The Female Body Under Siege: 
The Trauma of Occupation 
in Liana Badr's *The Eye of the Mirror* 

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Each of us has his own mirror, but our collective mirror is one which shares in the shaping of our existence or in the spreading of misery that is not all. More importantly, are we always up to following the road the mirror casts ahead of us and maintaining a lucidity resembling delirium, as we acquire a knowledge which hammers on the door of madness? This is what I have tried to do in *The Eye of the Mirror*, a book which was written by the lives of the people of the camp before ink traced the lines and letters.

—Liana Badr

Palestinian literature deals with the dual problematics of life under occupation and the consequent resistance to subjugation as exemplified by the Intifada or popular uprising. This literature explores themes such as exile, psychological trauma, physical displacement, nostalgia, conflict and revolt through the writings of Liana Badr, Sahar Khalifeh, Fawaz Turki, Mahmud Darwish, and Edward Said, among others. Within this corpus of poetry, political essays, novels and short stories, Liana Badr’s *The Eye of the Mirror*, offers a compelling narrative of the devastation faced by the Palestinian inhabitants of the Tal Ezza’tar refugee camp in the Christian-controlled section of Beirut in 1975–76 during one of the most repressive sieges in the history of the Lebanese civil war. Subjected to a regime of terror, intimidation and hardship instigated by the Christian militia, the refugees are engaged in a daily battle of survival in the face of ethnic genocide and cultural annihilation. Anxious to preserve this important period of Palestinian history from political extinction, the

*jac* 24.3 (2004)
author uses a complicated, palimpsest-like narrative that weaves together the threads of fiction, personal testimony, documentation, and oral culture to produce a compelling narrative that seeks wholeness amid chaos and fragmentation in an attempt to highlight the machinations of abjection that confront her characters on a regular basis. Using fiction as an effective instrument of investigation to record, preserve and re-present the history of her people, Badr produces a novel that is epic in its scope in terms of its characters’ heroic negotiations of the quotidian.

Tal Ezza’tar occupies a particular place in the Palestinian imaginary as a symbol of Palestinian history characterized by genocide, mass migration, cultural and political dispossession, and resistance to oppression. Located in the predominantly Christian-controlled part of Beirut, Tal Ezza’tar also represents the complexity of negotiating identity along the lines of race, gender, and class and the tensions that result from such negotiations. These tensions were exacerbated during the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war during which the Palestinian refugees became victims of political and ethnic scapegoating. Referred to as the “Stalingrad” of the Palestinian refugees, Tal Ezza’tar was subjected to a brutal siege that lasted one year, during which vital supplies, electricity, food, water and ammunition were cut off in an attempt to isolate and decimate the camp. The camp was ultimately destroyed and “there were about 4,000 casualties and some 12,000 Palestinians fled to other parts of Lebanon. What remained of the camp was razed,” according to David Gordon (92). Despite the impact of mass destruction and progressive annihilation, the inhabitants of the camp put up a brave front for over a year. Their bravery and tenacity of survival has become one of the landmark events in the war of resistance, a chapter worthy of immortalization in Badr’s novel. She was witness to the demolition of the refugee camps in Lebanon starting with Tal Ezza’tar in 1976 and continuing with Sabra and Shatila in 1982. As a journalist in Beirut that wrote about the “everydayness” of war, Badr was compelled to return to the scene of devastation in Tal Ezza’tar to document the history of the camp through personal testimonies and eye witness narrations. The subsequent interplay of journalistic entry, historical documentation, and fiction endows the novel with the powerful force of veracity and accuracy that draws the reader into a spellbinding narrative that is at once disturbing and poetically evocative.

An important aspect of the novel focuses on the traumatic impact of the war on the female body as exemplified by the character Aisha who suffers a dual colonization through her refugee status as well as through patriarchal control. This study affirms that Aisha’s story represents the
anguished cry for normalcy amid the daily horror of war to reveal women’s complicated narratives of survival in their fight for national and personal selfhood. The agony of political occupation and destruction reinforces the trauma of the patriarchal occupation of the female body in terms of the suppression of basic rights and privileges, freedom of movement/expression, and the right to life. The besieged female body, as the very locus of repression, consequently becomes the site of struggle in its search for subjectivity within the diasporic setting of Lebanon.

**Aisha: Trauma, Neurosis and Repression**

Aisha, the novel’s protagonist whose name means “life” in Arabic, is presented as an anti-heroine whose struggles for self-affirmation are conversely located in the negation of her body as a means of regaining control. The external battle for freedom plays itself out internally on the female body that manifests its simultaneous resistance and submission to domination. Symbolizing the situation of several exiled Palestinian women living in Lebanon at the time of the siege, Aisha acts out the trauma of national and patriarchal dispossession. The prisoner of a confiscated identity as a result of her dual alienation within dominant systems of power symbolized by her early convent education and her subsequent confinement in her father’s house, Aisha nevertheless develops discrete mechanisms of (self)control to resist domination and confinement. Her emotions and reactions reveal the tensions of the embattled body in its will to survive its multiple alienations.

