



Silencing the Subaltern: Gender-Based Violence, Subjecthood, and the Limits of Representation in the Western and Arabic Novel

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ABSTRACT:

Gendered violence has inspired a substantial body of literary fiction that draws attention to its severity and to the mechanisms that normalize it, yet the forms this attention takes differ sharply across literary traditions. This article develops a comparative framework for gender-based violence in the novel by reading three Western texts: Constance Maud's *No Surrender*, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and Joyce Carol Oates's *We Were the Mulvaney's*, alongside three Arabic novels: Muhammad Husayn Haykal's *Zaynab*, Mohamed Choukri's *For Bread Alone*, and Najwa Barakat's *Oh, Salaam!* Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's theory of the subaltern and Judith Butler's account of gender performativity, the analysis argues that gender-based violence in these texts exceeds the physical, encompassing psychological, institutional, and discursive forms of harm, and that the Western and Arab female characters respond to that harm in patterned but divergent ways: the former largely resist and speak, the latter largely submit and are spoken for. Situating these readings against epidemiological and survey data on gender-based violence in the United States, Egypt, Morocco, and Lebanon, the article contends that the relative marginality of gender-based violence within the Arabic novel's plot structures reproduces, rather than interrupts, the subaltern woman's silence, and it proposes that a literature attentive to this dynamic has an unrealized role to play in naming that violence rather than absorbing it into the texture of ordinary life.

KEY WORDS: gender-based violence, subaltern studies, gender performativity, comparative literature, Arabic novel, feminist literary criticism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

When the phrase 'violence against women' is invoked, it is commonly associated with images of women who have experienced physical abuse. Although intimate partner violence is the most widespread and well-known manifestation of gender-based violence, it is not the only form of violence experienced by women. Gendered violence takes on many forms and affects women from all walks of life; it is not only physical but also psychological, sexual, emotional, and financial. Whether manifested through physical violence or psychological abuse such as gaslighting, gender-based violence constitutes a serious and pervasive global issue. Its long history and persistence across societies have inspired a substantial body of literary works that not only foreground the severity of violence against women but also interrogate the social and cultural mechanisms through which such violence is normalized and perpetuated.

This article examines representations of gendered violence in three Western novels: Constance Maud's *No Surrender*, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and Joyce Carol Oates's *We Were the Mulvaney's* and reads them against three Arabic novels; those being Muhammad Husayn Haykal's *Manāẓir Wa-Akhḷāq Rifīyah*, Mohamed Choukri's *For Bread Alone*, and Najwa Barakat's *Oh, Salaam!*, in order to develop a comparative account of the ways in which gender-based violence is registered, and how often it is left unregistered, in Arabic literature. The Western novels serve as a critical anchor; the Arabic novels are read

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for what they reveal about Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) attitudes toward gender-based violence and about the role Arabic literature plays in either contesting or normalizing it. Each novel depicts a distinct form of gender-based violence and, in doing so, opens onto a distinct sociocultural landscape.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE SUBALTERN WOMAN AND PERFORMATIVE GENDER

This analysis takes as its starting point the Arab woman's subaltern status in both Arab culture and literature, and draws on Gayatri Spivak's groundbreaking essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which she argues that Indian women are doubly oppressed on the grounds of gender and race. Spivak asks why no one in power ever thought to ask the women in question what they wanted, instead of speaking for them; because for Spivak, the subaltern woman is pushed out of hegemonic discourse and spoken for rather than permitted to use her own voice. She concludes that the subaltern cannot speak, and that any attempt to represent and speak for the subaltern appropriates and silences that voice. Applied to the female characters of the Arabic novels under discussion, this framework illuminates the connection between the oppressed Arab woman and the ways in which Arabic literature can itself aid in silencing her. Barakat's *Oh, Salaam!*, for example, includes a rape scene that grants the victim no semblance of personality: nameless and voiceless, she is introduced, raped, and then dies by suicide. Her presence in the novel is brief, functioning chiefly as a device to display the two male characters' savagery. This can be read as a condemnation of sexual assault, yet the novel's treatment of the victim also sustains the very stagnation in Arabic literature's engagement with gender-based violence that it might be read as protesting.

