

Aspects of Alienation in the Novels of Elias Khouri



Literature

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ABSTRACT

Elias Khoury is a prominent Lebanese novelist, playwright and literary critic who has influenced the art of Arabic novel writing, especially Lebanese. His novels have focused on wartimes, particularly the civil war in Lebanon. That heinous war was a recurring common theme in his works. In this article, we will focus on the loner characters emerging from the cruelty of that war. To examine this literary aspect— with loner characters taking central roles— we will study three of his novels; namely Little Mountain, White Masks and The Journey of Little Gandhi. The study suggests a special model which measures the degree of characters' alienation at different levels. The model, which is expected to be adopted as an analytical tool that sets criteria for alienation, involves several levels: social, political, economic, psychological, sexual, religious, geographical, physical, linguistic and exile. The present article is however confined to four levels: social, psychological, linguistic and sexual. The study of alienation is aimed at illustrating the direct relationship between the loner characters and the harsh reality of war. The study has shown that the loneliness of the characters is a product of the war.

Onalienation

Owing to numerous social and political changes, a literary character is no longer heroic. Such changes reached a crescendo by early twentieth century. This has had deep implications on life as well as on literature. Today, loner characters have prominent presence in fiction and literary criticism. Blauner (1967) examines the idea of alienation, particularly in the industrial and economic settings, arguing that alienation is a composite of different aspects and individual emotions resulting from a certain relationship between workers and social conditions. Blauner provides three reasons for alienation: lack of awareness, the feeling of meaninglessness and the social isolation (Blauner, 1967: 15-24). On the other hand, Schacht (1971) describes alienation as a state of complete loss of control which later leads to the loss of capacity where an individual cannot change the conditions or regain control of things (Schacht, 1970: 170). Hasan Saad (1986) argues that the term involves powerlessness, living outside the self and the surroundings, discontent, hostility, isolation, lack of meaning in real life and frustration. Saad holds the society responsible for this alienation. The loner individuals experience a state of self and social loss; they no longer trust themselves; and eventually they choose to live in isolation, in which they find utmost comfort (Saad, 1986: 9-17).

Bassam Khalil Frangieh (1989) provides a definition of alienation and outlines its behavioral implications:

- Alienation is a state of vulnerability: The humans are controlled by things they themselves created; they are neither able to determine their own life nor capable of influencing the course of major events.
- The disintegration of the social norms: The values and codes of conduct can no longer control human behavior.
- Isolation (renunciation): This is a condition in which individuals do not feel they belong to the community; the personal relations are unstable and unsatisfactory; the individual relationships with others are superficial and formal.
- Self-aversion: This is a feeling of a lack of self-worth, a doubt and uncertainty, and feelings of not measuring up to standards. As a result, the individuals become a mere set of tools, goods and masks. This type of alienation is presented in the forms of anxiety, despair, anger, loneliness, emptiness and purposelessness (Frangieh, 1989: 27-29).

According to Frangieh, alienation has a set of behavioral manifestations:

- Social withdrawal: Individuals choose to escape reality instead of acquiescence or resistance. Some choose to with-

draw because they don't want to confront the surroundings or simply because they don't like commitment.

- Acquiescence: Some individuals choose to surrender to reality only to further their personal interests.
- Disobedience by those who seek to change the society through revolution, resistance and protest (ibid: 30-32).

In real life, often identifying individuals who go the solo route is a hard job. This is probably the reason that drove literary writers to bring the characters' alienation into focus. It is literature that depicts the life of repressed characters, illuminating the creeping melancholia, and thus offering a different perspective that exposes the irrationalities of social life.

Levels of loneliness in Elias Khoury's works:

The social level

Social relations are instrumental to connections among people as well as between people and their surroundings. The rationale underpinning such relations draws the basic features of a community. As such, if the rationale is sound, the relationships will be successful in rendering the intended results. Irrationalities, on the other hand, will produce distorted social life.