Aisha exemplifies the non-status of the sexualized and racialized female subaltern whose worth is located in her domesticated exploitation at the Lebanese convent school where she receives an education in exchange for her labor, and in her father’s home where she becomes an object of his obsessive control. The novel’s apologetic introduction of Aisha as a flawed character nevertheless highlights a certain humanity of representation that reveals the complexity of her characterization. As the narrator states, “The heroine will not win your admiration because of a flaw in her basic attributes. For she is human—we are all human in the end. The flaw causes her qualities to be either excessive, or below the normally required average. She is educated yet ignorant, common yet possessing aristocratic pride, more imaginative than necessary, unbearably idealistic and indescribably stupid. She believes herself to be better than others, yet she is besotted by confused mystical thoughts which have sensuous emotional roots” (2). In other words, Aisha’s characterization defies conventional understanding while resisting simplistic representa-
tion. The trauma of dispossession and its dramatic manifestations creates a body-in-exile that subverts facile binarisms through the paradoxical positioning of human existence. Consequently, the character demonstrates a certain formlessness that at once projects the non-space of abjection as well as the resistance to signification wherein her representational value locates itself within the subjective "turbulence" of symbolic orphanhood to be analyzed in the course of this essay.

In the novel, Aisha's self worth is limited to signifiers of women's domestic labor. Her child labor maintains the pristine conditions of the convent where she becomes the not-to-significant other due to her location as the daughter of working-class refugee Arab-Muslim Palestinian parents. The women-controlled space of the convent does not provide Aisha with automatic ties of communion and sisterhood. She must earn her education through hard work to compensate for her "difference." The novel indicates that the convent sustains itself through the exploitation of "other" children such as Aisha who are confined to dominant hierarchies of discrimination in which the nomenclature "Lebanese Christian" marks its ascendancy over "Arab Muslim." The novel describes Aisha's duties in the convent that preclude her from enjoying the pleasures of childhood reserved for the Christian girls: "Over there, games would stretch across the red arc of the aurora at sunset, running with the sound of the girls' laughter in the playground. There she would do her chores" (5). Differing standards of humanity imposed by the Christian nuns reinforce Aisha's outsider status whereby she is objectified in terms of the specific functions that she performs at the convent. Her difference makes her an object of curiosity for the Christian girls, whose freedom is guaranteed by Aisha's "colonization" and subsequent assimilation of Christian ideology. In turn, the colonized subject's identity is confirmed/conferred by the dominant hierarchy that maintains its self-proclaimed superiority through condescension, control, and the suppression of difference. The novel describes the girls' attitude toward Aisha, who becomes an exotic beast of burden in her caged environment: "They would talk to her with noticeable tenderness, the way they would address their nannies at home, or the way they would praise a creature whom they all agreed was quite unique. They would admire her ability to put up with hard work, and with tidying up static, depressing things. They would wonder how she could sweep lightly and daintily without twisting the discs in her back as she bent" (6). Aisha's position can be compared to the situation of women who are exploited by the machinations of the contracted labor system in
which the lure of a sustainable income by working as domestic servants camouflages a nefarious operation of indentureship.

The perpetuation of the system is ensured by the strict enforcement of a culture of silencing through the employment of intimidation and strategies of internalization. As the novel reveals, “The nuns had taught her that it was best for her not to talk and not to try to mix with the daughters of the influential families” (6). Silence and segregation constitute a tactic of dual control to maintain the ethic of nonaccountability of the convent where “Aisha did not talk. She would turn her back, carrying her wet cloth to a remote spot in the tiled dining-room, automatically distancing herself as she had done for seven years, during which she had become used to her surroundings” (7). By “acclimatizing” the colonized subject to its environment, the convent legitimizes its authority through a policy of regulatory control destined to create “docile” minds and bodies. Foucault describes the docile body as one that “may be subjected, used, transformed and improved,” by serving as an easily-available “target of power” (136). The manipulation of the body ensures its docility when it is stripped of its defense mechanisms by a daily regimen of coercive training and discipline in the name of the Christian faith. The novel exposes Aisha’s religious indoctrination: “She would wash herself, dress up, then go to church to kneel before the icons. ‘I beseech you, Oh Prophet,’ Aisha would say. Sister Mary would be amazed, and say to her with a mysterious smile, ‘Not Oh Prophet. Say I beseech you, Oh Christ, Oh Jesus’” (7).

Replacing the Prophet with the Christian God creates a false point of reference for the girl, who is made to believe in the inviolability of Christianity. The ideological occupation of the mind is ensured by the imposition of a syllabus of compliance to the “foreign” god whose worship further alienates the girl from her own family and surroundings. The novel exposes Aisha’s sense of estrangement from her parents, whose authority is replaced by Sister Mary from the convent to create forged linkage bonds in which the biological parents are at the losing end of a symbolic custody battle for the girl’s affection: “Sister Mary. If only. If only she had been her family and spared her all this suffering” (14). The civilizing mission of the convent is aimed at creating a subject-in-alienation through the undermining and subsequent obliteration of the “native” culture in the name of assimilationist ideology. This policy of assimilation to a unified ideal is ratified by a hegemonic structure of political, cultural, and ethical absolutism that negates the agency of colonial subjects through their submission. If the severe disciplining of
young, pliable bodies is ensured through child labor, the “idées reçues” mentality adopted by the convent guarantees intellectual docility through brainwashing and the invalidation of critical thinking. Aisha’s “mask of silence and purity” (7) carries the colonial imprint that impedes the possibility of searching for alternatives that would undermine the sole legitimacy of the Christian text that affirms itself through the grid of binary logic where “Christian” symbolizes high culture and civilization and “Arab” denotes backwardness and primitivism.

