

“DARKNESS, DIRT, DEVIANCE”—AND DADDY: PATRILINEAL RELATIONSHIPS  
AND THE NEGOTIATION OF WOMANHOOD IN THE LITERATURE OF MIDDLE  
EASTERN AND ARAB-AMERICAN WOMEN

By

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This thesis explores both works of fiction and non-fiction through which several Middle Eastern and Arab-American women writers have rebelled against traditional religious and ethical standards of their cultures in order to assert their individuality and independence. The writers represented—Darina Al-Joundi, Fadia Faqir, Lucette Lagnado, Elif Shafak, Teresa Nicholas, and numerous short story writers—adeptly display how the worlds of Middle Eastern and Arab-American women often extend beyond the expected roles of wives and mothers, often at the encouragement of their non-traditional Middle Eastern fathers. In several of these works, women flout gender and societal expectations despite enormous pressure to hold to traditional values; sometimes, women rebel against the wishes of their fathers (and brothers) or, in some cases, they rebel because of a lack of male influence in their lives.



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by

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This thesis is dedicated to my father, Samuel Zahran,  
and to all Zahran women, past, present, and future.

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“Darkness, Dirt, Deviance”—and Daddy: Patrilineal Relationships and the Negotiation of Womanhood in the Literature of Middle Eastern and Arab-American Women

## PREFACE

In this thesis I argue that in Middle Eastern and Arab-American literature, the patrilineal relationship is a significant and overlooked yet intricate thread connecting a woman to her culture and her sense of self. The father’s influence often leads to a daughter’s rejection of traditional gender roles in favor of embracing life beyond matrimony and motherhood; however, in a household without a father, the brother serves as an antithetical figure as he strives to dominate his sister, disallowing her freedom altogether. The fatherless woman might in fact be better off brotherless as well, for the absence of any patriarchy usually results in a matriarchal culture in which women are capable and content pseudo-patriarchs, and men are superfluous.

Although not all fathers condone their daughters’ decisions to remain unmarried and/or childless, it is the woman’s father rather than the mother or brother who seems more willing to relinquish control of the daughter’s life decisions, essentially freeing her from the outcomes of marriage and/or motherhood and granting her the autonomy to make her own decisions about her life, as constrained as these decisions might be within a patriarchal society. The unmarried Arab or Arab-American woman (and to some extent, the married but childless woman) experiences a freedom unknown to most of her female counterparts, including her own mother; she can be educated, opinionated, sophisticated, liberal-minded, and sometimes, if she is fortunate to live in a progressive society, sexually liberated. The woman’s father is often the overlooked or ignored cause

of this liberation, and the woman's brother—and largely, any man other than her father—is generally the cause of her oppression.

However progressive, magnanimous, and kind some Arab and Arab-American fathers might appear to be, another male family member—the brother—often appears in various works of literature as a decidedly close-minded and oppositional force. If the father is the mindful watcher of the Arab woman's freedom, the brother is her jailer, subverting the patriarchal influence into that of a sinister pseudo-husband, using violence—sometimes including sexual violence—to assert his domination of his sister, thereby signaling his refusal to allow her the freedom her father might otherwise have granted. In the absence of a kindly father, the Arab brother twists his authority into a repression of his sister's body if not her soul.

While father and brother traditionally serve as symbols of patriarchal authority for most women, Elif Shafak, author of *The Bastard of Istanbul* and *Black Milk: On Writing, Motherhood, and the Harem Within*, is defined by her father's absence. *Black Milk* explores Shafak's vacillation between the desire to become a mother and the urge to be independent from the demands of motherhood as she initially rejects motherhood. In this work, she explores both the lives of childless writers and the lives of female writers who were mothers. Shafak acknowledges the devastation of fatherly abandonment in Sylvia Plath's poem "For a Fatherless Son," in which Plath refers to Ted Hughes' desertion of their children as an "absence that grew beside them like a tree" (79). While fatherless homes are common in twenty-first century America, paternal abnegation is both devastating and defining in many parts of the world, including the Arab world,

where the father is traditionally both provider and protector, and the dearth of a father is an indignity inherited by daughters more than sons.

This thesis will primarily focus on the father-daughter, brother-sister, and absent father dynamic in Middle Eastern and Arab-American literature; secondarily, it will also focus on such issues as sexuality, rebellion, childlessness, marriage, mental illness, and rape. One of the overarching themes in all five chapters will be the incorporation of religion into Middle Eastern and Arab-American culture, whether it is Islam, Christianity, or secularism. Rather than devoting an entire chapter to religion in the patrilineal relationships, I will explore religion as an everyday force in confluence with—and at times in opposition to—other forces in a young woman's life. However, despite the myriad obstacles and challenges presented to the Middle Eastern and Arab-American woman living in a male-dominated culture, her unique resilience and strength ultimately vanquish her most formidable foes, including the disparate forces within herself.

In short, delving into the complex and often misunderstood patrilineal relationships makes it possible to explore not only family dynamics but also feminist dynamics within male-dominated cultures; consequently, the Middle Eastern or Arab-American woman, perhaps more than any other, makes choices not in spite of her father and brothers but in reaction to them—or in reaction to their absence—by asserting her autonomy through non-traditional choices. The father or father-figure not only serves as a model for a woman's future relationships with men but also with her relationship with herself, serving as a mirror to reflect the daughter's womanhood, including her sexuality, self-esteem, and self-worth, both within Arab culture and in the context of sometimes opposing Western culture.

Chapter One, “Liberated Girls,” considers essays and short stories from Nawar Al-Hassan Golley and *Opening the Gates: An Anthology of Arab Feminist Writing*, exploring the history of Arab feminism through the context of Arab literature. This chapter will help establish the idea that the topic of this thesis—the father-daughter and brother-sister relationship in Middle Eastern and Arab-American literature—has been woefully underexplored, as Suad Joseph writes:

Most of the research on family in the Arab world, stressing the cultural ideals of patriarchy, patrilineality, patrilocality, and patrilineal endogamy, has focused on relationships among males, however. Scholars have paid less attention to brother/sister or other key male/female relationships. (52)

Chapter Two, “A Bouquet of Flowers and a Box of Tampax”: Liberated Fathers and Childless Daughters, presents the idea that progressive fathers engender a sense of self-preservation and independence in their daughters that is irreconcilable with the traditional expectations of marriage and motherhood. Though childless women are often pitied, their childlessness affords them extraordinary freedom and opportunity and allows them to behave in ways in which mothers cannot.

Chapter Three, “The Catastrophe of Womanhood”: Motherhood, Matriarchy, and Mental Illness, substantiates the argument that, in literature, the childless woman is commonly portrayed as mentally ill, as if her failure to bring forth children is inextricably linked with mental illness. If childlessness does not drive women to the brink of insanity, a subsequent negative maternal experience—a miscarriage, an abortion, or postpartum depression—will lead to feelings of worthlessness. Mental illness, miscarriage, and

postpartum depression are sometimes considered signs of psychological weakness rather than physical problems, allowing blame to be placed solely on women rather than biology or circumstance. This chapter explores the notion that the traditional trappings of womanhood are indeed catastrophic in nature and how the expectations of marriage and motherhood often propel women toward mental illness whether or not they actually become wives and mothers. Shafak's own fatherless childhood made her doubt that she herself would ever marry and have a child, and she explores her ambivalence about motherhood in her novel, *The Bastard of Istanbul*, and in her memoir, *Black Milk*, and further discusses the effects of marriage and motherhood in *Black Milk*. Both *The Bastard of Istanbul* and *Pillars of Salt* feature domineering, abusive brothers who exert physical control over their sisters with disastrous results.

Chapter Four, “Dirt, Desire, Deviance”— and Daddy—Sexuality, Rebellion, and Westernization in Patriarchal Culture,” examines the stories of women who are both highly sexualized and highly Westernized. With her provocative dress and her promiscuous behavior, the Arab woman claims her sexuality and her rebellion through Western modes of expression rather than Arab ones. In *Buryin’ Daddy*, the Arab-American author Teresa Nicholas rebels against her conservative Catholic father by having black friends and fighting for liberal causes in 1960s Alabama. Though the forms of rebellion may differ within cultures, the idea of father—and patriarchy—as oppositional to Westernized womanhood is consistent. Without the authority of the father (or brother, or “the man” in general), there is nothing against which a woman can rebel, as men traditionally define women’s roles by confining them to nonthreatening modes of expression.

Chapter Five, My Brother the Rapist: Perversions of Patriarchy, analyzes the brother as a staunchly antagonistic force in the Arab woman's life. In some literature, he is even that most vile aggressor, the rapist. This chapter explores the idea that the role of the brother is an oppositional one in much of Arab literature; he constantly asserts and subverts his power through violence and control of his sisters rather than protecting them from harm in the father's absence. Arab fathers may prize the characteristics of autonomy and self-direction in their daughters, but these same characteristics are deemed threatening when viewed by their sons. The Arab brother is not a friend to his sister; he tries to dominate her as much as possible, becoming a "lesser father" of sorts who rules with an iron fist rather than a helping hand.

While my interest in Middle Eastern and Arab-American literature initially stemmed from my own Arab-American heritage (I am one-quarter Lebanese on my father's side), the genesis of this thesis began in 2012 when I took Middle Eastern Literature, and my interest in this particular theme was sparked when I read Darina Al-Joundi's *The Day Nina Simone Stopped Singing*. Although Lebanon's civil wars of the 1980s are long past, the current political and social atmosphere of the Middle East—Syria in particular—has given rise to a new generation of girls and women who are at once marginalized and indispensable to their families and their culture as their male protectors have disappeared in droves due to war, and entire groups of displaced people are forced to reimagine their lives elsewhere—often in temporary camps run largely by resourceful and resilient women, many of whom are in their teens and early twenties. Suddenly, a world without fathers and brothers is a reality, and the women—battered but not broken—will lead the charge for a next generation. Their strength is

inspiring and astounding, and their survival—emotional as well as physical—is without question; it is inextricably linked to the women presented in my thesis, who serve as a collective voice for the millions of women in the Middle Eastern and Arab-American diaspora.

## Chapter One: “Liberated Girls”

Within the context of the Arab world, girls and women are often portrayed as a necessary burden borne by their families and their societies. Yet for individuals on whose very existence future generations hinge, girls and women are alternately prized, sheltered, ignored, marginalized, abused, and lauded. How can such a dichotomy exist? How can girls—at least theoretically—be cherished when they are young, traded as chattel when they are adolescents, and then subsequently dismissed when they are women if they fail to measure up to familial and societal expectations? Inside the historically limited confines of the Arab world, girls and women often have few choices, and the mixed messages they receive—from their mothers, their fathers, their religion, and the outside world—all contribute to feelings of confusion, ambivalence, and longing for rebellion, although liberation from social conventions is not always possible, and it is often not advisable because it will likely result in exile, whether self-imposed or forced. By examining the essays of several different Arab woman writers—Etel Adnan, Fadwa Tuqan, Suad Joseph, and Nawar Al-Hassan Golley—one may gain a deeper understanding of the complex oppositional forces faced by Arab women and the multifaceted rejoinders to these foes as Middle Eastern and Arab women forge a path of self-determination in today’s ever-changing global society.

