BETWEEN TELLING, WRITING AND BECOMING: FLUIDITY AND TRANSCENDENCE IN ‘ALAWIYYA ṢUBḤ’S MARYAM: KEEPER OF STORIES
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This article explores literary representations of fluidity in the novel Maryam: Keeper of Stories (Maryam al-Ḥakāyā) by the Lebanese writer ʿAlawiyya Ṣubḥ. It discusses the subtle ways in which the form and imagery as well as the thematic focus of the novel all contribute to establishing and further illuminating the fluid boundaries between telling, writing and becoming. It explores how the blurring of the lines between storytelling and writing, between the past and the present, between the author and the character, and, last but not least, between the creation of a work of literature and the construction of the subject, all play a vital role in creating the narrative flow that transcends rigidity of structure in favour of the fluidity of structuration. To this end the article also provides an extensive discussion on the role of water symbolism present in the novel, which further enhances the notion of fluidity that is sustained not only through the structuration and plotting but also through the imagery employed throughout the novel.

Keywords: ʿAlawiyya Ṣubḥ, Maryam of Stories, Keeper of Stories, storytelling, fluidity, identity, desire, self, water

Maryam of Stories

Maryam: Keeper of Stories is, as the title implies, composed of a number of loosely interconnected stories of short length that are seamlessly woven into an extensive, multi-layered narrative reminiscent of the Thousand and One Nights.¹

¹ In an interview with Akl Awit of the literary magazine Banipal Ṣubḥ admits to having drawn her inspiration from the Thousand and One Nights as well as the Oriental storytelling tradition, in addition to classical and modern techniques [of storytelling].

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Though the stories of women’s lives and friendships as well as their shared struggle against the confines of patriarchy are narrated by several of the novel’s female protagonists, the main thread of the narrative is sustained by Maryam, who, throughout the novel, is relentlessly searching for ʿAlawiyya. ʿAlawiyya, herself one of the novel’s central characters, is a writer; hence she not only happens to share the author’s name, but also her vocation. The narrative technique can therefore be described as a play of mirrors, whereby the initial authors’ intent of the two ʿAlawiyyas is realized through the character of Maryam, whose narrative relates to the reader the lives of three generations.

I’m the one who would not stop babbling, telling her everything I knew about myself, about her and all the characters of the novel. It started when she came to me towards the end of the war and said: ‘The war is over. I want to write the experience of our generation. No. Not the experience of our generation. That’s too ambitious. I want to write your story, because you are the shadow, the shadow of all the protagonists in the novel, and the shadow of all our memories. I find your character enticing.’

The narrative voice in the novel is split in two, as both Maryam and ʿAlawiyya take turns in telling the stories. Within the aforementioned mirroring technique, both Maryam and ʿAlawiyya also take turns in situating one another in the role of either the protagonist or the narratee in their respective stories. The narrative thread, however, relies almost entirely on Maryam, as ʿAlawiyya’s narrative voice is heard only briefly.
Thousand and One Mights of Storytelling

Storytelling in the novel is interwoven with the processes of creation of a work of literature as well as with the construction of the subject, whereby the boundaries between the reality and the fiction, between the (fictional representations of) real individuals and fictional characters, between the narrator and the narratee, between the author and her fictional namesake, between the narrator and the characters, and, last but not least, between the telling, writing and becoming, are constantly being blurred.

The very act of storytelling is equal in its importance to the story told, as the telling of a story is not only a means of ‘processing’ and reflecting the (social) reality, but also plays a role in its creation. The power of storytelling thus resides both in the depiction of, and the possibility of the creation of, a (new) reality. The social function of storytelling also shares some commonalities with the social function of texts, which, according to Kristeva, is to produce “a different kind of subject, one capable of bringing about new social relations”. When one dissociates themselves from the dominant or totalizing narratives that inform or control one’s life, one is free to focus on those aspects of one’s experience that challenge the conventional knowledge. In relation to the women’s storytelling in the novel discussed here, we can therefore also conceive of them as having a certain ‘epistemic privilege’ that “pertains to the position of marginalized subjects as subjects possessing an alternative and more critical optics, with a sharper, keener eye that enables them to notice what escapes the view ‘from the centre’”.

Likewise, from the point of view of identity construction, storytelling serves as a means not only of self-reflection, but also of self-construction. This process is perhaps best exemplified in the novel’s title, which, by way of a genitive construction, denotes the relation of possession; in Arabic, the relation between the possessor and the thing possessed is determined by the order of the nouns in the construction. While it is common for book titles to include the word ‘story’,

