

Framing Disaster: Performativity & Desire in the Writings of Syrians in Diaspora

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In his articulation on disaster Jalal Toufic says “The surpassing disaster leads to the withdrawal not of everything, but of tradition, and touches not everyone, but a community¹” it is in this surpassing disaster that Syrians are left with a tradition that has been withdrawn from and a community in-flux. Under decades of totalitarian rule that reached its breaking point in a now six-year civil war, Syrian tradition and culture has had its meaning and holiness become an empty glass. This research focuses on how Syrians writing in diaspora have articulated and recreated tradition and culture in the aftermath of the surpassing disaster, specifically as it relates to gender and identity.

The experience of what it means to be Syrian has dramatically shifted in the last few years; adopting titles of refugee², terrorist³ and burden on neighboring countries⁴, creating with it a vacancy for writers and thinkers to attempt to refill the glass of tradition. Under this complexity of identity reformation and in examining the writings of Syrians in diaspora, this research will seek to find the aspects of culture that have been resurrected and chosen to become monuments of culture.

Utilizing the theoretical frameworks articulated by Jalal Toufic in *Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*⁵ and aspects of

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performativity found in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*⁶ as well as theories on identity and totalitarianism, I will showcase how surpassing disaster connects to performativity, specifically in relation to the Syrian crisis. My lens will recognize the ways in which writers and thinkers are articulating and creating change and how it is interconnected with gender and identity.

In order to maintain intelligibility throughout, I will provide working definitions for the key terms used in this research. However, this does not assume a monolithic unchanging definition for these terms, nor does it assume a universality for their usage.

Surpassing Disaster⁷, a term coined by Jalal Toufic in order to denote a disaster that "is measured not by the impact of loss of life, but rather on the withdrawal from tradition that can be measured in its aftermath⁸." Hence the term - surpassing disaster – is specifically related to the divesting of cultural and human practices, rather than the more common, and more visual, death and destruction. This will be important as we investigate the rebuilding of these traditions, in response to the surpassing disaster, by Syrians in diaspora.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity defines gender as that which is performative, as in that which relies on a collection of speech acts, linguistic and otherwise, in order to reiterate itself. This research specifically relies on the linguistic articulation that reiterates performativity⁹.

The Syrian disaster, here denotes both the ongoing Syrian civil war¹⁰ as well as the forty-seven-year reign of the totalitarian Ba'athist 'Asadist' regime¹¹.

Queer is used in dual ways throughout this research, to denote that which is subversive and outside the norm as well as an articulation of non-normative sexualities and genders. The varied usages are made clear contextually.

My research is divided into two sections, the first section will provide a theoretical and historical overview to contextualize the research. Bringing together theories on identity, desire, and disaster,

and laying out the ways in which I have placed their intersections to bring them together into a cohesive theoretical framework. Section two provides a close reading of primary literary texts, all written by Syrians in diaspora, resurrecting specific aspects of culture and creating new monuments of existence, and how they relate to the aforementioned theories.

Finding Disaster: A Theoretical and Historical Overview

The importance of a gendered theoretical approach to the configuration of identity and disaster in Syria, relies foremost on witnessing how power dynamics are constructed and shifted under a gendered lens. The formation of gender within Syrian society is influenced by a totalitarian regime, religious discourse, and social policing, yet the scope of this research cannot extrapolate heavily on all of these aspects and so will focus primarily on the influence of the totalitarian regime. Gender, in its various manifestations, is constructed and formed by a collective of speech acts, that are both placed on the gendered body and performed by the gendered body¹². This gender formation, defined as gender performativity as articulated by Judith Butler¹³ in *Gender Trouble*¹⁴, provides an entire life fantasy that is placed upon the newborn in accordance to their perceived gender and the power dynamics that they will navigate. This newborn's life fantasy embodies the gender norms that the child, and all children, are expected to emulate, and enact.¹⁵ The recognition that gender norms and the power dynamics they navigate becomes vital to the formation of culture and tradition, and is a central point within this research: to recognize that performativity is a form of tradition that is central to cultural formation. Gender and complying to its regulations and norms is so central to the formation of society, much like tradition, it becomes that which is policed, expected and normalized, while any outliers to the preservation of its existence are treated with resistance and often violence. Treating gender as part of tradition allows this research to consider how the effect of disaster on tradition influences and interacts with performativity.

