

## Engendering Critique: Postnational Feminism in Postcolonial Syria

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In his much-cited essay, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” Fredric Jameson controversially maintained that “all third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical” (1986, 69). For Jameson, nationalist allegories substituted in postcolonial societies for modern European literature’s focus on the individual. “In the third-world situation,” Jameson specified, “the intellectual is always in one way or another a political intellectual” (74). In foregrounding the primacy of the political in postcolonial contexts, Jameson maintained, third world texts preclude the concept of art’s autonomy from the social realm that has so heavily informed European modernism. According to the Jamesonian thesis, in postcolonial societies, “private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (69). Although Jameson’s assessments were intended less as a judgment of a limitation than as a value-neutral taxonomy of differences, his axiom continues to arouse controversy among theorists of the postcolonial condition.<sup>1</sup>

Jameson read postcolonial literature from the vantage point of the metropole. As such, the analytical framework he offers, so helpful in elucidating the transnational ambit of postcolonial literary form, risks obscuring the local contexts that are equally salient to grasping the politics of literature. As Therese Saliba and Jeanne Kattan argue, claims to the “fluid movement of texts across national borders” all too frequently ignore “the reception of these texts within their own countries, thereby obscuring the roles of power, economics, literacy, and the marketing of so-called Third World authors, particularly women, in the global economy” (2000, 84).

Militating against such disjunctures, and in an effort to better track what Samer Frangie (2011) has termed “the broken conversation between postcolonialism and intellectuals in the periphery,” this essay briefly documents the attempt of a Syrian graduate student, whom I will call Zahra, to cultivate her own conception of transnational feminism by bringing together critical strands in postcolonial theory and Arabic women’s literature.<sup>2</sup>

While the desirability of engaging postcolonial literature transnationally is self-evident, transnational engagements cannot displace the need for engaging with postcolonial texts in their local contexts and, in particular, for tracing the reception of these texts among readers who are the object of their representations. Attending to the interface between transnational and local, national as well as pan-Arab, receptions will enable us to better discern the tensions that enrich and complicate the postcolonial feminist agenda. Far from aspiring to produce a pure or authentic account of indigenous Syrian feminism, I aim here to problematize the geography of contemporary feminism, including my own location within this intellectual movement.

The conflation of postcolonial literature with third world nationalism has been the subject of multivalent contestations. Meanwhile, the implications of postcolonial allegory for transnational feminism have been less thoroughly scrutinized. Allegories frame literary discourse as generically masculine. But what if a feminist writer who undertakes to speak for, to, and against a given national formation refuses to subordinate her gender to the nation’s supracommunal claims? As a category of analysis, gender cuts through allegory’s surface, modulating monologic representations to resistant female, or feminist, voices. It follows that postcolonial literary texts read in locally grounded feminist contexts will refute the mainstream Jamesonian model of third world cultural dissemination.

By way of engendering our understanding of the postcolonial political self while diverging from the still-normative conception of third world literature that reduces all texts that emerge from this world to mono-dimensional representations, this essay considers the nexus between nationalist and feminist postcolonial agendas in contemporary Syrian academic life and discourse. By focusing on the reception of transnational texts in a postcolonial environment, I look beyond the traditional scope of literary criticism. Elizabeth Thompson’s proposition that “even as colonial peoples waged nationalist battles for independence they inevitably participated in the very political order they rejected” (2000, 1), made with respect

to Syria during the French Mandate (1920–46), is substantiated by the material adduced in this essay. Looking beyond literature even as I read literary texts in the contexts of their most powerful political signification enables me to track how, in the post-9/11 world, transnational feminism has become implicated in powerful geopolitical agendas, thereby making “a principled politics of solidarity” across lines of nation, class, race, and gender “increasingly problematic” (Kandiyoti 2007, 505).

The dialectic between the politics of anticolonial resistance and the colonial residue inhering in postcolonial nationalism has been famously tracked by Partha Chatterjee, who regards the “refusal of nationalism to make the woman’s question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state” as one of the most basic fractures in the ideology of transnational postcolonial liberation (1989, 631).<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, theorists critical of Subaltern Studies’ distance from relations of material production have aimed to revitalize the “flagging energy of Marxist theorization” by bringing feminist thought to bear on postcolonial liberation (Bannerji 2000, 904–5).<sup>4</sup> Situated at the intersection of these two contradictory tendencies in contemporary engagements with the postcolonial condition, this essay tracks some of the ways in which the woman’s question is increasingly being posed from *within* nationalist discourses, even while remaining on the peripheries of political discourse in the postcolony.