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6 For theoretical reflections on the sociological aspects of literary creation, see, for instance, WILLIAMS, R.: “[…] the society determines, much more than we realize and at deeper levels than we ordinarily admit, the writing of literature; but also […] the society is not complete, not fully and immediately present, until the literature has been written”. WILLIAMS, R. Writing in Society, p. 72.
8 Here the patriarchal.
9 ČIŽMIKOVA, D. Women’s Writings on the Lebanese Civil War, p. 152; For the concept of epistemic privilege as a key concept in feminist standpoint theory, see BAT-AMI. Marginality and Epistemic Privilege, pp. 83–100.
it most frequently occurs as the first term of such a construction.\textsuperscript{10} However, here the title reverses the order of the nouns, putting ‘Maryam’ as the governing noun, and ‘stories’ as an attributive adjunct. The literal translation of the Arabic title, which, however, is not preserved in its English translation, would thus be ‘Maryam of Stories’. Moreover, it is not only the reversed order of the first and the second term of the genitive construction that sets the title apart from other book titles sharing the same pattern; also the grammatical category of number changes: from the more common ‘story’, we have ‘stories’, which may indicate the shift from dichotomous thinking (setting one’s story apart from, and, against those of others) to a more pluralistic and fluid notion of the multitude of stories through which and, in relation to which, the main protagonist of the novel, Maryam, is being constructed as well as self-constructed. From this perspective, we can say that Maryam’s storytelling is also her attempt at self-birth; she is brought into existence by the very stories she relates.

\textbf{Between Longing and Belonging}

If stories eventually gave birth to Maryam, what gave birth to her stories? As Ouyang has repeatedly noted in \textit{Poetics of Love in the Arabic Novel}, discussing the lasting influence of the \textit{Nights} on the Arabic novel, it is desire that gives birth to narration.\textsuperscript{11} Taking his cue from Fedwa Malti-Douglas, who in her discussion of the \textit{Thousand and One Nights} argued that “desire is at the root of the frame of the \textit{Nights}”,\textsuperscript{12} al-Masri arrives at a similar observation in his dissertation entitled \textit{Telling Stories of Pain}, as he places Maryam’s desire to find ‘Alawiyya at the root of the ‘frame-tale’ of \textit{Maryam of Stories}. According to al-Masri, the entire novel is driven by this desire, “which is […] in turn motivated by her [Maryam’s] desire to have her story written down in a novel”.\textsuperscript{13} Al-Masri further points to the similarities between the frame tale of the \textit{Thousand and One Nights}, which “re-asserts itself at the beginning of each night before Shahrazad again takes up her storytelling”\textsuperscript{14}, and Maryam’s recurring articulation of her desire to find ‘Alawiyya, which sets off the narration in the first five chapters of the novel.

\textsuperscript{10} For instance, a well-known novel by another Lebanese author, Ḥanān ash-Shaykh, entitled \textit{The Story of Zahra [Ḥikāyat Zahra]}, follows this pattern.
\textsuperscript{12} MALTI-DOUGLAS, F. \textit{Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing}, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{13} AL-MASRI, K. M. \textit{Telling Stories of Pain}, p. 192.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
before the story intended to be written by ʿAlawiyya is told by Maryam instead. In *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, Peter Brooks investigates the link between the desire and the narrative:

> In *The Thousand and One Nights*, Shahrazad’s storytelling takes a desire that has gone off the rails – the Sultan’s desire, derailed by his wife’s infidelity, becomes sadistic and discontinuous, so that the mistress of the night must have her head chopped off in the morning – and cures it by prolonging it, precisely by narrativising it. Desire becomes reinvested in the telling of and the listening to stories, it is reconstituted as metonymy – over a thousand and one nights – until the sultan can resume a normal erotic state, marrying Shahrazad, who thus fulfils her name as ‘savior of the city’. Narration, in this allegory, is seen to be life-giving in that it arouses and sustains desire, ensuring that the terminus it both delays and beckons toward will offer what we might call a lucid repose, desire both come to rest and set in perspective.  

In a similar fashion, Maryam’s storytelling, set off by her desire to have her story written down, either by ʿAlawiyya or Zuhayr, or, preferably, by both of them, eventually results in her narrativising ʿAlawiyya’s desire to write a novel, which she then reinvests in the telling of stories in ʿAlawiyya’s stead, the ultimate finality of which becomes the book itself. In this sense, ʿAlawiyya could be seen as the instigator of the storytelling function, reminiscent of the role of Dunyazād in *The Thousand and One Nights*. Though at the beginning it was Maryam, who

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15 Likewise, Bešková in her monograph entitled *Mahfouzian Nights: Fate, Desire and Politics in Layālī alf layla* discusses Shahrīyār’s mental illness as a case of “desire gone awry” and credits Shahrazād with succeeding in substituting Shahrīyār’s carnal desire with a new, narrative one. For a more detailed discussion of desire in Mahfouz’s work as well as in *The Nights*, see BEŠKOVÁ, K. *Mahfouzian Nights: Fate, Desire and Politics in Layālī alf Layla*.  

16 BROOKS, P. *Reading for the Plot*, p. 61.  

17 “I hoped to discover my shadow in a novel or my character in a play.” In SOBH, A. *Maryam: Keeper of Stories*, p. 10 and ȘUBH, ʿA. ʿMaryam al-Ḥakāyā [Maryam of Stories], p. 16.  