Choukri's *For Bread Alone* offers a comparable case: Mohamed's mother is depicted as a battered woman whose sole narrative purpose is to bear children. She waits for her husband to return from prison and endures countless beatings; even the death of her son at her husband's hands does not lead her to leave him. The novel never explains why she remains by his side, though the cultural stigma attached to unwed, divorced, and single women offers one plausible answer and that is she is afraid of being shamed for being a divorcee. Mona El-Sherif has analyzed Choukri's own position as a subaltern figure and the ways his autobiographical narrative allows the male subaltern to speak, in contrast to his depiction as a silent figure within Euro-American literary and filmic narratives; yet the very fact that Choukri is able to write an autobiographical novel and have it widely read complicates his position as a subaltern. His mother, by contrast, is a subaltern in the fuller sense: a prisoner within her own marriage and her own society, unable to voice her suffering, and constrained by her subordinate position in 1950s Morocco from acting against her husband even if she could voice it.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers a second lens through which to read the Arab woman's response to an oppressive culture. Butler theorizes that gender roles are not inherent but constructed by society, extending Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (330). For de Beauvoir, men's Othering of women is the root of women's oppression: society characterizes men as the default gender, identifying them as "essential" and women as "inessential". Femininity, on this account, is a set of learned behaviors imposed on women from birth to control and subordinate them. Applied to gender-based violence, this suggests that women are conditioned to respond to abuse in ways consistent with an expected femininity. One of patriarchy's key ideologies is men's presumed physical, intellectual, and emotional superiority. Women, presumed docile and submissive, are expected to accept gendered violence as an expression of that superiority. This conditioning, coupled with sociocultural customs that favor men over women, produces an environment well suited to normalizing gender-based violence.

The Western and Arab characters examined here respond to abuse and to the patriarchal systems that enable it in markedly different registers. The Western characters are, on the whole, more active in resisting their oppression; the Arab characters more often take on a compliant role shaped by their sociocultural environment. Conservative MENA societies that privilege men over women, and that place great weight on family honor, foster a culture that blames the woman and conditions her to accept abuse as a deserved punishment. Western authors, in turn, tend to condemn gender-based violence explicitly and to examine patriarchy's impact on women directly, while Arab writers more often approach patriarchal systems obliquely, without placing gender-based violence at the center of the text.

III. SUFFRAGE AND SUBMISSION: *NO SURRENDER* AND *ZAYNAB*

Constance Maud's 1911 novel *No Surrender* gives readers an inside view of the women's suffrage movement and the harsh pushback faced by suffragettes fighting for basic rights. The novel's didactic register can feel repetitive, but it was written at a moment when concepts now taken as settled, gender equality, paid labor, were considered egregious and unfathomable. *No Surrender* follows two women from different social classes who are united in their fight for women's rights. The novel includes scenes of domestic abuse, force-feeding and gendered violence in prison, workplace discrimination, and the ways classism compounds women's subordination. Barbara Caine notes that the English women's movement was not initially aimed to achieve full equality between men and women but toward the removal of the legal restrictions that held women in a subordinate position (537–50). The law was made for men, by men; women were reduced to second-class citizens, legally controlled by fathers and husbands. Sophia A. van Wingerden observes that single women did not possess "the right to her person, property, and income"

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(5). Working women were compensated far less than their male counterparts and had limited options for employment, especially since high-paying professions and many universities were not accessible to them. Married women forfeited what limited rights they had to their husbands, effectively becoming their property. Prior to the Custody of Infants Act of 1873, English mothers had no rights over their children so long as the father was alive, and even after his death a mother could not overturn a paternally appointed guardian's wishes. *No Surrender* depicts the bleak reality that women faced in early twentieth-century Britain.

