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The quest for identities in modern Lebanese women's fiction : summary

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SUMMARY

The Quest for Identities in Modern Lebanese Women's Fiction

This book presents a study of women's writings on the Lebanese civil war. It explores women's response to the war in Lebanon as well as the ways in which the arabophone female writers have transformed their specific war experience into creative literary activity, both during and after the war. The work focuses on two of the most prominent writers of the (post)civil war novel, namely Ḥanān ash-Shaykh and 'Alawiyya Ṣubuḥ. The focus is laid on the works that feature female protagonists, while the scope is narrowed to the study of heroines' identity formation within the confines of patriarchy. The book consists of three chapters. The first chapter introduces some of the most articulate women authors and their writings, while highlighting the works inspired by their direct war experience. It further situates women's writings on the war into a broader perspective, discussing the confluences as well as points of departure throughout the various stages of literary development, the onset of which could be traced back to the late 1960s and early 1970s. While the late 1970s saw a marked increase in both the magnitude and the quality of literary production in Lebanon, this was also accompanied (and partially explained) by the emergence of an unprecedented number of women writers, who, in their search to reflect the complexities of Lebanese society, sought to portray its internal contradictions through narrativising the female experience. The chapter provides an overview of the major themes, tropes and modes of women's writings on the war and discusses the continuities as well as ruptures between the works written during the war and those that were written and published after. The following chapters are immersive studies of the two selected novels that can be considered representative of the predominant literary

values of a given period (i.e. war and post-war); the second chapter provides an analysis of Ḥanān ash-Shaykh's novel *Hikāyat Zahra* (The Story of Zahra), while the third one presents the reader with the analysis of 'Alawiyya Ṣubuḥ's novel *Maryam al-ḥakāyā* (Maryam: Keeper of Stories). Both analytical chapters utilize a Foucauldian lens to analyse power relations in the course of heroines' identity-formation, while also drawing on feminist literary theory and criticism employing psychoanalytic framework (Judith Butler, Jane Flax, Nancy Chodorow, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, among others). *The Story of Zahra* was looked upon through the lens of the concept of subjectivation, which maintains that the process of subject formation is being realized through submission to power, whereas in *Maryam: Keeper of Stories* I analyzed the role of power from the perspective of women's (story)telling, which serves as the main vehicle for undermining the dominant [patriarchal] discourse, in relation to which it takes on a subversive role. *Maryam: Keeper of Stories* also enabled me to correlate the process of [women's] identity formation with the flow of storytelling as well as creation of a work of literature and to explore how the blurring of the lines between storytelling and writing, between the past and the present, between the author and the character and, last but not least, between the creation of a work of literature and the construction of the subject, all contribute to illuminating the fluid boundaries between 'telling', writing and becoming.

Female characters, as well as the [female] protagonists in both novels, Zahra and Maryam, represent those members of society, who have been, in many different aspects, marginalized. Apart from the gendered basis for the marginalization of their life experience, the female protagonists, as well as other male and female characters in the novels, come from the lower and/or poor economic background. As previous scholarship on the topic has shown, it is these classes that represent the most vulnerable population groups in the elaborate system of patron-client relationships that foster the socio-economic inequality permeating the fabric of the Lebanese society; therefore, even as they themselves, to a certain extent, help perpetuate the structures of patriarchal oppression, they are still portrayed as its victims, since they have almost no power at their disposal that would enable them to successfully, and sustainably, challenge the system.

This view is also reflected in the postwar destinies of the novels' protagonists, as *The Story of Zahra* closes with the death of the heroine, and the (life-)stories of the protagonists of Maryam's narrative, as well as Maryam's own, end with their return to the very "institutions of oppression" that they had tried to extricate themselves from in the years of war. The process of social transformation thus rests in the hands of civil society leaders and intellectual elites, among whom a prominent role is being taken up by the voice of female authors.

Keywords: Lebanese Civil War, women writers, modern Arabic literature, Ḥanān ash-Shaykh, 'Alawiyya Ṣubuḥ