Performativity and Surpassing Disaster

Performativity relies on aspects of linguistic phenomena that are used to express and create gender, and as gender is a central aspect to tradition and cultural formation it would be impossible to separate

performative aspects of gender from culture and tradition. In addition, the function and consequence of surpassing disaster, expanded and articulated by Jalal Toufic in his work *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*¹⁶, demonstrates that a surpassing disaster results in the withdrawal of meaning from tradition and culture¹⁷. Therefore, in order to recognize and understand the ways in which tradition, and therefore performativity, have been withdrawn from and subsequently resurrected by writers, and thinkers¹⁸ we must first explore the functionality of both within Syrian society. The question then becomes what happens to performativity and tradition, when they are influenced by a surpassing disaster, that is, what occurs when the material withdrawing becomes part of its reconfiguration.

Within a surpassing disaster aspects of the culture that were not demolished, therefore aspects that maintain a form of existence in some manner; are immaterially withdrawn from by the surpassing disaster¹⁹. These aspects of culture, can only then be resurrected by writers, thinkers and artists²⁰. Toufic argues that it is in the act of resurrection that one can truly explore what has become central to culture: "...while many buildings that were considered monuments of the culture in question are revealed by their availability, without resurrection, past the surpassing disaster as not monuments at all of that culture, other buildings, generally viewed as indifferent, are revealed by their withdrawal to be monuments of that culture.²¹" That is to say, Toufic explores how what could have been considered as benign could become one of the most vital aspects of tradition (or performativity) and that which was practically worship becomes without resurrection a hallowed out husks of attempted societal creation.

The structures of gender that are upheld through traditional practices, taboos, and binaries have notably shifted since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and the militarization and violence that was to follow. This shift has not always meant a relaxing of binaries and gender norms, rather the shift in attitude has taken on a dichotomy of that which is an intensely rigid upholding of specific gendered norms on one hand, witnessed clearly in the gendered rhetoric of militia groups like Jebhat Al-Nusra²² and Islamic State²³. While on the other side of the spectrum, a more relaxed and fluid understanding and

approach to gender norms and traditions has grown, seen in the recent marriage of two Syrian men in Lebanon²⁴. It is tempting to attribute these drastic changes to an outside force or intervention, or as an expected reaction to war and unrest. However, in utilizing the scholarship of Hannah Arendt, whose writing on totalitarianism²⁵ and political violence specifically looked at how totalitarian regimes come to power and how they enact violence, I would argue differently. Indeed, the so called Syrian Crisis is not a sudden eruption of a disaster but rather the culmination of events in Syria that began with the Corrective Movement and the rise of Hafez Al-Assad to power in 1970²⁶ which coincided with enacting social and political rigidity and violence that included the violent mascara of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Hama in 1982²⁷. These major events began a surpassing disaster that would touch everything that was held sacred to the people residing within the constructed borders of Syria and culminate in the violent civil war currently raging in Syria.

Totalitarianism and the Ba'ath

In order to examine the trajectory of disaster, desire and performativity in Syria, we must first recognize how aspects of totalitarianism have influenced cultural meaning-making within the country. Scholarship on totalitarianism and the banality of evil specifically examine the rise of totalitarianism within Europe, however utilizing Arendt's theories in Syria allows for a better mapping of disaster. Arendt's book *On Totalitarianism*,²⁸ explored the rise of totalitarianism in Europe specifically in the aftermath of World War I and its relation to imperialism, anti-semitism and nation making. Importantly, she notes the ways in which a totalitarian regime's mission is to enter every crevice of the population it rules; that its mission is not just the seat of power, but to eradicate the ability to formulate any thought that could conceive of it as other than 'in power'. Arendt argues that totalitarian regimes rely on propaganda, the creation of terror, anti-semitism, or a racialized other, and huddled masses (or refugees), as scape-goats, as well as forms of super-nationalism²⁹. In the aftermath of colonialism and within the constructed borders of Syria, it experienced a rise in super-nationalism that coincided with the rise of the Ba'athist³⁰ political party that would ultimately come to power via a military coup³¹ and would lead to Hafez Al-Assad's rise to power³². The rise of the Ba'athist party also overlapped with the eruption of an influx of

refugees from the State of Israel and the Six Day War, which, as Arendt specifically noted, are necessary for totalitarianism. Indeed, the eruption of super-nationalism, anti-Semitism and refugees shapes the totalitarian state. In a post-colonial and post-war state of existence, Syria's super-nationalism, as well as its a flood of refugees and the eruption of anti-Semitism, following the formation of the state of Israel, all came together under the regime of Hafez Al-Assad to formulate a totalitarian state. It was under this totalitarian regime that violence meant to curb any whisper of defiance began, and remained.

The influence totalitarianism has on a nation is multi-leveled and often cannot be fully taken apart until years after its fall from power. However, most notably, totalitarian regimes are often equipped with an educational system whose job has "never been to instill convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any."³³ The people are regulated under totalitarian rule to a mob of 'yes men'. The totalitarian regime also relies on the violence that is inevitable to maintain power. The aforementioned all coalesce into an apex wherein the pressure becomes unlivable and revolt or despondency become the only options.