In Elias Khoury's novel *White Masks*, social systems are collapsing and relations are disintegrated, as evidenced by relations governing the behavior of ordinary people. The character Noha Jaber (wife of central character Khalil Ahmed Jaber) says this explicitly: "He was a man in the full vigor of his youth. Suddenly, everything has gone. I can no longer understand him, nor can he understand me" (p. 16). Khalil's behavior changed radically following the death of his only son, Ahmed. This sudden change has impacted his relationship with the closest person, his wife. Their relationships are no longer harmonious— a fact that created familial estrangement and ruptured social integration, at least at this stage of the character's life. Khalil-Noha estrangement was only the first phase of a broader break with the community and the early manifestation of introversion that later developed into fear: "He laughed, baring his big yellow teeth. That was the first time I knew his teeth were that big. He was capable of devouring me. I felt scared of my husband after all of these years together. Yes, I still feel scared" (p. 34). The grievous events in someone's life make it possible for social relationships to thrive. It is war that created this rift between Khalil and his wife; it is also war that developed such a rift into fear. Though the wife recognized that such a state of fear was irrational, she explicitly admitted that it did really exist.

The relationship which brought together Mahmoud Fakhro (a

janitor in a building with a Christian majority) and his wife Fatima Fakhro (who would help him in his work) was that of fear: "He smoked and smoked, and she did not dare coming close to him. She slept scared by his side" (p. 117). The more ugly the war, the lesser the social cohesion. The novel depicts social relations of secondary characters as illogical and regressive. Hussein, son of Mahmoud Fakhro, would come to his mother, Fatima, asking for money. When she refuses, he would insult and hit her. That is a horrible relationship— a flagrant evidence of the decline in social cohesion: "He beats her; the beast beats his mother and ten disappears" (p. 114). This piecemeal degradation is exacerbated with the progression of the war, reaching a complete rift that cost Khalil Jaber his life. These relationships were not probably the direct cause of his death, but they certainly had a role in the spread of crime. Ali Kalaksh narrates his story with Khalil: "The crime has spread like an epidemic; the plague has eaten us from inside... This is the irrationality associated with the civil wars" (p. 45). Khalil Ahmed Jaber, who threw himself into solitude, found himself sent into a tailspin life because of the decline in social relationships. Khalil's alienation at home, a result of this disintegrated social system, was soon to govern his relationships with the community. The traumatic experience has pushed him into the loner camp. He became strange, subdued and different, which raised doubts about him. The fate of the war has conspired to keep him solo. Probably, the odd behavior at the time of war makes the idea of killing very possible and plausible.

In the novel *Little Mountain*, which is also the name given to Al-Ashrafieh neighborhood in East Beirut, the narrator (who used to be a fighter) lays down arms, but cannot not restore his social relationships as he expected. His abandonment of fighting increased his isolation. This is but an indication that when reclusiveness starts to develop at home, infusing into the broader societal context gets more irrational: "... But now, I don't even feel that I belong to my wife..." (p. 117). As in *White Masks*, this grey area of relationships exacerbates the already tense connections, and the estrangement between the spouses reaches a serious rupture. Later, this estrangement extends to the character's relationships with the community which already suffers war grievances. Naturally, this social absurdity sends characters into a state of absolute alienation from the surroundings: "... The civil war has touched all relations..." (p. 156). This statement exposes the peculiarity of the civil war, which is marked by a state of chaos and dissociation of the social fabric.

The psychological level

The relationship between the social and the psychological dimensions is direct and conspicuous, and the nexus between war stress and psychological disorders are well documented. A stable social situation sets the stage for a secure and normal psychological state (Shehadeh, 1999: 26-27), and vice versa. The *White Masks* novel is a stark expression of the psychological impairments. In addition to the civil war cruelty, Khalil suffers a new psychological disaster following the death of his only son, Ahmed. Just as Elias Khoury depicted the characters gradual falling into loneliness, he again portrays the gradation of the characters' psychological reclusiveness. Khalil's psychological unstable state starts when he enters the solo route and stops communicating with people. These are the first symptoms of a psychological crisis: "He would rarely talk" (p. 23). In the next stage, people start to take notice of his abnormal behavior, and thus they start to treat him in a different way, which exacerbates his psychological crisis: "But he has changed. He is now a different person" (p. 24). His tendency to avoid communication with people does not make him a different person, as he kept performing his daily chores as usual. However, people could observe his disorder when his behavior started to look odd: "I came back and found that he locked himself in the bedroom. I knocked at the door, but he did not reply. I screamed

