible thing – you can't transform it by controlling it, not beyond a certain point. That's the problem – the female complex is still controlling Najwa Thabit (El Atrash 2003: 149).

Ihsan and Nadia's marriage fails just like Najwa and Jalal's marriage. Nadia discovers that Ihsan is having an affair with another woman. Unlike Najwa, she does not ask for a divorce but decides to take control of her life in the way she wants, not the way he wants. She tells him:

How dare you imagine you can drop me whenever you like, and expect me just to stand there, waiting for you to come and pick me up again when you happen to feel like it! To get myself ready for your arrival, when I don't even know where you are? You thought you were the axis and I'd go on and on revolving around you. Even the heavenly bodies sometimes break away from their spheres. Didn't you know that? They burn, maybe, but they're free (El Atrash 2003: 166).

At this point, Ihsan realizes that he has lost control and lost Nadia for good: "Ihsan was speechless. The situation was bigger than any cunning he was capable of. The decision, he knew,

was hers alone not his” (El Atrash 2003: 168). His words show how Nadia, the simple subjugated woman who followed the footsteps of all her female ancestors, has come round a full circle, as she regained control over her life and tilted the balance to have control over his life as well.

Huzama Habayeb presents a very different perspective, as her narration focuses on sexual politics. The women in the novel are presented through the perception of the men who describe their wives, the women they love, or with whom they are having fleeting affairs. The merit of her narrative lies in her representation of the lived experiences of the five Palestinian men who recall their disorientated childhood amid the social and political circumstances that drove them to grow up in refugee camps or under humiliating conditions. Their stories are presented in random recollections of the past, but they are deliberately selective to focus on the gender politics. While Elatrash presents the political through the personal, here the political forms the outer frame of the novel. The first and the last scenes in *The Root of Passion* show all five men gathered at Kamal El Kadi’s apartment watching Al Jazeera channel’s report about the serious health condition of the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. The novel catches their lives from the time the announcement is made, when they anticipate Arafat’s death. All five men live in a sense exiled in the United Arab Emirates, as their memories continuously float back to the past tarnished with nostalgia for their lost homeland in the midst of poverty, humiliation, and all kinds of let downs. Their only exercise of power is confined to their sexual affairs that are elaborately depicted throughout the novel. By exposing their sexual fantasies, Huzama uncovers the disturbed psychological and social framework that makes them to lose respect for themselves and mistreat the women around them.

The youngest among them is Firas Ayash who is 37 years old and is single. He jumps from one affair into another symbolizing his inability to settle down and nurture a true sense of family and belonging. He recalls his love for Ruba, when he lived in Kuwait during the Gulf War. When he met Ruba, she was two years older than him. She worked as a secretary and was pregnant and divorced. He starts a relationship with her and finds out that she was married to a physician who used to hit her with his shoes. Firas listens to her story and treats her with respect, as he throws himself into her arms feeling his own defeat in his inability to change the political turmoil in the Arab world. Even the attempts he undertook were unsuccessful, and he was arrested, taken into custody, and tortured. As he plans to marry Ruba, he discovers that she has other plans:

In their final meeting, she ravenously licked him in a disturbing way. She seemed as if she wanted to fully devour him and to leave nothing for the future encounters. Then, she went on top of him greatly aroused, which made him think she is about to die. She told him ... that she is going back to her ex-husband, as this is better for her

and her child. They will leave to Amman before the war starts and from there go to the United States, because her ex-husband has an American passport. She told him that she cannot stand being in Kuwait when the war actually starts. ... He tried to dissuade her from going back to her ex-husband. "I love you," he told her, "And we will get married when everything is over". He begged her on his knees, still naked, and cried. He felt ashamed of his tears that stripped him of his last outer signs of composure. She knelt beside him and wiped his face with her maternal hand. Her voice seemed to be sliding down from a very high place and falling violently on the ground as she told him, "When everything is over, all what is between us will be over" (Habayeb 2007: 137).

Ruba's inability to trust in a good life with Firas stems from a Firas's own sense of insecurity, which makes him the passive partner in every relationship and not the active masculine subject who is supposedly in control.

The rest of the other characters as well carry a defeated spirit within, as they watch their lives slip away from them. Kamal El Kady wastes his life watching sex videos and masturbating in the absence of his wife. He is unable to forget his mother Rokaya who was forced to marry his father, a man who continuously used to beat and abuse her. Rokaya who was a beautiful woman took pride in her appearance and wanted love and appreciation. She is one of the few women in the novel who believes in the possibility of a happy life. Kamal remembers her, after she had given birth to his baby sister. She would uncover herself and look at her body in the mirror dissatisfied with how she looked and the stretch marks she gained during her pregnancy. As her newly born cries she says: "I am fed up with all of this" (Habayeb 2007: 100). She wants to regain control over her body and refuses the traditional life of servitude and bearing children. In the end, she rebels and musters the courage to ask for a divorce. The beating and threats of her husband do not stop her from leaving her children behind and seeking a brighter and better life with a lover of her choice.