The novel highlights these binaries by contrasting the unhealthy conditions of Aisha’s camp/home with the pristine conditions of the convent, whose hygiene is ironically maintained by Aisha’s labor while her own people are forced to live in abjection. The sulfuric fumes of the camp and its “hellish odour” are compared with “the fragrance of ambergris soap which permeated the school and its long corridors” (9) to suggest that the convent offers a model of heavenly living through reflection and peaceful mediation (7) while the camp reveals the ugly face of hell and perdition described in the following manner:

This time, Aisha had not known. She did not know until she saw the black flags of mourning on the roofs of many houses in the camp. She heard the moaning of women and the crying of children as she walked along the roads. She saw the faces of women who had not caught her attention before, struggling under the burden of a heavy blow which had changed their features and mutilated their bones. Their misshapen faces overflowed with grief and anger. (9)

The hopelessness of the camp and its grim surroundings of death and destruction plays into the darkness/light binary promoted by the convent where the possibility of an education offers the lure of dispelling the darkness that shrouds Aisha’s existence. However, her aspirations of becoming a teacher are thwarted by an act of ethnic violence whereby the bus massacre of Palestinian civilians by Christian militiamen upsets the preconceived parameters of civilized behavior maintained by the convent school. The idea that the convent maintains its light through the devastation of its “others” is suggested by the reference to its mythical castle-like proportions that dominate the landscape to maintain a façade of impenetrability and omnipresence (4).

The Story of the Open Wound
The ideal of inaccessible omnipresence is not only absorbed by the
colonial subject but remains frozen within its psyche as a much-desired but unattainable fetish that creates a traumatic wounding of the ego. This wound is located in a double displacement of gender and nation to confirm Fadia Faqir's claim with reference to Aisha's characterization: "She is marginalized as a young girl in a society with very fixed definitions of what womanhood entails, and also as a Palestinian who is homeless and whose entire nation has been displaced" (vii). Aisha's story is therefore the story of the original wound that seeks to articulate its text by giving voice to the politically and culturally repressed through the medium of the body where "her body told, and she listened. Her body spoke, and she heard the words it was saying to her" (11). The self articulates its text in a private, interior language in an effort to gain awareness of its dual disenfranchisement by accessing the unconventional imaginative space of the limitless, the sacred domain of the creative spirit. As the novel indicates, "There were stories, tales and reports which they enticed her into hearing and mysterious faces of charming heroes which they were reluctant to describe or hint at. And there were things which they never mentioned, but she knew about them of her own accord" (11). The body's private entry into the forbidden world of the unspoken resembles a quest for knowledge that borders madness, the very language of the unsignifiable, Aisha's private text and strategy of defense (32). These defenses are motivated by a psychic splitting between dreams and reality where her fantasies provide the necessary escape from the "desperate monotony" of daily life (13).

This monotony of existence is inscribed within restrictive gender codes that offer limited possibilities of access. If dreams engender the creative expansiveness of the individual through a heightened internal awareness of the self, the corresponding static controls of patriarchal hegemony create an impasse in gender development where "as long as social attitudes do not change . . . the transformed individual woman will be alienated, unable to inscribe her transformation into political action and discourse" (Cooke 194). The impossibility of discourse and the inability to translate thought into action provide the root cause for traumatic memory as the very site of the body's multiple violations in a history of loss and absence. Linking trauma with the unassimilable in terms of the psychic wounding of the mind, Cathy Caruth writes that trauma is "always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Unclaimed 4). Caruth's formulation lodges trauma in an in-between space of simultaneous deracination and recuperation where the body
generates its own mechanism to speak the unspeakable in an attempt to give public voice to a private story. The body fabricates its own text to overcome the void of physical and existential homelessness that, in the Palestinian context, constitutes an impossible history or impasse. By absorbing the very impossibility of this discourse in terms of its alleged political and gendered non-negotiability, the body, according to Caruth, becomes the very signifier of this impossibility whereby “the traumatized ... become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (*Trauma* 5). As mentioned before, Aisha is deprived of her national history as a Palestinian refugee and of her history of selfhood as a woman caught between confining gender ideologies in the privacy of her home. She is thereby obliged to confront a dual impasse that complicates her narrative of survival.