as I started to worry about him. Then, I heard his voice inside" (p. 24). His solitude in that place has deepened his introversion, and now he refuses any contact with the world outside. The development of the unhealthy psychological state was steady. His treatment attempts were also gradual. First, his wife took him to a psychiatrist who said it was a time-limited psychiatric disorder: "... In any case, your husband suffers a nervous breakdown" (p. 27). Finding that psychiatry could not do her husband any good, she turned to wizards who said the house was haunted by evil spirits, suggesting a cat to keep these spirits away. All these attempts went down the drain, and now Khalil's case is getting worse: "...The scream of the man was mixed with smashing objects. I ran to the door and I heard breaths coming in short pants and he was jumping over the bed..." (p. 31). Yelling and smashing the objects in the house represent a serious complication in Khalil's case. His wife's fear is another sign of how risky his psychological condition was: "...I did not dare to sleep beside him. I was afraid..." (p. 33). Khalil's relative composure is not enough to guarantee his recovery, and he relapses. Now he buys erasers to rub out pictures in newspapers. Was he trying to wipe off his dreadful past, and eventually the past of Beirut and Lebanon? Did he feel that the people around had betrayed him, and so he wanted to expose their betrayal and erase them from his memory? Whatever he wanted to say by that behavior, he now has an inward turning tendency, focusing exclusively on his internal thoughts. In another complication, Khalil starts to paint white everything he can reach: "...He would carry a bottle of white manicure, paint the face white and cut the head with scissors..." (p. 38). The white color has a special significance: it can erase the remnants of the past. In a sense, it is a cover of the past events. In another sense, it is a symbol for purity. In wartime, people need to forget the past and wipe off the cruelty of war. Khoury uses Khalil's character to lay bare the truculence of war and its traumatic events. Khalil's psychological state deteriorates steadily and on a continuum of severity. In addition to the symptoms mentioned before, he develops episodes of delirium, a complicated state where he suffers disorientation, solitude, feebleness of mind and inability to attend to things around him. Khalil is lost between two worlds: the real world and the fantasy utopian realm. The first signs appeared when he invoked the image of Jameel Hamdan, perhaps to expose the brutality of those who triggered (and still fuel) the civil war: "I'm sure they are the ones who are behind the disappearance of Jameel Hamdan:" - You know nothing about Jameel...He was our colleague who disappeared...His friend who was executed? Nobody was executed? What is this man saying?" (p. 40). He continued to rave, now evoking the image of his son, the boxing champion, when he met Fatima Fakhro in the street and introduced himself as a champion in boxing and weightlifting: "I am a champion in boxing and weightlifting" (p. 102). At this stage of his mental disorder, he tries to transcend the boundaries of blood and murder, so as to rest with those who he needs and loves. Another episode of raving occurs with him in his conversation with Fatima Fakhro: "I am a great officer. You must have heard about me. I would wait for them at the crossroads and then I would kill them all" (p. 115). In a delirium state, people unveil what is there in their aching spirit. Sometimes they reveal the facts about things and events that they would rather hide when they are conscious about their behavior. When Khalil started his white painting, he began with his home, but later the practice went out to the broader setting— probably a desire to create an Arcadian world during wartime: "He opened the door and went down the stairs quickly. That was the last time I saw him" (p. 42) This is the critical phase on the continuum. Khalil's departure is a sign of a worsened psychological disorder and a desire to build peace in a war-torn society as well. On the other hand, his wandering in the streets— painting everything white (see pp. 123-125, p. 659 and pp. 72-73)— was not a crazy show; rather it was an exposure of the war and a cry for salvation. Elias Khoury wanted to expose the cruelty of war. Khalil's psychological disorder is

not unique. During the Lebanese civil war, many people would develop signs of mental disorders. The disorder continuum reached a pinnacle with the death of Khalil Jaber. This climax is not intended to create a logical end for a man suffering psychological disorders; rather it is to express a rejection of peace and a murder of peaceful people who have nothing to do with the fight. Khalil's white painting has led to his death; the black defeated the white; war defeated peace.

Other characters in the novel suffer psychological disorders, as well. They developed such disorders from the surroundings. For example, Aida, daughter of Ali Kalaksh, howls like dogs and refuses to sit on the chair in the classroom, choosing instead to remain under the desk. According to her mother, this psychological disorder has resulted from the father's panic during bombing: "... How can I take care? I asked my wife, who replied that it is natural that the girl is afraid. My wife held me responsible for the panic the girl suffers. She said the extreme fear I suffer during bombardment and my running to the shelter frighten the girl" (p. 66).