The Ba'athist regime often found itself face to face with the impossibility of tradition under its reign. In order to maintain complete and utter power a totalitarian regime must straddle the line between that which suppresses tradition, therefore maintaining an anaesthetized populace that is more amenable to huddling into the mass it is meant to be, and allowing for the fantasy of plurality and individualism. In its influence on tradition, a totalitarian regime, becomes that which demands a withdrawal from tradition, but disallows any resurrection of the material, creating an ongoing surpassing disaster. The violence and loss a totalitarian government inflicts is a form of surpassing disaster that suffers for its inability to move past it, an act which only becomes possible with the eruption of revolution and war. This loss is in and of itself an exploration of the disappearance of that which was assumed to be constant and consistent, a loss of that which is unfathomable because what is lost was assumed to be a monument of that society or community.

Maurice Blanchot, a philosopher who in *On the Writing of the Disaster*, explored how the very nature of a disaster becomes a loss of meaning: "...the movement of Meaning was swallowed up, where the gift, which knows nothing of forgiveness or of consent, shattered without giving place to anything that can be affirmed, that can be denied..."³⁴ In articulating the loss of meaning, Blanchot does not mean that there was meaning that was taken away and something replaced it as a placeholder, that somehow there was meaning or conviction behind the atrocities of the Shoah³⁵ and Porajmos³⁶, rather he conveys that meaning no longer existed; if nothing can be "affirmed"³⁷ or "denied"³⁸ there is nothing. Specifically, Blanchot explores how the meaning was taken away but nothing settled in its place. In order for totalitarian regimes to truly be in power, they must annihilate the need for meaning, creating a nation that lives under the Nuremberg defense. Toufic's expansion on Blanchot's writing is to locate how this loss of meaning continues as its own form of violence unless it is allowed to resurrect and re-formulate meaning. Totalitarianism strips meaning from the tradition of a people, and it is only when its writers and thinkers and artists find themselves capable of resurrecting it, that change is possible.

Construction of Desire and Identity

Within these borders of totalitarianism and disaster; desire with all its complexities is constructed and forged. Desire- celebrated, maligned and studied with an eye attempting to understand its patterns as affecting the gendered body - has long been written about. Lauren Berlant writes on desire in her book *Desire/Love*³⁹ and explores cultural artifacts: movies and books, to look into how desire and love are formed and expected and how they relate to identity and a sense of selfhood. "The objects to which desire becomes attached stabilize the subject and enable her to assume a stable-enough identity.... you know who you 'are' only by interpreting where your desire has already taken you"⁴⁰ so desire is a vital aspect to how selfhood and identity is located and defined, at least according to Berlant. Butler's theory of performativity pairs well with Berlant's theory of desire and identity, that is the construct of womanhood is understood through the mapping of desire that was done unto the infant that was gendered as a woman, and creating with it the heterosexual matrix⁴¹. That is to say, when a child is given a doll for her birthday or is taken to a dance class there

is an assumption of desire that is creating this identity and existence, all of which culminate into the heterosexual marriage plot that gives a meaning to identity. Berlant argues that the desire for this “love plot...then, represent[s] a desire for a life of unconflictedness.[sic]⁴²” Following the script of desire and gender with an expectancy of the life stability that has been promised cannot be sustained in instances of disaster as it finds itself often butting heads with the impossibility of stability. Furthermore, recognizing that the change in the meaning of the locality of this identity manifestation is bound to cause a disruption of desire and identity. That is to say, Berlant and Butler’s theories on desire and performativity become disrupted in surpassing disaster as they rely on an “individuality...[as]... a cluster of qualities that do not express the totality of a person but rather her value as data to the reproduction of the normative world.”⁴³ Therefore, Syrians living under a totalitarian regime cannot define their own identity making beyond what the totalitarian regime allows, or at least they cannot do so openly and without fear of annihilation. Hence their identity making relies not only the stability of the totalitarian regime, but also on their position within the hierarchal power structure it provides. Furthermore, as the civil war has allowed for a resurrection of some forms of meaning, the ways in which desire and gender are mapped and created have drastically shifted as they can no longer rely on the totalitarian regime to define desire and selfhood.

In examining and witnessing how gendered renderings have been impacted by the surpassing disaster, it is important to analyze the cultural artifacts that claim these renderings. In particular the following will utilize data from the writings of Syrian artists and activists in diaspora and how they apply literary prose to articulate loss and create meaning, specifically in relation to a gendered existence. The following will consider how the writings of Ahmad Danny Ramadan⁴⁴, Samar Yazbek⁴⁵, and Hiba Dlewati⁴⁶ have touched on and explored themes of disaster, gender, and desire in the aftermath of the surpassing disaster.