Even as we acknowledge with Jameson the politicization of representation that the postcolonial condition inflicts on postcolonial texts, it is necessary to insist on the inadequacy of his hypothesis, and not only for reasons that have already been explored by others. From the vantage point of this analysis, Jameson misses the mark by factoring gender out of his “third world + literature = allegory” equation. His reduction of third world literature to postcolonial allegory joins a broader historical failure within Euro-American feminism to globalize its geographic foci, notwithstanding the important work that has been done to theorize the intersection of transnational feminism and the postcolonial condition in recent decades (see, for example, Mohanty 1991). By drawing on a thesis defense I observed in Damascus during the summer of 2010, several months before the beginning of the current atrocities in March 2011, I seek to identify a postcolonial feminism that looks beyond the nationalist elision of gender politics in order to ensure that nothing will “fracture the unity essential to the anticolonial struggle” (Charrad 2011, 424). While the encounters that inform this discussion transpired in pre-war Syria, and my discussion is

inevitably circumscribed by this timeline, the disjuncture of national and gendered consciousness that follows has relevance for any society torn apart by war, and particularly for societies shaped by colonial legacies, including, in the case of Syria, that of the French Mandate and less direct influence from the United States.<sup>5</sup>

Like sociologist Mounira Charrad, I am persuaded that a transnational feminism of the future should move beyond the anti-Orientalist critiques that have productively influenced earlier decades of feminist critique (2011, 431). In order to move beyond Orientalism, however, we first have to move beyond the ignorance and prejudice that enabled Orientalist structures of knowledge to constrain intellectual inquiry for centuries, particularly in the academic disciplines that are the object of Edward Said's critique. Such reconceptualization entails reconceiving feminism on the basis of the rich variety of ways in which gender has been experienced and interrogated across the Arab world, as well as in other post- and precolonial geographies.<sup>6</sup> While I cannot begin to address all these many alternative feminisms of the past and the future in the space of this essay, I do introduce one specific alternative trajectory, which I encountered while seeking to expand my own geographic awareness of the stakes of literary form.

### **Writers and Receptions**

In the summer of 2010, an MA thesis titled "A Post-colonial Reading of Ghadah al-Samman: A Comparative Study in the Light of Edward Said's Theory" was defended at the University of Damascus. A Syrian writer who was educated in London and has lived in Paris for the past thirty years, Ghadah al-Samman (b. 1942) commands an international readership in Persian, English, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese.<sup>7</sup> Al-Samman's (1992) correspondence with the Palestinian writer and political activist Ghassan Kanafani, with whom she had romantic relations in the 1960s, is an important contribution to modern Arabic belles-lettres. In addition to her writings, al-Samman's family lineage makes her important to the Syrian nation-state, for her father was the president of the University of Damascus from 1962 to 1964. In part because of her writings' incendiary content, al-Samman founded her own publishing house in 1977, thereby ensuring that she would be able to write and publish whatever she wished. In the words of Palestinian critic Salma

Jayyusi, al-Samman has, together with Nawal al-Saadawi, done more than any other contemporary Arabic writer to drive “women’s emotional, sexual, and social liberation into people’s consciousness” (2008, 1033).

Alongside Arab women writers of earlier generations such as May Zia-deh (1886–1941) and Nazik al-Mala’ika (1923–2010), al-Samman was recently named by contemporary female Palestinian college students as one of their favorite writers (Saliba and Kattan 2000, 95). Tellingly, these names are missing from the global pantheon of postcolonial literature and command less recognition outside the Arab world than their widely translated and Anglophone counterparts (for example, al-Saadawi and Ahdaf Soueif, respectively). This list is, however, indicative of the difference in the circulation of Arabic women writers within and outside the Arab world. Hence, notwithstanding her many decades in Parisian exile, al-Samman belongs to the category of “established [Arabic women] writers” who remain “relatively unexposed outside the Arabophone world” (Moore 2008, 4).

For the Lebanese critic Wafiq Ghurayzi, sex is “the major theme” of al-Samman’s oeuvre, which attacks “to the roots the evils that suffocate, up to our age, male-female relations in the Arab-Muslim world” (2009, 7). Perhaps because of her original treatment of sexual relations, al-Samman wields great influence among female Arab readers across the Arab world’s diverse constituencies. In light of her extensive local and pan-Arab influence, the relative absence of critical reflection on her oeuvre in histories of modern Arabic literature is striking.<sup>8</sup> Even more striking is the paucity of scholarship that engages with al-Samman’s take on gender and sexual relations, particularly from theoretical and postcolonial perspectives.