18 Zuhayr is a playwright. In one of her interviews for the Lebanese daily as-Safir [The Ambassador], Șubḥ clarifies her relationship to Zuhayr (and to Maryam) in the following words: “Zuhayr represents my intellectual memory, whereas Maryam is a representation of my life experience. Zuhayr, as a modern intellectual, was unable to write about the war. He could not keep up with all the changes. […] At the end of the novel, I had to make him disappear. One of us had to disappear.” (An interview with ʿInāya Jābir). Quoted in YĀRID, N. S. *Wa ʿlam taṣmut Shahrazād: Ishkāliyyat khīṭābihā al-yawma* [Shahrazad did not Cease to Talk: Issues of her Discourse Today].
was supposed to be written into ʿAlawiyya’s text as if she was a shadow cast by her and other characters’ recollections of the past, in the end it is ʿAlawiyya who Maryam weaves into the tapestry of her own text:

Who was the one writing then, she or Zuhair? The handwriting on the pages in front of her was illegible. She began reading the story from the beginning but the tales overlapped, and the names of Ibtisam, Maryam, Yasmine, Zuhair, Kareem, Mustafa, Abu Yusuf, my mother and her mother and the others did not behave like a list of names entering the story in a sequence. […] Her fingers felt sore and her hand feverish. But she could not be certain of anything. Nothing was certain.\(^{19}\)

Maryam, who was initially assigned the role of a mere shadow, a spectator, and a keeper of stories, thus overshadows ʿAlawiyya by virtue of the fluidity of her narrative plotting. This fluidity, a storytelling happening of its own accord, also provides a ‘solution’ and a cure, or, as Brooks would have it, a “lucid repose of a desire both come to rest and set in perspective”.\(^{20}\) Maryam’s narrative mastery becomes most evident in Chapter 6, which stands out from the rest of the novel not only by the sheer volume of the chapter in question (taking up 145 pages out of the 426 pages that make up the entire novel), but also by its visual prominence, as the entirety of the chapter (in the Arabic original) is typeset in bold. Al-Masri also points out the very location of the chapter, which is situated approximately in the middle of the novel, that is, right in its ‘heart’.\(^{21}\) The chapter imparts the family history of the novel’s main protagonist, Maryam, who narrates the tales revolving around her family members, most notably those about her mother Fāṭima and her father Ḥasan, but also those of her aunts and uncles, siblings, grandparents, and, to a lesser degree, also their neighbours. What makes the chapter most remarkable, however, is the chronotopic contrast it provides. The tales are set in the rural South, which is in contrapuntal relationship with the otherwise prevailing chronotope of Beirut’s cityscape, which it engages dialogically. Maryam begins her narration with the agricultural image of “the last grape hanging at the end of a bunch” as a way of introducing herself, and proceeds to tell the story of her family that “started as a collection of little young berries when [they] first migrated to Beirut, only to ripen and scatter all around, until each grape matured and gave seed to a new cluster”.\(^{22}\) The dynamic structuration

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\(^{19}\) SOBH, A. Maryam: Keeper of Stories, p. 261; ʿUBḤ, ʿA. Maryam al-Ḥakāyā [Maryam of Stories], p. 426.

\(^{20}\) BROOKS, P. Reading for the Plot, p. 61.


\(^{22}\) SOBH, A. Maryam: Keeper of Stories, p. 85; ʿUBḤ, ʿA. Maryam al-Ḥakāyā [Maryam of Stories], p. 111.
of Maryam’s narrative plotting mirrors the image of the bunch of grapes, and her storytelling mastery lies in providing a digression on each “grape” (of a story of a particular protagonist) in her attempt to reach the centre. From this poetic introductory lead-in, her narration moves on freely, steadily and continuously; “from the somewhat rigid notion of structure to the more fluid and dynamic notion of structuration”,23 where ‘each grape [of a story] mature[s] and g[ives] seed to a new cluster’. However, an even more prominent role in sustaining the narration in the novel is given to water. Water symbolism drives the narration as well as the unfolding of individual stories. Flowing freely and continuously, seeping into everything, wearing away even the hardest of substances, water is a nutrient that sustains not only the “grapes” of a story, but also the “berries” (protagonists) themselves. From this perspective, water, as a great nurturer, can be said to represent love. In many respects, love is like water.24 So, too, love, like water, offers the cure. Desire, as we could see, plants the seeds of stories, but love, in the novel symbolized by water, is what nourishes them, sustains them and makes them grow. Love, as the natural medium for carrying messages, also sustains the continuity of Shahrazād’s and Maryam’s tales, allowing life to continue and flourish. The desire to narrate represents only the initial step, a seed; further analysis will show that Ouyang’s assessment of the narration and narrative of the Nights frame tale (as well as of other tales) may also apply to Maryam’s narrative plotting; as “desire drives the narration and gives birth to narrative, but love makes home for them.”25

A Well of Stories

In Maryam, Ṣubḥ has created a modern-day Shahrazād.26 Yet while Shahrazād’s storytelling is born out of her desire to save her people, and herself, from Shahriyār, the narrators in Maryam try to rid themselves of the burden of the stories they relate. Both in the Nights as well as in Maryam, narration serves as a

23 BROOKS, P. Reading for the Plot, p. 18.
24 Interestingly, one of the short stories in the short story collection by Samia Serageldin is entitled Love is Like Water. In this particular short story, however, the expression refers to what Nanou, the grandmother, would say to her grandchildren, meaning “that love flows from the older to the younger, and not vice versa, just as water flows downhill and not up”. See SERAGELDIN, S. Love is Like Water and Other Stories, p. 27.
means of self-preservation. The recurring metaphor for an untold tale is the motif of water retention, the building up of fluids inside the narrators’ bodies. ‘Alawiyya, for instance, always shows up “only when her mouth had filled up with water of a story that she could not swallow”. 27 Likewise, when Maryam rushes to meet Ibtisām, she also wonders “what water filled [her] mouth”. 28 The danger that the water/narration retention poses is established early on in the novel, after Maryam’s cousin Ḥalīma falls inside the well and “ha[s] to be turned over and her belly emptied of the water and the secrets she had swallowed”, in order for her life to be saved. 29