Amid the numerous paradoxes of womanhood, it is very difficult, if not impossible, for the intelligent, free-thinking Arab woman to establish and maintain a sense of self separate from her parents, her siblings, her extended family, and if she marries, her husband and children. Often, the Arab woman is intrinsically tied to her family in a way that even a married, non-working, “soccer mom” of the Western world

may not be; after all, the stereotypical “soccer mom” is usually educated (graduating from high school, if not college, and sometimes with an advanced degree), not a virgin when she marries (which is usually in her mid- to late twenties or even thirties), has probably at some point worked to earn her own money, and—to varying degrees depending on her family structure, religious background, and community—made or been involved in making independent decisions about her friends, hobbies, clothing, romantic life, money, and education long before she reached adulthood. Although there are Western families who are intrusive and enmeshed with their adult children, many if not most parents accept that at a certain age a young woman must make her own decisions, no matter how ill-advised the parents might find them and how critical society might sometimes be of those choices which seem tantamount to what is still largely seen as women’s inevitable, primary roles of wife and mother. Though there are many women who don’t reach these milestones—approximately 20% of American women never have children (Notkin), and the number is actually higher in certain countries, such as Germany (25%) and Japan (30%)—women around the world in both Western and non-Western countries may be subjected to scrutiny, sympathy, or skepticism if they fail to become first wives and then mothers (Siegel).

In Etel Adnan’s essay “Growing Up to be a Woman Writer in Lebanon,” the author describes how she found a sense of personal freedom despite the strict French Catholicism of her school, her father’s emotional absence, and her mother’s tacit rejection of her unconventional lifestyle. Born in French-ruled Beirut in 1925, Adnan—a child of a Greek Catholic mother and a Syrian Muslim father—is a child of curiosity and contradiction. She is not baptized until she is six years old (and only then at the

insistence of the nuns), she is an only child, and she is granted an unusual amount of freedom despite her rigid religious schooling. Adnan's father, already past middle age by the time his only child is born, is a benevolent but impotent force in his daughter's life; her mother, on the other hand, shows remorse for her religiously mixed marriage yet is harshly critical of her daughter's equally unconventional choice to eschew marriage in favor of moving to Paris to study.

Adnan's mother instills her daughter with a sense of fear of men, as Adnan "was made aware early in my life that little girls were in 'danger.' My mother never let me go alone anywhere, and allowed me to go playing with friends of only two families" (8). She recounts how the "admonitions grew more serious when I was an adolescent. And when at college age I expressed the desire to go to Paris to study, my mother just said: 'There the men will devour you'" (8). Despite her mother's frightening admonitions, Adnan is able to view her mother with some degree of sympathy, as she is forced to "wonder if my mother didn't suffer from the fact that I was her only child and that she didn't have a son" (8).

If Adnan's father is displeased that he has a daughter and not a son, he never lets on; instead, the young girl's father is quite permissive, although largely silent, which is unusual for an Arab father. However, given his age and his outsider status in (at that time) largely Maronite Catholic Beirut, his "defeated" attitude is understandable if not inevitable (10). Adnan's father undergoes a remarkable transformation when he takes his daughter to his childhood home, Damascus, where Adnan describes him as "relaxed, mysterious, romantic" (10), and she in return is "happy" in her father's native city, where she is free from the judgmental, Catholic gaze of her mother and the French

nuns. In Adnan's world, oppression has a female face, not a male one, and her father is a "tragic figure" rather than a domineering one (11).

Adnan, like Darina al-Joundi (whom we will encounter in Chapter 2), finds solace and escape in entertainment; specifically, the cinema transports her from Francophilic Beirut to the dangerous, exciting West. Consequently, her "image of men, of love, of interaction with the outside world, the world at large, was formed uniquely by the cinema of the thirties and early forties. And that cinema was not local, it was the cinema out of Hollywood and France" (13). Adnan was "in love with Marlene Dietrich, Garbo, and Gary Cooper," a combination of distinctively Western personas that created a "parallel life outside of the gaze of my mother" (13) in the famously public, intrusive Arab world, where "private thoughts" are a form of "rebellion" and "emancipation" (13). Although Adnan's father does not accompany her to these films or share them with her, he must have tacitly accepted them as he did other aspects of his rebellious, headstrong daughter—at least, there is no indication that he disapproved of her Western ways, for it is Adnan's mother who feels a "sense of exile" when it is clear that her daughter is bent on becoming educated, actually "putting out the lights when I was reading or obliging me to go to bed early so I would not sink into some book or magazine that she viewed as enemies and intruders" (14). While her father "respected learning" (14), Adnan's mother is "shattered" when her daughter finally makes her exodus to the City of Light (20).

The mother's attempts to stifle the daughter's education are startling in their subterfuge; the message seems to be that if the mother didn't have the opportunity to further her education, then neither should her daughter. If matrimony and motherhood

are good enough for one woman, then any woman who shuns these institutions isn't merely making a choice about her life, but she's also making a judgment about the inadequacy of others' choices, exposing the false—or at least the limited—bill of goods sold to women of previous generations. While a father may not deeply care if his daughter—who is, essentially, inconsequential in the eyes of society if not in his eyes—marries and has children, since she is incapable of carrying on the family name, the mother cares too much about her daughter's choices, as the daughter's choices are finally either an acceptance or rejection of her own.

In Fadwa Tuqan's excerpt from her autobiography, "Difficult Journey—Mountainous Journey," the Palestinian poet recounts the difficulty of escaping from the matriarchal realm in which she grows up, as she writes,

Given the many prohibitions imposed on women, their movements in the home strongly resembled those of domesticated poultry who can come and go freely until they find fodder and then suffer constant temptation. But this particular domesticated poultry confined its energies to hatching the young. Women exhausted their lives with the big, copper cooking pots and gathering firewood for the stove in all seasons. As in other societies where the lives of women make no sense, the lives of Palestinian women, in every epoch and in every house, seemed devoid of significance. Such an environment had a stifling grip on me, which intensified as I approached sexual maturity. (28)

Rather than resigning herself to being “domesticated poultry,” Tuqan seeks inspiration from the female teachers who “distinguished themselves by their education and material possessions” and who, as a result, “demanded and received deference from the common people” (30). Although she “learned the meaning of economic independence” from these educated, self-made women, she also saw how they abused their power and made little attempt to change the conditions of their fellow women, spending the money they earned “to satisfy their desires for fashionable clothes” and “never altered the rules and practices that existed among common people” (31).

As with Adnan, Tuqan describes women—in this case, even the most educated, elite women of a repressed and retrograde society—as enemies of other women. By refusing to advocate for the education of young girls and showing concern only for maintaining their relative wealth in an impoverished society, the schoolteachers miss the opportunity to earn the trust of Tuqan and other young girls like her, being content only with the awe-struck admiration they receive as princesses among paupers. Not only are these misguided mistresses of their own fate far from being feminists, but they are also not even viewing their female counterparts as fellow comrades in the battles of the sexes. In their eyes, the poor women at the bottom are victims, to be sure, but little else besides charity needs to be shown them; they cannot hope to ascend the ladder of success that the schoolteachers were fortunate enough to climb. It’s better for them to stay at the bottom, where they are not a threat and can easily be placated with a few crusts of bread or a few kind words.

For girls and women living in oppressed conditions, there often can be no liberation without education. One cannot truly be free if she is not able to support herself

and her family and is given the opportunity to do so, which often comes through the education and training of girls so that they might reasonably earn a living, not just serve as temporary relief when men are absent or ineffectual. Yet within Tuqan's culture—and within numerous other cultures both inside and outside the Arab world—"male sponsorship and female subordination [are] the rule" (31). Tuqan notes the case of one uneducated woman who "believed that the power of men to make all the decisions in society was nothing more than brotherly compassion. But when the men in her family were unemployed, this woman was forced to turn to society for sustenance" (31). Ultimately, Tuqan finds her liberation in artistic expression—singing, playing the violin, and writing poetry. The excerpts here from her autobiography "represent[s] an attempt to break with the male poetic tradition into which her famous brother Ibrahim Tuqan had initiated her" (26). Although she does not have a father who celebrates her gifts or a brother who restricts them, Tuqan's Palestinian culture serves as a patriarchy that represses all women because the majority of women consent—albeit unwillingly—to the systemic tyranny against them when they do not openly express themselves.

However, the war against women is not merely waged by unhappy housewives, cloistered nuns, and traditionalists afraid of upsetting the status quo. In Suad Joseph's essay "Brother/Sister Relationships: Connectivity, Love, and Power in the Reproduction of Patriarchy in Lebanon," the author discusses the relationships between brothers and sisters in the Arab world, suggesting that brothers serve a unique purpose in the Arab world, and as we will see in Chapter Five, that purpose is not only woefully underexplored but largely antagonistic. Joseph explains,

With the “Arab family” becoming increasingly the center of controversy in the literature and popular culture of the Middle East, new efforts have been made to more closely scrutinize familial issues on both Arab and national bases. Most of the research on family in the Arab world, stressing the cultural ideals of patriarchy, patrilineality, patrilocality, and patrilineal endogamy, has focused on relationships among males, however. Scholars have paid less attention to brother/sister or other key male/female relationships. (52)

Joseph goes on to present two views of the brother-sister relationship: romantic and patriarchal. While the patriarchal relationship is understandable (particularly in light of the father’s absence or failure to provide support), the romantic view offers the suggestion that the brother-sister relationship serves as a sort of training ground for marriage, in which the brother is a pseudo-husband and the sister is a kind of pseudo-wife; if such a relationship exists, then it is only natural that the woman could expect to be “trained” in what to do (obey her “husband”) as well as in what not to do (disobey, dishonor the family).

It is only natural, then, that if a girl is to be liberated from the regressive views of her mother, her religion, and her fellow women, she must also be freed from the patriarchal relationship which demeans and restricts her most: the relationship with her brother. Long before she is married, the brother prepares her for marriage, serving as a model of how a husband will treat her, seeing her as a woman and not a daughter, which is how the father will ultimately always see her. This “reproduction of patriarchy” (6) is inevitable but fraught with complications, and if a young girl cannot establish her

autonomy within her relationship with her brother (even as they both live under their father's roof), it seems unlikely that she will ever establish a sense of equality within her marriage. A woman can never be liberated if she is, finally, always a second-class citizen, coming in last behind all male relatives, including younger brothers. Although it is difficult to break with thousands of years of traditional family dynamics, it is necessary for a woman to reexamine and have the option of redefining her familial relationships if she is to break unhealthy habits in the hopes of forging healthier ones, not just for herself but for all such women. Chapter Five will further demonstrate that while loving, positive brother-sister relationships do exist within the Arab world, many of the brother-sister relationships represented in the literature reflect the disparities between brothers and sisters and the inherent underlying abuse of the power structure that goes with these disparities.