Among al-Samman’s many fictional and nonfictional writings, there is one that boldly addresses the tension between feminism and postcolonial nationalism: “Our Constitution—We the Liberated Women” (1961). This text was written in response to an antifeminist polemic by the influential *qadi* (judge) of Damascus, Shaykh Ali al-Tantawi (1901–1999).<sup>9</sup> In this brief manifesto, which is not included in al-Samman’s collected writings, the author justifies feminism in Islamic terms, and Islam in feminist terms, long before the florescence of Islamic feminism in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on the example of Aisha, Muhammad’s favorite wife and the “mother of the believers” (*umm-al-mu’minin*), who was distinguished for her military courage during the Battle of the Camel (656 CE), which successfully concluded the first Islamic civil war, al-Samman argues that feminist con-

sciousness is entailed in Islamic piety and vice versa.

Although the fact that she was writing in response to al-Tantawi's polemic may have influenced her turn to religious discourse, al-Samman clearly perceived the relevance of Islamic traditions to her vision for transnational feminism. Addressing herself as much to antifeminist Islamism as to anti-Islamic feminism, al-Samman insists that "Islam delivered us from the deserts where we were being buried like cadavers" (qtd. in Al-Samman 1990, 140). While delineating the many ways in which Islam facilitated the historical liberation of women, al-Samman articulates a feminism that is enriched by Islamic pasts. "Islam," al-Samman argues, "forbade us to be dolls decorating tables and playthings for the god of petrol, and butterflies around the colored lamps of vanities" (1990,140). By implicating petrol, arguably the most significant element in the contemporary Arab world's political economy, into the gendered politics of everyday life, al-Samman further conceives possible alignments between postcolonial critique and transnational feminism.<sup>11</sup>

Zahra's engagement with al-Samman's oeuvre was not the only thing that conferred on the thesis defense at University of Damascus its explosive quality. Even more controversial was Zahra's attempt to situate as feminist a Syrian writer who had, even if only incompletely, been incorporated into Syria's postcolonial nationalist canon. Deliberately or not, such a project flagrantly rejected the conventional wisdom, common to Syrian intellectual circles across the gender divide, that, in Syria, there is "no such thing as women's literature" (Cooke 2005, 50). The conversation staged in the thesis between al-Samman's writings and Saidian contrapuntalism—largely as expounded in Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)—catalyzed its author into a confrontation between postcolonial nationalism and a gendered critique that she was in the process of clarifying for herself.

In European and particularly North American scholarship, Said's theses on Orientalism marked a watershed in multiple disciplines, including feminist studies, although their heavy emphasis on European representations is now increasingly recognized as having limited purchase within postcolonial knowledge formations.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, in the Arab world, Said's impact has been less direct and more ambivalent. Inasmuch as the reception of Said's *Orientalism* centrally shaped the reception of Zahra's thesis, it is worth disentangling some aspects of the Arab encounter with Said before turning to her work. *Orientalism* entered the Arab world three years following its English-language publication in a translation by the eminent

Syrian literary critic Kamal Abu Deeb, who had made his reputation in the British academy two years prior as an interpreter of the medieval literary theorist ʿAbd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d. 1078) (see Said 1981 and Abu Deeb 1979, respectively).

With respect to Syrian and Lebanese intellectual life, Frangie has documented the ambivalent reception of Said's work, which ranged from "enthusiastic adoption of his thesis to more suspicious evaluations" (2011, 43).<sup>13</sup> I encountered a similar ambivalence toward Said among some sectors of the Syrian academic establishment, but I also observed another form of engagement, which is not documented by Frangie in his helpful readings of the critiques of *Orientalism* by Sadiq al-ʿAzm (b. 1934) and Mahdi ʿAmil (1936–1987). While working in collaboration with colleagues and friends at the University of Damascus, I observed the ways in which Said's postcolonial project had been harnessed to the agenda of postcolonial nationalism and placed in opposition to transnational feminism.<sup>14</sup> As I witnessed the short-circuiting of potentially productive alignments between feminism and the postcolonial project effected by this reductive reading of Said, I gained a better understanding of how, when effectively deployed, feminist critique can disrupt the homogenous and overwhelmingly masculine solidarity inculcated by the nation-state.

A likely reason for the divergence between my impressions of Said's reception in Syria and Frangie's is that, whereas I was exposed primarily to the views of members of the Syrian academic establishment who saw in *Orientalism* an argument that could bolster their nationalist agendas, Frangie engages primarily with Arab intellectuals who were dissidents within their own societies. Far from being members of the academic establishment, al-ʿAzm and ʿAmil are contrarian figures for whom critique, in the Marxian sense, is the purpose of intellectual life. Such a relationship to critique did not hold for the judges of Zahra's thesis, who were more interested in domesticating Saidian critique for nationalist ends than in opening it up to feminist interrogation.