Where *No Surrender* addresses the suffragettes' fight for legal and civic rights, Haykal's *Zaynab* tackles the devastating effects of forced marriage on a young peasant girl in the Egyptian countryside. Hamdi Sakut notes that most critics credit *Zaynab* as "the first true novel, Egyptian or Arabic, in the precise definition of this genre" (17). The novel takes up forced marriage and its emotional and psychological toll on the Arab woman; Hilary Kilpatrick observes that Haykal draws on realistic Egyptian peasant life to press the case for societal change, particularly around women's rights in Egypt, and in doing so exposes how certain cultural customs create openings for sexist and misogynistic practice. *Zaynab*'s forced marriage costs her not only her autonomy and happiness but, ultimately, her life. The marriage is forced rather than arranged, a distinction that turns on consent. Geetanjali Gangoli et al. argue that the absence of consent in forced marriage makes it a human rights violation, whereas in arranged marriage the spouses delegate the right of consent to their families, and by allowing their families to choose a spouse they indirectly consent to the marriage. Arranged marriage retains broader social acceptability because of its cultural weight in societies that prioritize the preservation of family and tradition over individual self-fulfillment (Gangoli et al.). Dalya Abudi notes that the sons and daughters of Arab families are conditioned to place family above self and are pressured, intentionally or not, to preserve the family's reputation even at the cost of their own happiness (27–34), a dynamic that explains *Zaynab*'s submission to her circumstances.

Although both novels present images of oppressed women and the ways in which those women respond to their oppression diverge sharply, Maud's suffragettes fight back despite violent reprisal. They are loud, rebellious, and heard. *Zaynab*, by contrast, is passive and submissive: she surrenders to her fate and to her family's expectations, and even when forcibly married she does not resist or revolt, becoming instead an obedient housewife who performs domestic labor for her husband's family without complaint. This is not a condemnation of *Zaynab* but of a culture that offers her no room to stand up for herself. Arab identity is heavily inflected by Islam, which is frequently weaponized against women to keep them in a subordinate position, and *Zaynab*'s inability to challenge her family or refuse the forced marriage most plausibly stems from her religious upbringing and her fear of disobeying her parents. Ulfah Yusuf's *The Perplexity of a Muslim Woman* debunks certain myths about Islam's treatment of women and the relationship between Muslim women and their religion, arguing that Muslims' tendency to glorify religious scholars, and to place scholarly interpretation above scripture itself, is the source of Islamic societies' conservatism and sexist treatment of women. The Arab family's emphasis on honor compounds this dynamic by showing that any defiance on *Zaynab*'s part would be read as a shameful act bringing dishonor on her family. Denying *Zaynab* her rights and her voice aligns squarely with Spivak's definition of the subaltern; she is silenced and denied the right to her own personhood. She only breaks free of that subaltern status in the moments before her death when she condemns her mother for forcing her into a marriage to which she never consented. British society's comparatively secular character affords early-1900s women more latitude than their Arab counterparts, and *No Surrender* does not shy from the sexist nature of British society or the poor state of women's legal standing in the period. Yet the fact that *No Surrender* was written by a woman, while *Zaynab* is considered the first Arabic novel written by anyone, male or female, marks the considerable disparity in the developmental stage of Western and Arab literary traditions at the time each text was produced.

IV. THE CLINICAL GAZE AND THE POLITICS OF THE BODY: *WOMAN ON THE EDGE OF TIME*

Marge Piercy's 1976 novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* tells the story of Consuelo "Connie" Ramos, a Mexican-American woman confined to a mental institution who discovers she can communicate with Luciente, an androgynous figure from the future society of Mattapoisett. The novel explores the cruelty of psychiatry and medicine toward female patients, particularly those labeled mentally ill through Connie who is ignored and abused throughout by doctors and other healthcare professionals. Billie Maciunas observes that concepts such as mechanized childbearing, the prioritization of interpersonal relation, and the use of "healing" to address all forms of harm derive from feminist postmodern theories oriented toward building a new egalitarian society rather than reforming the existing elitist and misogynistic one (249–58). Maciunas further argues that the male doctors treating Connie use her instability to justify a "treatment" regime of shock therapy, experimental drugs, and brain implants, prioritizing their research agenda over their patient's mental and physical welfare.

Michel Foucault's concept of the medical gaze, developed in *The Birth of the Clinic*, offers a productive frame for Connie's treatment. Foucault argues that doctors separate the patient's body from the patient's identity in order to fit that body into a biomedical paradigm, viewing the patient as a body experiencing symptoms rather than a person experiencing an illness. This analytic, dehumanizing gaze recasts the patient not as a person in need of help but as a mechanism through which a problem is to be fixed. The concept extends the argument of Foucault's earlier *Madness and Civilization*, which traces the origins and evolution of madness and the mental institution in European societies. There, Foucault locates the asylum's original purpose in the segregation of the mentally ill from the rest of society, and describes the inhumane conditions under which they were confined before the

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development of psychiatry restored a measure of humanity and dignity to their treatment. Even so, Foucault insists that the mentally ill remain largely unable to tell their own stories. Like Connie, they are silenced and spoken over by doctors who no longer see them as people.