Iyad Abu Saad is the only one who marries the woman he loves. He falls in love with Fadia after eight years of loving her in silence. She is the sister of his friend Mazen, who is a handsome revolutionary young man who introduces him to the communist party. Iyad feels disillusioned with the life, as he sees how Mazen preaches one thing and lives another, as he rolls in money from the business deals he strikes. Fadia turns out to be cold and frigid. He ends up dispirited by not finding the love he wanted, on one hand, and by the socio-political friends and situation, on the other hand. He starts an affair with Layal who keeps him on edge, as she toys with him in bed and tortures him in her own way. In the end, he finds himself unable to put an end to his relationship with her and take control of his life.

Amr Al Sarow was in love with his colleague at the university, and his parents forced him to marry his dead brother's wife against his will, as his brother wrote the apartment he owned in her name. Worse than his marriage, is his sense of humiliation in front of the authorities, as he is subjected to interrogation, when he applies for a passport to travel out of

Jordan. He cannot erase a strong sense of exile and destitution, because he has no patriotic feelings towards the Arab countries he lives in, in addition to the marriage he found himself trapped in. His life becomes one long drag, as he feels he has wasted his years without any sense of achievement.

As for Ramzy Ayash, their eldest, he is a retired 64 year old man and the father of Firas. He dies at the end of the novel, as the rest of the characters sit around the television screen waiting to hear of Yasser Arafat's death. Ramzy Ayash dies old, helpless, and defeated, as he watches his favourite daughter Samar waste her life with a man who cheats behind her back. He recalls her childhood memories, the day she became an adolescent and how one day on his way to the kitchen at night he sees her in the bathroom:

Her shadow appeared behind the opaque glass of the bathroom door. She seemed to be twisting her body in front of the mirror above the sink. He went to the door and heard the sound of her body in friction mixed with exciting sounds. The shadow of one of her arms appeared to be brushing her breasts, while her other arm slipped to the lower part of her body. The friction increased and her moans became louder, just before her shadow violently shook behind the opaque glass (Habayeb 2007: 294).

The Root of Passion is about sexual identity that seems to take precedence over the social and political circumstances around the characters. Habayeb deliberately talks about the female sexuality, the female body, women's sexual appetite in order to break taboos around the subject. It is through Ramzy Ayash who observes his daughter growing up and her bodily demands increasing, that one can see through the eyes of a father the biological awakenings in his daughter. Although he himself treated his wife Nema like a slave and was drunk most of his life, he changes as he observes the female side in his daughter. His sense of utter defeat comes when he finds that Samar is no different from the rest of the women in her community. He visits her after her marriage and finds her in her pyjamas having gained weight after the birth of many children. He observes her watching television and eating a big tub of ice-cream. He tells her to leave her failure of a husband who mistreats her and cheats on her. He asks her to take the children, come live with him, and start a new life. She lets him down, as she licks the ice-cream that melted and dripped on her clothes and says: "But I love him!" (Habayeb 2007: 301).

The novel attempts to expose an absence of hope as the spirit is broken by the political situation in Palestine and in the rest of the Arab world. Though, the characters move with extreme sexual freedom, it is not a real freedom of the body, but is another form of enslavement, as they release their frustrations through sex. More than anything, *The Root of Passion* presents the sexual, social, political, and cultural defeat prevalent in the spirit of the Arab nation. The socio-political hypocrisy and the cultural veils of Islamic dogma appear no more than a bare crust that can no longer be held. The characters try and evade the fact that their lives and their countries are filled with lies. They realize they need revaluation and renewal, but they do not

have the will or the spirit to do so. Thus, the anticipation of Yasser Arafat's death becomes symbolic of the death of the nation itself, as his death represents to them the ultimate political death of Palestine.

The three writers manage to break the social, cultural, and religious bonds forced upon them by delving into a consciousness of self that goes far beyond the thoughts and taboos of their own culture. It is through this creative expansion that they are able to move away from what the society presents to them as the only interpretation of life and reality. They move away from a system that desires to control and mistakes its own viewpoints for the truth. By moving away from what exists, they find a space of what it could be. What their culture represents no longer becomes the only viewpoint of reality but one of many possible perspectives (Tolle 2003: 15). This is what labels them as dissident as they move away from the traditional ways of thinking into the new areas of identity. It is the primordial area that is not governed and controlled by the existing laws of male-made theocracies, and this is what offers them a chance to free themselves and the rest of the society.

I would like to end with Margaret Mead's words: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has" (Mead 2014). What is seen today in the women's writing in general and in Jordan in specific is the act to oppose the mind and body control set by the political process under the name of social and religious reform. Jordanian women writers help to awaken the apolitical, the cynical, and the disillusioned through their fiction by simply presenting the lives of other women whose courage to live calls for confrontation that could well cost them their lives.

¹ All quotations from *Outside the Body* and *The Root of Passion* are my translations from Arabic to English.

References

- BATAYNEH, A., 2004. *Outside the Body*. London: Dar Al Saki.
- COULSON, J., CARR, CT., HUTCHINSON, L., EAGLE, D., eds., 1962. *The Oxford Illustrated Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- EI ATRASH, L., 2003. *A Woman of Five Seasons*. N. Nuwayhid, C. Tingley (Trans.). Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink Books.
- HABAYEB, H., 2007. *The Root of Passion*. Beirut: Al Moassassah Al Arabiyah Lil Dirasat Wal Nashr.
- TOLLE, E., 2003. *Stillness Speaks*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- MEAD, M., 2015. *Margaret Mead*. Available from: http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Margaret_Mead [1 May 2014].

Gauta 2014 06 12

Priimta publikuoti 2014 12 12