In the end, as Nawar Al-Hassan Golley reminds us in her essay “Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?”

Arab women’s needs for positive change in their lives are neither more nor less than the need of a woman for positive change anywhere else in the world. When one considers the vast differences in Arab women’s lives from the Atlantic to Iraq and throughout the different social, economic, educational, religious, sexual and other determining factors, the aura of exoticism that surrounds the term ‘Arab woman’ may dissolve, giving way to a more realistic and practical way not just of representing women but also of changing lives. (Golley 522)

While the “liberation” or even the need for liberation of Middle Eastern and Arab women may be questionable, the powers that be—familial, societal, and global—present changes to our notions of both the “Arab woman” and Arab patriarchy (Golley 522). The relationships girls and women have with all members of their family are complex, and an oversimplification of any of these relationships—matriarchal or patriarchal—is not advisable nor desirable.

In order to gain a better understanding of the complexities of the Arab woman, one must undertake a thorough study of the Arab family and Arab culture, beginning with the most complex, significant, and consequential relationship—that of the Arab woman and her father, which is a relationship inextricable from any both a young woman’s self-concept and all other relationships she may have. Two authors in particular—Darina Al-Joundi and Lucette Lagnado—embody the significance of the father-daughter relationship in their memoirs, which are just as much about their complex, Westernized fathers as they are about the women’s own coming-of-age journeys, which are strikingly similar in several ways, most notably the authors’ shared childlessness.

## Chapter Two: “A Bouquet of Flowers and a Box of Tampax”: Liberated Fathers and Childless Daughters

Darina Al-Joundi’s powerful and often jarring memoir *The Day Nina Simone Stopped Singing* (2011) is the story of one Lebanese woman’s close and sometimes disconcerting relationship with her father, a complex man who shuns Islam, listens to jazz, gets his eight-year-old daughter drunk on Bordeaux, and later brings her “a bouquet of flowers and a box of Tampax” when she has her first period (52). Declaring that his daughters are “liberated girls” (51) rather than Christians or Muslims, he introduces them to American and European influences and enrolls them in Catholic school in war-torn Beirut, exposing them to a multitude of influences and allowing them the autonomy to explore their femininity and sexuality in a culture which largely dictates that “only men are free” (101). Al-Joundi, ever the apt pupil, lives what her father preaches, fashioning a largely liberated life within the context of her culture, though she experiences domestic violence, public beatings, rape, and life in a mental institution as a result of her determination to be a “liberated girl.”

Similarly, Lucette Lagnado’s powerful memoirs *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit* (2008) and *The Arrogant Years* (2011), explore the traditional and close-knit relationship between the author and her Jewish Egyptian father as the family makes its way from old-world Cairo to 1960s Brooklyn after the rise of Nasser. Lagnado and her glamorous yet enigmatic father have a complex but distant relationship in many ways, though in the prologue to *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit*, she notes, “Eventually, I came to understand that I was the chosen one, entrusted with the impossible task of

taking our shattered family and our lost home and restoring them” (10), a task which she accomplishes by retelling her family’s exodus from Cairo to New York.

Despite the fact that both Al-Joundi and Lagnado hold their fathers in high regard, their relationships with their fathers differ greatly, though both fathers seem more European than Arab in many ways: Al-Joundi in his penchant for jazz, liquor, and liberation; Lagnado in his “hand-tailored suits made of white sharkskin” (2) and his obsession with *la bourse*, his term for the stock market. However, while Al-Joundi’s father abhors Islam and traditional gender roles, Lagnado’s father clings to Judaism and patriarchy. Both the men have daughters who never become mothers, although for different reasons. “Liberated girls,” it seems, may often grow up to be childless women in a culture which traditionally reveres motherhood and pities women who do not become mothers, leaving these women bereft and their fathers bewildered at their daughters’ failure to reproduce.

Given the somewhat modern idea that women are “free” to choose whether or not they will become mothers, it might seem somewhat antediluvian that both father and daughter who are so enlightened in myriad ways might share a sense of ignominy at the daughter’s childlessness. However, if the portrayal of the Arab family is worth scrutinizing, then particular attention must be paid to some of the most intimate and interconnected relationships known to humankind, that is, the relationships between fathers and daughters, which also includes the possibility—if not the probability—that the daughter will one day become a mother, making the father a grandfather and further fortifying the family relationship. Although a father does not always become a grandfather, a young woman’s relationship with her father may at least in part determine

whether she will become a mother. The two authors presented in this chapter have unconventional relationships with their fathers, to say the least, and these relationships play a part in the authors' emerging sexuality and eventual childlessness. In particular, the relationship between Darina Al-Joundi and her father is both interesting and, at times, disturbing, and it sets the stage for Al-Joundi's own effete adulthood.

Unlike many men in Arab culture, Al-Joundi's father never encourages his daughter to have children. Although he openly comments on Darina's choice in men and sometimes seems opposed to her marrying, he never makes any comment about whether or not she should have children or comments on her childlessness. In turn, Al-Joundi's two failed pregnancies—one an abortion, the other a miscarriage after she is beaten by her husband—serve as a commentary on her inability to have children if she is to remain truly unencumbered in a society where a woman's primary roles are wife and mother. In both Al-Joundi and Lagnado's memoirs, the overriding focus on their relationships with their fathers suggests that there is an undeniable link between a father's desire for his daughter's liberation and a daughter's refusal to adhere to cultural norms, especially having children, although Al-Joundi and Lagnado are not childless for the same reasons.

Many young girls receive their advice about how to be women from their mothers, but Al-Joundi almost unequivocally receives hers from her father, who teaches her seemingly everything a young woman needs to know, from menstruation to bras to sex. Although Al-Joundi's mother is present throughout her life, she remains a shadowy figure throughout most of her daughter's childhood, and Darina's sometimes disturbingly

close relationship with her father serves not only as the subject of her memoir but as the central relationship of her life.

Early in her childhood, Al-Joundi identifies more with the boys than she does with the girls, saying that she “hated dressing like a girl” and that she “wore [her] hair cut very short” (10). She says, “The villagers called me ‘little Hassan,’ they were convinced I was a boy” (10). Al-Joundi describes her childhood as a “constant feast” in which “alcohol flowed freely” (14). Although her parents were artistically inclined and her father was “fervently secular,” her father “made sure to live only in Christian quarters and to have us educated only in Catholic schools” (16). Al-Joundi is particularly infatuated with the Maronite Catholic women’s passion for Jesus Christ, describing how the women would “throw themselves so covetously on Christ’s statue” going as far as to “lick his navel and glory in his thighs” (16). Although she didn’t know yet that she was not Christian, Al-Joundi adopted all of the fervor of Catholicism, relishing in particular “when Sister Marie told us the story of Jesus and the prostitute” (17).

Al-Joundi’s father discusses every single aspect of womanhood with her, so when she has her first period at the age of 11, she is not unaware of what this momentous occasion means,

I cried. My mother left work in a panic and had alerted my father. Bombs were falling on the road. In the front seat I was crying. The sun was setting over the sea. Smiling, my father was waiting for me in front of the building with a bouquet of flowers and a box of Tampax. (52)

Most people would find it curious that the father—not the mother—was the parent waiting for his daughter with “a bouquet of flowers and a box of Tampax,” but Darina’s father’s reaction to this auspicious event communicates the contradictions of womanhood: on the one hand, womanhood (particularly motherhood) is celebrated, but on the other hand, it carries with it a set of expectations for behavior, especially once a girl has transitioned from flat-chested childhood to budding adolescence since a woman must be especially careful to guard both her virginity and her reputation in a way that a man need not do.

Despite her best attempts at self-sovereignty, Darina fails to exert control over her body time and time again over the course of her adolescence and young adulthood. The first time she has sexual intercourse with a man is when she is raped, an act which not only degrades and humiliates her but also leaves her pregnant. Interestingly, in her moment of desperation and victimization, Al-Joundi decides against calling her father, saying that he “would never have tolerated it” (99). This quote leaves the reader to wonder what it is, exactly, that he never would have tolerated—the phone call? The rape? His daughter’s tears? Why, at the moment she most needs him, does Al-Joundi not give her father the chance to play the hero? Her decision to keep the rape, her pregnancy, and subsequent abortion to herself suggests Al-Joundi’s ambivalence about her own actions; although she does not ask to be raped and impregnated, the resulting pregnancy would not be tolerated in her culture, presumably even by her avowedly liberal father, and certainly not by her mother. Darina’s decision to have a secret abortion confirms that while she is choosing to live a rebellious lifestyle, even her acts of defiance have a limit within her Lebanese culture.

The fact that Darina's father never finds out about her secret abortion is not surprising, and even when Darina eventually marries and gets pregnant by her abusive, philandering husband, Darina's father never intercedes in his daughter's violent relationship. Her father does, however, warn her against marrying her first husband, telling her, "My girl, if you want to have an experience with that man go ahead, but watch out, do not get married. I want to make you into a liberated woman, not a subservient one" (104).

Darina rebels against her father when she marries her first husband, who does his best to turn her into a subservient woman, using his brute force against her, even beating her when she is pregnant, which Al-Joundi describes on page 108: "I felt something explode inside my belly, ran to the bathroom, and laid down in the tub with blood pouring profusely from my vagina. I didn't move, said nothing, simply listened to my body at last emptying itself of all his brutality." Once again, Darina's pregnancy is ended, though this time at the hand of her husband. Though she endures several more abusive relationships before she finally ends up being temporarily committed to a mental institution after her father's death, Darina finally finds the freedom she seeks by moving to Paris. Although her father does not intentionally expose his daughter to violence and aggression, the manner in which he raises her and her sisters prepares them for a life of playing defense rather than offense.

Darina's liberated father tries to raise liberated daughters, failing to realize that at least in his culture—and some would say in nearly every culture—a woman cannot live her life the same way a man can live his, as unfair and misogynistic as that might seem. The violence that is committed against Darina highlights the gross inequalities women

experience even in fairly progressive societies and in the most liberal upbringings. The price of freedom for her seems to be that she must be outwardly chaste, childless, and cautious in a culture that has little tolerance for “liberated” girls who will not follow conventional morals; however, rather than ascribing to her culture’s soul-crushing and almost deadly standards, she escapes to the free-spirited City of Light, where both Bordeaux and the sultry voice of Nina Simone can be enjoyed without retaliation or repudiation.

In Lucette Lagnado’s memoir *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit*, the author’s father, Leon, is a highly westernized man who enjoys a life of luxury and success. Leon is a devout Jew, a stylish dresser, and a fiercely independent Francophile who wants nothing more than to live the way he wants in the lavish, exciting world of 1940s Cairo. When he meets and marries Lucette’s beautiful mother, Edith, he quickly whisks the young woman away to a life of domestic drudgery while he continues to spend nights prowling the city streets, drinking and carousing until dawn, then dutifully going to synagogue on the Sabbath, “because he took his religion as seriously as he took his games and his pastimes” (Lagnado 2). Despite Leon’s European flair, he is at heart a traditional and uncompromising man who is deeply disappointed when his first child, a girl named Suzette, is born. Though he later has two sons and another daughter, it is his relationship with his youngest daughter, Lucette (nicknamed Loulou), which proves to be the most contentious.