Among the academics in the English department of the University of Damascus, Said had been canonized to the extent that fierce political battles were waged over the minutiae of his texts. There was a contest of authority in place among senior faculty to determine who was the most qualified reader of Said. The chair of the English department, who claimed to be Said's student, regarded his authority as unimpeachable in this regard. This canonization had the effect of placing Said beyond the pale of

criticism, fixing the meaning of his work once and for all, and rendering it unusable for feminist or other forms of political critique.

Reproducing conventionally gendered distinctions between public and private spaces, which correlated to the writings of Said and al-Samman, respectively, the Syrian academic establishment severed these spheres from each other and placed a moratorium on their convergence. As a result of this moratorium, feminism was perceived as intrinsically hostile to postcolonial nationalism and vice versa. When added to the powerful restrictions on free expression that the postcolonial Syrian state had inherited from its French predecessor, these hostilities combined to produce an atmosphere of collectively enforced silence and pushed dissent to spaces beyond the pale of the university context.<sup>15</sup> Such was the state of affairs at the University of Damascus when Zahra's thesis on Saidian contrapuntalism in the works of Ghadah al-Samman was presented to the faculty of the English and Arabic Studies departments in the summer of 2010.

### **The Thesis and the Defense**

Born and raised in a small town in western Syria on the Mediterranean coast, Zahra came to Damascus after receiving her BA from Aleppo University. She worked for a few years in the private sector, improving her English language skills, before entering a graduate program at the University of Damascus that would, she hoped, eventually lead to a PhD. At the time I met her, Zahra was an MA student in her late twenties, preparing to defend her master's thesis. If the defense was successful—if her score was high enough—she would automatically be granted admission to the PhD program. This would make it possible, Zahra explained to me, for her to spend the rest of her life teaching and writing without needing to leave Syria. This was her dream, Zahra added. She wanted to become a scholar but she could never abandon her mother, who would never leave Syria.

Like every dissertation defense at the University of Damascus, Zahra's MA defense was widely publicized and well attended. Visitors came from rural Syria and Aleppo to listen to the panel of experts hold forth on the state of Syrian national literature, as well as to celebrate and photograph their friend's rite of passage.

Having edited an early version of the thesis that was to be defended prior to its submission to her committee, I was drawn to the proceedings for multiple reasons. I wished to commemorate this event in the life of

my friend and to see the fruits of my work. Zahra had also specifically requested that I attend, and I could not refuse. Although her written English was not always fluent, Zahra's argument was presented with a depth of detail and a critical engagement that did credit to its author. I was most impressed by her original endeavor to subject Syrian nationalism to gendered critique and was curious to see how this conceptual innovation would be received by a panel of professors for whom feminist thought was terra incognita. Finally, the defense itself was of major significance in terms of the university's history; it represented the first official collaboration between the two largest humanities departments at the University of Damascus: Arabic and English. Typically, graduate students in literature pursued academic degrees either in Arabic, which freed them from the requirement to engage with contemporary literary theory and to obtain fluency in English, or in English, which freed them from the requirement to master classical Arabic literature. Rarely did students undertake to master both discrete spheres of inquiry. Zahra, however, was exceptional, in this respect as well as in others.

For all these reasons, I knew that the proceedings would be both significant and interesting, but I was unprepared for the verbal assault I would witness on Zahra's hermeneutics, and in particular on her use of feminist critique to engage a canon that had attained prestige in the Syrian academy. During the course of the entire proceedings, in keeping with local conventions, Zahra did not speak. Instead, the professors came having read the thesis, and arguments began. The debate was heated as fault lines breached ideological commitments. A professor who had traveled from faraway Aleppo announced that he detected a "dirty mind" in his student and claimed that her readings of al-Samman's male protagonists went beyond the text in vilifying all males.

Before proceeding to further detail the reception of Zahra's thesis, I would like to pause here to summarize its contents. Roughly the length of what would normally be a PhD dissertation in a U.S. university, Zahra's MA thesis consisted of two parts, along with an introduction, conclusion, appendices, and bibliography. The first part was titled "Postcolonial Reading of Ghadah al-Samman's Novels in the Light of Edward Said's Theory." The second, more controversial part was titled "Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Ghadah al-Samman's Novels." Over the course of these two parts and mostly in the first part, close readings of five of al-Samman's novels were undertaken from the vantage point of what they had to say about

the politics of heterosexual sexual relations. The thesis structure signaled a clear movement from Saidian critique to the study of gender and in this way attempted to suture a postcolonial agenda onto a feminist hermeneutic. In my own assessment, the attempt was largely successful, if in need of further refinement.