The life-giving, invigorating properties of narration, embodied in the free-flowing, unimpeded stream of stories, are in sharp contrast with the secrets and untold stories symbolized by the stale and stagnant waters of the village well. The dark, muddied waters of the well stand for everything that remains suppressed and hidden; unvoiced, and thus unheard. In Maryam, the untold story results in dis-ease, or is accompanied by death. The words imprisoned in Ibtisām’s chest are thus “wet with muddied water”, 30 and when she finally speaks out, her voice is “barely able to leave the well of her chest”. 31 Likewise, the water of the village well closes in on Rawda’s body (and its secret), whose own father (Maryam’s grandfather) had thrown her into the well in order to restore the family’s honour after his youngest daughter got pregnant as the consequence of a rape. Muddied water seems to have also spelled the end of ‘Alawiyya’s novel:

The rain and the wind had written the end of the novel. She stood watching our memories float on water and mud, as words dissolved in the rain and erased our shadows, hers and mine. Our ending swam in the dirt, and the madness of the playwright swam along with them. ‘Alawiyya lost her mind and went almost as crazy as Zuhair. She said, ‘The manuscript is gone, Maryam. Our stories have been washed away by water and mud.’ As she told me what had happened, water and mud flowed from her eyes and erased her features right before my eyes, just as they had erased the words on her papers. For weeks, [she] would wake in the night, finding her pillow wet with mud and water. 32

28 Ibid., p. 67; Ibid., p. 82.
29 Ibid., p. 17; Ibid., p. 25.
30 Ibid., p. 210; Ibid., p. 266.
31 Ibid.; Ibid.
32 Ibid., p. 18.
The symbolism of the well as a reservoir of untold stories and secrets waiting to be divulged is further extended to Beirut itself when, on entering the city after a night of heavy shelling, Maryam feels as though she was “descending into a vast cavern beneath the earth, like the hollow of the old well in [her] village home”. Describing the city as “a bottomless well”, she recalls her fear of the hollows filled with stagnant waters. This fear dates back to her childhood when she would listen to her mother’s stories of the lady jinns “sitting at the very mouth of the well, the place where the secrets of the unknown world lay”. Her mother would often speak about her fear of wells, “of the edges of water, and of empty spaces” and caution her children to take refuge in God every time they approached “any kind of hole that could fill up with water or in which water was used”. When Maryam leaves her apartment to see ʿAbbās after two days of constant shelling, she feels as if she was “descending into a dark space filled with water”, once again held captive by her “childhood fear that Mother would fulfil her threat and ‘take care of [her]’ in the water of the well if [she] wasn’t a good girl”. However, Maryam’s fear of the mysterious well also entices her “to seek

33 SOBH, A. Maryam: Keeper of Stories, p. 15; ʿUBḤ, ʿA. Maryam al-Ḥakāyā [Maryam of Stories], p. 23.
35 Ibid., p. 22; Ibid., p. 31.
37 Jinn, representing an important part of an elaborate system of folk beliefs, are believed to dwell underground by day and make their appearance at night. According to Gregg, “this makes wells, caves, drains, and latrines dangerous, as jinns usually live in or pass through them, and it also makes dusk and night dangerous times”. From the psychological point of view, a variety of unusual feelings and emotions is often explained away by the actions of jinn spirits, even though they may have psychological or medical causes (such as seizure-like fits, etc.). Various precautions are often being taken to protect oneself from the actions of an angered jinn, and many of the precautions that could be taken in order to peacefully coexist with the jinn spirits are woven into daily customs and routines, for instance, saying “bismillah, ‘In the name of God,’ before stepping over the threshold to enter a house or before hauling water from a well or throwing hot water down the drain”, so as to alert the jinns and announce oneself as a believer. See GREGG, G. S. The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology, p. 125.
38 SOBH, A. Maryam: Keeper of Stories, p. 22; ʿUBḤ, ʿA. Maryam al-Ḥakāyā [Maryam of Stories], p. 31.
39 Ibid., p. 15; Ibid., p. 23.
40 As Gregg points out, children are taught from their earliest childhood to actually believe that these spirit beings are real. Evoking the spectre of jinn spirits or ghouls is often used by traditional Middle East North Africa (MENA) parents as a means to control their children and make them docile. “Threat in the eye, warmth in the heart” seems to be considered the right parental attitude in MENA countries. See GREGG, G. S. The Middle
what [is] hidden under its lid", losing herself “in the dread and pleasure of finding secrets”. Likewise, the streets of war-torn Beirut also titillate her and lure her out to “peer into the secrets of their hollows”. The symbolism of the well in the novel extends also to other hollow places, as both the woman’s eyes as well as her vagina serve as the ‘reservoirs’ of untold stories and secrets that had been drowned. It is these secrets that the men in the novel are fearful of, since they have the power to threaten the social, as well as the political, status quo. Therefore, Jalāl fears Ibtisām’s past, which he failed to convince himself he did not care about, and his true feelings become evident as “for years thereafter he would enter her as if into a crevice teeming with demons”. In the novel’s marvellous play of signification, the ‘water of a story’ fills also the hollow of the eye, where tears can partake in the telling of tales. The tears held back again represent the stories untold, while the tears flowing freely hint at liberation. Thus one of the numerous female characters in the novel, Tuṣḥa, “would hold the tear prisoner in her eyes”, while Maryam’s mother, Fāṭima, “held it in her heart”. Umm Yūsuf has hidden her tears from her husband, Abū Yūsuf, all her life to the extent that whenever she woke up in the middle of the night and “found a tear at the corner of her eye, she would fear that Abu Yusuf might have awakened by mistake and caught a glimpse of it”. Maryam also relates the story of her grandmother Zaynab, who had lost her four daughters to illness and spent a year wailing and mourning their deaths, “until she would cry without shedding a single tear”. Finally, your tear has fallen,” Maryam’s grandfather comments on the tear on her cheek, still “moist and dewy”, as he finds her lying motionless on the floor behind the door, her dead body stiff and dry. The symbolism of the well and its associations with the hollows of the woman’s body are anchored throughout the novel so firmly, that there is no need for Ṣubḥ to tie these associations together; every mention of the eyes or vagina inadvertently refers the reader back to the well and its imagery of untold stories or sunken secrets.
In this way, it is not only the woman’s voice engaged in telling the stories that poses a threat to the patriarchal order; her eyes, as well as her sexual organ are seen as equally ‘dangerous’, as all of these hollows can tell a story that would undermine the hegemony of patriarchal discourse and question its claim to a sole truth.