Although Lagnado reveres her father, her relationship with him—not unlike Al-Joundi’s relationship with her father—is sometimes a disappointing one, for the Lagnado women are never considered the equals of the Lagnado men, and their worth

is primarily functional: they are wives and mothers, taking care of others and setting their own needs and desires aside in order to live in a kind of habitual self-sacrifice while the men are allowed the freedom to go where they please and do what they want. Throughout her memoir, Lagnado communicates the deep sense of inferiority that is cultivated in women from a young age when even their birth is a disappointment to their fathers and a source of failure for their mothers. When Leon's first child is a girl instead of the highly coveted boy, his reaction is not one of joy in being a father but of unhappiness in having a girl:

“Une fille?” he said in disbelief when he returned and the midwife handed him the pretty dark-haired infant. “Ce n'est pas possible.” He was so disappointed that he left my mother and his newborn daughter and, hailing a taxi, went to the café where a year earlier he had fallen in love with Edith. Seated at his favorite table at the bar, he ordered an arak, and then another, and another. He stayed out all night, unable to hide his dismay.

(48)

Perhaps sensing her father's everlasting disapproval, Lagnado's elder sister, Suzette, rebelled by rejecting her Arabic name, thus punishing her father for his rejection of her:

From the time she was a young girl, my sister demanded that all traces of her Arabic name be expunged from the records. As she raged and raged at my father, it was as if she were seeking a way to punish him for that original sin, for the fact that he'd had to drown his sorrows over the news of her birth. (48)

Leon's obvious preference of his sons over his daughters is keenly felt throughout Lagnado's first memoir, *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit*, and its sequel, *The Arrogant Years*. Lagnado's mother, Edith, further complicates Lucette's feelings towards her father because she mulls over her decision to marry a much older man, a decision which resulted in her resignation from her beloved teaching job because Leon forbids his wife to work outside the home. Edith—an intelligent, educated, and highly sophisticated woman—spends the rest of her life pining for the youth and opportunities she wasted in exchange for marrying Leon and raising their children. Neither Suzette nor Lucette has any children of her own, and Lucette doesn't marry until she is in her forties. The link between their mother's domestic despondency and their subsequent childlessness seems undeniable at first, but Lucette's childlessness is far more complicated, though it is still a result of her relationship with her father.

When Lucette is a teenager living in Brooklyn, she becomes ill with stage-three Hodgkin's lymphoma. The family is informed of her illness, and decisions have to be made about her treatment, including the decision about whether or not to preserve Lucette's fertility. Although the choice seems simple to many parents today—after all, why wouldn't parents want to ensure that their teenage daughter had the option of having children at some future date?—Lucette's parents never discuss the issue with her, and she does not have the necessary surgery to preserve her fertility, as she recounts on page 293:

My family seemed too dazed by the avalanche of bad news to help me decide. My mother, having raised me to avoid the drudgery of kids and housework, couldn't suddenly turn around and sing a different tune....I

found the feminist rhetoric comforting, an antidote to my fears, a way to escape my sorrow about the course I was choosing, or that fate had chosen for me. I ultimately passed on the surgery, and started treatment. As I walked to my first radiation session, I was determined not to cry. I was my father's daughter: I would never let anyone see me break down.

The decision Lagnado makes—or rather, the consequence of her family's inability to make a decision—haunts her for much of her life. In *The Arrogant Years*, she describes her inability to have children as “a fact that was so secretly shattering to me I told none of my friends and couldn't even talk about it while alone with Mom...my future seemed filled with dark and terrifying possibilities” (240). Lagnado’s infertility creates an inferiority complex in her, particularly in regards to her sense of cultural worth, for as she explains on pages 261-262 of *The Arrogant Years*, “Childless women are unmarriageable in Middle Eastern culture, and that was the most taboo subject of all.” If Lucette is “unmarriageable,” it is at least partly because of her father’s failure to preserve his daughter’s fertility. As patriarch of the family, he has the responsibility to speak up on his sick daughter’s behalf and see to it that she has the surgery she needs; even if Lucette later chooses not to have children, at least she would be able to make the choice herself and not have to endure years of suffering because her family failed to discuss the issue when a decision had to be made. The tragedy, of course, is that Lucette’s fertility—and all of the years of her anger and self-recrimination—is left in the hands of the man who could never fully appreciate his daughter as an independent person to begin with, a man who sees marriage as uninterrupted freedom while expecting his wife to live a lifetime of “domestic drudgery” and thankless self-sacrifice.

When it comes to Arab culture, Suad Joseph notes that there is “connectivity and love in patriarchy” (55). In fact, Joseph claims,

Boundaries between persons are relatively fluid so that each needs the other to complete the sense of selfhood. One’s sense of self is intimately linked with the self of another such that the security, identity, integrity, dignity, and self-worth of one is tied to the actions of the other. (55)

If one’s “sense of self” is inherently reliant on relationships with others, it is only natural that a girl’s relationship with her father—which is part hero-worship, part hatred—seems to matter far more than her relationship with her mother. A girl’s father not only can serve as a template for her future romantic relationships with men but also can represent the world of men in its entirety; Daddy stands for father and brother, husband and lover, boss and spokesperson for all men. Whether a daughter rebels or conforms is intricately connected to her relationship with her father, that emissary from the world of men who, by conveying her worth to him, also conveys her worth in the world.

In *The Day Nina Simone Stopped Singing*, Darina Al-Joundi’s father overemphasizes his daughter’s freedom, falsely leading her to believe that she has no boundaries, and she nearly dies trying to push those boundaries beyond cultural restraints; in Lucette Lagnado’s memoirs, her father forever limits his daughter’s choices when he denies her a simple operation that changes her sense of womanhood and self. Ultimately, it seems that even the most cultured and progressive Arab woman must make careful choices under the loving but directive gaze of the patriarchal eye. Failure to adhere to traditional cultural mandates—marriage and motherhood in particular—

often comes at a high cost to the young woman who chooses to rebel, and she must walk a careful line if she wishes to avoid falling into despondency and depression, two frightening conditions which could result in her being ostracized and even institutionalized. The unmarried, childless woman in Arab culture is both pariah and anathema, the crazy aunt and interminable spinster who is feared and abhorred by all.

### Chapter Three: “The Catastrophe of Womanhood”:

#### Motherhood, Matriarchy, and Mental Illness

In much of world literature, a woman’s mental illness is strongly associated with her childlessness. Although Western literature is also filled with mentally ill women who are mothers, the ratio of childless mentally ill women to mentally ill women who are mothers is far higher. In fact, childlessness (or at least, domestic unhappiness) seems to be a precursor for mental illness in women; some of the most infamous literary protagonists, such as Blanche Du Bois of Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Emily Grierson of William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” are portrayed as childless spinsters whose maternal impulses are not so much thwarted by their mental illness as they are caused by the women’s failure to adhere to “normal” roles as wives and mothers. Their sexual desires are subverted as well; Du Bois’ rejection by her gay husband morphs into a desperate attempt to relive her youth through affairs with strangers, including her seventeen-year-old student. Miss Emily Grierson, rejected and humiliated by her would-be husband, Homer Barron, murders him and keeps his rotting corpse (and eventually his skeleton) in her home for some forty years, sleeping next to it in bed at night rather than admitting a fate worse than death—both his denunciation of her and her imminent spinsterhood.

Like much of Western literature, Arab literature also contains its fair share of mad women, all of whom are bound by the shackles of patriarchal expectation, whether or not they accept their confinement. However, defiance not only has its limits, but it also has its price—sometimes in the form of institutionalization (as in *Pillars of Salt* and The

*Day Nina Simone Stopped Singing*), but other times in seemingly self-inflicted or self-sustaining illnesses, such as hypochondria (*The Bastard of Istanbul*) or postpartum depression (*Black Milk*). Regardless of a woman's choices, the tyrannical nature of patriarchy will often result in the development of mental illness as a reaction to her oppression, a way of voicing her ambivalence and discontent when she cannot openly speak out against the constraints of her culture. The literature in this chapter suggests that while all Arab women are vulnerable to the crushing weight of mental illness, childless women and those who have experienced acts of violence—war, domestic abuse, and rape—are particularly prone to mental illness.

The protagonists of Jordanian writer Fadia Faqir's masterful novel *Pillars of Salt* are two women recently institutionalized for their sins: Um Saad, the older woman, has lost her mind after her husband took a younger wife; Maha, the younger woman, has fallen into despair after her husband was murdered by the English. Over the course of the novel, the women alternately tell their stories of how they came to be in the madhouse; their sad tales suggest that had their lives continued on their previous trajectories, they never would have succumbed to madness. The loss of their husbands, though through very different means, propelled them into lunacy and, inevitably, into their confinement.

In her article "From Confinement to Creativity: Women's Reconfiguration of the Prison and Mental Asylum in Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot* and Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*", Nadine Sinno suggests that "the protagonists recognize the deeper issues that unite them in their predicament: they are isolated and ostracized by the outside world, abandoned and rejected by members of their families, and subjected to invasive

medical treatments at the hospital" (68). Sinno further explains the role of storytelling as a coping mechanism for the women because it is "a means of commiserating with each other" which "becomes crucial in preserving their memories, especially when they are subjected to medical treatments with ambiguous side effects that take their toll on their speech, mood, and mental capabilities" (68-69). Although Um Saad and Maha have both been temporarily silenced by their male oppressors, they do not initially like each other; however, over the course of the novel, the common pain of their institutionalization fortifies their friendship.

Although Um Saad is extremely fertile, bearing ten children, Maha is unable to get pregnant when she and her husband Harb first marry. Maha resorts to extreme measures, including what can be assumed is cervical cauterization, in order to become pregnant. At first, Maha's childlessness is seen as a curse, of which she says, "My father was carrying a heavy load to which I could not add the weight of my barrenness" (Faqir 82). Um Saad is far from barren, but she disliked pregnancy and even the sexual act itself. She describes pregnancy as a sort of alien invasion in which she "hated [my] body, my sticking-out navel and the baby which was sucking my insides" (Faqir 122). Both her children and her husband alternately consume and diminish her, and for her husband, she "had always been and would always be a container into which he could get rid of his frustration" (Faqir 151). Although Maha deeply loves her husband even long after he dies and longs to be reunited with their young son, her brother—the only adult male relative—is able to commit her to an asylum simply as a way to exact his revenge on her, both in order to vanquish her property and also for standing up to him.

