

CHAPTER ONE: Reading Literature in Contexts

Unlike most works of literary criticism dealing with texts from the Arab world written in English, this study aims neither to be an exhaustive study of one work or author nor a comprehensive survey of a school or trend in Arab literature. I have also not endeavored to 'cover' a range of writers or to choose authors and texts that are somehow representative of 'Arab women's literature,' 'Lebanese women's literature' or any other such label. For example, all of the works here are written by Christian authors and were published in the 1990s, but I wish to make clear that I am not advancing an argument either about 'Lebanese Christian writers' or about 'post-war literature in Lebanon.' Other scholars are involved in these pursuits. I explore how three novels engage with a variety of labels, communities and groups but do not take them to be representative of any specific group or trend; my focus here is on presenting and reading these works in conjunction with a wide range of identities and affiliations. My aim in this book is to develop a reading method that brings together the study of technique and form – by investigating the use of intertextuality in a series of creative, literary texts – and the exploration of relevant critical concepts and ideas linked to understanding the subversive and transformative potential of literary texts. The novels I treat here do have several things in common: they all share the use of specific formal techniques in their intertextual rescriptings of religious figures and tales as well as a commitment to treating issues of women and gender in their works. Therefore, by remaining an extremely limited project in many ways, my approach here seeks to contribute to current discussions and debates in Arabic literary studies as a broad and open-ended exploration of ways in which reading the literatures of the Near East and the Arab world can be approached from multiple angles and within multiple contexts.

1. Multiple Contexts

In order to begin to claim to 'read literatures and literary works in their context(s)', it is necessary to devote considerable space in this introductory chapter to the varied and diverse contexts in which the works of Andrée Chedid, Hudā Barakāt and Najwā Barakāt are located. Specifically, I will examine some of the tensions and interactions between their literary texts and these multiple contexts. Like other Arab authors, and those in other parts of the world, who identify with more than one group or community affiliation, Lebanese writers, publishing in both Arabic and French, face a dizzying array of labels with which they are and can be affiliated. Authors' and publishers' choices, marketing arrangements, academic reception and criticism, public perception, as well as other factors, influence where a work of literature is placed in the canon, the public imagination, and on the shelves of book shops and libraries. For women authors there is an additional twist, particularly in a time when literary works written by women have received specific attention by academics and publishers. In her work dealing with questions faced by women of color who work in the creative arts, Trinh Minh-ha articulates this quandary as a 'triple bind', 'sooner or later [she will] find herself driven into situations where she is made to feel she must choose from among three conflicting identities. Writer of color? Woman writer? Or woman of color? Which comes first, where does she place her loyalties?'¹ Though Trinh's formulation focuses on the way in which individual women feel the pressure to choose between conflicting identities, here I would emphasize that it is not only the way in which an individual identifies herself in relation to these questions, but also the way in which she and her work are appropriated

¹ Trinh, T. Minh-ha (1989): *Woman Native Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington), p.6.

and labeled that are relevant to the discussion. A Lebanese woman writer publishing a novel today, for example, may be at ease with one or more ways of identifying herself. The discourses and dialogues in which her works are engaged, however, may not be as readily able to reconcile these multiple and conflicting identities. For example, Andrée Chedid speaks at great length about how she feels about fitting into many settings in her autobiographical récit, *Les saisons de passage*,

Nos ancêtres ne tendaient vers nous nul glaive vengeur, barrant le passage vers l'avenir! Nous délivrant de tout nationalisme exigu, de toute croyance partisane, ils nous offraient, en s'effaçant, toutes nos chances. Comment ne pas leur en être reconnaissants?

