

The Sense of Alienation in Hoda Barakat's *The Tiller of Waters*.**Mr. Mohammed Abdullah Hamood Hamid**

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Abstract

This paper tries to examine one of the major themes presented in Hoda Barakat's novel; *The Tiller of Waters*. It investigates the theme of isolation and loneliness. Isolation, loneliness and alienation are not new topics for Arabic literature. They are interrelated to the ways Arabs live and think; and reflect the state of sociopolitical instability. The major themes in the war literature in the postcolonial era in the Arabic society are related to alienation and the trauma of war. Isolation is one of the bad effects from the civil war in Arabic communities. The novel; *The Tiller of Waters* presents the tragedy of the protagonist who suffers from the war and lives in an isolation and loneliness within a society busy with war and violence. He suffers from loneliness, and from being alienated and isolated from the other members of their own society.

Keywords: Alienation, Civil war, Lebanon, Hoda Barakat, Refugee

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Introduction

The Tiller of Waters is a thriller story written by Hoda Barakat. Barakat is one of the greatest contemporary Lebanese novelists. She is considered as one of the most important contemporary female voices against war in the Arabic literature. She was born in 1952 in Maronite family. She lived in Beirut during the civil war then moved to Paris where she is living there now and working as journalist. She experienced the Lebanese civil war which has erupted in 1975 till 1990. She tries to display in her works a lot of suffering that the people were experiencing during that brutal war. "The Lebanese civil war, which always forms the backdrop of Hoda Barakat's narratives" (Al-Samman p.19)¹. Barakat wrote many novels during and after the Lebanese civil war and in her works always focuses on the civil war as a subject matter for her works. "The works of Hoda Barakat constitute a fine example of the Lebanese novelistic discourse that takes shape after the civil war" (Ashour 31)². "Baraka's narratives depict a Lebanon ravaged by Civil War and sectarian division. Her characters are deeply affected psychologically by the chaos and disruption of war" (132)³. Barakat wrote many of novels such as *The Stone*

of *Laughter* and *The Tiller of Waters*. *The Stone of Laughter* display the lonely life of the protagonist (Khalil) who closed himself in his flat during the war. *The Tiller of Waters* is also a story that depicts isolation of the novel protagonist (Niqula) in his basement during the brutal war.

By the way, *The Tiller of Waters* is a narrative novel about the life of the protagonist, Niqula Mitri, a fabric merchant. He stays in Beirut during the severest days of the civil war. He escapes from the civil war and violence after he lost his home to live in isolation in the basement of his father's fabric shop in the center of the city. While the upper floor of the shop was destroyed during the war, the lower level with all its natural fabrics was unharmed. During his isolation in the basement, He refuges to the past by his memory with the stories of fabric with his Kurdish maid Shamsa to pass the trauma and consider a future. "Therefore, in order to resist death/war/forgetfulness, he tells stories about the past which was peaceful in order to keep that memory alive" (Amin 115)⁴. While the war destroyed all the physical features of the city in his isolation, Niqula rebuilds the history of his city by re-telling the stories of natural fabrics. Niqula dies in the streets of Beirut before he finishes the stories of fabric. His voice is rising and rising to become the chaos in all the city of Beirut asking his father's soul about his killer.

***The Tiller of Water* (Ḥārith al-miyāh)**

The Tiller of Water is a mythical memory and shifting novel. It was published in Arabic in 1998 and translated into English by Marilyn Booth in 2004. *The Tiller of*

Waters is one of the most famous novels which display the civil war in Lebanon that lasts nearly two decades. It is not as narrative and traditional novel so it depicts the horror and ruin brutal civil war impacts on individuals and society as well. This novel is also an attempt from the protagonist to survive in his isolation in which his life is reduced to an animal-like existence. “Barakat saturates her character’s memory with painful details and interlaces them with something altogether different, largely by imagining the suffering of someone who kills and was tortured not for his murder but at random” (Al-Ghadeer, 116)⁵.

The Lebanese civil war is the main theme in *The Tiller of Water* and that brutal civil war has caused many catastrophic outcomes, socially and individually. Isolation and loneliness are among those bad effects on the person and society. Niqula is but an example and micro-image of all Lebanese who isolated themselves and tried to survive far from the war. So, they refused to be involved in the wars and violence by preferring isolation to participation in making death. Niqula isolates himself and decides to stay alone in the fabric shop away from the war and violence. Barakat gives special focus to the protagonist of Niqula who lives in alienation and solitude away of the war affairs. He lives in an isolated city between the ruin in the center of Beirut which changed to a city of ghosts. “Barakat constructs an isolated world in a war-torn city to generate evocative scenes that could not occur in a realist representation of Beirut and its peripheries” (P. 116)⁶.