The stale and stagnant waters of the village well, the muddied water of the stories imprisoned in the chest, the tear held back in the eye, the muddy rain puddle erasing the stories intended to be preserved for posterity in ʿAlawiyya’s novel, or the lid of the well that closes behind Rawḍa’s body to obliterate both the story of her body and, by extension, also that of her life, serve as a backdrop against which the liberating nature of the flow, of movement embodied by running water, as found in the river, the sea, the ocean, the waves, the tears flowing freely, the gushing fountain or the valley spring are brought forth to engage in a dialectical interplay. The imagery of the water flowing, oozing, or spurring unimpeded serves throughout the novel several purposes: it symbolizes movement (narrative or emotional), promotes healing, lends expression to the feelings of joy, or facilitates liberation. Through these images, life asserts itself again and again, in ever multiplying and widening circles, in much the same way as ripples form on the surface of a lake or a still pond when one drops a pebble into the water. Thus Yāsmīn’s understanding of a better life takes the shape of “lush gardens with fountains”, the water of the valley spring from which Maryam’s mother drew the water to wash her brother’s feet upon his return, is seen as “restor[ing] the soul and lighten[ing] the burdens of the body”, and Ibtisām is fondly referred to as “the sea of [Maryam’s] memories”, “even though her marriage has darkened its waters and broken the rhythms of its waves”. The depiction of intimate encounters between Karīm and Ibtisām also utilizes the same imagery, since to engage in them is, in and of itself, an assertion of life in a city full of destruction and death: “They began twisting and turning like two waves merging their rhythms and waters”. The imagery not only denotes the movement per se, but also stirs the reader’s emotions, fueling their imagination. Even Maryam’s mother, who otherwise denied herself every pleasure, and would never acknowledge her desires, to the extent that “[s]he hollows of two wells”, sinking deeper and deeper until “[s]he had faded into the hollows of her eyes and could no longer see [her]”. See SOBH, A. Maryam: Keeper of Stories, p. 22 and ṢUBḤ, ‘A. Maryam al-Ḥakāyā [Maryam of Stories], p. 31.

50 Ibid., p. 164; Ibid., pp. 201–2.
51 Ibid., p. 38; Ibid., p. 249.
52 Ibid., p. 74; Ibid., p. 92.
would not even admit the pleasure of eating”, would still rejoice at the moments devoted to the “weekly pleasure” of cleaning the house: “Mother’s happiness on those days, when she poured water into the house from the hose, cannot be described. The more she saw the water ebbing and flowing on the room floors, running in a stream, the more delighted she became. [S]he would press firmly on the opening of the hose with her thumb, making the water rise until it reached the ceiling.” The “extended romantic rendezvous between Mother and sanitation”, Maryam narrates, was the source of “unequalled joy and unmatched happiness”, making her mother look “as if she had just walked out of the ocean”. These life-asserting images of running water further reinforce the importance of the empowering nature of the flow of storytelling. Narration is seen as life-giving, life-sustaining and freeing and reaches its fullest expression in the fluidity of Maryam’s storytelling, which, as previously mentioned, can also be viewed as her self-birth.