Our ancestors did not put vengeful swords in our hands, blocking our path to the future! Freeing us from all limited nationalisms, and all partisan beliefs, by withdrawing, they gave us all of our opportunities. How can we not acknowledge them for that?²

In an autobiographical essay, the Lebanese-American author and critic Evelyne Accad also shows herself to be comfortable with many labels declaring that she was born, "an Arab woman in Beirut, of a Swiss mother and a Lebanese father who himself was born in Egypt, who received a strict Protestant education in Beirut, the most cosmopolitan city in the Middle East at that time." ("[une] femme arabe à Beyrouth de mère suisse et de père libanais né en Egypte, recevoir une éducation protestante rigide, à Beyrouth, la ville la plus cosmopolite du Moyen-Orient à l'époque.")³ These writers celebrate their mixed identities and loyalties without expressing the same tensions that many other writers do. Trinh's 'triple bind' thus must be understood not only as a question and problem that individual writers and their works confront and are confronted with, but also as a larger question we must pose as readers and critics of literature. This is particularly relevant for women of color writing in diverse locations around the world whose works are often subsumed under the totalizing category of 'post-colonial literature.' If authors are connected to and engage with a series of labels, categories, communities and affiliations, then we as critics must be prepared to engage with them as well. My argument here is that, as readers of literature, we can begin this process by approaching works of literature in relation to their multiple contexts and by exploring these complex relationships.

2. The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Lebanon

In both the very opening to this book and its title, I privilege 'women' and 'Lebanese' as two important categories. To begin my explorations here therefore I propose that these two categories provide a point of entry into a discussion of some of the important contexts in which these literary works are read. In order to begin a discussion of these contexts, it is necessary to open with outlining some of the problems involved for the critic writing about Lebanon and women in Lebanon. Scholars who deal with contemporary Lebanon (perhaps particularly those of us working in the United States) must confront the issue that writers from Lebanon, and recently women writers in particular, have been swallowed up by categories that appeal to and perhaps are congruent with certain needs of non-Lebanese and non-Arab communities. This is not only the case for Lebanon, but also other locations in the Arab world and Near East more generally as well, though the specific features of individual situations vary

² Chedid, Andrée (1996): *Les Saisons de passage* (Paris), p. 98.

³ Accad, Evelyne (1993): *L'écriture comme éclatement des frontières*. In: *Esprit créateur* 33:2, p. 120.

considerably. In the case of contemporary literature from Lebanon, for example, it is clear that the focus of attention in the academy in the past thirty years has been almost exclusively on literature about violence in Lebanon.⁴ The impact of the wars which raged in Lebanon for more than fifteen years starting in 1975 should of course not be underestimated, nor should the impact of the violence and destruction wrought by these events be ignored or denied. The fascination with the idea of Lebanon as a place of violence, however, has been consistently underlined in European and American readings of Lebanese literature in the modern period almost to the exclusion of all other features and with a few exceptions, readings of literature in western critical practice is largely devoted to war and violence, with a good deal of material specifically focusing on women's opposition to the war and violence. The explosion of translations of literature from Lebanon into English in the 1980s and 1990s shows this clearly as most works translated deal directly with the war, with women writers amply represented. There seems also to be a certain predilection for works that tell a personal story; the European translation series 'Mémoires de la Méditerranée', for example, has contributed a number of translations of Arabic works of fiction, from Lebanon and elsewhere, into English.⁵

The market for shocking stories of course is one of the motivations for translations of literature about war, but it is somewhat curious that well-received and popular Lebanese writers have not been translated into English. One example of this is Emily Nasrallah (Imīlī Naṣrallah), a writer who is extremely popular in Lebanon and has published fifteen novels and short story collections, most of which present idyllic portraits of Lebanese village life and the countryside of Lebanon. For example, her novel *Al-Iqlā' 'aks al-zaman* (translated as *Flight Against Time*) dealing with a family that has emigrated to Canada because of the war is the only one of her books easily available in English translation.⁶ Its predecessor and one of Nasrallah's most famous works, *Tuḡyūr Aylūl* (September Birds), about a young girl from the South yearning for an education, is not.⁷ Nasrallah is but one example of a much larger phenomenon that has only begun to be raised and debated in Arabic literary studies. As Magda M. Al-Nowaihi expresses, "... my anxiety stems from my knowledge, through my first hand experience in dealing with translations from Arabic, that the works that make it into English, and the English forms they take, offer more insights into the politics of reception in the host culture than the cultural dynamics of the originating one."⁸ The recent attention paid to the politics of translation from Arabic signals that this will be an important area of investigation in Arabic literary studies as we begin the twenty-first century.⁹

⁴ An important exception to this Elise Salem's (2003): *Constructing Lebanon: A Century of Literary Narratives* (Gainesville). A Lebanese scholar based in the United States, Salem looks at the construction of national narratives in Lebanon in relation to the connections between literature, history and politics. This work is referred to in greater detail below.