The Writings of Syrians in Diaspora; The Window on the Border

The censorship of sexual violence and rape within Syrian communities has been a longstanding tradition, so much so that the very language used to describe and recognize rape existed only in hushed tones of

warnings to control wayward girls. In the aftermath of the surpassing disaster of the violence of the totalitarian regime and the Syrian crisis, sexual violence has become so rampant, that the holiness of its censorship, an aspect that was by and large a pillar of society, has been withdrawn from and no longer capable of being sustained. In this void of language and culture, writers like Hiba Dlewatī attempt to resurrect language that can allow space for survivors of sexual violence to exist.

In her short story *The Window on the Border*⁴⁷, Hiba Dlewatī, a journalist and Syrian in exile explores the weight of story, and the words used to categorize specific narratives, that is she uses linguistic acts and choices to explore gender narratives. The story follows an unnamed Syrian interpreter at a hospital on the Syrian-Turkish border, attempting to gather survivor statements along with a journalist and aid worker⁴⁸. The translator, is capable of connecting with the various survivors by providing them with her own experience of sexual violence at the hands of the regime, however, even as the narrator seems self-possessed and capable of handling these statements, she is shaken by being so close to a place she called home⁴⁹. The language used by the narrator, by her own admission, is vital to the stories she is attempting to gather, “No one really likes to talk about rape... So we called it ‘women’s experiences’ during the war...tracking activists, aid workers, refugees and health facilities to talk about ‘women’s experiences during the conflict.’⁵⁰” There are two vital aspects to this language usage, on the one hand an acknowledgement of a not so distant past that held the censorship of the very words of sexual violence as taboo, on the other there is a moving beyond that censorship and demanding a vocalization of sexual violence. Even if *rape* as a word is not used, the use of the new terminology ‘*women’s experience*’ no longer responds to the aforementioned sacredness of censorship. While a visceral reaction occurs in the hospital room where the narrator is translating upon the mention of rape or harassment, specifically when the narrator provides her own experience, with “generations of fear of shame and honor etched onto their faces⁵¹” due to the traumatic nature of the subject, they still do give statements on the subject. Dlewatī, constructs this story recognizing the traditions and culture that had once been material to the narrator’s existence, and then acknowledges the impossibility of adhering to them as though they have not been withdrawn from. In the

reverberation of disaster Dlewati, chooses to have women's hushed stories of violence, be spoken; for their voices that had been shrouded in shame to be resurrected.

Dlewati's story explores how aspects of culture can be resurrected in lieu of others, specifically the taboo of sexual violence. However it also showcases how performativity is that which is not only performed onto the gendered body, but also performed by the gendered body. That even in the surpassing disaster where Dlewati notes how aspects of performativity can shift and change, in ways that allow for a broadening sense of its manifestation the ways in which it operates on the gendered body remain consistent, in that it is performed by and onto the gendered body. The story also explores the function of the love plot, which Berlant defines as the manifestation of stability⁵². In talking openly about sexual violence the narrator is challenging the notion that sexual violence removes the possibility to exist within the love plot. Therefore, while the story pushes back against the creation of sexual taboos and attempts to resurrect women's experiences and voices, it does so by relying on normative aspects of performativity and desire⁵³.

The Crossing

Under totalitarianism diversity of any kind existed as an anathema, that which was not only discouraged and maligned, but also created as an impossibility, to be Syrian was to be what the Ba'athist regime defined as Syrian. Thus, totalitarianism created a multiplicity of impossible subjects⁵⁴ under its rule, including ethnic and religious minorities as well as gender and sexual minorities. In her book Yazbek seeks to resurrect the definition of Syrian that is not beholden to an ethnicity, religion, gender or way of existence. In order to redefine and create a non-monolithic Syrian, Yazbek gathers stories from a diverse set of characters to narrate their stories all under the banner of Syrian stories. Significantly, while Yazbek does not include stories of gender and sexual minorities, she takes it upon herself to gender-queer her own narrative. She redefines Syrian to include all ethnic and religious minorities, and the very narrative she uses to do so, is a queering of the rigidity identity allowing for a gender, ethnic and religious queer Syria.

Totalitarianism relies on identity making that eradicates difference. Indeed it creates impossible subjects⁵⁵ of any and all those who upset the enforced monolithic normative landscape. In many ways, the totalitarian regime's ideologies continue with violent sectarian or separatist rhetoric, enforcing a 'one way' of existing. Within this harsh background of enforced sameness Samar Yazbek, a Syrian activist and writer, traverses into an inquiry on how to resurrect a Syrian identity that recognizes the diversified canvas that has been forcefully eradicated; *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria*⁵⁶ (hereafter *The Crossing*) is Yazbek's cataloguing of her repeated excursions into Northern Syria in late 2012 to mid 2013. Her treks which began as a women's organizing project in combatant areas, evolved into her recording the varied narratives of the Syrians she encounters, a difficulty as Northern Syria becomes increasingly fundamentalist and sectarian.