Elisabetta Di Minico argues that novels such as *Woman on the Edge of Time* underscore the importance of protecting the body and its spaces, since the oppression of women is closely intertwined with the constriction of their space and the instrumentalization of their bodies in service of a patriarchal regime. Bodies and minds, in this reading, are themselves spaces, and women's bodies in particular come to symbolize Otherness, which is why they are so often abused and violated. For Di Minico, gendered violence is a form of patriarchal domination over women and female autonomy. Piercy devotes considerable narrative space to childbirth and its relation to women's oppression; Kathy Rudy observes that womanhood is culturally bound to biological motherhood, such that a woman's worth becomes tied to her reproductive capacity. In Piercy's imagined future, however, childbearing shifts from live birth to a technological and mechanical process, freeing women to value themselves as independent individuals rather than as child-rearing mothers.

V. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA: *FOR BREAD ALONE*

Where Piercy's novel exposes the healthcare system's inherent sexism and its violent effects on female patients, Choukri's *For Bread Alone* explores domestic abuse and intimate partner violence and their long-term effects on children. An autobiographical novel by Moroccan author Mohamed Choukri, the text is highly controversial and has been subject to heavy censorship for its sexually explicit content and its treatment of drug abuse. It follows Choukri's life from a young boy fleeing famine in the Rif region to a young man embroiled in crime and dissolution in Tangier and Tetouan. Extreme poverty and an unstable home life push the young Mohamed toward theft and swindling, a pattern of behavior that eventually leads to his arrest at the age of twenty. His father physically and verbally abuses both the young protagonist and his mother, and the family's limited means force them to share a single room, which leaves Mohamed to witness his mother's abuse at close range and to develop, in turn, an intense hatred of his father.

Patrizia Romito, examining the mechanisms behind society's disregard or outright denial of violence against women and children, theorizes that domestic violence and rape stem from men's desire to control women and exercise power over them, and argues that gendered violence functions as a deliberate act of retaliation against women who step outside the confines of what is expected of them; for Romito, such violence is inflicted to punish women, and society frequently declines to condemn or oppose it. Joyce E. Williams maintains that girls are taught to be scared from a very young age so they grow up to be fearful women. Rape culture thrives on female fear because it keeps women in a controlled and subordinate role through fearmongering, limiting their mobility, and restricting their independence. "To grow up female [...] is to internalize a fear unknown to males – knowledge that you can be raped" (3). Williams acknowledges that while men can also be victims of rape, they are not socialized to expect and fear rape the same way women are.

Alongside his father's violent outbursts, the young Mohamed also witnesses intimate scenes between his parents following each fight and their subsequent reconciliation, and he internalizes this destructive dynamic, misreading it as love. He comes to believe that physical and verbal abuse is a normal, even necessary, part of how a relationship works and how a man demonstrates affection. The International Men and Gender Equality Survey, Middle East and North Africa (IMAGES MENA) reports that "men who, as children, experienced violence at home were significantly more likely to perpetrate physical, emotional, or economic violence against their wives; in addition, men who witnessed violence against their mothers in childhood were more likely to use sexual violence against their wives" (El Feki et al. 136). The novel names a dangerous practice across the MENA region: the normalization of intimate partner violence as an uncontested feature of ordinary life. That normalization has a public register as well as a private one. In 2016, Moroccan state television aired, with an alarming tone of casualness, a segment instructing battered women in how to conceal their bruises with makeup (Kennedy). The shocking segment garnered much criticism and controversy, but its initial broadcasting in the first place brings attention to the normalization of violence against women and the social mechanisms that prioritize concealing its visible consequences over addressing its underlying causes.