⁵ For example, the Lebanese Rashīd Al-Da'if's (1995) *'Azīz al-sayyid Kawābātā* (Beirut) that was translated in 1999 as *Dear Mr Kawabata* trans. Paul Starkey (London).

⁶ Nasrallah, Imīlī (1980) *Al-Iqlā' 'aks al-zaman* (Beirut) translated in 1997 as *Flight Against Time* trans. Issa Boullata (Austin).

⁷ *Tuḡyūr Aylūl* was first published in 1962 in Beirut. Another English translation of a number of Nasrallah's short stories from various collections was published by a small Canadian press Gynergy, (1992) *A House not Her Own: Stories from Beirut* (Charlottetown).

⁸ Al-Nowaihi, Magda M. (2001): *For a "Foreign" Audience: The Challenges of Teaching Arabic in the American Academy*. In: *MESA Bulletin* 35, p. 26.

⁹ See for example, Amireh, Amal (1996): *Publishing in the World Problems and Prospectives for Arab Women Writers*. In: *Al-Jadīd* 2:10. Coffin, Nancy (1999): *B'fat fīlāstin: Taswīq al-adab al-*

The focus on Lebanon as a violent and war-torn location is not the only ideology that affects the way in which Lebanese literature is received and marketed throughout the world. The focus on women's literature and the imposition of feminist ideologies on Arab women's literature generally and Lebanese women's specifically is a second peril of working on women in Lebanon that has been debated in somewhat more detail by scholars. In her important article dealing with this debate, "Negotiating Feminist Ideologies Within Lebanese Women's Writings," Elise Salem Manganaro points out that women's literature has been a privileged area of study and many scholars have imposed a grid of understanding onto it derived largely from notions of feminism current and popular in Europe and the United States. Like many other Arab women engaged in these debates, she is concerned with how the emphasis on gender which is often encouraged in the west detracts from other important aspects of the texts and the realities of people's lives in Lebanese contexts. She argues that the discussion of Lebanese literature must be contextualized with an openness to its diverse influences rather than a focus on ideological agendas, "To study Lebanese female war fiction, therefore, in isolation is to arrive at certain pre-ordained conclusions that do more to further western feminist agendas than to help us appreciate the nuances of the literature ... or to understand the causes of our wars and the challenges that face us in the years ahead."¹⁰ Part of the inspiration for my project is the need to emphasize the diverse influences and contexts in play in Lebanese literature and to move away from reading these texts through the lenses of war and/or feminism that Salem Manganaro critiques so convincingly in her piece. While I also agree with Salem Manganaro's assertion about the value of studying "female fiction in conjunction with, and not in opposition to, literature produced by men,"¹¹ here I have not taken on that task and have chosen to focus on three texts that are all written by women.

3. Women as a Cultural Category

Though Salem Manganaro's analysis is sound, I believe that reading how gender is expressed and debated in literary texts written by women can be a valuable exercise without necessarily studying them in conjunction with men's texts. This study does not claim to make overarching statements about women's writing as opposed to men's writing in Lebanon; it also does not claim that men cannot and do not engage in similar and/or complementary projects. The study of Hudā Barakāt, Najwā Barakāt, and Andrée Chedid as a discrete group of three women authors is partly due to the fact that the three novels under examination here are particularly interesting because they encode transformative messages about gender and society by rescripting religious tales and figures in their creative texts. Though this choice of topics is no doubt influenced by my own interest in and commitment to the study of gender in literature, my goal in this study is specifically to work with the nuances of the literary works in question and bring them into relief in a number of different contexts, and clearly not in opposition to men's literature. In the case of these three works, as is the case with many women writers, questions related to gender – women's and men's roles and positions in society and how

filastīni bi-l-luḡha al-inglīzīyya. In: *Al-Ādāb* July/Aug., pp. 59-64. Her readings propose how Palestinian literature has been marketed to an American audience in particular and how this has changed in relation to the politics and social climate of the era. These questions are also raised in Abboushi Dallal, Jenine (1998): *The Perils of Occidentalism: How Arab Novelists are Driven to Write for Western Readers*. In: *Times Literary Supplement* April 24, pp. 8-9.