The psychological level in *Little Mountain* takes dimensions different from those in *White Masks*. The disorders in this novel are manifestations of the hard time the characters experience. The feeling of inferiority, for example, is only an expression of severe psychological conditions. The characters (most of whom are fighters, like the narrator) collapse, finding themselves unable to change the bloody situation. When fighters (who are supposed to represent valor) suffer a state of despair and inferiority, it is very easy to imagine how dreadful that war was. The characters lose their value as fighters. Therefore, the gap between their dream of salvation and the brutal realities on the ground is broadened, which makes fighters sacrifice their friends to achieve their dirty cheap interests. It is not surprising then that these characters find themselves inferior and helpless when they experience the gap between dream and reality: "We are insects dumped in such a large space" (p. 94). The *Little Mountain* narrator says that fighters cannot develop this feeling unless they are defeated from inside. Elsewhere he says: "I talk because I am sad. We die like flies" (p. 104). The narrator, in both cases, equates human beings with insects— an expression of inferiority in wartime.

Another manifestation of despair in the *Little Mountain* novel is the resort to excessive drinking in an attempt to escape the disorderly reality which created psychological disorders in characters. Escaping reality through excessive drinking is not a sound solution, as drinking increases fantasy and strips people off their ability to face life: "People die and you are only drinking" (p. 120). The narrator does not care about what is happening around him. As a veteran, he closely knows there is no point of fighting. Now, however, he is forced to live this pointless war, finding himself running away from shells. Fighters abandon the war with full despair and a sense of defeat. They have to continue to live a normal life, running away from death, which only heightens their despair, eventually sinking into excessive drinking.

The sexual level

Sex has a strong presence in modern literature. In Lebanon, it was of particular importance, especially during the civil war. In Elias Khoury's novels, this theme is featured prominently. As pornography during the civil war crossed critical borders, literary writers needed to address that phenomenon. The strong presence of this theme was a result of two factors: the civil war itself; and the particular attention paid by literary writers (Accad, 1990: 160-170). The view that depicting such a phenomenon in literature is an attempt to arouse the reader's sexual desires is simply superficial. To do literary works some justice, we need to fathom the logic behind the portrayal of this social ill.

In *White Masks*, the first sexual encounter is rape (robbing and killing of Armenian doctor Khacha Dorian and his wife), which is the most violent sexual practice (Meyer, 2001: 136-140). Rape is an inhuman action— a decline of values during the civil war. It is a heinous, disgusting practice, especially if the offender is a young man raping a woman in her 60s (pp. 54-56). During civil war, people observe no limits; an offender would not only rape the victim, but also kill her. Killing the doctor's wife after raping her was not for fear of snitching; it is an odd behavior through which people seek to discharge the heavy brunt of the war. In wartime, the statement "The criminal could have left the victim alive after he robbed and raped her" would seem irrelevant and irrational. In wartime, killing the victim after raping her is a predictable action. The three perpetrators show indifference and have no qualms about committing such a heinous crime: "...They do not feel any remorse and they are not afraid of investigation or prison..." (p. 54). This hideous indifference is another dimension of sex in this novel.

Sex is a sign of male virility, and the sexual intercourse (in *White Masks* and other novels, as well) is often associated with physical abuse. The relationship between Mahmoud Fakhro and his wife, Fatima, demonstrates this violence: "... He put his hand on her mouth and began to beat her. Fatima tried to scream. He jumped around her, putting his hand on her mouth. She wanted to kneel on the ground and kiss his hands. Why is he beating her violently with a club? He threw her on the floor and tore her clothes" (p. 79). This occurred the night Mahmoud Fakhro and Fatima got married. The scene is meant to express the irrationality of that time. The behavior of Mahmoud does not aim to establish a worn-out habit of male domination as much as it seeks to highlight the defeat of manhood and masculinity in wartime. The man escapes from a setting where he is defeated (war) to a setting where he can show his potentials (home), thus preying on a human who is weaker than he is (the woman). This is an ironic sense of the pseudo kind of manhood that is manifested in an absurd way. The barriers the civil war places between the husband and his wife signify the lack of pleasure between spouses and absence of passion for life in general, which privileges the characters' search for pleasure outside marriage. This might explain the relationship between Mahmoud Fakhro and his wife in *White Masks*: "Fatima wonders why he does not sleep with her. She did not dare to ask this question, but in fact he does not sleep with her..." (p. 96). Elsewhere in the novel, we see the suppressed character of Mahmoud Fakhro with Bahiya, another woman that Mahmoud was forced to get married to: "... He came closer to her and in a minute, he was making love. She was different. He has not been with a different woman for ages" (p. 109).