The novel highlights the idea of impasse in its very inception where the narrator bemoans the tragic impossibility of entering her homeland: “One of the greatest wonders is that I am unable to enter my country or pass through the regions around it” (1). The idea of blocked entry becomes the leit-motif of the novel especially in terms of the female characters who constantly plot alternative routes of access. In Aisha’s case, the girl moves from the confined space of the convent to confinement in her father’s house. Conformity to her woman-centered domestic roles in both spaces also leads to the questioning of gender roles in a Christian and Muslim sphere of influence where neither domain provides an enduring model of female enhancement. While her levels of acceptability/nonacceptance depend upon the ability to remain in her designated position of subaltern-ness, it is her second-class status itself that indicts the narrow definition of gender and its exclusionary paradigms of female mis(representation) in her society. These limited paradigms of affirmation find their source in traditional perceptions of female sexuality where the cult of the Virgin in the Christian context mirrors the cult of virginity in Arab-Muslim culture.

**De-sexualizing the Feminine**

Female sexuality constitutes the ultimate fetish of fear and attraction in the male imaginary that elaborates repressive methods of control to delimit its expression. Associated with the forces of fitna or destruction and chaos, the policing of female sexuality becomes a patriarchal imperative to impose “rational control” in the face of communal displacement and group identity. As Soraya Antonius explains, “Women are taught early that their sexuality does not belong to them, it is not theirs to give
or to withhold; it is the inalienable, permanent property of the hamula (clan). As a result, sexual purity and lineage honor are seen as inseparable” (764). The perception of female sexuality as the public domain of the collectivity reflects the commodification of womanhood whereby women are reduced to exemplified ideals or keepers of the Muslim faith in their role as the purveyors of tradition and culture. The strict enforcement of moral codes of conduct for women is legitimized by ambiguous and limited interpretations of sexual morality whereby women are valorized for their asexuality when they uphold the virtues of honor and chastity.

In several patriarchal societies, family and communal honor depends upon a girl’s virginity as a sign of her moral righteousness. The family’s reputation is maintained first and foremost by the daughter’s virginity, followed by the wife’s fidelity and, the mother’s ultimate sexual negation. Sexual restraint for women becomes a patriarchal mandate whereby women are traditionally held responsible for maintaining communal honor through an extreme privation of their bodies. In the novel, this sense of privation expresses itself through Aisha’s feelings of loathing for her body where the sight of menstrual blood, as a sign of emerging womanhood, becomes a violation or transgression: “the final verdict for a transgression or a crime she had committed” (16). The repression of the body is equated with a form of “debilitating heaviness” to signify the weight of its oppression (17). Aisha’s perception of the female body as burden is reinforced by the emergence of breasts that become an added appendage to further immobilize her movements: “A new useless organ, giving rise to embarrassment and a deep sense of its superfluity and meaninglessness.” (14) The body’s meaninglessness in the absence of personal subjectivity also becomes a metaphor for the futility of the refugee’s existence in terms of political subjectlessness to inscribe a dual exile on the female body.

Feminists such as the noted Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi consider the cultural manipulation of female sexuality to be the ultimate weapon of patriarchal control. The preoccupation with female virginity and chastity becomes a major obsession for men who, at the same time, do not hesitate to subject women to violence and abuse in an attempt to keep them “in place.” Mernissi states,

Curiously, then, virginity is a matter between men in which women merely play the role of silent intermediaries. Like honor, virginity is the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation in societies where inequal-
ity, scarcity, and the degrading subjection of some people to others deprive the community as a whole of the only true human strength: self confidence. The concept of honor and virginity locate the prestige of a man between the legs of a woman. (183)

In the novel, Aisha experiences the body’s weightiness in her father’s presence where his menacing stares regulate her access to movement. The father’s penetrating looks establish his circumference of influence over his daughter in his role as the custodian of her virtue. As the novel indicates, “She sweeps, makes dark tea and serves it, cleans the dishes and rubs the aluminum saucepans until they shine like a mirror, while he follows her with his eyes, casting an invisible chord that traces her movements between the kitchen, the room and the roof” (21). The preservation of female sexuality limits women to socially-confined roles whose boundaries are fixed and well-defined, eliminating the possibilities of transgression or cultural errance. The imposition of spatial restrictions on women is intended to provide for their safe keeping. Once women are immobilized within culturally-sanctioned boundaries, they become impervious to the outside world or to external forces of contamination that could undermine their honor and integrity.

Diasporic Dissonance
The idea of establishing a “sexual protectorate” takes on a particular resonance in the novel where the father projects his own humiliation as a displaced Arab refugee onto his daughter in the form of his abusive behavior toward her: “‘We’re Palestinians,’ he had said, as though he were continuously searching the heavens and earth for excuses to humiliate her” (23). The father’s political emasculation mirrors his own helplessness as a castrated patriarch who loses his “inherent” powers of immanence in the process of migration. Consequently, the tenacious adherence to the immutable structures of the past in terms of antiquated gender ideologies becomes more than just a fixation for hegemonic permanence that authenticifies the rule of the patriarch who has everything to lose in the process of transition. The instability of the political present is counterbalanced by the salience of the immovable cultural past as a means of regaining control over family and community. The destabilizing forces of enforced migration which lead to a certain fracturing of the past threaten to upset the male-centered (im)balance of power maintained in the homeland by creating the possibility of alternative social structures in the new territory. Remembering and enforcing the past in terms of
gender is thus the ultimate defensive mechanism for the uprooted patriarch to make some sense of his presence insecurity. In other words, memories of the past are associated with an ideological recovery for men to maintain a feeling of rootedness amid the dispersal of culture and identity in the diasporic location.