¹⁰ Salem Manganaro, Elise (1995-1996): *Negotiating Feminist Ideologies Within Lebanese Women's Writings*. In *Bāḥithāt* (Beirut), p. 163-174.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

this relates to social norms and conventions for example – are featured prominently, and much more so than in the works of most male writers. Moreover, though men and women have both mounted challenges to religion from within literary texts, in Christianity and Islam as they are commonly defined within Arab contexts, women's texts primarily focus on the status and roles of women in religious texts and contexts, whereas this is rarely more than a peripheral concern in men's projects.

My choice to work only with texts written by women is not only because women's texts feature these issues, however. I also intend this book to engage with others written about women's literature in Lebanon and the Arab world, as a somewhat different project. Because within Arabic literary studies there are a number of scholars addressing the issue of women's writing, I have designed this study to engage with that debate directly. In this regard, I have been influenced by scholars such as Marnia Lazreg, who raises this issue in her now classic article, "Feminism and Difference: the Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria." In this piece, she calls for a radical shift in the way that people whose scholarly work is based on Algerian women think and write about them. She also calls for a comprehensive exploration and understanding of the body of knowledge produced by the indigenous people of the areas where we as scholars work.¹² Though my modest study cannot claim to be a radical shift in the functioning of scholars who are working within the academy in Europe and North America (myself included), I strive to contribute to changes in the way in which literature, particularly that written by women, is discussed in these locations. Part of my strategy is to outline my approach to reading these works in some detail, to promote the explicit discussion of issues, such as how we read women's literature in diverse locations as women in our own particular locations and what the implications of this are, and to locate myself and my work in relation to this.

One of the features of literary studies dealing with Arab women's writings, particularly in the European and North American academies is that they have tended to view women as an oppressed group within a traditional, patriarchal society and literary expressions written by women as voices that have overcome overwhelming obstacles to call out from 'behind the veil' and write against these features of 'their societies.'¹³ Other projects have sought to recover women's literature that had been condemned to obscurity and promote women writers whose works have been marginalized.¹⁴ Still others have sought to understand a development in Arab women's writing through an historical approach, typology, or comparison to European and American writers.¹⁵ There is no doubt that the plethora of recent works on Arab women writers in European languages and in Arabic will prevent women's writing from being ignored in the future

¹² Lazreg, Marnia (1988): *Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria*. In: *Feminist Studies* 14:1, p. 95.

¹³ See for example Accad, Evelyn (1978): *Veil of Shame: The Role of Women in the Contemporary Fiction of North Africa and the Arab World* (Québec), and (1990): *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East* (New York), Bezirgan, Basima Qattan/Ferne, Elizabeth (1977): *Muslim Middle Eastern Women Speak* (Austin), and Cooke, Miriam/Badran, Margot (Eds.) (1990): *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminism* (Bloomington).

¹⁴ Sha'abān, Bouthaynā (1999): *100 'ām min al-rivāya al-nisā'iyya al-'arabiyya (1899-1999)* (Beirut).

¹⁵ Cooke, Miriam (1987): *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (Cambridge); Hafez, Sabry (1995): *Women's Narrative in Modern Arabic Literature: A Typology*, in: Allen, R./Kilpatrick, H./de Moor E. (Eds.): *Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature* (London); Zeidan, Joseph (1995): *Arab Women Novelists: the Formative Years and Beyond* (Albany).

as it has often been in the past. Many of these works have made a valuable contribution to current scholarship on literature written by women in the Arab world and have had a considerable impact on the respect with which women writers are increasingly accorded. With most studies, though, showing women to be oppressed and newly finding a voice with which to write, it can at times be difficult to make sense of the position of writers who seem not at all to fit into these categories. What should we make, then, of Etel Adnan's response to the question, "As a woman in the Arab world, have you had major difficulties to overcome in order to become a writer?"