As an Alawite in a Sunni majority area experiencing high sectarian tensions, Yazbek's position is often that of anxiety for herself, and her surrounding combatants. While she chooses not to disclose her religious affiliation, it is at times revealed by others, specifically when other combatants begin slurring Alawites in her presence. In one such instance where a younger combatant has gone on a tirade against Alawites, he is informed that Yazbek herself is an Alawite, he moves to beg forgiveness from Yazbek who answers with "I'm not an Alawite," I told him, before we set off. 'And you're not a Sunni. I'm Syrian and you're Syrian.' He looked at me in astonishment. 'It's true,' I said. 'We're *just* Syrians.'⁵⁷" (emphasis my own). Yazbek's use of Syrian as an identity that can bridge what has been shattered is a curious act, for increasingly Syrian as an identity has been withdrawn from, and the emphasis of Syrian essentialism seems more of an approach that the totalitarian regime has employed. After decades, a totalitarian regime imposed a monolithic 'Syrian' that was forcibly Arab, and relied on an Arab essentialism as the Ba'athist rhetoric often imposed a Pan-Arab rhetoric and identity⁵⁸. Yazbek, however, chooses to emphasize 'Syrian' as an identity that does not reiterate the same rhetoric of the Ba'athist regime, but rather moves to an exploration of how 'Syrian' can be an encapsulation of all the sects, tribes and identities existing within constructed borders. Therefore, while at first glance it seems that Yazbek is reverting back to a

totalitarian oriented identity making, she is in fact seeking ways to resurrect an identity that existed before an enforced pan-Arab identity that was enforced by the Ba'athist regime.

The influx of foreign militants coming into Syria to join either the Jabhat al-Nusra or The Islamic State (IS), seems to add to this narrative of a Syrian collective identity, understandably as that which is juxtaposed to another becomes more prominent in a narrative. Yazbek's frustration with foreign militants is echoed by others she encounters, however unlike Yazbek who is trying to resurrect an identity that goes beyond the rigidity of the traditional, the frustration with foreigners comes in a very particularly gendered way. The foreign militants are a source of shame for the men who were not able to stop the incoming influx of foreign militants "'...you men of Saraqeb, why have you handed our city over to foreigners?'⁵⁹" While the realistic elements of this call out are non-existent, as the incoming militias are well funded and well-armed, especially in relation to the inhabitants of the Saraqeb, it is still a compounded shame. This woman calling out the men around her is using a very traditional shaming mechanism, in utilizing traditional gender roles and shaming the men who could not live up to the gendered role of protector. An important element of this narrative is that these foreigners are predominantly other Arabs "-from Tunisia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia...⁶⁰", people who under the rhetoric of the totalitarian Ba'athist regime would have been part of the formulation of the Pan-Arab identity. While the woman is relying on traditional gendered honor and shame rhetoric, she is also moving into the wider scope of what it means to be Syrian, something completely divorced from the Ba'ath and taking in the various elements of what it means to exist together in constructed borders.

While Yazbek's work on formulating and resurrecting a Syrian identity that is capable of encapsulating all identities that exist within the Syrian borders is a vital aspect of her narrative, it is not as prominent as the narrative of reporting or witnessing. Storytelling, is a recurring theme throughout *The Crossing*⁶¹, not merely due to the memoirist nature of the prose which is in many ways a recording of the Yazbek journey as well as and the stories of those she meets, but also the act of storytelling in itself takes on a vital thematic role. Yazbek makes no secret of her secondary mission in collecting the