On the other hand, diasporic women have occupied an ambiguous position in the adopted land where they have been caught between past, present, and future patriarchies. As a result, these women have been simultaneously expected to “maintain homeland kinship networks and religious and cultural traditions in order to transmit them to their children. This tends to reinforce patriarchy and makes the domestic sphere both a refuge from the material and spiritual anxieties of exile and a trip in which the conflicting demands of family, work, and old and new patriarchies have to be dealt with. The situation is painful . . .” (Kavita 1). The conflicting demands of family and culture often concretize themselves in the institution of ‘arranged’ marriage where women become tokens of exchange within the patriarchal economy that reinforces male guardianship of women. The marriage pact that is concluded between parents on behalf of their children transfers the dynamics of control from the father to the new husband, who is often chosen for the daughter. This denial of property rights for women is demonstrated in Aisha’s outburst: “The house! Hassan’s house. Hassan’s family. Not hers” (102). The negation of personal choice maintains a structure that denies autonomy by demonstrating how conventions are a way of preserving and reinforcing familial “respectability” by placing women outside the parameters of the laws of equity. For this reason, Aisha perceives marriage as a contract rather than a partnership in which the chosen husband Hassan acquires an illusory form to demonstrate Aisha’s complete disengagement from the marriage process. The novel describes her nonreaction to her wedding: “It was all over now. The bridegroom had gone, and she had not seen him, although he had shaken hands with her. She had not heard him although he had spoken to her” (96).

Her disengagement intensifies her sense of alienation within a system that denies women the option of choice and free will. On the contrary, the preservation of tradition over the rights of the individual ensures the smooth functioning of the system of exchange whose terms and conditions are controlled by men and by women who are willing to act as patriarchal agents, most notably mothers and older female relatives. Aisha’s mother becomes an accomplice in the perpetuation of a tradition that outlines the inevitability of a girl’s “normal” destiny through the
following rationalization: “I know. You’re scared of marriage. We were all like you before getting married. All girls feel that way. That’s what destiny brings. All girls end up getting married” (92). The validation of a girl’s identity through marriage becomes a societal prescription to continue a preordained maternal heritage that guarantees the survival of kinship ties. As the mother explains: “Perhaps you will have children who will give you something to do” (92).

The Female Body and the Aesthetics of Pain

The mediation of female sexuality as a function valorized for its utilitarian, procreative use often leads to the internalization of external pressures in the form of imposed feelings of guilt and shame as the body’s only recourse to articulate this limitation through the fragmented language of sexual abnegation. By comparing her marriage to a funeral (96), Aisha relives the trauma of dispossession by becoming the anti-bride who refuses to carry the imprint of wedlock on her body: “The wedding. The night of consummation. Aisha had not wanted henna painted on her” (97). The adornment of the female body with henna or decorative body painting enhances its desirability on the wedding night through its ornamental value. However, for Aisha, the representation of the body as ornament is a sign of its corporeal colonization by male desire in which it becomes an object of manipulation and perpetration. The novel describes the ways in which the women prepare her body for her wedding night: “Since the morning, the crowd of women had done nothing but pursue her, touching the intimate parts of her body. Fingers stretched out at her, making a sugary lemon paste, examining her body, intruding between her organs as though she were a doll made of dough available to every hand to sculpt and remodel into something different” (99). The implied transforming of a women-centered celebratory ritual of beautification into a medical examination to verify the intactness of the hymen provides ultimate proof of the body’s market value through demonstrated evidence of its virginity, concretized by “the blood that would flow in that secret place as proof of her honour” (99).

The association between honor and pain in the form of the ruptured hymen indicates that the female body situates itself within the problematics of an original crime (the crime of being female) and its corresponding punishment in the form of self-inflicted mutilation as a sign of the “infirm” body. The disempowered body speaks a fragmented “invisible” text in which it has “a presence which is both striking and disturbing. Victim of the entropy generating its slow disintegration, this body is a
revealing text, one which draws attention to and denounces the necrotic ideology of our culture,” according to Françoise Lionnet (35). As prescribed by hegemonic readings, a woman’s relationship with her body is synonymous with her relationship to death, a self-canceling and requited censorship of the body and spirit. Outlawed by a system of arbitrary control within patriarchal systems of justice, the female body succumbs to a strict regime of regulation or censorship. Elaine Scarry inscribes the censored female body within an invisible geography of pain whereby pain becomes an expressive outlet to resist the stifling of self. She asserts, “Pain makes overt precisely what is at stake in ‘inexpressibility’ and thus begins to expose by inversion the essential character of ‘expressibility’ whether verbal or material” (19). In other words, pain speaks the language of the female body by articulating the inexpressible or the repressed. By speaking a double language that both reflects and camouflages the body’s need for self-expression, pain becomes the language of subversion for Aisha, who contests social conventions through “the dramatization of the body’s protest” symbolized by the act of savagely cutting her hair minutes before the wedding ceremony: “In the bathroom, she was choking like a slaughtered rooster. Her eyes fell on a pair of scissors that had been left on the window sill. She picked them up and began cutting off her hair in front of the broken mirror. . . . She cut off her hair in terror as her sobbing rose, drowning out the ululating and chanting outside. She cut the tresses as though they were superfluous waste paper” (101).