One of the sections of Zahra's dissertation that was most hotly debated by the committee was her discussion of al-Samman's *Masquerade of the Dead* (*Sahra tanakkuriyya lil-mawta*, 2003), a text partly narrated from the point of view of a protagonist who finds his masculine identity challenged after he emigrates from his homeland. When the displaced Arab male in al-Samman's novel marries a French woman—whose national origins inevitably symbolize colonial conquest in the context of this Syrian novel—he discovers to his chagrin that his French wife possesses more masculine virtues than he does. The harder his wife works and the greater her success, the more feminized he becomes. The paradox underwriting the marriage between a colonial subject and a French citizen is revealed only when the protagonist realizes that his physical desire for his wife is matched by an equally powerful urge to free himself from the threat she poses to his masculinity.

Only when his discovery that his wife has been taking birth control pills shatters his dreams of impregnating her does the emasculated hero finally perceive the extent of the clash between their life goals. He reflects on the paradox of the sexual desire that consumes him and that he is powerless to overcome: "The strange thing is that I became more fond of her and wished to have sex with her even more, if only to humiliate her. . . . I have a strong desire to have her in order to leave her." Far from the book's representing as a domestic sphere untainted by hierarchies of gender, racial, and class inequality, sexual relations in al-Samman's novel coalesce around hate, envy, lust, and mutual misunderstanding.

In Zahra's view, the domestic politics entailed in such texts present matrimony less as a sacred or emotional bond than as a social institution that feeds on human weaknesses, including arrogance, pride, and insecurity. The protagonist has sex with his French wife not because he derives pleasure from the sex act itself, but because he wants to humiliate her. That the hero's violent and contradictory acts are shown to be entailed in everyday heterosexual relations, and to be intrinsic to the domestic contract, is one of the more provocative aspects of al-Samman's rendering of sexual politics (particularly within the institution of marriage), and brings her

work into conversation with first wave feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, as Arab literary critics have discerned (Ikhtiyar, 1991). Sexual intercourse in al-Sammān's "family novels" is an act of violence. Instead of projecting the desire to sexually humiliate women onto a rapist or otherwise alien figure, al-Samman projects such violent inclinations onto otherwise appealing protagonists. Zahra's thesis highlighted these dynamics of the sexual politics of al-Samman's novels.

Another of al-Samman's novels on which Zahra dwelled, doubtlessly because of its haunting problematization of postcolonial gender politics, was *Night of the First Billion* (*Laylat al-Milyar*, 1986), in which the protagonist Dunya aspires to become a professional artist. Dunya begins her adult life auspiciously, first by studying in Geneva to be a painter and then by selling her work to great critical acclaim. Dunya's artistic originality is mocked by her husband, who subjects her to a sardonic recapitulation of her life. "So you're Dunya Thabit," her husband says, "who opened an art exhibit that featured paintings and sculptures of naked men. You're the rebel against tradition who can't understand why it is that when men paint pictures of naked women, it's considered art, whereas if a woman paints pictures of naked men, it's a scandal" (al-Samman 2005, 142). Although Dunya's husband subscribes wholeheartedly to the double standard whereby women who paint male nudes are promiscuous and men who paint female nudes are artists, al-Samman ensures that his hypocrisy will be self-evident to her readers. Further clarifying the implicit link drawn by al-Samman between heterosexual desire and the capitalist economy of exploitation, Zahra extrapolated the theme of marriage-as-prostitution to her own immediate postcolonial milieu. She was aided in this endeavor by Ghurayzi, who, in a chapter from her critical study of sexuality in al-Samman's oeuvre titled "Marriage as Legal Prostitution," reasons that Dunya is "merely a public-relations secretary in a business called marriage" (1994, 54).<sup>16</sup>