Ultimately, Um Saad and Maha both find that their motherhood cannot protect them from their placement in the asylum. Um Saad's ten children do not rush to her defense against their cruel father, who discards his wife when she is no longer sexually attractive and able to bear children, and Maha's infant son is unable to protect her from the cruelties of Maha's brother, Daffash, who is intent on marrying the widowed Maha to another man so that Daffash can have the land their father left her. Sinno argues, "Rather than addressing their personal problems with the female protagonists, Umm Sa'd's husband and Maha's brother force the two women into a mental asylum so that they can avoid their retaliatory hostility and disruptive presence in their lives" (69-70). Clearly, both Um Saad's husband and Maha's brother already see the women as a "disruptive presence," and they manage to sidestep their "retaliatory hostility" by placing them in the mental hospital, although the women continue to rage against the patriarchal machine even when they are incarcerated. Although Maha protests, "I will get married to nobody, I will not sign any deeds, and will never cook for the English" (Faqir 217), she underestimates her brother's ability to control her life until he commits her to the asylum, an act which seals Maha's fate as that worst woman of all—the crazy one, the one who is not to be trusted, not even with her own child.

While in the asylum, Maha witnesses the various methods that the doctors use to control the female patients, including cutting their hair, which she first encounters when Um Saad has her hair cut by the doctor, who "produced a silver tool with two wings which when pressed together made a metal mouth which ate the hair, leaving the skull bare. This is what they do to control us" (208). Um Saad's fate is no better—she is given shock therapy, after which Maha bemoans she is

as pale as a lemon. She had two bruises on her temples covered with a thin layer of foul-smelling paste. Her lips were dark blue and her eyes rolled under her closed eyelids. They had straightjacketed my sister, but the sleeves were loose, not tied behind her back. The convulsions were subsiding, regressing like waves. Her body was as cold as the morning water of the Long Well. My hands were useless. What shall I do to bring back the heat of her spirit? (220)

Although she could not be quieted by her husband, Um Saad is forever silenced by another man—the British doctor, and to a larger extent, the colonial system—when she refuses to do what some other women might have done in her place—kill herself. Since Um Saad and Maha will not commit suicide, unburdening their male captors in the process, the “heat of [their] spirit” will be slowly extinguished through medical methods, literally shocking them into submission and silence.

Towards the end of her memoir *The Day Nina Simone Stopped Singing*, Darina Al-Joundi describes her experience in a Beirut mental institution run by sadistic nuns, which confirms the importance of not overstepping one’s bounds when she is committed after exhibiting what is deemed wild behavior. Al-Joundi writes, “I knew that I could play the role of the madwoman and would run the risk of being one for good; actually, that was even easier for me than confronting this society that knew only how to make people live with a sense of shame” (136). In order to avoid permanent incapacitation and confinement, Al-Joundi realizes she “would have to make compromises, and at the same time I had to play their game” (136).

Through her compliance and her concession, Al-Joundi is able to earn her freedom, but before she is released to the care of her family, she is reminded by the institutional psychiatrist that her family “can alert the police concerning...her conduct, at any time” and she “will be recommitted” (138). Knowing the precariousness of her situation, and her mother’s repeating the psychiatrist’s words that she had to “promise not to dance anymore, not to drink or smoke anymore, not to talk the way you did before, or else...” (139), Al-Joundi flees Beirut for Paris for good, breaking the bonds of her oppression, freeing herself from the demands of marriage, motherhood, family, religion, and society. She shares much in common with Elif Shafak, the Turkish writer who also shunned tradition, living a nomadic and liberated lifestyle as a woman of the world.

Elif Shafak’s memoir *Black Milk: On Writing, Motherhood, and the Harem Within* delves into her own journey from ambivalence as a single, independent writer to wife and mother, a journey which is both real and fictional as she navigates both new motherhood and what she calls the “choir of discordant voices”—the harem of vastly different women who live within her mind—which lead her from one stage of her life to the next, from singlehood to matrimony and motherhood, including a crippling case of postpartum depression which temporarily stifles her creativity and smothers her soul (29). Although Shafak eventually emerges from her depression and goes on to have a second child, her soul-shattering experience does not leave her unscathed; rather, she has a newfound sense of the delicate balance all creative women—especially those who attempt to balance writing and family life—must maintain, and the constant precariousness with which mothers must live their lives.

At the beginning of her memoir, Shafak—still hesitant about both marriage and motherhood—seeks guidance from the words and lives of the women whose writing she so admires. Along the way, she tells stories of women with unwavering, absolute dedication to the creative muse, a dedication which has its own cost—childlessness. She also recounts the tales of women writers who did compromise, and she explores the costs they had to pay—their marriages, children, and careers all seemed to suffer under the weight of their creativity. Shafak suggests that some women, like Zelda Fitzgerald, actually went mad from too many acts of compromise—in the case of Fitzgerald, sacrificing both further children (she had three abortions after the birth of her only daughter with husband F. Scott Fitzgerald) and her writing career in order to placate the delicate ego of her husband (134-135).

Fitzgerald's descent was swift; ten years into her marriage to Scott in 1920, "in June 1930, after months that included a nervous breakdown, hallucinations and an attempted suicide, she was diagnosed with schizophrenia and taken to a hospital. She spent the rest of her eighteen years under psychiatric care" (135). However, Shafak also notes that Zelda "wrote constantly during this period," including her "semiautobiographical novel, *Save Me the Waltz*" (135). Shafak suggests that Zelda further compromised her creative efforts when, at Scott's behest, she "agreed to revise her manuscript" because her novel "largely overlapped" with what would be Fitzgerald's take on their marriage, the acclaimed novel *Tender is the Night* (135). Deprived of her home, her child, and the chance to tell her version of their doomed marriage, Zelda Fitzgerald died in 1948 in a fire in her Asheville, North Carolina mental institution (136).

Shafak also suggests that the seeming impossibility of creative and domestic balance may have led to the suicide of Sylvia Plath, whose love-hate relationship with her fellow poet-husband, Ted Hughes, exacerbated Plath's mental illness. As Shafak describes the poet, “[t]hroughout her life, Sylvia Plath underwent various anxieties with regard to womanhood and motherhood,” including “a fear that she would never have babies” and, after she had her two children, “she worried about the outside world and its cruelties” (77). Shafak muses, “[p]erhaps fatherhood was not as great a rupture in a man’s life as motherhood was in a woman’s” (78), for long after Plath confined herself to hearth and home, writing when her children were asleep, Hughes “continued frequenting literary events they used to attend together” (78), oblivious or uncaring that Plath was sequestered in their home, taking care of their children while his life and work continued unabated.

Although most of the women writers about whom Shafak writes are not Arab, her examination of their lives in relation to her own clarifies the position of all women, particularly creative women, and the concessions they must make regardless of their occupations, hobbies, or family status. Shafak suggests that the nature of woman is conciliatory, but the cost of that compromise is often more than a woman is willing or able to bear, often leading to such mental health conditions as depression, schizophrenia, or even a nervous breakdown from which she will never recover, effectively silencing all of her “discordant voices” forever (29).

Shafak’s masterpiece, the celebrated novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*, explores the many negotiations of womanhood through the intersecting lives of the Kazanci women, including the novel’s protagonist, Zeliha, a woman of “fiery intelligence” (3), great

beauty, and an unwavering desire to chart her own course in life, including having a daughter born out of wedlock—a daughter who at the end of the novel is revealed also to be her niece, the product of Zeliha being raped by her brother when she was nineteen years old. Zeliha kept the secret of her daughter's father for many years, preferring to have her daughter thought of as a "bastard" and herself as a promiscuous woman rather than acknowledge her brother's paternity and his rape of her, a self-possessed and proud woman in the face of physical and sexual assault by her own brother, even though she continues to suffer emotional distress, blaming herself for the rape long after it happened:

She remembered the sky on that ill-omened day for years and years to come, not because she had turned her eyes up toward the heavens to pray or to beg Allah for help, but because during the struggle there came a time when her head was hanging over the bed, and while unable to budge under his weight, unable to fight him back anymore, her gaze had inadvertently locked on to the sky, only to catch sight of a commercial balloon slowly floating by. (307)

Shafak writes, "Zeliha shivered at the thought of a colossal camera taking pictures of everything happening down here on earth at that moment in time" (307). Zeliha, like many rape victims, is embarrassed by what happened to her, blaming herself for her inability to overpower her brother and the possibility that someone—anyone—might have witnessed her subjugation and humiliation at the hands of a man. Her defiant behavior—wearing heavy makeup, high heels, and short, tight clothing—suggests a brazenness tantamount to one the central, undeniable horror of her life: she was raped

by her brother and conceived and bore a daughter by him, although she could never tell anyone the truth about the rape or her daughter's father/uncle. Zeliha does finally tell her daughter, Asya, about her parentage after Mustafa drops dead at the age of forty, but Mustafa himself is never confronted by his sister or his daughter—rather, it is the poisoned meal his sisters serve which kills him, not anyone's accusation of him, the man who exiled himself to America for nearly two decades after his shameful behavior.

Although Zeliha manages to maintain a semblance of sanity despite the overwhelming circumstances of her young life, Zeliha's family members—run by women after the death of their father and the self-imposed exile of their brother—are no strangers to abject mental illness, not unlike something out of a Tennessee Williams play or William Faulkner novel. The Kazancı women are a unique cast of characters, and although Zeliha is both brazen and brash, she is also the strength of the family, a person who does not crumble even in the face of brutality. One of her sisters, Feride, is clearly not as strong as Zeliha, for in the period of just a few years

she had been diagnosed with eight different illnesses, each of which sounded more alien than the one before. Whether it was the doctors who could not make up their minds or Feride herself industriously working on new infirmities, one could never tell. After a while it didn't really matter one way or another. Sanity was a promised land, the Shangri-la she had been deported from as a teenager, and to which she intended to return one day. On the way there she rested at sundry stopovers that came with erratic names and dreary treatments. (24-25)

Feride's hypochondria would not have been so well-tolerated had there been a familial patriarchy in place to tolerate (if not condone) it; the Kazanci women—mother and daughters alike—humor Feride's odd behavior rather than try to stop it. Their acceptance of her oddity suggests that while mental illness is never desirable, it is men who find it intolerable, quarantining women in asylums and giving them shock therapy. Even the women who behave cruelly towards other women are doing so at the behest of men, not on their own accord. Mental illness, then, is not so much an affliction of womanhood as it is a reaction to men's control—think of Blanche Du Bois' total nervous breakdown after her rape by her brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski. For a woman who is already dancing on the edge of sanity, a single act of cruelty will send her spiraling into total lunacy. That Zeliha is able to avoid Blanche Du Bois' sad fate suggests both her enormous will to survive and her recognition that her daughter—a child of incestuous rape—deserves to live despite her traumatic origin. Had Zeliha's brother been skulking the halls of their family home rather than an ocean away in Arizona, Zeliha may very well have had a nervous breakdown and been locked away for good, and her daughter might have been placed in an orphanage or, at the very least, subjected to bullying, rejection, and mental anguish upon learning the horror of her conception.

In the introduction to *Black Milk*, Elif Shafak writes, "A depression can be a golden opportunity given to us by life to face head-on issues that matter greatly to our hearts, but which, out of haste or ignorance, have been swept under the carpet" (xi). Shafak's depression—overwhelming and exhausting as it was at the time she experienced it—allowed her a window into herself which she had not previously had. It provided her with the opportunity to reflect upon her the demands she had placed upon

herself and the expectations she had of women in general. She acknowledges, “We suppress many aspects of our personalities in order to conform to the perfect image we try to live up to” (xii). For many women writers, and for many women who are not writers, self-suppression is a necessary tool for survival in a patriarchal society. However, not only does suppression come at a high cost to one’s freedom, both mental and physical, but suppression finally leads to deep unhappiness and sometimes mental illness, institutionalization, or even death.