The sexual relationship which brought together Nada Al-Najjar, daughter of Khalil Jaber, and her husband Nadim Al-Najjar, is also an illustration of false manhood: "He hit me hard, then took me to bed and slept with me. Is this reasonable? I did not want to sleep with him. I told him I did not want, but he did it. Then, he sat on the bed and asked me to make him a cup of coffee" (p. 223). There is no respect for her privacy or readiness for sex. Apart from revealing how males showcase their manhood through flexing their muscles, the scene involves an irony that figures in the behavior of men who live compelling, unnatural conditions. *White Masks* exposes sexual impotence, as well (the dysfunction of Musa, a friend of Ali Kalaksh: pp. 62-64). This disorder is not intended to expose the sexual malfunction of men; rather, it highlights the holistic inability of the individual in wartime.

Prostitution is another bizarre product of the civil war. This social ill reveals a moral decline that touches the family and the community at large (pp. 261-267: the story of Dr. Abu Suleiman and pander Nazeeh Tabash). Prostitution is perhaps an escape

from the dreadful social or economic conditions. This war profiteering industry seeks to indulge more and more in these conditions through exploiting the poor population, especially the displaced people. The interaction between the trafficker, who sells the victims, and the customers, who seek illicit sex, provides a source of wealth for pimps, just like civil war at the national level. The sexual dimension and its ambivalence in *White Masks* represent an extreme creeping melancholia, where sex is always associated with violence, rape and abuse. Murder is a key term in the novel. It is the foundation or the narrative. Elias Khoury employed sex to portray death that controls the plot. There is no place for sex that arises out of love, and values decline with the fall of the legal framework that regulates human behavior. The odd sex relationships are illustrations of the collapse of the war-torn society.

Little Mountain demonstrates deep duality about human sexual motives. Sex is instrumental to the life of the individual (particularly in wartime), on the one hand, and it provides an escape from the dire ravages of the war, on the other. This duality has become typical for the characters who suffer uncertainty. In his talk about the impact of war on non-combatants in the fourth chapter of the novel, the narrator shows how important sex is at time of war. It is the only thing that is done realistically: "How do you make love to a woman? Grab her waist. Pull her close, and then make love. Waist is sex, and sex is life" (p. 115). Sex is an escape form war, from bombing and missiles: "...At night, in the shelter, everyone was breathing. My wife was beside me breathing regularly. She came close, with tears in her eyes, and I approached her. When we finished, she told me that I had body odor and that she didn't like that" (p. 120).

In addition to the obvious duality, sex is associated with drinking alcohol: "...I approached her. Her smell wafted out of her body. She was not my wife; she is another woman. Sweat can do everything. I kissed her and slipped on her body like a young man having sex with a woman for the first time. She would move forward and backward and hug me. I pushed myself inside her. The most beautiful thing in the world is a having a woman hugging you while having sex" (p. 134). Drinking alcohol in the novel is not intended for lust. Rather, it is an escape from the cruel world, and sex is but another way for further escaping.

In the fifth chapter of the novel, which is being set in Paris away from the war and Beirut, sex shortens the distance between Beirut and Paris. The sexual scene in Paris appears as though it is utterly in Beirut, not free of blood: "I grabbed her hand. She fell on the ground and was broken. The fragments spread in all direction inside the room. I bent down to collect the pieces. She began to bleed, and the walls were stained with mud and trees. She grabbed me and my body shuddered a bit like when someone suffers a feverish cold. Then, she fell" (p. 160). The civil war is present even in the exile. The sex dual sense in the novel came to express the duality the characters experienced during the war. Elias Khoury's careful selection of sex to express duality was not unconscious. Sex has often been considered to be one of the most meaningful and sublime human expressions. Typically, sex is the physical act of love: the former is an action; the latter is an emotion, but both complement one another. In wartime, however, sex is a means to escape the world. Because sex in wartime is awkward, it becomes a vague link between the characters and their real life.