In Arab countries society does not like women in politics, but does respect women writers. There is such reverence for literature in the Arab world and such love for poetry, that even women share in that respect. Women writers have no great problems in the Arab world. At times they are subjected to censorship, but in this they are no different from their male colleagues. They are not censored because they are women.¹⁶

Or Hudā Barakāt's similar statement about her feelings of worth as a girl and a woman who could empathize but not relate to women who are 'hidden behind a veil' or undergo clitoridectomy?¹⁷ Or that Andrée Chedid's successful career as a creative writer and poet spans over fifty years?

To understand the contradictory positions in which women often find themselves it is perhaps instructive to recall the manifold ways in which the 'woman question' (*qadīyat al-mar'a*) has been treated in Lebanon and the Arab world. The role/s and position of women in society has certainly been one of the most important and furiously debated intellectual questions of the twentieth century and this has had an impact on the discussion of literature as it has on so many other fields of study. Important inquiries have been advanced, for example, into the usefulness of terms like 'women's writing' and 'feminism' and their impact on the potential exclusion of women from mainstream Arab intellectual and literary life. Indeed, even what terms to use in Arabic to express these ideas is still unresolved, with the words '*nisā'*' and '*unthawī*' most often chosen to be used in different word patterns in order to express the different ideas expressed by the English words, 'feminine,' 'feminist,' 'female,' and 'woman' as an adjective in relation to literature. What constitutes a relevant expression of feminism(s) for Arab and/or Muslim women as well as the applicability of western feminisms in Arab environments has also been discussed at some length. A number of prominent Arab writers and critics, including Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, Emily Naṣrallah, Muḥammad Banis, Hishām Sharābī, Mai Ghousoub (May Ghussūb), and Khālida Sa'īd, are featured alongside translated works by the French scholars Julia Kristeva and Chantal Chawwaf in the special issue of *Mawāqif* titled '*Qidāyā al-mar'a al-arabiyya*' (Issues of the Arab Woman). This edition treats many angles of the issues related to women and gender in society, with a particular focus on women and art. The eminent scholar and literary critic, Khālida Sa'īd also discusses the terms 'women writers' and 'women's writing' (*al-adab al-nisā'i*) specifically in her book *Al-Mar'a, al-taḥarrur, al-ibda'* (Women, Liberation, Creativity) which consists of essays dedicated to the Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi.¹⁸ Other Lebanese writers like May Gebrane (Jibrān) have sought to make the French notion of '*écriture féminine*' developed by Hélène Cixous relevant to

¹⁶ Interview with Etel Adnan by Hilary Kilpatrick, in: Schipper, Mineke (Ed.) (1985): *Unheard Voices: Women and Literature in Africa and the Arab World, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America* (New York), p. 117.

¹⁷ Barakāt, Hudā (1993-1994): *Ru'ya wa-i'tirād*. In: *Mawāqif* 73-74, p. 215.

¹⁸ Sa'īd, Khālida (1991): *Al-Mar'a, al-taḥarrur, al-ibda'* (Beirut).

women's writing in Lebanon.¹⁹ It is thus clear from only these few examples that the proposals for how to treat the 'woman question' in Lebanon and the Arab world more generally are wide-ranging and encompass a broad spectrum of political and social views.

One element that draws many of the people involved in these debates together, however, is the resistance to the labels 'feminist literature,' 'women's literature,' and 'woman writer.' This can be understood as challenging the marginalization of women writers. One distinct concern expressed by many writers is that their works are not taken seriously and on the same level as men, leaving them isolated in a 'ghetto' of women writers. Any subsequent success would then always imply a qualification – 'she is a good writer – for a woman'. Moreover, the rejection of these labels is also a commitment to guarding against these issues in the Arab world being subsumed into a feminist agenda, defined by white, European and North American women and thus far removed from the situations of Lebanese and Arab women. The influence and relevance of many feminist ideas and movements are acknowledged by Arab critics, however, the importance of highlighting local issues is also a prominent focus for many.