In a man’s world—which, essentially, it is, despite women’s protests and any concessions made by men in the women’s movement—any woman who dares to defy cultural expectations must be prepared to deal with the consequences of her behavior, as ludicrous and unfair as those consequences might seem. Nadine Sinno claims that Um Saad and Maha’s stories in *Pillars of Salt* “become manifestations of larger public crises stemming from both colonialism and patriarchy—two systems portrayed by Faqir as being deeply implicated in one another” (77). Sinno further maintains that Faqir “deconstructs the myth that Western colonialism—in its ostensible liberalism and gender equality—is antithetical to existing patriarchal systems and inherently superior where gender issues are concerned” (82). Although Faqir may “deconstruct” what Sinno calls the “myth” of Western colonialism, the literature in this chapter suggests that the myth is alive and well, particularly for non-Western women who have romanticized the West, seeing it as a big-screen, glossy, Technicolor version of how their lives could be if they, too, lived in America.

When Darina Al-Joudi leaves Beirut for the last time at the end of her memoir, she reminisces, “I was paying the bill for thirty years of imaginary freedom in this city of

hypocrites, lies, and greasepaint" (138-139). The sense of liberation that women feel is at best elusive and at worst imaginary, and the most romantic of these women—and, some would say, the most delusional—turn their faces away from the oppression of Arab culture to the sexy, rebellious, glittering West.

## Chapter Four: “Dirt, Desire, Deviance”—and Daddy—Sexuality, Rebellion, and Westernization in Patriarchal Culture

It is no coincidence that young, non-Western women often look to the heady glamour and sophistication of the West when they are seeking solace from a strict family, a stifling religion, or an oppressive culture. Given the strong ties between Europe and much of the Arab world in the first half of the twentieth century, it is natural that the young women who were born in the Middle East after World War II were enamored with anything Western, particularly anything French or American. The four authors represented in this chapter—Darina Al-Joundi, Lucette Lagnado, Teresa Nicholas, and Elif Shafak—were all born between 1954 and 1971, at the tail-end of a halcyon era for much of the world, including Lebanon, Egypt, the United States, and Turkey, where the days of prosperity and peace were ended by civil and government strife. In many Arab countries, there was a growing intolerance for all things Western and a crackdown on personal freedom; in the United States, personal freedoms were sometimes overruled by the demand for conformity, often propelling young women into rebellion, especially if they were from religiously conservative families. Whether they grew up in the Arab world or in the United States, the Arab and Arab-American authors featured in this chapter expressed their discontent with patriarchy through varied forms of rebellion, including sexual promiscuity, social activism, religious disobedience, and also, oddly enough, through conformity to stereotypical postmodern Western values, such as feminism and equality.

In *The Day Nina Simone Stopped Singing*, Darina Al-Joundi’s revolt against Islam is hardly surprising because her father has taught his daughter to eschew

traditional religion. In fact, Al-Joundi commits her first mutinous act against her father, a “fervently secular man” (16), when, while she attends a Maronite Catholic school, she becomes enthralled by the catechism of the church and “swallowed the Host by the handfuls” (17). Later, she is “thrilled when Sister Marie told us the story of Jesus and the prostitute,” and determines that “Beirut was a city of hookers and I imagined them all kissing Christ for having spared them from being stoned” (17). When the nuns find out that her father is Muslim and that she has been pretending to be Catholic, she confesses that she loves catechism “because of the story about the whore”(27).

Caught up in the religious eroticism usually only experienced by devout Catholics, Al-Joundi deviates both from her Muslim heritage and the secularism of her father’s house, but her defiance comes at a cost. By pretending to be Catholic, she is not only indulging in the seemingly exotic and strangely erotic world of sinners and saints—the world of women who, upon seeing a statue of Jesus, “lick his navel and glory in his thighs,” but she is also flagrantly defying her father, who finds such religious fanaticism repugnant (16). Religion is just one of many tools which Al-Joundi uses to challenge her father; with each attempt Al-Joundi makes to adhere to more traditional practices, the more she finds that her father’s open-mindedness does not extend to his daughter’s more conventional choices.

As a young teenager, Darina Al-Joundi yearns to venture into the world of sexual expression, though her father warns her, “Be careful, daughter, Arab men know nothing about women and if she should make the first move he’ll take to his heels” (53).

Despite his warnings, Darina and her father are both pleased when she begins to appear more womanly, as she describes on page 66: "When I felt my breasts were beginning to grow I was very proud and my father applauded heartily." However, when Darina feels that her newly developed womanhood requires a bra, her father responds vehemently: "You're crazy, a bra? Why not a leash? A bra, do you realize the bondage that suggests?" (67)

Ultimately, Darina's act of rebellion involves buying a bra, though she only wears it for a short time before she feels that it "strangles" her (68). However, if her father had not compared a bra to a leash and implied that a bra made a woman sexually undesirable, would she have tossed it aside in favor of "liberating" her breasts? It seems that in her quest to rebel against her culture's expectations for women, Darina also makes herself into her father's ideal woman, one who celebrates her femininity without reservations, allowing her body and her mind total freedom and perhaps even limitless indulgence for a time.

Despite Darina's precociousness, she remains a virgin until she is nearly sixteen years old, though she gets additional sex education not from her father but from her gay friend Maher, who

told me what Lebanese men said about women, how they bragged about popping their hymen like the cork on a bottle of champagne. They didn't say deflowering but breaking, taking the top off, and whenever a man 'opens' a girl she is his for life. It made me think of branding cattle as I'd seen it done in American films, which I found appalling. (92)

The idea of a man making a girl his own because he “took” her virginity is hardly original, but it is disturbing just the same, as it implies not only temporary possession but permanent ownership, as if a girl’s virginity is a prize to be won. Al-Joundi wants no part in this game, so she breaks her own hymen while her friend Maher watches. Interestingly, while her fingers are inside her vagina, pushing against “something resistant” (98), she hears her “father’s laughter” (97-98). This combination of images is unsettling; is the “something resistant” her father or herself? That a teenage girl would be thinking of her father at the time she breaks her own hymen is both strange and revealing; the act she is performing is both defiant and desperate, an attempt to control her own sexual fate in a culture where women can be “opened” and “broken” by men.

Even though Darina chooses to break her own hymen, she fails to exert control over her body time and time again over the course of her adolescence and young adulthood. The first time she has sexual intercourse with a man is when she is raped, an act which not only degrades and humiliates her but also leaves her pregnant,

Since abortion was still taboo in Lebanon, I went to see a gynecologist who drew up an official report of rape for me. Without telling my mother I went to the American Hospital on the eve of my sixteenth birthday to have the pregnancy terminated under general anesthesia. (99-100)

Most parents probably fear their young daughters’ getting pregnant, especially if they are not married, which in many cultures is still taboo and sometimes even leads to a woman being shunned or, worse yet, killed by her community. Towards the end of her

memoir, Darina Al-Joundi's description of her experience in a Beirut mental institution confirms the importance of not overstepping one's bounds:

The women I saw around me were the same women I'd seen in the Arab world: beasts of burden. I had understood our vulnerability as women: it's fine to be a star, a doctor, a celebrity, but at the slightest misstep a woman becomes a woman again, a beast of burden who is tied up as men see fit.

(136)

Al-Joundi is committed to the mental institution after her father's death. One might conclude that for a woman, the death of her father is more bittersweet than the loss of her mother could ever be; the father is the first man who really sees his daughter both as his own child and as her own woman. He is often the motivation for her rebellion and also the person whose approval is of absolute importance and whose disapproval is devastating.

At her father's funeral, Al-Joundi asks herself, "Now that you're no longer here, to whom am I going to tell my stories?" (126). Her father's death not only marks a profound change in her day-to-day life but also in her self-perception. Who is she without this man against whom all men must be measured? Against what forces will she now rebel? Although Al-Joundi is released from the mental institution, upon her father's death and her subsequent commitment, she realizes "no one appeared to liberate me," so upon her release from the institution, she flees to Paris, leaving her father's Beirut behind forever (137).

Another refugee from the Arab world, Lucette Lagnado flew from Cairo to Brooklyn when she was not yet a teenager. While Lagnado's first memoir, *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit*, details her relationship with her well-dressed, worldly father Leon, her second memoir, *The Arrogant Years*, traces the family's exodus to America after increasing hostilities towards Jews in Nasser-ruled Egypt. *The Arrogant Years* also recounts the early years of Lagnado's mother, Edith, an intelligent, beautiful, and independent woman who not only bolsters the spirits of her "cosseted and spoiled" (43) mother but also keeps the family from abject poverty by supporting them on her schoolteacher's salary after Edith's father abandons his wife and two children. Lagnado muses,

My mother had the most sheltered upbringing imaginable, yet in some ways it was also the most progressive because of the books she read. She learned about love affairs while reading Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*. Her exposure to marriage and its disappointments and betrayals came from *Madame Bovary*. (46)

Edith's marriage to Leon Lagnado, the wealthy, much-older, sophisticated businessman, might seem like a fairy tale, but Lagnado implies that Edith was far from just being beautiful: she is someone with stellar survival instincts, a young woman who, as a child, periodically starved because her "aristocratic" (43) mother was unable to get a job and instead became one of those "little birdlike women without any nest—eating the crust of humility all their life" whom Tennessee Williams describes in *The Glass Menagerie* (Scene II), living on the paltry charity begrudgingly bestowed by family members when a woman without a man is unable to support herself and her children.

When Lagnado's family immigrates to the United States, they find community among their fellow Jews in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. Young Lucette, on the cusp of womanhood, rebels by seeking both equality and conformity; while she plans to merge the men's and women's sections of her synagogue, she also longs to dress like Emma Peel from the television show *The Avengers*:

I knew what I had to do: I had to become the Avenger of the women's section. I wanted to demolish our wooden enclosure, to smash it into a thousand pieces, to strike it down with some deft karate chops the way I knew Emma Peel would if given the opportunity. (7)

Like many young women, Lagnado sees fashion not only as the ultimate form of self-expression but also as a means of transformation; in her "arrogant years" (a reference to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*), she wears colorful clothes as a way of standing out, but after she begins college at Vassar, her style begins to change, partly because of her post-cancer depression but also because she is unable to have children as a result of her cancer treatment (a difference which separates her from other young women), which leads her to believe she should no longer seek distinctiveness but should instead strive for conformity whenever possible. As Kyla Wazana Tompkins explains in her essay "History's Traces: Personal Narrative, Diaspora, and the Arab Jewish Experience," "Invisibility can be as enraging as it is strategically useful" (129). Tompkins' theory further suggests that Lagnado's coming of age is further complicated by the complexity of her Arab Jewishness, which has become even more problematic since Lagnado's youth, because

the project of formulating a progressive Arab Jewish identity has come to seem more necessary but more difficult than ever. On the one hand, the Israeli-Zionist project has rendered the idea of Arab Jewishness oxymoronic, in the North American context; on the other hand, to put forward this subject, the Arab Jew, both flies in the face and puts oneself in the path of heightened U.S. racism toward Arab Muslims. (35)

Although neither of Lagnado's memoirs acknowledges the complexity of "formulating a progressive Arab Jewish identity," the reader knows that Lagnado's complicated status—immigrant Arab Jew—makes her situation complex, particularly when she matriculates to Vassar in 1973.