**Between Autonomy and Interdependence**

The novel’s thematic focus on the processes of writing and storytelling, which are inherently present in both Maryam’s and ʿAlawiyah’s ‘self-births’ (in the processes of their identity construction), hints at the many parallels between the creation of the self and the creation of a literary work. In her study on the issue of identity in fiction and in fact, exploring the relation between fiction and autobiography, Patricia Spacks has repeatedly noted that: “[t]o tell a story of the self is […] to create a fiction.” Her conclusions echo the social constructionist theories that conceptualize personal identity in terms of text. Chrz, for instance, defines identity as a text or a story, which “to a certain extent, is written by a given society based on the forms of [its] discourse (as a given system of social interactions), and, on the other hand, by an individual, who accepts responsibility

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54 Ibid., p. 176; Ibid., p. 216.
55 Ibid., p. 177; Ibid.
56 SPACKS, P. M. Imagining a Self, p. 311.
57 Similarly, Rousseau, when striving to “render [his] soul transparent to the eyes of the reader” in his Confessions, claims that identity can only be thought of in narrative terms. However, it is up to the reader to “judge by himself”. See ROUSSEAU, J. J. The Confessions, p. 146.
for the story they co-create”. Peter Brooks concurs with both Spacks and Chrz on the issue of defining and constructing “our sense of self through our fictions”, which we do “within the constraints of a trans-individual symbolic order”, as will be discussed later in this article. Like the novel, identity is, by its very nature, dialogic.

The power and importance of women’s storytelling, as well as the centrality of relationality in the development of women’s self-concept, become clear in the following paragraph:

I simmered coffee on the stovetop and the stories rose from their mouths with more fervor than the steam rising from the large pot. We needed to tell each other everything, even the most intimate of details. Each of us needed to tell our story in the presence of the rest, so we could be mirrors in which to discover their many faces and ours.

As seen above, female identity is primarily constructed relationally. Psychodynamic theories based on the work of Nancy Chodorow trace the development of gender identities to earlier patterns of attachment and separation. In her study of personality development, Chodorow draws critically upon Freud’s conclusions emphasizing the psychosexual nature of the early developmental

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58 CHRZ, Vladimir. Poetika identity: Kategorie popisu narativní konstrukce [Poetics of Identity: Categories of Description of the Narrative Construction]. In ČERMÁK, Ivo, MIOVSKÝ, Michal (eds.). Kvalitativní výskum ve vědách o člověku na prahu třetího tisíciletí [Qualitative Research in Social Sciences on the Threshold of the Third Millennium], pp. 40-47. The study approaches the conception of identity as a narrative construction, presuming that identity is arrived at by narrating a story.

59 BROOKS, P. Reading for the Plot, p. 36.

60 For the dialogic nature of the novel, see BAKHTIN, M. M. The Dialogic Imagination, where the author contests the ‘monologic utterance’ and its internal unity. According to Bakhtin, the novel reflects the ‘internally dialogized discourse’ of the time in that it is not only an expression of the author’s voice, but a tapestry woven from the threads of many other voices (characters) representing different worldviews. Every utterance is, therefore, an intersection between the ‘unitary’ (literary, normative) language and “the social diversity of speech types” (prrozoročie) through which it is brought into existence. See BAKHTIN, M. M. The Dialogic Imagination, pp. 262–63.

61 Self-concept is defined as the combination of perceptions, conceptions and values that an individual believes to be true of their own self. See BUKATKO, D., DAEHLER, M. W. Child Development: A Thematic Approach, p. 422.


63 See, for instance, Carol Gilligan’s work on women’s development, In a Different Voice. See GILLIGAN, C. In a Different Voice.
stage, but moves her attention away from the [sexual] drives and turns it towards relationality.64 In her research she draws upon the thesis that both boys’ and girls’ first identification at the earliest stage of psychosocial development is with their mothers, to whom they are almost symbiotically attached, developing a sense of self that is fundamentally feminine. She further explains that the later process of self-identification is therefore more fluid in the case of girls, since it is in agreement with their earliest identification, while for boys, masculinity is defined negatively, as something that is not feminine, since boys must suppress, or renounce their earliest [feminine] sense of self and move towards identification with their fathers (or other male role-models). As a consequence, women do not separate from their mothers as definitively as do boys and thus develop a sense of adult identity defined by more fluid ego boundaries and a less absolute separation of self from other.65 Chodorow maintains that this accounts for different relational abilities in male and female personalities, and believes that girls develop a greater capacity for empathic involvement with others. However, these differences do not mean that “women have ‘weaker’ ego boundaries than men”, but rather that “girls emerge from this period with a basis for ‘empathy’ built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not. Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another’s needs or feelings as one’s own”.66 Carol Gilligan’s theory that women develop in interdependent connection with others, while men develop via separation and pursuit of autonomy, also builds on Chodorow’s work.67

Diverging developmental tasks of boys and girls accounting for different dynamics in male and female identity construction are reflected in the novel as the divergence of Zuhayr’s and ʿAlawiyya’s approaches to the process of literary creation. While both of them decide to depict the war experience of the same characters via the literary medium68 that suits them best, ʿAlawiyya begins her literary tale with a comma, a mark of punctuation used for indicating a division,

64 One of the first psychoanalysts to point out that the Oedipal triangle is not, in essence, about sexual drives, but rather about affection, attachment and dependence, was Abram Kardiner, who, in the 1930s, attempted to apply psychoanalysis to the field of anthropology and cultural theory and developed one of the first cross-cultural theories of personality development. GREGG, G. S. The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology, p. 205.