**Speaking the Body**

A woman’s tresses, as a symbol of her beauty, enhance her suitability for marriage wherein abundant hair growth reflects a healthy fertility rate, according to psychoanalytic theory. Cutting hair in a haphazard fashion to expose the baldness of the scalp becomes an act of disenchantment instead to reveal the starkness of Aisha’s fight for agency. The unconventional use of body language to express its dissatisfaction that cannot be articulated through the conventional language of free expression is mistaken for a symptom of madness by Aisha’s mother, who fails to comprehend the motivation behind her daughter’s “irregular behavior”: “A secret grief entered her heart at her daughter’s uncontrollable madness and at what her insanity had prompted her to do” (101–02). The immediate diagnosis of madness to characterize women’s alternative attempts at self-expression reveals the limited possibilities available to women who try to take control of a losing situation. Madness becomes a metaphor for female cultural and social exile, a sign of protest and rejection of
conventionally-defined female roles and expectations, thereby reflecting the desire to transgress the limitations imposed by such forms of exile on women. Phyllis Chesler indicates that madness is a “mirror image of the female experience and a penalty for being “female,” as well as for desiring or daring not to be” (15). Mirroring the search for female uniqueness within inhibiting social structures, madness manifests itself through muted or sublimated forms of female self-expression such as silence, catatonic behavior, numbing to external stimuli, and indifference. These symbols of discontent are a symptom of the impasses that women encounter when they try to transcend the limitations of their socially-fabricated destinies. In other words, madness as a creatively-elaborated form of alternative thinking that defies conventional modes of thought could represent a form of lucidity to pierce through the conflicting demands made on women in terms of social conformity. For Aisha, madness becomes a strategy of self-protection, an enclosed space that permits reflection and a certain recuperation of the self instead of representing a form of pathology. The armor of solitude, as a protective cocoon, leads to the loosening of the body's tensions as it liberates itself from captivity. The novel describes the voluptuous nature of Aisha's solitude: “She weaves her solitude with a slow pleasure... She works slowly, enjoying her aloneness as though she were tasting a unique flavour whose secret is unattainable to others” (20).

The mask of solitude could, in fact, represent a state of dual consciousness when schizophrenic demands made on women lead to the development of a psychic splitting in which they are caught in a dialectical configuration propelled by externally-imposed images of self (social reality) and an inner psychological reality that remains repressed very often. The novel exposes Aisha's perceived schizophrenia. “Half of her appeared here, the other half there. Each mirror reflected a separate part of her. Each image opened onto an inverse side of the other” (105). This division or fragmentation of self is an indictment of the ways in which society prevents women from achieving a totality of representation through partial or truncated identifications. Deprived of an essential part of herself, woman sees herself in alienation. The novel compares Aisha's sense of alienation to a feeling of soullessness or psychic demoralization whereby the partitioned female body symbolizes the severed ties with the original center, the motherland Palestine (66). Territorial demands made on the female body become a compensation for the lack of national territory revealing a permanent state of orphanhood for the Palestinian refugees. In fact, Aisha's fate as the female subaltern mirrors the fate of
the entire camp wherein her personal exclusion within patriarchy complements the national exclusion of her people: “Aisha once again experienced a bitter taste in her mouth as she recalled her past. George no longer visited because he was preoccupied with his new duties. She could do no more than surrender to the fate of her acidic days. But she was not alone. That applied to everyone else living in the Tal . . .” (124). The collectivity of abjection leaves its mark on the abject female body in the form of its “madness” or search for reckoning.

This search maintains its efficacy through a system of oppositional thinking that enables Aisha to subvert the very structures that seek to oppress her. As Antonius explains, “A young bride enters her husband’s household at an extreme disadvantage as she will be subordinate not only to all men in the family but also to senior women, especially the mother-in-law” (763). However, elevation from a position of subordination is guaranteed through pregnancy, especially with the birth of a male heir. Aisha uses the guise of pregnancy as the prescription for a fruitful marriage to transform her disenfranchised status as the new daughter-in-law to her advantage. The novel exposes the duplicitous game that begins between Aisha and her mother-in-law Um Hassan: “Also during that period, a cat and mouse game began between Aisha and her mother-in-law. Um Hassan very strongly believed that Aisha was pregnant. Aisha did not think that she was, but she went along with the game, playing it adeptly because it gave her unexpected privileges of pampering and attention” (134). Aisha’s game reveals the tenuous nature of social conventions that can be creatively subverted through subtle discursive insurrections engineered by a politicized rereading of local culture. In fact, Um Hassan’s delusions sustain a tender relationship between the two women that invalidates traditional expectations of antipathy. Aisha’s ability to convert symbolic action into politicized consciousness is motivated by her so-called madness that conversely inscribes itself within heightened levels of lucidity.