When Lagnado begins wearing plain but expensive clothing, "the pursuit of beauty, one of my primary objectives for so many years, going back to my fascination with Emma Peel, was over. My arrogant years had officially ended" (254). "Fitting in" rather than standing out becomes "essential—to blend, to mimic, and to resemble the other women on campus" (255). Still, Lagnado is unable to completely relinquish control of her former self-image, and one day she "wiled away the afternoon trying on dresses—beautiful dresses, dresses that brought me back to a time when I liked the way I looked, when I felt so proud about the way I looked, dresses that reminded me of my arrogant years" (272).

Like Al-Joundi, Lagnado's attempts at self-suppression have only disastrous results; while she does not end up institutionalized like Al-Joundi, Lagnado's bout with

cancer at age sixteen, her subsequent health problems, and her parents' slow but heartbreaking deterioration in nursing facilities take a toll on both her mental and physical health. That her "arrogant years" end at age sixteen makes it understandable that she would seek conformity and peace rather than rebellion and chaos. However, both Lagnado's memoirs suggest that while conformity may cause less stress in one's life, it does not necessarily lead to happiness, and acts of nonconformity—leaving one's home for a new country, breaking down barriers in synagogue, and dressing for one's own pleasure rather than others' approval—are necessary for the establishment and maintenance of the self.

In her memoir *Buryin' Daddy: Putting My Lebanese, Catholic, Southern Baptist Childhood to Rest*, Teresa Nicholas establishes herself as a master of nonconformity; from childhood, she clashes with her penny-pinching, opinionated, old-fashioned Lebanese-American father, a man who is both staunchly Catholic and unapologetically racist, making him both nonconformist and conventional in the tiny town of Yazoo, Mississippi. Born in 1954 to a half-Lebanese father and a Southern Baptist mother, Nicholas' experience as an Arab-American poses a striking dichotomy; on one hand, she is a typical Southern girl, deeply entrenched in the customs and lifestyle of the mid-century Deep South, but on the other hand, she is always the somewhat freakish "other"—Catholic, Arab, and with a domineering and distant father whom she never truly understands during her childhood and whom she only begins to comprehend after his death.

Unlike Al-Joundi and Lagnado, who had loving but progressive fathers, Nicholas' father is a reflection of the time and place in which he is born: small-town, pre-World

War II Mississippi, a provincial place where Nicholas' father was himself an outsider, always separated by his ethnicity and religion. It is certainly understandable that he, without any sense of self-reflection, would seek to separate himself from other minorities in his town; Arabs, though different from other Caucasians, were not black, even though Nicholas laments, "my own grandmother had called me nigger" (63). Nicholas' father calls his daughter a "weirdo" and says that she comes from "dog people" (61) after she asks her grandfather what the birds and the bees are (59). There is no sense of patriarchal affinity, no sense of a heart of gold hiding beneath his gruff exterior; rather, Nicholas' father is a tyrant, a man who provides for his family but demands their obedience and bristles at any acts of defiance.

Despite the separation that Nicholas feels both within her family and outside it, she befriends others who have been similarly ostracized, including some of her black classmates. By the time Nicholas is ready to leave for college (not Louisiana State University, as her father had at first demanded, but Swarthmore), their relationship is at its breaking point. Nicholas writes, "Our farewell consisted of his placing his heavy right hand on my shoulder. 'Goodbye, daughter,' he said. I felt the pain of that hand's heaviness, the weighty emotion that lay buried between us. And I silently begged, counting the seconds his hand rested upon me, that he remove it" (68). Nicholas has minimal contact with her family until she returns to her hometown after her father's death, but her memoir suggests the need for daughters to distance themselves from their fathers emotionally and physically if they will ever discover who they are. That Nicholas' father calls her "daughter" rather than "Teresa" is revealing; even though she is a responsible young adult when she leaves home for college, to her conventional,

conservative father, she will always be his willful and wayward daughter, and she is, therefore, unable to distinguish herself outside of his paternal gaze until she erects a physical distance between them to match the emotional distance which has been in place since her childhood.

Unlike Teresa Nicholas, whose father-daughter struggle is at the core of her memoir, for Zeliha Kazanci, the protagonist of Elif Shafak's novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*, there is no father against whom to rebel; by the time the novel begins, he has been dead for many years. She, her sisters, and their mother live in a house without a man; that is, except for Zeliha's brother Mustafa, who rapes and impregnates Zeliha before he leaves for America. However, even before Mustafa's self-imposed exodus, Zeliha and the other Kazanci women clearly rule the roost; Zeliha, in particular, is beautiful, strong-willed, and fiercely independent, someone who, even at the age of nineteen, takes on the mantle of responsibility of carrying and raising the child she conceives after her brother rapes her.

Zeliha is portrayed as an iconoclast even within her own family, someone who "had been born with frizzy raven-black hair, but unlike the others, she liked to keep it that way" (Shafak 3). This bold young woman makes no attempts at conformity; for "[t]here was no power on earth that could prevent Zeliha...from donning miniskirts of glaring colors, tight-fitting blouses that displayed her ample breasts, satiny nylon stockings, and yes, those towering high heels" (3-4). Although Zeliha wears clothing that both her family and the outside world might deem provocative (her sisters connect her out-of-wedlock pregnancy to her clothing choices when they proclaim, "This is what

happens when you dress up...like a whore!””), Zeliha never alters her sense of style in reaction to what many might consider her shameful situation (29).

As Zeliha rushes through the streets of Istanbul on the way to her gynecologist’s appointment, she

managed to ignore their gaze, just as she managed to ignore the gaze of all the men who stared at her body with hunger. The vendors looked disapprovingly at her shiny nose ring too, as if therein lay a clue as to her deviance from modesty, and thereby the sign of her lustfulness. (3)

Zeliha’s “deviance from modesty” is, of course, in the eye of the beholder; her family assumes that her provocative clothing is directly linked to her unwed pregnancy, and Zeliha never suggests otherwise. She may “ignore” the gaze of men who lust after her and women who envy and judge her, but at a central decision-making moment of her life—when she is lying on the gynecologist’s table preparing to have an abortion—she listens to a larger male voice—Allah’s—when she hears the call to prayer and believes it is a sign for her to call off the abortion (17-19). After Zeliha wakes and realizes that her child has not been aborted after all, she goes out into the street, where she watches children “taking delight in committing simple sins” as they play in mud puddles (21). Shafak refers to this moment in Zeliha’s life as “one of those rare moments when it felt like Allah not only watched over us but also cared for us; one of those moments when He felt close” (21).

In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Zeliha is fully conscious of the male gaze; although she ignores it when she feels the weight of judgment, at the time when she must make

a life-changing decision, she rebels both against her male-dominated society and her own desire to be rid of the physical reminder of that domination, choosing to keep her “bastard” child no matter the judgment she herself might receive. Zeliha’s rebellion reminds us of Nancy Armstrong in her essay “Some Call It Fiction: On the Politics of Domesticity” that “We must read fiction not as literature but as the history of gender differences and a means by which we have reproduced a class and culture specific form of consciousness” (927).

Nevertheless, although Zeliha might sometimes seem unmindful of the male gaze, she is ultimately responsive to a paternalistic figure—Allah, the elusive “Him” whose loving presence she feels when she lies helpless upon the doctor’s table (18). Abandoned by her father, abused by her brother, and comforted by the thought of an omnipresent father figure, Zeliha cannot avoid the male gaze as much as she might try to do so.

The four authors in this chapter all strive for autonomy despite encountering some of life’s greatest challenges, including immigration, social ostracism, violence (including rape), poverty, cancer, unwed motherhood, institutionalization, and the death of loved ones. Their stories exemplify strength in the face of both inner and outer turmoil, and despite the myriad challenges they face, they never surrender their singular notions of womanhood or accept their status as second-class citizens, a remarkable feat when acquiescence often seems far easier than endless struggle. They redefine what it means to be a woman amid the many cruelties of modern-day life, particularly in places where women’s freedoms are not just contested—they are not accepted or even acknowledged.

Towards the end of *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Zeliha claims, “In the end nobody found anyone ‘woman’ enough” (140), suggesting that no matter how dynamic a woman is, the male gaze serves as a necessary opposing force, and even when it is most warped and detestable—as in the form of the sadistic and pseudo-paternalistic brother—it is indubitable. Try as she might to escape from the male gaze, it is everywhere she turns—beginning in her family, when her father and brothers serve as both her champions and captors when she is a young girl. For the young Arab woman, her brother represents the possibility and promise of manhood: handsome, strong, and closer in age to her than her father, he is both a pseudo-father and a pseudo-husband, her first adversary for her father’s attentions and the first man she sees as sexual yet separate from herself, a combination of characteristics which can lead to disaster if the brother sees himself not as his sister’s greatest protector but as her rival in the family hierarchy.

## Chapter Five: My Brother the Rapist: Perversions of Patriarchy

In her pivotal article “Brother/Sister Relationships: Connectivity, Love, and Power in the Reproduction of Patriarchy in Lebanon,” Suad Joseph claims that “the central role of the brother/sister relationship in the reproduction of Arab patriarchy, as a result, has been missed, misconstrued, or underestimated” (50). By focusing on brother/sister relationships in Camp Trad, Borj Hammoud, a working-class area of Beirut comprised of various religious and ethnic groups, Joseph gains understanding into this misunderstood affiliation, which is complex and, to some extent, without equal (50). Joseph argues that the brother/sister bond has a dynamic of “connectivity,” and she further claims that “connective relationships could be loving or hostile” (56). In the “loving” connective relationships, “persons anticipated each other’s concerns, pains, and joys as theirs” (56). Joseph acknowledges that connectivity is “a double-ended hook joining the lives of brothers and sisters” (56) and her study clarifies the idea that this relationship is “built on the duality of love and power expressed psychodynamically, social structurally, and culturally,” although “it was premised on a power symmetry—the subordination of the sister to the brother” (66). If this “power symmetry” is not observed by the sister—or if the brother overexerts his power—then the results can be disastrous for the sister. However, brother/sister relationships are undeniably intricate and often byzantine, and their multifariousness provides further insight into an Arab girl and the negotiations she makes as she enters into womanhood.