The Journey of Little Gandhi is an impressive illustration of weird sex, particularly in terms of type of relationships, the place these relationships take place and the parties involved in them. The first sexual action in the novel is an affair between Reema, the friend of Hisn (Ralph), the son of Little Gandhi, and the doorman, Abu Abd Al-Kurdi. The couple would have sex in the building staircase, during power outages that were frequent during

bombing: "...He held his arm as though he was getting in her way. Reema pumped into his arm and almost fell down. He wrapped his arm around her waist. She did not say anything, but she remembered she said 'no' or 'tomorrow'. He did not say anything. He butted her with his head, and she fell down, probably on the edge of the stairs. He did not take off his pants, but slid into her after rolling up her short dress. Everything went quickly. She felt the sperms on her neck, and then went down the stairs as though she was waiting for him, and indeed she was waiting for him" (p. 52). The place where the sexual intercourse takes place and manner in which it occurs are irrational. Sex in this scene breaks all current and expected norms. It represents the ugly war, and from this war it acquires its cruelty. The war murdered all societal values and crossed all boundaries, and now the characters no longer consider these values. In wartime, everything is cheap, and it is no problem making love very quickly in staircases without flirting. This is consistent with bombing, destruction and death that take place in no time. Survival in this case is only for those who can move quickly, and by the same token, sex is only available for those who can do it very fast without prior flirting. A second chance is almost impossible under the speed horrible death. Both getting rich and having sex happen rapidly in wartime.

The age difference between sexual partners is a special feature of the civil war. The social constraints to behavior are no longer there, and now it is normal for a young man to have sex with a woman as old as his mother: "The woman took him to a place he knows nothing about. Every day, he would sleep with her. He would feel that she was drinking him. It was a crazy relationship, and she was crazy about him. She would hug him and scream, and he just made love to her" (p. 77). Apparently, sex lost its prestige when all values degenerated.

The Linguistic level

Elias Khoury's characters use language that is consistent with the dirt of the war, even at the sexual level. The wild sex, resulting from the frantic war, entailed odd pejorative talk. Khoury was professional in forging a holistic system of jargon in the literature of the civil war. The system involves gradual intensity from the moderate and endurable to the pejorative and excessive expressions. Examples on the first type from *White Masks* include *ass*, *bitch*, *son of a bitch*. Ali Kalaksh uses dirty words when he refers to his wife: "How does this ass want me to sleep with her without drinking two glasses of wine" (p. 67). The painful reality makes the characters' talk offensive and harsh, as though it is an attempt to face cruelty with viciousness. There is no place for leniency when people are subject to humiliation. The pejorative talk is also characteristic of the talk of Ali Kalaksh's friend, Moses, who is sexually impotent: "The bitch says I am impotent" (p. 71). By using the word *bitch*, he meant to disparage the woman who demeaned his manhood. In another scene, the vulgar language represents the humiliation the individuals experienced during the war, as it appears from the investigation with Zain Aloul, a municipal worker who discovered the body of Khalil Jaber and was accused of a connection with a military organization: "They beat him, and he did nothing. Do not say anything, son of a bitch" (p. 136). Intensity of indecency increases gradually in *White Masks*. Nadim Al-Najjar, Husband of Nada, daughter of Khalil Jaber, expresses his dismay: "War is literally shit, intolerable" (p. 223), and "The shop will close down. War is shit, unbearable" (p. 231). This obscenity is not so much about exposing the characters' filthiness as it is about unmasking the deterioration of values under war.

A decent talk in wartime is rather difficult no matter how much the characters try to be demure in describing the brutality of the war. Nadim Al-Najjar could have described the war as 'something unbearable', yet he was eager (and in more than one place) to use the pejorative term 'shit', as a spontaneous description in

an unnatural state. Using pejorative language is a way of releasing self from a leash, as it appears. A decent language might not free the characters from the psychological fatigue they experience, nor might the refined words mitigate the misery the characters suffer.

Obscenity in *White Masks* peaks when Nadia (wife of Moses, the sexually impotent) and Nada Al-Najjar (daughter of Khalil Jaber and wife of Al-Nadim Najjar) use the word *whore*: "What would people say about me? A whore? I will not divorce him," Nadia says (p. 63). The same term is used by Nada when she talks about her husband: "Am I a whore? My husband says I am a whore, and that all women are whores, and that he is free and that...". This is the spontaneity of the characters who suffer the brunt of the war. The characters do not take the trouble to use prudent language. Bottom line: war is an uncivilized action that induces unrefined language and an absurd behavior.