Looking for Love?

Within this context, how does the quest for lucidity parallel the quest for love in an inhospitable world where the political madness of war and occupation simultaneously undermines and enhances the will to survive? Aisha’s search for love mirrors the quest for immortality and permanence in a situation of violent disruption. Her conception of love bases itself on a timeless ideal fabricated by her convent education and by her rejection of certain social mores that mistakenly position duty and obedience as
signifiers of love. These conventions that conflate love and power in the name of societal/parental authority become instruments of control and subjugation instead of permitting the expansiveness of the soul as it seeks transcendence with the cherished other. Aisha’s search demonstrates the disjunction between the idea of love as abstraction or spiritual concept as represented by the Virgin Mary and the physicality of female sexual possession within socially-constructed institutions such as marriage that, in her estimation, are based on a certain “loveless-ness.” The question that requires resolution is whether the self-conceived ideal can ever mediate and transform the limitations of the physically-imposed misconception of love into a positively synthesized, multidimensional expression of the spirit given the exigencies of war and its upheaval of human existence.

In the convent, ideals of love are concretized through the enduring image of the Virgin, as the very symbol of maternity and womanhood. The cult of the Virgin bases itself on the principle of universal feminine love achieved through the ascetic mastery of the body, as a sign of self-possession, to resist the objectification that women suffer within the economy of male desire and the limitations of earthly love and its disappointments. The idea of Immaculate Conception posits the autonomy of the female body that can control its own rights of re(production) without being manipulated as a sexual object. The Virgin personifies the very model of boundlessness for Aisha through her resistance to signification as represented by the absoluteness of her love for George, a family friend and freedom fighter who nevertheless fails to respond to her feelings. The novel describes the absolute nature of this emotion: “And Aisha sees him. The young man... She looks at him. Forgets herself. Stops feeling everything around her. The sounds of the camp retreat from her ears, and its sights recede from her vision, so that she sees nothing but him. She hears him only, and feels him alone” (29). Blinded by a vision that resembles the apparition of the holy spirit, Aisha experiences a moment of divine transcendence that animates her senses deadened by the monotony of daily life. George’s appearance represents an immediate epiphany or point of transformation where he merges with the divine godhead to become an object of divine and immediate adoration. George occupies a mythical omnipresence in Aisha’s imagination where “nothing remains except him” (29). The conflation of human and divine godhead through religiously-inspired re-creations converts George into a Christ figure whose martyrdom for his people resembles the martyrdom of the freedom fighters or the Feda’ee for the creation of the Palestinian
nation. Religious and political ideals inscribe themselves on the female body as the site of a holy war engendered by the motivation of martyred love as a prerequisite for the corresponding emergence of love for the martyr. Both ideals reflect the desire for immortal love through the abnegation of the body represented either by death or spiritual mortification to reach a level of divine ecstasy that transcends the limitations of the physical.

The Martyrdom of Life
The concept of the martyr takes on a special resonance in the Palestinian context where martyrdom is perceived as the fight of "an individual who has sacrificed his life in the struggle against occupation and injustice and for freedom and humanity. . . . Its origins, although traditionally religious, have come to be adopted by the entire community and do not necessarily connote religiosity" ("Concept"). Martyrdom, while reflecting the confluence of Christian and Muslim religious and political ideology, also symbolizes the fight against social and politico-religious inequities and oppression. The battle for a homeland and political self-determination complicates the fight for women’s rights and feminist self-determination whereby both struggles embrace the problematics of resistance and survival under siege. Access to immortal life in paradise by dying in the line of duty complements the will to survive in a war-torn society by experiencing "virginal" love as the highest expression of humanity in the face of genocide and human degradation. The novel draws a parallel between Aisha’s love for George and the love of the mater dolorosa for her son: “She did not know how to describe the taste of that love. Something like Christ. Like the young Virgin holding the child to her bosom, where the deepest feelings of the heart are, inside” (44). The "interiority" of her feelings cannot be verbalized because of the limitations of dictionary-defined expressions of love. The absence of an adequate vocabulary to celebrate the language of limitless love is represented by a state of longing as a sign of linguist aphasia where the body is suspended between the dual dynamics of silence and paralysis: “All she had left was the longing alone, manifesting itself in long, mute waiting” (49).

Longing and silence consequently become nonverbal forms of communication, a manifestation of Aisha’s existential nausea, whose grafting onto the female body makes it “a skeleton with hollow eye sockets” (49). If the eyes are windows to the soul, “hollow eye sockets” symbolize the abjection of the soul’s anguish, the very personification of the mater
*dolorosa's* suffering at the instance of her son’s crucifixion, an anguish that transcends language and the possibility of expressing pain. Instead, the trauma of crucifixion is symbolically reconfigured on the female body through the physicality of pain: “As she is walking, the pain moves from her heels to her spine, and she is unable to lift her body, as though her joints are being pulverized by stone weights” (47). The inability to communicate moral pain leaves its weight on the physical body as a heavy cross to bear in the same way that women are expected to bear the burden of the male follies of war in their “supporting” role that transforms them into the socio-cultural martyrs of war. The novel suggests the idea of female martyrdom with reference to Aisha in the following lines: “She had become endowed with a strange, discomfitting beauty, the beauty of pain and suffering which becomes particularly concentrated in the pupils of the eye, causing them to stand out like shining black stones at the bottom of a translucent marble pool. He was surprised by the change that had overcome her” (75).