66 Ibid., p. 167.

67 “Masculine personality, then, comes to be defined more in terms of denial of relation and connection (and denial of femininity), whereas feminine personality comes to include a fundamental definition of self in relationship.” CHODOROW, N. The Reproduction of Mothering, p. 169.

68 ʿAlawiyya is a novelist, while Zuhayr is a playwright.
while Zuhayr decides to begin his text with a connective word, ‘and’. The function of ‘and’, as a connective, is to connect, join, or include. On the contrary, the function of a comma, as a division marker, is to divide and separate. The separating function of a comma is even more pronounced in Arabic, where the word for comma is fāṣila, meaning ‘separating, dividing’. As a result of their literary undertakings, ‘Alawiyya explains, the difference between women’s and men’s perception of the same characters and the stories heard and retold, will be brought out for everyone to see. We could conceive of their choices of the beginnings of their respective tales as being subversive of the aforementioned gendered perspective, as ‘Alawiyya’s intent was to weave her narrative around separation and division (indicated by her use of a comma), whereas Zuhayr seemed to desire to pursue the unfolding of his characters’ destinies through the inclusiveness and continuity of the ‘and’. However subversive of the tradition their initial intents purported to be, the narratives themselves bore a vital relation to it. Ibtisām relates how on one facet of these two different approaches to literary creation, two distinct modes of text production, permeates ‘Alawiyya’s text: “As she read the drafts aloud, it would pain me to hear my story wander and become lost among a host of names”. However, ‘Alawiyya defends herself: “But your story is not yours alone. I heard the same story from Huda, Jumana, Suaad, Samiha and many others whose names and faces I no longer remember”. Here, ‘Alawiyya points to the shared characteristics of women’s storytelling, as well as to the shared specificity of their experience. Nevertheless, her characters claim...
their individuality and demand autonomy, which ʿAlawiyya seems to struggle considerably to acknowledge. Her text is marked by disintegration and fragmentation. Her inability to sustain its inner cohesion leaves ʿAlawiyya on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Maryam muses: “If I find ʿAlawiyya I will not ask her about our story. I will tell her that the comma with which she intended to begin her novel, to separate the present from what had preceded it, had drifted away and split into little pieces. I will tell her that the clauses are no longer dependent, and that predicates no longer concern me…”

Zuhayr’s approach is antithetical; it is based on a strict delineation of the individual characters’ identities, which, on the one hand, enables him to preserve his characters’ integrity in terms of respecting their individuality, yet on the other, lacks in fluidity. Maryam shares her observations: “Zuhair’s hero would go to sleep a communist, but when Zuhair would visit him the next day, he would find that he’d become a banker, or a shoe merchant. Then Zuhair would start writing the story of the communist who became a merchant. But when he would go back to check on the fellow the next day, he would find him praying all day, that he’d become a fundamentalist.”

His approach, though markedly opposed to ʿAlawiyya’s, nonetheless inevitably results in the disintegration of his protagonists’ identities, as well as in the fragmentation of his text as a whole. In this way, his desire – just like the Sultan’s in the Nights – became discontinuous, though it was not the mistress of the night who ‘must have her head chopped off in the morning’ but his characters’ yesterday’s identities. The lack of control over his characters’ destinies likewise leads to his mental breakdown. By juxtaposing Zuhayr’s and ʿAlawiyya’s differing approaches, Šubḥ problematizes the “correctness” as well as the (implied) superiority of a single way of perceiving, and conceiving of, social reality. On the contrary; she underscores the complementarity of the male and female approach to ‘the text of the world’ and encourages their mutual synergistic interaction in the process of social transformation.

Between Telling, Writing and Becoming

Within the signifying process that constitutes language, Kristeva recognizes two modalities (or dispositions) that operate dialectically. The symbolic modality is

74 SOBH, A. Maryam: Keeper of Stories, p. 50; ŠUBḤ, ʿA. Maryam al-Hakāyā [Maryam of Stories], p. 63..
75 Ibid., p. 247; Ibid., p. 307.
76 For Kristeva, the symbolic modality represents the paternal principle (the Law of the Father, or the socio-symbolic order), while the semiotic modality is an expression of the maternal principle (instinct, impulse, or drive).
focused on the object world of other people and things, and has the capacity to impose the uniformity of meaning and syntactic structure. It is known for its relative stability and, through the act of defining, provides the basis for interpersonal communication. The second modality, which Kristeva calls the *semiotic*, tends towards identification rather than separation and can be characterized as continuous. Language, according to Kristeva, is a dialogue between the unconscious drives (the semiotic) and social modes of expression (the symbolic). She conceives of language as a dialectical interplay between its two modalities that produces discourse “in process/on trial”. For Kristeva, the two modalities are inseparable and the extent to which they are balanced, or the extent to which one predominates over the other, determines the type of discourse. However, Kristeva never ceases to emphasize the need for an organizing principle – the ordering presence of the symbolic – without which language would only become psychotic utterance. Kristeva’s theory of language is also reflected in Ṣubḥ’s own approach to literary creation. When interviewed for the literary magazine *Banipal*, Ṣubḥ addresses the role of memory in her narrative imagination and characterizes her writing as the process of uncovering women’s memory and its ‘hidden languages’. In so doing, she is well aware that “uncovering female memories is perhaps an interrogation of patriarchal memory and an undermining of its discourse”. At the same time, she acknowledges the existence of the [patriarchal] symbolic order that dominates both women’s and men’s writing. According to Ṣubḥ, it is not necessary that “a woman’s writing be the tool that shatters the dominant discourse”, because, like Kristeva, Ṣubḥ recognizes the need for the symbolic modality, which anchors the meaning that, exposed to the creative force of the semiotic, is always in a state of ‘generative instability’. A key concept throughout Kristeva’s theory of language has been that of a ‘boundary/rupture’ or ‘threshold’, which refers to the boundary between the conscious and unconscious, between unconscious desire and the social. It is on this threshold site of the psychic and the social that the interaction between them takes place, which, consequently, produces language as utterance. For Kristeva, signifying practice is a “heterogeneous contradiction between two irreconcilable elements – separate but inseparable from the process in which they assume asymmetrical functions”. Literature is the site of a permanent struggle to show