The distinct challenge faced in this study that does treat women's writing as such is that it must guard against being both too reductive – these are merely women's writings to be read in isolation from men's writing – and too broad – these are women's writings and thus say something about the general condition of women. One way in which I endeavor to avoid these additional perils of writing about women is to read them as a group that has been influenced by a discrete cultural construct of what it means to be a woman. Simplistic models for understanding women's writings are discarded here – it is relevant neither to 'lift the veil' from these women for whom veiling (literally or figuratively) has never been an issue, nor to see them as breaking out of a societal pattern that oppressed them as women and prevented them from writing. While by no means diminishing the achievements of these and many other women who have faced battles in writing and publishing nor suggesting that many women do not face enormous obstacles in achieving equality with men in important aspects of their lives as writers, I would like to accent that the three writers discussed here that way in which their gender affects many women writers in Lebanon, as writers, is considerably more varied and complex.

In the citation above, Etel Adnan claims that it is not a taboo for a woman to be a poet in Lebanon; but she also speaks about the differences and difficulties that she felt being a girl rather than a boy growing up in Beirut and frequently visiting Damascus with her father. Writing was her escape from an existence that limited her because of her gender as did things that "reinforced my identity of being neither just a girl nor a boy, but a special being with the attributes of both."²⁰ It is perhaps not an accident that Hudā Barakāt's articulation of being comfortable as a woman writer is couched in similar terms, when she speaks of writing as a location where she can be "a man and a woman at the same time."²¹ Thus, being writers, public figures, and publishing their works is not something many Lebanese women writers confront as a particular hardship, though

¹⁹ Jibrān, May (1987): *Ḥiwār: May Jibrān tataḥaddath 'an al-adab al-umihawī wa-dahālizihi min mandhur 'ilm al-naṣf*. In: *Al-Shāhid* 26, pp. 65-67.

²⁰ Adnan, Etel (1990): *Growing Up to be a Woman Writer in Lebanon*, in: Badran/Cooke (1990), p. 9.

²¹ Barakāt, Hudā (1993-1994), p. 215. This of course also recalls the protagonists in Barakāt's first two novels who struggle with being men biologically, but who feel like women.

without denying that women are far from equal to men in many aspects of life in Lebanon including legally, socially, and in terms of education.

Another lens through which the discussion of women's roles and positions in society in general and as writers in particular can be viewed is the relative privilege that most women who are creative writers enjoy in relation to their societies. In order to write, a person usually must have access to fairly advanced levels of education. Most Lebanese creative writers have had this educational background and do hail from the most prominent and wealthy families in Lebanon. Many have lived considerable portions of their lives abroad. Though this is by no means exclusively the case, it must be emphasized that a great many of the people who have pursued successful careers as creative writers belong to elite groups in Lebanese society, have enjoyed the requisite privileges, and thus have had access to education at extremely high levels. This is a further nuance to the somewhat peculiar positions women have in relation to literature in Lebanon. It is clear that this phenomenon is not unique to Lebanon – Trinh T. Minh-ha uses the examples of Adrienne Rich and Zora Neale Hurston to point out how many women have reflected on their positions as 'special' in contrast to their less fortunate sisters and what the implications of this were for them. In her estimation, "Specialness as a soporific soothes, anaesthetizes my sense of justice; it is to the wo/man of ambition, as effective a drug of psychological self-intoxication as alcohol is to the exiles of society."²² Part of the challenge of the readings here is to understand how and if Chedid and the Barakāts deal with the question of their relatively privileged positions within Lebanese society in their creative works and how this is manifest in their intertextual projects.

The positions of privilege occupied by Andrée Chedid and Hudā and Najwā Barakāt are marked by their social class and family status, length of residence abroad in Paris, and elevated educational backgrounds – all interrelated markers of the Lebanese elite. They also all are Christian. I have not highlighted this aspect of their identity for several reasons, the first of which is that I would like to underline the importance of working against assumptions of what this background means to their literary texts. The stereotype of Christian women as more educated, liberated, and being more free to write holds true only to a certain extent and must be viewed in relation to a number of other relevant factors including the class background, educational status, and family position of the writer in question.²³ Often the stereotypes of groups in a diverse society such as that of Lebanon are rooted in the way in which women behave or are perceived to behave by outsiders, and this is not a useful way in which to understand a society's complexities. Moreover, though none of these authors makes a secret of her religious background, this is not an identity that any of the three authors has explicitly underlined or claimed for herself in relation to her writings.