Aisha’s martyrdom assumes different symbolic forms in the novel whereby the body’s abjection highlights both the horror of war as well as the search for creative expression that transcends the limits of social regulations. The quest for transcendental love engages the body in a process of self-mortification as it aspires to a higher ideal in which the mortality of the physical self is counterbalanced by the permanence of spiritual enlightenment. The idea of permanence is particularly important in instances of war wherein conditions of instability and destruction lead to the interruption of life through the re-creation of hell on earth. The novel compares the camp to hell where “Aisha was buried beneath the weight of her fear of the camp, which had become a hell inhabited by monsters” (26). Self-immolation as a form of exorcism purges the body of its insecurities by destroying the demons that threaten its preservation. Consequently, the body’s abnegation ironically constitutes an act of self-preservation whereby the metaphoric shedding of skin where “she became thinner by the day” leads to a certain metamorphosis or elevation of spirit as a means of regaining control of one’s circumstances (66). The novel describes this phase of repossession in Aisha’s life by stating that she had “won the right of belonging after a long rejection” (114). The reclaiming of self becomes a stepping stone to an altered consciousness of the self that reaches its fruition after the martyrdom of her own husband, Hassan. This consciousness, in the form of abnegation and penance as the very symbol of the female condition, marks a temporary gestation period, the first stage in the cycle of total survival amid
extenuating conditions. Its elaboration is located within the very problematics of survival where "she felt as though she had been teetering over the brink of an abyss without realizing it, and was just beginning to wake up to it" (258). The heroic will to survive demonstrated by the women contrasts with the self-abnegation of the male characters whose martyrdom bases itself on their ultimate (and heroic) death on the battlefront. In other words, while Aisha's survival locates itself within the politics of the home front represented by the search for more dynamic roles for women within restrictive patriarchal codes of conduct, the male quest for immortality reflects the will to survive (in immortality) on the battle front.

It is ironically Hassan's death that marks a turning point in Aisha's consciousness, as she reflects on her status as the wife of a new martyr. Her initial indifference and subsequent affection for her husband are transformed into feelings of love for him as represented by her revised perception of her body as a carrier of life and her ultimate acceptance of an unwanted pregnancy. Her life as a series of social abortions symbolized by feelings of alienation and heightened dispossession reconfigures itself through the presence of a fetus as a sign of renewed life and a continuation of the cycle of permanence within the cycle of war and destruction. As the novel suggests, "She owned nothing any more, except for what was within her" (259). Aisha's pregnancy becomes a politicized statement of the individual's survival rights as reparation for death to signify the necessary right of passage that situates life as a journey of discovery and self-preservation (260). The birth of a daughter further guarantees the permanence of life that revolves around the female principle of creation. Pregnancy under siege becomes a politicized act of creation and survival where "the siege had destroyed her confidence in everyone around her except for herself" (261). Motivated by a sense of responsibility for the future, Aisha finally accepts her role as mother when she comes to the realization that the birth of her daughter could possibly represent renewed hope for the eventual birthing of a Palestinian nation. This realization brings a certain closure to her individual struggle for an enhanced future for Palestinian women, in particular. The novel ends when Aisha takes the initiative to assume a leadership role in the creation of a viable Palestinian future where women can take the lead in asserting their demands for self-determination with men. As the novel concludes, "Her hand touched her belly in a movement of spontaneous recognition. Staring at her mother with an unaccustomed boldness, she said:
‘That is my responsibility. . . . I don’t want anyone else to take it instead of me’” (264).

Survival and After

The Eye of the Mirror offers a panoramic view of how Aisha’s personal struggle against patriarchy mirrors the larger struggle for political liberation that situates the female body as an active site of contestation and affirmation. Her individual story is inscribed within the historical fight for self-determination as demonstrated by the resistance of the refugee camp in the 1970s followed by the liberation movements of the Intifada. In this respect, Aisha’s story reveals both the power and the will to survive as a metaphor for the continuing endurance of the Palestinian people. This tenacity of life is best reflected in the comments of the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said who affirms, “Our society still functions. We are a people because we have a functioning society which goes on—and has gone on for the past 54 years—despite every sort of abuse, every cruel turn of history, every misfortune we have suffered, every tragedy we have gone through as a people. . . . As Palestinians, I think we can say that we left a vision and a society that has survived every attempt to kill it. And that is something.” Consequently, Liana Badr’s narrative vision preserves a crucial period in Palestinian history from extinction through its immortalization in narrative memory.

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Notes

1. Also consult Fadia Faqir’s introduction to Badr’s novel for important contextual details.
2. All references will be made to the edition translated by Samir Kawar.
3. See Ganguly.

Works Cited