At the acme of Zahra's critique of patriarchal reason stands her engagement with al-Samman's *The Impossible Novel* (*Al-riwaya al-mustahila*, 1997), a work that, in the words of al-Qadi and Hadidi, reveals the author's "keenness to highlight women's social oppression" (2008, 91). The point of departure for Zahra's reading of this text is an episode in this novel when the protagonist Amjad reflects on the aftermath of his sexual encounter with a French woman. Amjad is relieved by his lover's departure when he discovers after their first sexual encounter that she is not a virgin. "I even

felt sorry,” he states, “that my first experience with her body took place as though I were just passing through [her life]. I who had placed this woman within a great love story [*al-qissah al-hubb kabira*]” (al-Samman 1997, 262). “Virginity,” Zahra extrapolated from al-Samman’s example, “signifies several things. It is not just a matter of bodily chastity; rather it indexes the chastity of the soul. *In postcolonial societies, virginity specifically symbolizes a nation’s ability to resist the invader.*” While al-Samman’s portrayal of the sexual encounter converges with de Beauvoir’s critique of normative heterosexuality, Zahra’s analysis of the nexus between the virgin female body and the nation speaks to the historical processes whereby colonized women are asked to bear the burden of “a new social responsibility” that binds women to “sovereign nationhood” in “a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination” (Chatterjee 1989, 629). In terms of the argument for and against postcolonial allegory with which I opened, the Syrian nation could be regarded as politically fortified only so long as the women who upheld its domestic foundations had never been penetrated, or at least had only been penetrated by their husbands.

With her insight in the second part concerning the relation between female virginity and the integrity of the nation, Zahra had arrived at her main theme. Bringing the thesis to life, this argument also stirred her committee members’ ire more than any other statement, just as it had quickened my pulse when I read it weeks prior. From her initial premise that female virginity indexes a nation’s ability to resist the invader, Zahra concluded that sexual women are perceived as dangerous because they are taken to be traitors to the nation. The woman who engages in intercourse risks “prostituting the nation,” to borrow Zahra’s phrase. The logic of postcolonial nationalism, Zahra implied, tasks the colonized female subject with protecting her virginity against the colonial invader while contradictorily expecting her to propagate future generations.

As recognized by theorists of this conjuncture, this double bind in which the colonial female subject is entangled entails a continuity rather than a break with the colonial commodification of women’s bodies. The “construct of woman as a sex object in Western patriarchy” is displaced by postcolonial nationalism, but it is not thereby overcome (Chatterjee 1989, 630). When the nationalist male comes to think of his own “wife/sister/daughter as ‘normal’ precisely because she is not a ‘sex object,’” then the binary politics of purity and pollution that commodify women’s bodies is reinforced through the concept of the nation (630). Such rhetoric, which

denies any place for women outside the space of third world allegory, constructs an opposition between feminism and national liberation. Thus far, it would seem that Jameson's reduction of postcolonial literature to allegory was grounded in actual readerly conditions, but that it unfortunately factored out gender, and thereby failed to take into account the literary engagements of half the population.

In drawing out the feminist implications of al-Samman's oeuvre, Zahra fused together the seemingly antagonistic discourses of transnational feminism and postcolonial nationalism. She came to recognize the authoritarian way in which postcolonial nationalism used women to represent the nation's cause to the world. She also came to believe that feminist critique demanded that subordination of women's freedom to patriarchal norms, including those promulgated by postcolonial projects it partly embraces, be rejected. As Joseph Zeidan notes in his history of modern Arab women's literature, postcolonial liberation absorbs personal identity "in the search for national identity, even to the extent of sacrificing the former for the sake of the latter" (1995, 170). It is thus not only feminism that is compromised by postcolonial nationalism; any political claim advanced on a non-national basis potentially threatens the stability of the nationalist project.

In revealing the intellectual allegiances underwriting the nationalist emphasis on female virginity, and in exposing a constitutive violence governing heterosexual relations, Zahra's thesis cast the Syrian nationalist project in an ambivalent light. She exposed this nationalist agenda as a subjugator of female sexuality and of women's demand for freedom. On the basis of al-Samman's fictions, Zahra argued that postcolonial nationalism mandated acquiescence to patriarchy. It required the sacrifice of female lives and bodies to a cause that violated the interests and desires of individual women. It asked women to conform to a national construct within which men reigned supreme.

Zahra's feminist hermeneutics revealed postcolonial nationalism as patriarchy's twenty-first-century idiom. Rather than explicitly critiquing patriarchy, al-Samman's fictions ironize and, as Jameson would have said, allegorize the patriarchal colonial legacies entailed in everyday domestic politics. In al-Samman's oeuvre, postcolonialism's allegorical aesthetics generated a feminist critique of the nation. Al-Samman leaves the task of drawing out the political implications of her fictions to her readers and critics. However, the mere citation of these passages, particularly in the second part of Zahra's thesis ("Postcolonial Feminist Reading"), was suf-

ficient to disturb the Syrian academic establishment that had assembled in robes of black silk to evaluate the candidate. In the estimation of Zahra's professors, her contribution to postcolonial nationalism was compromised from the beginning, by her having endeavored to link al-Samman to transnational feminism and thereby taking the small field of studies on this Syrian writer in a direction they considered a priori illegitimate. As one professor insisted definitively, "Al-Samman is not and will never be a feminist."