stories of those she encounters, and the ways in which this is met is often with skepticism or mistrust at Yazbek taking down an honest account without an agenda. A refugee from a neighboring village agrees to tell Yazbek her story only after she confronts her: “Do you swear by God that you’ll tell the world what I have to say?” she asked. ‘I swear.’ ‘Swear by the thing you hold most dearly deep in your heart.’⁶²” This confrontation is not unique to this one situation, the disbelief that Yazbek wants to hear people’s stories and that she will record and tell these stories as they were told to her reoccurs throughout the memoir. However, Yazbek assures her storytellers that she wants to hear them, and that she is faithfully recording their stories. Oum Fadi, a woman whose village is on the frontlines, grasps Yazbek’s hand “Do you really want to tell people what happened to us?⁶³” she questions her and again Yazbek assures her she does want to hear. Yazbek has cast herself in a subversive role as a woman in asking for and hearing these stories; stories not only from women, but also from militia men. These are not cleaned up stories, fit for her hearing; these are stories about rape, murder, and the gruesome realities of war. It is when she is asking stories from the militia, when her subversive role is given a name “...Come on, Shahryar, back to the story,’ I said to him. He laughed at my calling him the name of the king from One Thousand and One Nights. ‘No – we’ve swapped roles: you’re Scheherazade, the storyteller...’ I added.⁶⁴” Yazbek’s choice of casting herself as a gender-bent Shahryar, as well as casting her storytellers, many of whom are men, as Scheherazade, is an important aspect to this narrative; specifically in queering the narrative, both by redefining the story and creating a gender queer character. Yazbek does not only seek to resurrect a newfound connection to a folklore figure, but also Scheherazade’s resurrection is queered. The witnessing and storytelling that Scheherazade performs as entertainment to Shahryar in order to save her life is a vital piece of the 1001 Nights⁶⁵, however the recasting of this story in a way that allows the narration and gender to be queered allows it to be resurrected in an entirely different light. Furthering the queering of Scheherazade and Shahryar, is Yazbek herself, who takes on the role of Shahryar in receiving these stories, but then in retelling them she is Scheherazade. She becomes a “dual-gendered Shahryar, with a dual role: I would listen, then go back and assume the identity of Scheherazade as I passed on the narrative in turn.⁶⁶” Utilizing classical

literary figures Yazbek challenges a normative approach to gender roles; she queers herself and her role in her own story, she both lives and records her own existence, she is entertained and listens to the stories of others, and then records their stories. Even in attempting to parse out where her role as 'Scheherazade' or 'Shahryar' begins or ends is a futile exercise: she is both living and telling the story. In resurrecting the importance of identity and story and then turning around and casting doubt on the validity of the traditional roles that have not only remained rigid but due to IS and Jebhat Al-Nusra have become even more rigid and unbending, Yazbek is able to queer the very core of her story, the narrative itself.

In *Queering Migration Discourse Differentiating Racism and Migratism in Postcolonial Europe*⁶⁷, Alyosxa Tudor purposes "...that in the idea of "impossible subjects" could lie a promise of queerness.⁶⁸" While Tudor's specifically explores the impossible subjects of Migratism and the creation of European identity, it can extrapolated on to explore how Yazbek begins her memoirs by relying on this "promise of queerness⁶⁹" to locate a new Syrian identity; one that can exist outside of a totalitarian regime. In doing so she opens the door for herself to queer gender and narrative. In giving herself a non-binaristic gender identity within her narrative, she pushes back against the necessity of the gender binary which performativity relies on so heavily, and that changes her desire formulation as she can no longer fit neatly into a heterosexual matrix⁷⁰ or a love plot⁷¹. Yazbek thrives on this "promise of queerness⁷²", demanding a resurrection of Syrian identity that must refuse the notions of a huddled mass of oneness, and defines itself by its queerness.

The Clothesline Swing

The construction of sexuality as violence has a long history in Syrian myth-making, where predominant so-called love stories are often those of sexless love stories such as Qais and Layla, Rumi and Shams and Antra and Albah. Sexual relationships between men are established as only possible through violence in Syrian imaginings. This creation of a violent men's homosexuality is given credence under anti-sodomy laws still on the books in Syria as well as religious rhetoric that denotes capital punishment as the absolver for the violence of men's homosexuality⁷³. Ahmad Danny Ramadan, moves

particularly against this rhetoric of violence, and attempts to resurrect and establish a cultural monument of consummated love and desire, specifically in relation to homosexuality. Ramadan's desire to claim love as part and parcel of his character's sexuality leaves him in many ways linguistically barren, which ends up with him utilizing foreign words to redefine sexuality within the opportunity generated by the surpassing disaster which resulted in the possibility of new terminology that in themselves allow for a different experience. Importantly Ramadan's usage of foreign words does not detract from the importance of his resurrection, in fact it is in naming that which was only nameable through aspersions that he allows for a reclaiming of identity. Interestingly, he relies on aspects of linguistic performativity⁷⁴, which Butler connects to sexuality and gender identity, that are foreign to him, and in doing so incorporates a foreign gender performativity into his own articulation, creating and resurrecting a way to love and live that is unique to both.