A 2003 study led by a team of healthcare researchers found that domestic violence in Arab and Islamic countries is widely accepted or, at minimum, ignored (Douki et al. 165–71). Cultural factors in these countries contribute to the acquittal of the abuser, typically the husband, and to the normalization of physical violence, which is frequently justified on religious grounds or reframed as a legitimate form of disciplining the victim. The same study found that domestic abuse produces devastating psychological effects that sometimes culminate in suicide, and Douki et al. argue that the broad social acceptability of domestic abuse is a systemic problem as much as a societal one: maintaining a family's reputation is frequently treated as more important than a victim's wellbeing, and victims are discouraged from involving the authorities, so that domestic violence cases are handled internally wherever possible. The study identifies three primary justifications offered for wife-battering: religious grounds, the wife's financial dependency on the husband, and prevailing notions of marriage. Where laws exist to protect domestic abuse victims, they are seldom invoked, since both the authorities and victims' own families discourage them from pressing charges against their husbands. Douki

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et al. further argue that Islamic texts on the discipline of a wife are frequently misconstrued to legitimize spousal abuse, an argument that echoes Yusuf's critique of religious scholars' misinterpretation of the Quran in the service of a patriarchal system that serves their own interests.

A 2012 study identified victim-blaming and fear of retaliation as major obstacles that deter Arab abuse victims from reporting the violence they experience (Usta et al.). Men, the study finds, often engage in domestic abuse to exert power and maintain control within the relationship; Jennifer Scarduzio et al., however, stress the importance of distinguishing female perpetrators who use violence in self-defense from those who use it as retaliation, and criticize gender-asymmetry arguments on the grounds that they "often led to research that conflates sex and gender" (5). Scarduzio et al. find that while both male and female aggressors are read as emotional, female aggressors are framed as scared or over-emotional while comparable aggression from male perpetrators is treated as expected and accepted, with blame frequently redirected onto the victim. These same stereotypes, the authors argue, are harmful to non-abusive men as well, since they constrain men's ability to express emotion, particularly fear; male victims, correspondingly, are often ridiculed on the assumption that men are inherently stronger than women. Intimate partner abuse, framed this way, becomes legible as a response rather than an act, which reinforces victim-blaming and displaces accountability from the abuser onto the abused.

VI. RAPE, BLAME, AND FAMILY RUPTURE: *WE WERE THE MULVANEYS* AND *OH, SALAAM!*

Joyce Carol Oates's 1996 novel *We Were the Mulvaney*s follows the Mulvaney family as they confront the rape of their teenage daughter and its effects on the family as a whole. The novel is unusually forceful in its depiction of sexual assault and of the culture of shame and ostracism that assault can breed; the Mulvaney's evolution from a loving family into a dysfunctional one illustrates how sexual assault inflicts psychological harm not only on individuals but on families. The novel opens in 1976, establishing the Mulvaney's as a close and loving family unit, before their daughter Marianne is raped by an upperclassman at a Valentine's Day dance. Marianne does not tell anyone what happened and blames herself instead, carrying the shame and guilt for several days before her secret is discovered; a disclosure that initiates the family's unraveling. Her father can no longer bear to look at her, and the family sends her to live with a distant relative as its unity quickly disintegrates. Marianne internalizes this blame and shame and spends years avoiding any attachment she might form with others.

Although the novel is sympathetic toward Marianne, she is never given an opportunity to fully process her trauma or to heal; the rape becomes intertwined with the Mulvaney's response to it and with the destruction of their family identity, while Marianne's own trauma recedes from view, subordinated to the family's strained relationships. The novel is among the most sympathetic and humane fictional treatments of female sexual abuse, yet it remains largely mediated through male perspective, chiefly those of Marianne's brother Patrick and her father Michael. Nathan Shank argues that Oates deliberately underrepresents her characters' interiority, Marianne's above all, as a way of emphasizing their trauma, and that Marianne's underrepresented consciousness can be attributed in part to the narration of her younger brother Judd, whose limited view of his sister reduces her to her trauma. The novel nonetheless offers a realistic account of rape's destructive effects and of the long-term reach of sexual trauma.