The first attack on Zahra set the stage for more sustained objections. The chair of the proceedings—and of the English department—began by informing the audience that he had been a student of Said's while pursuing his PhD in British Romanticism at the University of Virginia. (He did not explain how this was possible, given Said's lack of any affiliation with the University of Virginia.) The professor explained that his personal relationship with the great thinker led him to take umbrage at Zahra's use of Saidian contrapuntalism. He seemed less interested in clarifying the grounds of his objections than in asserting his authority, and in controlling and policing any Syrian engagement with Said. On multiple occasions, Zahra made motions indicating that she wished to respond to her professor's diatribe, but each time she opened her mouth or raised her hand she was interrupted with the directive that her role as a student whose work was being publicly judged was to *listen*, not to *speak*. In part, this hierarchy stemmed from conventions specific to academic decorum in the Arab world, where even tenure cases are debated and voted on publicly, while the subject of the proceedings remains silent, but in this particular context such strictures resonated (from my vantage point) with the politics of gender difference.

Writing in 1991, Edward Said connected the "demoralization" of the Arab university to "the lack of democratic rights, the absence of a free press, and an atmosphere bereft of well-being and confidence elsewhere in the society" ([1991] 1996, 220).<sup>17</sup> Said omitted to mention the impact of women's unequal representation in institutions of higher education to structuring intellectual life in the Arab university. This elision of gender notwithstanding, Said's diagnosis applies in amplitude to the Syrian academy, as does his point that nationalism, once a tool of antiestablishment agitation, had been grafted onto the establishment. Said perceived that academic nationalism in the Arab world had come to represent "not freedom but accommodation, not brilliance and daring, but caution and

fear, not the advancement of knowledge but self-preservation” (219). Remarkably, the very professor who grounded his authority as an interpreter of Said on his having been Said’s student conformed quite closely to the object of Said’s critique when he invoked the nationalist imperative to silence feminist critique.

After a vehement debate that extended well over two hours, and which mostly involved the committee members talking past and at each other while ignoring Zahra’s responses, the committee moved to a separate room to deliberate on her grade. (In contrast to the unwritten expectation in the North American academic system that every thesis that is defended will be passed, every MA and PhD thesis in the Arab world receives a numbered grade on a scale of one to a hundred, and the possibility of failure remains an ever-present reality.) The proceedings had led me to fear the worst, and I waited in suspense. Twenty minutes later, the committee returned to the public assembly, solemn expressions pasted on their faces. After a lengthy preamble in florid Arabic (the rest of the defense had been conducted in English, the language in which Zahra’s thesis had been written), the chair announced the grade: sixty-eight. Sixty-five was the lowest passing grade. This made a score of sixty-eight the equivalent of a D in the North American university system.

The committee who came close to failing this aspiring feminist literary critic appeared to be opposed in principle to the application of a gendered hermeneutic to the study of postcolonial texts. It seemed obvious that the low grade they assigned Zahra’s thesis had more to do with its contestations of patriarchal norms than with any weaknesses internal to the text or to her argument. The committee was visibly displeased with the author’s methodology of bringing postcolonial critique into conversation with feminism, but the biggest controversies were stirred by the interpretive stance of the thesis, which made feminism the lens through which postcolonial texts were read. The implications her feminist readings of a postcolonial archive had for the nationalist project were greeted with contempt and fear, when they were not simply ignored. In particular, Zahra’s feminist modulation of Saidian contrapuntalism was regarded as incoherent, implausible, and dangerous. A graduate who received a score of sixty-eight on her final work could never be admitted to a local PhD program, let alone compete for an academic post in her home country. “Passing with a sixty-five is almost the same as failing,” Zahra explained to me after the defense, clenching her teeth to keep back the tears.