The Journey of Little Gandhi abounds with the second type of pejorative language typical of filthy characters: prostitutes and strumpets, particularly Alice, the whore who tells the events to the narrator (Aghacy, 1996: 163-173). The dirty language among this group of people is part of their job. The simplest terms *crap* and *shit* are used by Khawaja Espero, who owns a bike hire business: "Espero is named after Saint Esperadonius, the miraculous. You are only a crappy generation" (p. 55), and in another place "What a crappy committee?" (p. 192). Alice equates the elderly home she took priest Ameen to with the hotel she works at: "You would smell shit everywhere. Here, too, the smell of shit is long-lasting. I use soap to clean everything in the place. Yet, when you live in shit, you do not expect the stench to disappear" (p. 195). This is a stark illustration of the miserable conditions under the civil war. The word *shit* has a figurative meaning— a description of the squalid long-lasting conditions of the characters' life.

Apart from spontaneity, the writer reports the conversations verbatim and without social or religious caveats— another contribution to the civil war literature by Elias Khoury. Elias Khoury's employment of Alice's character as a reserve for the memories of the war has struck the right note. By doing so, he meant to expose two facts: the passivity of the official institutions; and the decline in values— a force that drove characters to work as prostitutes. The peculiar characters do not have any qualms about using such pejorative language, which is the reason why such obscene terms were commonly used in communication. During Lebanese civil war, individuals would find it usual to talk or behave in an odd way— an indication that all products of war are irrational. The argument that the use of pejorative language was socially approved is evidenced by the fact that the individuals would use derogatory words for humor. The owner of Salonika Hotel (where Alice and other prostitutes work) "laughs and says: "No Madam, we are not sons of a bitch," and then he squawks" (p. 9). The use of this language by whores may sound familiar by virtue of their working conditions. However, literature does not deal with the familiar, particularly during civil war. It depicts the strange behavior characteristic of alienation. When descent people start to use pejorative language, we must understand the great pressure they are subject to. Perhaps they use such vulgar talk to defend themselves, to counterattack or to assault oth-

ers. Moses— the sexually impotent character— verbally abused a whore in *White Masks*. Wife of Tannous (one of the men whom Alice loved) did the same when she learned of her husband's betrayal: "Tannous, divorce me and get married to that whore... Come with me, son of a bitch, I swear I will unmask your disgraceful behavior" (p. 69). Hisn (son of Little Gandhi) falls in love with Nuha Aun, a woman older than he is. When he knows that she is going to get married to a rich man, he asks her why, she replies: "I want to marry him; you are something different." He brawls: "You are a harlot. I'll show you" (p. 81).

Little Mountain employs the vulgar language to signify places rather than people. The whore in *Little Mountain* signifies the city itself, Beirut, rather than the human whore as in *The Journey of Little Gandhi*: "Beirut is like a whore. You cannot approach a whore unless you have your pockets full of money" (p. 126), and elsewhere: "What is this whore city? Do you believe that one whore can have sex with a million men and yet survive? Can you imagine a city that receives a million shell and yet survives" (p. 141). The term *whore* in this dialogue does not signify a diffusion of lewdness in Beirut; rather it describes the horrible situation of the city. This pejorative language is strong and significant though it injects too much ribaldry. It describes Beirut with the new guise emerging from bombing and destruction, as though the city is now different and it has disowned its children who can no longer adapt to living in it.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated the direct relationship between the loner characters and the miserable life in wartime. Khoury's loner characters are dejected and helpless. War brutality has cast a shadow on life in Lebanon, thus producing a state of estrangement. The false beliefs and the confused behavior of the characters are attestation to their alienation. On a different note, there appears to be a causal relationship between all dimensions of alienation (for example the causal relationships between the social and psychological dimensions). This causality makes all levels interact to produce a network of estrangement.

To illustrate the pattern of alienation in the characters, the study took the social and the psychological levels as examples to show that the characters undergo a dramatic transition. Insofar as the war disfigured Beirut and the entire country— creating a new Beirut that disowns the prior-war Beirut, a new city whose life is consistent with melancholia— it created characters who repudiated their natural roles and wore a melancholic dress 'woven' by the civil war. As a matter of fact, literature has never sought to prettify the rather ugly face of life. Its main job is to expose life in a succinct, insightful way. It debunks the frailties and flaws of human relationships (especially under war) and calls upon people to stand on the right side of history and at least reject war.

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