Najwa Barakat's 1999 novel *Oh, Salaam!* unfolds in an unnamed war-torn Arab country, presumed to be Lebanon, and follows two war criminals, Luqman and Najeeb, and their associate Salaam, the fiancée of their deceased friend, whom the two men feel obligated to care for but instead exploit for her money while treating her as a burden. Luqman, a former bomb-maker, and Najeeb, a former sniper, thrived during wartime, when their services were in demand and well compensated. The recent "peace" strips them of both income and status, and they respond by opening a rat-extermination business funded by Salaam's money, capitalizing on the same homicidal instincts that once served them in war. Narrated largely by Luqman, whose cruelty and misogyny mirror his surroundings, the novel portrays both male characters as women-hating and sadistic, their violence a reflection of the culture around them. Women are described in demeaning terms, and the two men regard the opposite sex chiefly as sexual conquest, recalling, with what can only be described as fondness, a girl they once raped who later took her own life. When Luqman meets Shireen, a beautiful upper-class young woman, his description of her departs sharply from his treatment of other women in the novel, becoming complimentary and awestruck rather than derogatory, a shift that exposes how social class and wealth determine a person's perceived worth. Salaam, meanwhile, fears becoming a spinster and leverages her money for men's approval. The social stigma attached to an unmarried woman preoccupies her and eventually drives her to the involuntary manslaughter of her own brother. Although less overtly violent than her male associates, Salaam is not exempt from a narrow view of the opposite gender. Barakat offers a nuanced portrait of gender dynamics and class conflict that reflects a broken society; the novel ends with the deaths of all three principal characters.

Leslie Lebowitz and Susan Roth examine the ways rape victims draw on cultural beliefs about women and female sexuality to process trauma, arguing that sociocultural factors reinforce the notion that a woman's worth lies in her sexual appeal to men, and that women internalize culturally located ideas about rape that place blame on the victim. Many female rape victims, accordingly, blame themselves on the strength of these preconceived cultural notions. The study also traces how rape survivors make sense of the assault and its aftermath, finding that the commodification of female sexuality means a raped woman is regarded as damaged

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goods. Her value as a person remains tied to her sexuality to such a degree that not even an act as violent as rape displaces it. Many of the study's interview subjects reported feeling disgusted with themselves and their sexuality; Lebowitz and Roth observe that "[w]ith the loss of sexual value women lose some of their humanity" (372). Non-virgin victims, the study further found, were treated with comparative indifference on the assumption that prior sexual experience diminished the urgency of the assault, and several subjects described family and friends' harsh reactions. One woman's mother considered her "soiled" once she was no longer a virgin, while another's friend suggested she had it coming because she had been hitchhiking.

Fragments of Marianne's rape are scattered throughout *We Were the Mulvaney's*, and her rapist is shown blaming her for his own assault, insisting at one point that she "wanted it" (Oates 71) and that "nothing happened [that she] didn't want and ask for" (Oates 90); her classmates, in turn, are heard saying that she "asked for it" (Oates 162, 298). In Barakat's novel, Luqman and Najeeb recall raping a girl who committed suicide the following day, with Najeeb insisting that the victim tempted them and bears the blame for their act: "isn't she the one who came to us wanting it, without any pressure or threats? [...] and when we began having some fun, she began resisting, saying no, and playing hard to get" (Barakat 57). Victim-blaming of this kind is a familiar response to rape, shifting blame onto the victim to lessen the rapist's guilt or to justify the act outright; the notion that a victim was "asking for it" contradicts the very definition of rape, which is by nature forced and unwanted. As Kate Harding observes, sexual assault is sustained by myths that allow a culture of rape to take hold and become normalized, among them the myth of "asking for it". As Harding puts it, "it is literally impossible to ask for rape" (30), since rape is by definition sex that was not asked for. The idea is simple, yet it continues to be disregarded or deliberately ignored.

VII. MEASURING THE UNSPOKEN: GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN QUANTITATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies gender-based violence as a global issue and a public health problem of epidemic proportions, reporting that "more than one in three women (35.6%) globally report having experienced physical and/or sexual partner violence, or sexual violence by a non-partner" (35). A global study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime on gender-related killing found that a staggering 137 women are killed every day by a family member (10); the study also found that although the largest absolute number of women and girls killed occurs in Asia, African women face the greatest risk of being killed by intimate partners or other family members, while the risk of gender-based homicide is lowest in Europe and Oceania.