The controversial reception of Zahra's thesis offers an exemplary illustration of postcolonial nationalism's constraints with respect to gender. In the wake of the 1967 defeat, Arab authors overwhelmingly characterized their political present by portraying "the emasculation/desexualization of the national hero" (El Sadda 2012, 120). These same writers saw that political opposition that could formerly be openly expressed was now "smothered in public places" and had to be transferred to the domestic sphere (El Sadda 2012, 120). Partaking of this same consciousness of political defeat, al-Samman lamented in "Our Constitution" that "Palestine is moaning while we twist in the cocoons of our time." After alluding to the impact of the 1967 defeat on the Arab world at large, al-Samman unearthed a second wound by alluding to the second major trauma of Arab history. "Algeria" she added, "is crucified every dawn" (1990, 140). In the current post-9/11 juncture, the open wounds of Iraq and Afghanistan, which serve as painful reminders of ongoing colonial legacies, contribute to an inhospitable environment toward feminism in the Arab world, whereby "few women activists [from the Islamic world] feel comfortable with the term ["feminism"], and those that do are not consistently vocal about its self-definition" (Karam 2012, 201).<sup>18</sup>

In light of the committee's assessment of her thesis, Zahra could never expect to ascend the academic ladder of success. Instead of pursuing an academic career, Zahra left university life. To the best of my knowledge, she still lives in Damascus, notwithstanding the violence. As of May 2012, Zahra supported herself by working for a private German banking firm. Since then, we have lost touch. She may be living on her savings from those earnings now, which would place her in a better position economically than most teachers at the University of Damascus. But that satisfaction could hardly make up for the losses—to herself as well as to the Syrian academic establishment—brought about by the nationalist rejection of her transnational feminist hermeneutic. The resistance to gendered critique that Zahra encountered at her thesis defense speaks to Franz Fanon's prediction that, under conditions of social inequality, "nationalist consciousness" would become "an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty" of what, under conditions of fuller equality among races, peoples, classes, and genders, it might have been (1963, 148). At the same time, Zahra's impulse to use feminism to trouble normative alliances between gender and the nation suggests a role for feminist critique even within local contexts wherein the term itself is regarded as irrelevant.

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## Notes

Transcriptions from Arabic are given without diacritics in the main body of the text and without vowel lengthening noted in the notes.

1. For critical responses to Jameson's essay, see above all Ahmad 1992 and the riposte by Lazarus (2004).
2. To preserve anonymity on a still-sensitive event, the names of those involved in the thesis defense have been changed.
3. Chatterjee later incorporated this 1989 article into his influential *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-colonial Histories* (1993).
4. In addition to Bannerji's critique of Chatterjee's "resolution of the women's question," see O'Hanlon 1988 for further critical engagements with Chatterjee's thesis.
5. For recent scholarship on Syria's encounter with French colonialism, see, in addition to Thompson 2000, Neep 2012 and Khoury 1987. For a comparative perspective, see Sluglett 2004.
6. A major development in transnational feminism left unexplored here is Islamic feminism, which has done much to integrate contemporary Islamic thought with feminist theory. For introductions to this intellectual movement, see Badran 2008; Cooke 2001; and Fernea 1998.
7. There is no book-length study of al-Samman's work in English. For a brief engagement, see al-Qadi and Hadidi 2008, 60, 90–92. Tellingly, this is translated from an earlier Arabic edition. In Arabic, see Awwad 1989 and Shakir al-Nabulusi 1990.
8. Notwithstanding her popularity among Arab readers, Anglophone studies of modern Arabic literature tend to downplay her significance. Cacchia (1990) does not mention al-Samman. Allen (1995) devotes scant attention to al-Samman on pages 87 and 105.
9. For al-Tantawi's autobiography, see his *Dhikrayat* (1987–89).
10. For the time line of Islamic feminism, I follow Mojab 2001, 124.
11. For the intersection of petrol politics with the politics of gender in the Islamic world, see Ross 2008.
12. For rich bibliographies, see Pollock 1993, 292–301 and Varisco 2007.
13. For Said's reception in the Arab world, see also Schmitz 2008.
14. The purpose of my sojourn in Damascus was primarily to study the writ-

ings of ‘Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani with specialists based in Damascus and to deepen my knowledge of classical Arabic literature. I was never employed by the university in any capacity and my professional relationships and friendships were not mediated by any funding organization other than Columbia University, the institution with which I was affiliated at the time.

15. See Cooke 2011, and specifically for continuity between French colonial and postcolonial censorship practices, see page 8.
16. This is the same book cited above in French translation; the Arabic is inaccessible to me, and I cite from Zahra’s translation.
17. For recent statistics on gender demographics in Middle Eastern universities, see the articles on Turkey, Iran, and the UAE in Mabokela 2007, 73–112. With its proportionately greater number of women than men enrolled in institutions of higher education, Iran is an exception to the overall underrepresentation of women in Middle Eastern universities. See Aryan 2012, 35–52 and the valuable contributions in Ahmed 2013.
18. For further challenges to feminism in the contemporary Arab world, see Abu-Lughod 1998, 22.

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