In *The Clotheslines Swing*⁷⁵, a novel by Syrian refugee and activist Ahmad Danny Ramadan, the narrator's search for meaning seems to demand the corporeal, even as the novel is entrenched with magical realism the narrator's articulation of the disaster is how it manifests on the bodies of Syrians, how Syrians as individuals, not as a collective entity, have gone through a multiplicity of disasters and how they shaped their desire and gendered existence. The novel follows the story of the narrator as he attempts to come to terms with his lover's looming death due to age and illness⁷⁶. The narrator tells his lover endless stories from their life together, his life before his lover, and the life of where they came from (Syria), as though in telling enough stories his lover would continue to live. All the while Death, as a physically embodied character, lives with them and is friends with the narrator⁷⁷. The novel concludes with a final narration of a memory that may or may not be true, of the narrator and his lover as young children playing in a park in Damascus. When the narrator's story ends, his lover passes away in his arms, while he sobs at this heartbreaking inevitability⁷⁸.

Ramadan does not provide the narrator a name beyond "Hakawati"⁷⁹ (story teller). He makes the novel an exposition of the disaster; the narrator both exists fundamentally, and can be forgotten

easily. The choice Ramadan makes in leaving both his main characters unnamed is a poignant one. Within Syrian culture, naming things often resonates with a fear towards that which is named. Cancer, for instance, is often left unnamed and called *that disease*. Leaving the two most important people in the book unnamed, but naming everything else that happens to them is notable, the characters name themselves as gay, the narrator even goes so far as to call himself gay to his father. As the author names one thing after another, he does not name himself. In not choosing a name, the narrator goes unnamed and holds a position of control that is connected to a culture and tradition that personified him as violence. Instead of a name, he has his own identifications of himself ““I’m a fabulist, a writer, a hakawati.⁸⁰” and “I’m Gay⁸¹”. Importantly, by leaving these two main characters unnamed, they exist as a mirage: men who have been able to find love and desire in each other. However, being unnamed does not mean the narrator is invisible throughout the novel, in fact the narrator’s connection with his mother and his sexuality takes up a significant part of the novel. The parallels between Hakawati and his mother in some ways allow for a showcasing of how totalitarianism reacts to those it cannot control. Hakawati, a gay man, cannot live under the regime and must become a refugee, while his mother sinks into an insanity that will eventually kill her⁸².

The narrator goes further in this parallel, by providing the story of Samer, another gay man who remained under the totalitarian regime and it took his life⁸³, much like the Hakwatis’ mother. Samer is the boy the narrator first fell in love with as a teenager; Samer commits suicide after he is brutalized, forced to marry his cousin, and inevitably is caught in the arms of another man. However, Samer’s life is not only the narrative of a victim, in performing his defined role under the totalitarian regime, he becomes violent towards his wife; “She feared me; I knew it. I left the mark of my palm on her face once or twice before.⁸⁴” It appears that in spite of, or perhaps because of, knowing firsthand the pain of violence for being perceived as weak, he continues to perform his role in the cycle of patriarchal pain. Furthermore, even in his death Samer is disruptive to the norms, as though even in death he is unable to perform his role quite so well, “No one carried my dead body to one of Damascus’s mosques. No one prays a death prayer for a man who killed himself...⁸⁵” Samer’s death,

to the narrator, is a death crueler than that of his mother as it is so close to his own demise. It is a death that weighs heavily on him “his ending could have been prevented⁸⁶” he says as Samer’s story ends. It is the bitter reality that Samer’s death is the death of hundreds and thousands whose story will never be told. Importantly, even though Samer’s life is marked by violent acts, his own brutalization at the hands of his father, his brutalization of his wife and his violent suicide, his desire and sexuality is constantly denoted as loving and romantic. Even as he picks up guys on the street, he is longing for an emotional connection. “We didn’t have conversations about kittens or comic books; we didn’t exchange war stories about insane parents.⁸⁷” he says as he remembers his short lived love with the narrator and holds it to himself like the sweetest of the bitter fruits, taken away from him and constantly looking for it. Ramadan actively places love as a marker for Samer’s desire and ultimately that which he dies unable to reach, even as Samer inflicts violence, even as he himself receives violence, his sexuality is a victim to violence only from those who seek to change him, not from the violence of sexuality and desire itself. Ramadan refuses the narratives that homosexuality is constantly marked by violence⁸⁸, a prevailing narrative Syrian rhetoric, and he chooses instead to resurrect a view of homosexuality and queerness that is marked by love, a love that can be found in Syrian literature and media. Moreover, Ramadan does not only choose to place love as central to homosexuality, he also ensures that a narrative constantly marked by violence, as that of Samer, is separated from his sexuality.