According to IMAGES MENA, nearly half of surveyed Egyptian men report having used physical violence against their wives, and a fifth report having used economic violence. In Morocco, 61.2% of surveyed married women reported emotional abuse from a spouse, 26.2% reported physical violence, 19.2% reported economic violence, and 23.4% reported sexual violence or marital rape. In Lebanon, IMAGES MENA found that nearly 60% of women reported some form of street-based sexual harassment, while 10.4% reported physical intimate partner violence; the survey further notes that "many qualitative research [Lebanese] participants said that conflict, displacement, militarization, and war had increased the frequency of intimate partner violence in their homes" (El Feki et al. 192).

Although these countries have enacted laws to protect women and punish perpetrators of gender-based violence, such laws remain largely unenforced, and public attitudes toward gender equality and gender-based violence continue to be shaped by conservative and patriarchal norms.

VIII. DISCUSSION: LITERATURE, SILENCE, AND THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION

Across the Arabic novels considered here, images of gender-based violence do not occupy the narrative foreground; they take a secondary role to the main plotline. Even in *Zaynab*, where Haykal deliberately depicts forced marriage, the romance between the characters remains the novel's organizing concern. In *For Bread Alone*, the depiction of gendered violence is presented as an inconsequential fact of life, as though the violence experienced by female characters carries no real narrative weight of its own and functions instead as background texture for the protagonist's story. This is not to suggest that gendered violence is peripheral to lived experience; rather, the nonchalance with which these texts register it is itself the problem.

The Western novels discussed above, by contrast, place gender-based violence at the core of their narratives, making it impossible for the reader to look away, and they confront readers with the material reality of gendered violence and its short- and long-term effects on victims. This centering is largely absent from the Arabic novels, which tend to privilege love, relationship, and class struggle as their organizing themes. The sociocultural system of representation that produces this asymmetry allows MENA literary cultures to overlook the battered woman's humanity even while registering her existence. There is ample room within the Arabic novel to engage such concepts while also foregrounding gender-based violence and demonstrating its damaging effects on those who survive it.

Read together, the six novels examined here demonstrate that gender-based violence exceeds physical abuse. It assumes many forms, and although these forms overlap across the corpus, each novel depicts at least one distinct register of gendered harm, a range that underscores the persistence of the issue despite the substantial progress in women's legal and civic rights achieved over the twentieth century. Each novel is also anchored in a distinct national and historical setting, and the progression of time across

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these settings marks a further axis of comparison. The novels register, unevenly, how Western and Arab societies' responses to gendered violence and physical abuse have shifted, or failed to shift, over time. The quantitative findings surveyed above situate these literary representations within a measurable pattern of gendered violence across the United States, Egypt, Morocco, and Lebanon, and help account for the divergent behaviors exhibited by the novels' female characters, particularly the Arab women among them.

Spivak's theory of the subaltern and the non-white woman's double oppression offers a guide to the cultural and social position these characters occupy. An inability to act as an autonomous, vocal member of society is precisely what constitutes the subaltern condition, and Zaynab's and Salaam's submission to the status quo can be read as an internalization of patriarchal expectation and prescribed femininity. Butler's account of gender as learned and performative extends this reading, helping to explain the comparative stagnation of MENA societies on questions of women's rights. The actions and reactions of these abused female characters correspond closely to the gender roles and femininity scripted for them, and that scripted femininity, transmitted across generations, does much of the work of sustaining patriarchy's violent effects and the region's lackluster response to gender-based violence.

IX. CONCLUSION

The comparative reading developed here suggests that the disparity between Western and Arabic fiction's treatment of gender-based violence is not incidental but structural, rooted in differing relationships between the novel as a form, the subaltern woman as a subject, and the patriarchal systems each literature is embedded within. Where the Western novels examined here place gendered violence at the center of the narrative and grant their female characters an increasing measure of voice and resistance, the Arabic novels more often relegate that violence to the margins of plots organized around love, family honor, and class, reproducing at the level of narrative structure the very silencing that Spivak identifies at the level of discourse. This asymmetry is not a fixed property of Arabic literature but a historically contingent one, shaped by the particular sociocultural and religious contexts each novel represents; it follows that a body of Arabic fiction more deliberately attentive to gender-based violence, rather than a fiction that treats it as ambient background, could begin to close that gap. Future comparative work might extend this framework to contemporary Arabic fiction written after the region's more recent conflicts and social movements, where the relationship between gendered violence, narrative form, and women's voice may be shifting in ways the earlier texts examined here do not yet register.

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