Joseph contends, “The little work that does exist on brother/sister relationships in the Arab World tends to regard it as either romantic or patriarchal, focusing respectively on ‘love’ or ‘power’” (52). Joseph also argues that the brother can “highlight his father’s

failures as head of household” (52). However, fatherly absence is always replaced by brotherly authority as long as there is a brother present, and whether that authority assumes a positive or negative role depends largely upon the brother himself, as there is no one to correct the brother’s behavior if it is aberrant. If the brother assumes an adversarial role within the family, he perverts the patriarchal role into that of a tyrant, a warden, and sometimes, a sadist. Elif Shafak’s *The Bastard of Istanbul* and Fadia Faqir’s *Pillars of Salt* both present the brother as a twisted tormentor who delights in his younger sister’s oppression; rather than guiding his family with love, he rules by force, even though his sister is not immobilized or controlled by fear of him or of the consequences of her actions for speaking out against her intimidator.

In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, a chain of events begins when Mustafa Kazancı rapes his younger sister, the outspoken, headstrong, and provocative Zeliha. When Mustafa rapes nineteen-year-old Zeliha, she conceives her daughter Asya, who is, ironically, also her niece. Although the shocking details of Zeliha’s rape and Asya’s parentage are not revealed to Asya until nearly the end of the novel, Shafak clearly establishes Mustafa as a strange and secretive man who separates himself from his family in Turkey not in order to forge a new life in America but rather as a reaction to some kind of inner turmoil.

When Mustafa returns to Turkey towards the end of the novel, he is forced to confront the truth about his daughter-niece. Mustafa’s rape of Zeliha may be interpreted as a violent reaction to his marginalization within the family rather than his sexual attraction to his sister; Shafak describes him as a man who is consumed by “a harrowing remorse” for his actions, and whose guilt “had been gnawing him inside, little

by little, without disrupting his outer façade” (337). Mustafa’s frustration and anger can barely be contained; he is a man who is shamed by any expression of emotion, a man who, as a boy,

prided himself on never crying, not even a tear, when Daddy would take the leather belt out. As much as he had learned to control his tears, he had never managed to suppress the gasp. How he hated this gasp.

Struggling for breath. Struggling for space. Struggling for affection. (335)

When he returns to his family home, it appears that “the fight between amnesia and remembering was finally over” (337). However, Mustafa’s fight only ends when he relinquishes himself to a two-part punishment: the realization that his sisters know he raped and fathered a child with Zeliha, and the poisoned meal they dish out as a way of meting out their long-overdue justice. Shafak explains that Mustafa “knowingly and willfully” eats the poisoned meal, “savoring each and every ingredient with every mouthful” and that, for him, it “felt so good to walk out on life” (337).

While Mustafa’s sisters allow him to take the easy way out—dying a quick, agonizing death rather than facing the hostilities of his sisters, his daughter, and surely his American wife—Daffash, the antagonist of Faqir’s *Pillars of Salt*, triumphs over his sister Maha when he commits her to a mental institutionalization, where she is not only confined physically but psychologically after she is lobotomized by her English doctors. Daffash has several reasons for wanting to quiet Maha: to get the land she would otherwise inherit from their father; to punish her for her judgment and defiance towards him over the years, including her knowledge of his rape of another woman; and, finally,

to align himself with the emerging colonial power, the English, thereby securing his position in the colonial uprising and avoiding the fate of Maha's late husband Harb, who died fighting the English.

In her essay "From Confinement to Creativity: Women's Reconfiguration of the Prison and Mental Asylum in Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot* and Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*," Nadine Sinno characterizes Daffash as someone who

acts 'civilized' and progressive in the company of his English companions, [but] is an avid sexist in his own home. His abuse of his sister is not only allowed but encouraged by the colonial authorities with whom he has affiliated himself. Furthermore, unlike Harb who cherishes Maha's devotion to her land, Daffash resents her strength and resourcefulness in tilling the land and bringing it back to life every time he turns it into a wasteland. (80)

Like Mustafa, Daffash clearly feels powerless within the family structure; his only power comes from being male and therefore able to exert his will upon his sister. When he is dying, Daffash and Maha's father describes Daffash as "a disobedient son who never listened to his father" (Faqir 174). Although Daffash and Maha's father treats his children equally, given his weakened physical condition, he cannot stand up to his wayward and willful son, who defies his father not only through his allegiance to the English but also through the brutality he exhibits towards his sister. Sinno further elucidates Daffash's cruelty towards Maha as

a result of his personal vendetta against her, not an attempt to treat mental illness. Clearly, without the help of the Turkish Pasha and the English medical team, Daffash would not have been able to overwhelm Maha and defeat her. The novel reveals how the colonizing forces claiming to civilize the natives, protect the rights of women, and move the country “forward” are the ones that enable Daffash’s inhuman and sexist treatment of Maha in return for his allegiance. (80)

Neither Mustafa nor Daffash wins his power by earning his sister’s respect; because their sisters never acknowledge their authority within the family structure and never willingly submit to them, the brothers’ victories are insubstantial because they could not have been accomplished without both their fathers’ absence or ineffectualness and their sisters’ humiliation and debasement through force.

Although she claims brother-sister relationships are “connective,” Suad Joseph also hints at their “asymmetry,” acknowledging that “brothers were socialized to receive more than to give service to sisters” and, as a result, “as adults, brothers expected the same,” resulting in their sisters’ feeling “frustrated by the asymmetry” (57). Joseph further claims that “asymmetrical expectations” are “engendered early on,” although both Mustafa and Daffash’s relationships with their sisters go beyond asymmetry and into deep dysfunction, as evidenced by the physical brutality they unleash upon their sisters. When this brutality is not enough to quiet their obstreperous sisters, they must go a step further and either extricate themselves (in Mustafa’s case) or their sister (in Daffash’s case) from the family unit for their own survival. The sister’s survival—

emotional as well as physical—is of no importance; she is completely expendable as far as the brother is concerned.

In her essay “Personal and Political: The Dynamics of Arab American Feminism,” Susan Darraj assesses the current state of Arab American feminism by recalling Gloria Steinem’s declaration that ‘The political is personal,’ (250), noting the dichotomy of Arab American feminism compared to mainstream American feminism, declaring,

For Arab American women, feminism’s core is slightly, though significantly, different. Arab American feminists must grapple with the political and the personal. These are two battles confronting them, and they are not the same. In American society, women of Arab descent or ethnicity find themselves portrayed in two different ways: their family and the Arab community regard them in one way (the personal), while the larger American society, and especially the American government, regards them in another way (the political). Although there is often overlap, it is more accurate to say that Arab American women face sexism in two distinct realms. (250)

The authors presented in this thesis—Darina Al-Joundi, Fadia Faqir, Lucette Lagnado, Teresa Nicholas, Elif Shafak, and others—have demonstrated that, while sexism still exists and is particularly pervasive in the Arab world, women’s roles as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and independent women will not be diminished to what Mona Fayad calls “the deeply implanted stereotype of the Faceless Veiled Woman” (Darraj 257). Darraj urges Arab American women “to reconstruct our own portrait, to present

not the monolithic image of Arab women that everyone seems to want—which seems convenient—but the collage of Arab American women’s faces, voices, and perspectives to America and the world” (259).

Still, presenting this “collage” is more complicated for Arab Americans—regardless of their religious affiliation—than it likely is for non-Arab American women, including other ethnic minorities, due to the pervasive image of the “Faceless Veiled Woman” and all the associations she evokes for many Westerners: radical Islam (even when she is not radical, or even Muslim), female oppression, anti-capitalism, and even hatred for the West. Today more than ever, Arabs and Arab Americans face a compendium of negative images of their culture which do not reflect the beautiful intricacies of the many ways of life represented within the Arab world, whose customs seem antediluvian and regressive to many Westerners, afraid as they are of terrorism and the nullification of twentieth-century Western influence upon the Arab world.

Arab and Arab American women continue to be burdened, challenged, and, yes, even haunted by the Faceless Veiled Woman but also by unrealistic expectations placed upon them by their families and cultures. Darraj suggests that this pressure is particularly rife for Arab American girls, especially “where the paternal figure equally encourages his daughter as well as his sons to excel” and “girls will often feel the burden—more so than their brothers—to not become westernized or Americanized” (253). But how does one avoid becoming westernized when one lives in the West? Should avoiding westernization be a goal, even though just over a century ago, when the first wave of Arabs immigrated to the United States from countries such as Syria, common components of westernization such as learning how to speak English,

softening one's ethnic heritage, and embracing American culture were necessary for one's survival? Can Arabs and Arab Americans—particularly Arab and Arab American women—truly incorporate both the East and the West into their lives, or are the two cultures so increasingly disparate that there can be no peaceful negotiation?

### Conclusion

Every woman must learn to negotiate her womanhood, although the terms of what it means to be a woman are constantly shifting in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways. For both Arab and Arab American women, the word *woman* is often synonymous with *wife* and *mother*, which can cause an identity conflict both as a woman and an Arab if a woman does not meet these definitions. Who is a woman if she is not a wife and mother? How does she define herself in relation to her family and the world? Can she be satisfied merely as the doting aunt and the devoted daughter, or does she descend into self-loathing and madness? To paraphrase Darina Al-Joundi, once her father—the man who most greatly influences her identity as a woman—is gone, to whom will she tell her stories? (126)

There is no clear answer to this question. Being a woman in today's world is challenging no matter one's ethnicity, religion, educational level, or financial status. The mixed messages women receive from various outlets—the media in particular—make it seem as though a woman must not be one thing; rather, she must be all things: wife, mother, chef, maid, model, seductress, and business tycoon. The feminist movement provided her with the ability to do nearly everything a man does, but, much like Cinderella before she goes to the ball, she must continue to perform her domestic

duties in addition to everything she does outside the domestic sphere. She must be responsible for her husband, her children, her colleagues, her extended family, and herself. She is mother to all even if she is not a mother, and if she does not have children, she is judged for that decision too; after all, in today's technologically advanced society, a woman who does not have children given the many ways in which she can do so must be a truly selfish woman indeed. After all, what kind of woman doesn't want to bring another generation of daughters into a life as complex and chaotic as the one shared by most of today's Western women?

This modern paradox does not mean that an Arab woman who lives in the most trying of modern-day circumstances—such as a refugee camp or burned-out city—would not trade her mode of existence for the lifestyle of the typical American woman, imperfect as it is. Most Arab American women have little tolerance for the “darkness, dirt, and deviance” (Shafak 276) of their ancestors, even though just a generation or two ago, their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers resigned themselves to hardship with a level of patience and acceptance that most women would find maddening today. They were aware, at least on some level, of the pervasive sexism in their culture, of the preference for boys over girls, and of the limited options they would have not because they were not smart or hard-working or talented but simply because they were women.

In spite of the injustices they suffered, Arab and Arab American women forged a bewilderingly strong bond with the men who were their greatest champions: their fathers, who saw potential in them unchecked by cultural dictates. In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, when Elif Shafak declares, “Perhaps somewhere in her luminous universe

there was room for darkness, dirt, and deviance" (276), she suggests that, no matter what happens to her, a woman's radiance cannot be dulled, and it is her father more than anyone else who will help her polish and purify her patina.

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