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77 A play on words, exploiting the dual meaning of the French original, *en procès*.
79 MORRIS, P. *Literature and Feminism*, p. 146.
80 KRISTEVA, J. *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 82.
the ‘facilitation of drives’ within the linguistic [socio-symbolic] order itself, by which it practices the very thing sought by the theory of the unconscious: “the ultimate means of its transformation and subversion, the precondition for its survival and revolution”. 81 This ‘intertext’ or dialogic interaction taking place at the threshold between the unconscious drives and the social also forms the basis for identity construction: “self is thus a dialogic interaction of these two dispositions and produces a subject also ‘in process’ – pluralized identity never fixed and finished”. 82 However, it is important to note that for Kristeva self also remains a part of the socio-symbolic order; to opt out of it altogether, is “to opt out of history.” 83

In Kristeva’s conception of language, the semiotic is thus inherent in the symbolic, while it also goes beyond it and threatens its position. 84 Following my previous discussion of the diverging ‘tasks’ in male and female identity construction, which were parallelized by male and female approaches to literary creation as transpired in the creative processes of Zuhayr and Ṭalawiyya, we could perhaps conceptualize Zuhayr’s approach as symbolic, while conceiving of Ṭalawiyya’s as semiotic. As has already been stated, both aforementioned approaches resulted in failure in the processes of literary creation and text production. In the light of Kristeva’s understanding of poetic language, one can thus ascribe Zuhayr’s failure to the lack of flexibility or fluidity in the construction of his subject, which resisted his attempts at absolute knowledge. Zuhayr’s subject who lay down in the evening as a communist but woke up as a banker failed to constitute an unambiguous fact. Zuhayr’s expectation that his text turns out to be a confirmation of a single ‘truth’, was not met. It could be argued that it was this realization, coupled with his creative failure, which eventually led to his mental breakdown. Contrary to Zuhayr, Ṭalawiyya allowed herself to be overwhelmed by the forces of the semiotic; in extricating her text from the socio-symbolic order, she was left at the mercy of the unconscious desire. However, Kristeva warns against the danger of creative potential being controlled by the suppressed drives of the unconscious, as “[d]isengaged from the symbolic modality, the ‘revolutionary’ potential of the semiotic disposition explodes into a non-sense or madness”. 85

Within the discursive space of the novel, it is eventually Maryam’s narrative plotting that makes the form-giving possible, as it reconciles Ṭalawiyya’s ‘semiotic’ and Zuhayr’s ‘symbolic’ approaches and balances them out.

81 KRISTEVA, J. Revolution in Poetic Language, p. 81.
82 MORRIS, P. Literature and Feminism, p. 146.
83 Ibid.
84 KRISTEVA, J. Revolution in Poetic Language, p. 81.
85 MORRIS, P. Literature and Feminism, p. 146.
Conclusion

The novel *Maryam, Keeper of Stories* (in Arabic *Maryam al-Ḥakāyā*, Maryam of Stories) by the well-known Lebanese novelist ‘Alawiyya Ṣūḥh offers a polyphonic, multi-layered narrative that is strongly reminiscent of the tradition of Arabic storytelling exemplified by perhaps the most famous of all storytellers; that of Shahrazād of the *Thousand and One Nights*. Although the two works share a lot of similarities, especially with regard to the frame-story and the technique of embedding the narratives, and, as has been shown, also the function of having the storytelling instigated by one of the characters and by desire (or, more appropriately, by a desiring character), the focus of my study lies not in comparing the two works, but rather in teasing out a number of aspects of achieving the narrative fluidity of Ṣūḥh’s novel that it would prove rather challenging to demonstrate otherwise. As I have also shown, an equally important role in creating and sustaining a fluid narrative can be attributed to the use of metaphors of water used throughout the novel. While Maryam’s alluring way of storytelling appeals to the reader more on a conceptual plane, the vivid images of water used throughout the narrative awaken their senses. Water metaphors evoke not just the narrative but also emotional movement, and movement, just like water, is a blessing.86 Portraying women’s struggle between letting the waters of their stories flow and keeping the lids of their wells closed, Maryam’s narrative represents a site of confluence of overlapping political, cultural, and creative forces, which it has both internalized and transcended.

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86 *Al-ḥaraka baraka* [Movement is a blessing.] Arabic proverbial saying.


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