The novel is constructed on the nostalgia and regret of the protagonist's memory in his new home. Niqula returns to his home after a short staying with the family's friend in his house to discover it has been taken by strangers; a pregnant woman with her child. He gives up the house and without any clear choice, is drawn without awareness to the middle of Beirut (Souk Tawile) where his fabric shop lies. His happiness is undescribed when he found that the basement of his fabric shop was still in a good condition after the fire of war and violence collapsed all the shops to ruin. "Everything was just as it had been. Not even a trace of dust.... it was the most beautiful moment of my life, yes, since my birth" (Barakat, 2012, P.26)⁷. So he decides to use the basement as a home escaping from the violence and war in Beirut.

Niqula in his isolation becomes as lonely as Adam in that land where everything has been destroyed by war. He starts to adapt with his new life between destruction and stray dogs. He tries to build his peaceful and secured world and creates his own happiness away from war by using tissues. He makes what appears to be a house livable, with furniture and piping made of fabric. He thinks himself happier than before. His happiness is based on the tissue and travelling in his memory with his Kurdish maid, Shamsa.

*After I undid the ties and unrolled the tight bolts of cloth
from their spools, I began to work my imagination. I let my
desires guide me as I arranged and furnished my home,
spurred on by an irresistible ecstasy. (P.40)⁸*

In his isolation, he doesn't want to contact with any human outside his area because he was afraid of all people who are filled with evil. He starts to take trips in his town which became neglected and abandoned. The civil war changed it into Ghosts town. He doesn't want to see more ruin and destruction as he realizes the awareness the reality of war. This refusal of facing the reality of the war is because he thinks that the isolation is better from facing the war and violence. So, he thinks that alienation is the only way to survive.

Niqula found himself a stranger in his own city. In his isolation he does not encounter with a gangster. His encounter is with fierce dogs which are spread on the streets instead of gunmen. The alienation and war also make them fierce in the death city "They're wolves, I said to myself"(P.57)⁹. After a long chasing from street to another, this encounter ends by the friendship between the leader of dogs and Nigula, who realizes that the dog did not want to fight. It was only searching for a new master after his first master disappeared in the civil war.

Niqula in the middle of ruin and destruction finds his happiness and joy. The fabric recalls him with his family and his maid, Shamsa. His past memory refused to depart his loneliness and solitude. In these stories of fabrics is the history of Lebanon and its culture. "His narratives connect past time and space with the present and underscore Beirut's position within a global culture that rejoices in Lebanon's prosperity and suffers for its woes" (Amin 108,109)¹⁰. By this history, he tries to keep his identity and his city

from erasing by the brutal war and by the new colonizer. "Harith al-miyah interweaves characters' ancestral histories with the mundane activities of the narrator as he tries to survive alone in the bombed-out city of the novels present" (Dyer 17)¹¹.

On top of that, Barakat embodies isolation in *The Tiller of Waters* as the exile. The protagonist of her novel *The Tiller of Waters* isolates himself as a stranger in the down level of his fabric away from his people and society. Barakat embodies Beirut as an isolated city from the other people. "Barakat constructs an isolated world in a war-torn city to generate evocative scenes that could not occur in a realist representation of Beirut and its peripheries" (Al-Ghadeer 116)¹². This isolation is a disappointment in the case of Niqula and his exile moves away from humanity. Niqula's life in his isolation in Beirut during the brutal civil war is similar to living in exile. Edward Said, the eminent Palestinian critic, displays the exile of the protagonist Niqula, who is searching for his peaceful city from his childhood. The war compelled him leave his city and life in isolated and homeless condition.

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted.

(173)¹³

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, war and violence, as we know, have catastrophic and agonizing outcomes everywhere. In her novel, *The Tiller of Water*, Barakat displays the theme isolation which a tragic result of the war. The person refuges to isolate himself and live a lonely escaping from the war and violence. He wants to live in a safe place even between the ruin or away from his society rather than being involved in that wars and violence as we see and experience it today in our Arab societies. Lots of people unwillingly leave their homes and properties to survive from the civil wars and search for the peaceful shelter. They find themselves inforced to adapt new life in their isolation and far from their people and properties as the protagonist of the novel Niqula did in his alienation.

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