Love, or the lack of it is also noted as that which is a contributor to the destruction of the narrator’s mother. A woman who is continuously subjected to violence due to her position in the totalitarian hierarchy of power. To cope with this positioning she reconfigures her memories and places herself as the victor when she was constantly the one bullied, beaten, and crushed⁸⁹. One such memory is her reaction to being slapped by a stranger who bumped into her and her child; in her retelling she punches the man and takes her child to get a new ice cream and replace the one the man had crushed⁹⁰. This is the memory she desires, it fits into her narrative, while the reality of her collapsing and the man looming as her child cries is too heavy for her to handle. Later on, she burns most of the photographs in the apartment. When she is discovered by the narrator,

she is triumphant, this meant something to her, to the narrator it is a devastating loss of his memories⁹¹, but to her it is the loss of a reality that continues to hurt her, continues to be the source of her trauma. The more she is able to let go of reality, the more she is able to survive. Unfortunately, as she loses her grasp on reality, she becomes increasingly paranoid and reclusive. Her life, which was never her own to begin with, becomes something she has completely disassociated from and thus fears. The parallels of life between the narrator's mother, himself and Samer are vitally important. They showcase one of the most vital aspects of what living under the totalitarian disaster causes for those who are unable to conform to the particularities of totalitarianism. Samer and the narrator's mother could not survive. She lost her grasp on reality and he lost his ability to exist in reality.

In constructing an identity that relies heavily on storytelling, it is no surprise that the narrator compares himself to Shahrazad, the fabled queen in *1001 Nights*⁹² who ensures her continued survival from execution by telling the king, Shahryar, nightly stories. "I'm your Scheherazade."⁹³ However, unlike Yazbek whose queering of Scheherazade and Shahryar relates specifically to gender and narrative⁹⁴, Ramadan's queering of Scheherazade and Shahryar is a queering of violence. Wherein the original telling of *1001 Nights*, Scheherazade entertains her king with her tales in order to keep herself alive⁹⁵, in the narrator's reconstruction, he is Scheherazade trying to keep Shahryar, his lover, alive.

Love is vitally important to the narrative of *The Clothesline Swing*⁹⁶, even amidst the horrors of totalitarianism and disaster, when the writing of the disaster is the writing of the loss of meaning. Ramadan's focus is on love: "You whisper that love is what makes worlds real."⁹⁷ A love that has placed itself as central to sexuality and desire when it has been consistently deemed an impossibility. Ramadan, claiming and taking hold of love, with all the linguistic weight of existing in queer love is this novel's narrative and the way he envisions a possibility of a future. Through reframing the narratives of queer sexuality, he uses the surpassing disaster to reclaim the language surrounding it and to thus recreate what it means to be a gay man in Syria filled with desire.

Ramadan explores how performativity can be redefined not only by resurrecting aspects from its own formulation, but also by exploring foreign aspects of performativity to reach into a new queered resurrection that can create new ways of existence. He reformulates desire, specifically homosexual desire, as being inseparable from love. In doing so, he tells a story that relies on Syrian tradition, such as epic love stories for instance, but are retold to encompass a larger more inclusive narrative. Ramadan relies on a canonical positioning of his narrator. By calling him a Hakawati and attributing him to Shahrazad, and in that resurrection in the aftermath of the surpassing disaster, he not only explores new ways of gendered and sexual identity, but also assures the importance of continuous resurrection by writers finding new ways to tell stories and share narratives.

Conclusions

I have used the fiction and memoirist writings of Syrians in diaspora to give a cohesive image of how withdrawal from tradition and its subsequent resurrections has been shaped and influenced by Syrian writers in diaspora and what specifically they have chosen to resurrect and how that was influenced by expressions of desire, identity and gender. The writers specifically explored the ways in which language can be used to articulate and reclaim sexual violence, narrative can recreate identity, and linguistic choices and framing of accounts can reformulate sexuality.

In conceptualizing, what it means to exist as a Syrian it was important to contextualize Syrian existence, specifically in relation to the totalitarian regime. Utilizing the theoretical frameworks of Arendt on totalitarianism allowed for a further exploration of the loss of meaning and identity and how both are resurrected in the aftermath of disaster. Exploring how identity and gender, in reference to Butler⁹⁸ and Berlant⁹⁹, were severely impacted by the Syrian surpassing disaster, using the theory of Toufic¹⁰⁰, reiterated the necessity to explore where Syrian diasporic writers have chosen to find meaning.

This research has explored the ways in which Syrians in diaspora have explored and redefined meaning in tradition and culture, specifically in relation to sexual violence, Syrian identity, and the validity of queer desire. This research has generated a further

understanding of what has been lost in the disaster, and what has been resurrected and chosen as new aspects of tradition and culture, specifically as it relates to desire and gender, both imperative aspects of the collective human imagining. Further research should allow for an expanded view into how writers thinkers and artists have chosen to move forward from the surpassing disaster.

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- ⁷⁸ Ibid.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid
- ⁸⁰ Ibid. 14
- ⁸¹ Ibid. 88 & 139
- ⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid

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⁹⁰ Ibid 114

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