The religious backgrounds of the authors are important to this study in another way, however, because they demonstrate the diversity of positions that women in the Arab world occupy. Though the three authors treated in this study are Christians rather than Muslims, their three works engage with various aspects of both Christian and Muslim religious texts, traditions, and customs. Hudā Barakāt's re-telling of the story of Yūsuf in *Hajar al-dahik* (translated as *The Stone of Laughter*) is particularly important in this

²² Trinh (1989), p. 88.

²³ My thinking on stereotypes and the positive as well as negative uses of them has been influenced here by Rosello, Mirelle (1998): *Declining the Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in French Cultures* (Hanover).

regard because her use of the figure Yūsuf (the Biblical Joseph) clearly is a discussion not only of the Biblical text and meaning, but also is specifically related to the Qur'ānic text and other Arab cultural traditions deriving from Muslim understandings of the *Sūra* of Yūsuf. *La femme de Job* (Job's Wife) reclaims a female figure from the Bible giving her a complete story and though is clearly influenced Christian traditions, it is not limited to these. Set in a peasant milieu and dealing with issues related to families in traditional villages, Najwā Barakāt's novel *Ḥayāh wa-ālām Ḥamad ibn Sīlāna* (The Passion of Ḥamad, Ibn Sīlāna) is also largely rooted in Arab Christian tales and traditions about Jesus. An understanding of Muslim concepts of Jesus, however, adds layers of meaning to readings of this work. The only one of these works that has been translated from its original language to date, Hudā Barakāt's *Ḥajar al-daḥik*, is also the only work that deals directly with war and its accompanying violence. Thus though the backgrounds of the women whose works I treat here are homogenous in many ways (Najwā and Hudā Barakāt are sisters!), the diversity of subjects treated and approaches taken even within this limited sample are shown amply by the texts. My project here is to link these texts and place them in dialogue with each other without somehow positing them as universal or authentic specimens of some certain 'type' of literature.

4. What is Lebanon?

If any issue in the study of literature is as hotly contested as gender, it is nation. Often national labels are affixed to literary works and used to describe literary traditions because they seem self-evident in this age of political organization around nation-states. Describing literary works by using a national definition is thus often simply a shorthand designation used for the sake of clarity. In other cases, like that of France, the rise of national literatures and developments of genres such as the novel are linked to the rise of modern nation states. As many critics have proposed, however, the ideas and ideologies implied by using national labels to describe literary works and traditions are deeply rooted and often highly problematic. In deepening our understanding of literatures and the literary works that comprise them, national labels and affiliations must be interrogated if they are to be useful.

Lebanon is perhaps one of the most contested national spaces that emerged in the twentieth century. Because it is still in the process of emerging from the series of wars that left the state all but destroyed in the 1990s, the beginning of the 21st century has been a time for discussions about how Lebanon will emerge as a successful nation. One aspect of the assertion of a Lebanese national identity, which directly affects the way in which the national label is understood in relation to literature, for example, is the way in which Lebanon defines itself in relation to the Arab world, and relates to it. The roots of this tension lie in the specific ways in which the modern nation was envisaged and constructed by the architects of independent Lebanon during the French Mandate and the early independence period. In this period, the contested definition of the modern independent nation-state of Lebanon was based on the idea that it was an entity separate from the rest of the Arab world. Though the nation was to have close ties to the Arab world and an 'Arab face,' it distinguished itself as unique and also having a 'European face.'

The Mandate and independence periods witnessed considerable discussion around the shape of the new nation and how it would be built both practically and ideologically. One question posed was the extent to which the nation would 'be Arab.' Defining Lebanon as distinct and separate from other Arab countries has led to the use of the term Lebanese in connection with literature to carry a particularist connotation linked