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Challenging Phallocentrism in Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman*

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Introduction

Alan Robbe-Grillet once wrote that the worst thing to happen to the novel was the arrival of psychology.

– Aalia Saleh, *An Unnecessary Woman*

Rabih Alameddine's (1959 – present) is an American writer of Lebanese descent whose experimental work “has been hailed as provocative for its rich exploration of Arab, Arab American, philosophical, queer and transnational themes” (Pickens). The experience of migration and its role in identity and self-formation is the author's recurring theme and interest as represented in his novels. His focus on the question of languages and the mixing of Arab and European literary forms, place Alameddine “squarely within the Levantine tradition of *mahjar* literature”. The Mahjar literature is the Arab emigration literary tradition that began in the late nineteenth century in the United States and includes contemporary writers such as Rawi Hage (novelist), Wajdi Mouwad (playwright), and especially Gibran (1883 – 1931) – the author of *The Prophet* (Creswell 1).

Rabih Alameddine belongs to a group of Lebanese-born authors who partially or fully spent their childhood and adolescence in war-torn Lebanon between 1975-1991. These writers have produced post-war literature which has been written in and about exile, civil strife and mainly expatriation. These younger authors share with their predecessors the memories of the survivors of war, and their “fiction forms a cross-cultural phenomenon and is the cornerstone of a contemporary, bilingual corpus of Lebanese exile writing” (Hout 219).

Regarding his work, Alameddine's novels explore such diverse themes as homosexuality, death, belonging, exile, the Lebanese civil war (1975- 1990), the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s in the United States and in his debut novel *Koolaid's: The Art of War* (1998). In *The Hakawati*

(2008) he employs multiple narrators, plots, genres, languages, and he strives hard to tell the story of American homophobia, Lebanese sectarianism as well as the physical and psychological outcomes of war (Tabacková 112). In *The Angel of History* (2013) he tells the story of Jacob, a Yemeni-born gay poet who wants to check into a mental health center and who is haunted by memories of lost loved ones and visions of war in a story that moves between San Francisco and the Middle East (The Guardian). Equally, *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (2001) tells the story of Sarah, who lives in a state of alienation between New York and Beirut and “home is never where she is” (Rastegar). Hence, Alameddine's protagonists move between the Middle East and the United States struggling with existential issues of identity, exile, death, and war.

However, *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013) marks a new turn in the author's style and theme compared to his previous novels. It is Alameddine's fifth novel and was nominated for the National Book Award for 2014, and the one which gave its author a legitimate literary success after *Koolaid's*. The novel is told in the first-person narrative voice through Aaliya, the protagonist and the narrator of her own memories and experience in Beirut, during and after the civil war (1975-1990). Aaliya is seventy-two-years old, “childless”, “divorced”, “Godless”, and lives alone in her spacious apartment where she spends her days reading and translating translations of French and English books into Arabic and putting them into boxes (*An Unnecessary Woman*, back cover page). Aaliya is not “a very convincing translator” and her translations have no hope of being published, but she claims to be driven only by her esteem for the great writers and the joy she takes in the activity itself (Creswell 2-3).

In his review, Robyn Creswell affirms that the novel is told from Aaliya's single point of view and proceeds in a straightforward narrative aside from a few flashbacks. It “marks a departure from the style and themes” of the author's earlier work. He states that Aaliya is no longer at ease in Beirut, and she considers Lebanon a deeply parochial country, which she can

only escape by reading W. G. Sebald and José Saramago (Creswell 2-3). Aaliya is escaping from her relatives and from her city, which force her into exile in her Beirut apartment. Aaliya does not feel at home in her native city, and for most of the novel, she walks through her neighborhood in West Beirut remembering past lovers, favorite books, and the bitterness of her family life. She also recalls the past and how the city of Beirut used to be before the concrete spread and devoured “every living surface” (Creswell 2-3).

Creswell also contends that Aaliya's passion for translation is “the prime source of the novel's claim on its readers' sympathies”. The loneliness of this passion strengthens the readers' sympathies which are heightened by the idea that Aaliya is pursuing her vocation in a cultural desert (Creswell 3). Consequently, Creswell believes that the Lebanese parochial or patriarchal backdrop to the novel drives Aaliya to her seclusion. She is entrapped in a female role imposed on her by her family and society. As a result, Aaliya rebels against a number of phallographic and patriarchal social factors that initially cause her social exclusion and marginalization as a woman; then they result in her voluntary self-seclusion as a sign of resistance against the oppressive social norms. Thus, Aaliya opposes the phallographic Lebanese patriarchal mindset by immersing herself in the world of literature. Aaliya confesses:

I long ago abandoned myself to a blind lust for the written word. Literature is my sandbox. In it I play, build my forts and castles, spend glorious time. It is the world outside that box that gives me trouble. I have adapted tamely, though not conventionally, to this visible world so I can retreat without much inconveniences into my inner world of books. Transmuting this sandy metaphor, if literature is my sandbox, then the real world is my hourglass – an hourglass that drains grain by grain. Literature gives me life, and life kills me. (*An Unnecessary Woman* 5)

Sobhi Saleh is sexually challenged, and he is equally oppressed by the Lebanese patriarchal system for not possessing a potent phallus. Sobhi is mentioned in the novel only to highlight his social invalidity as an impotent man who does not abide by the assigned social role. Sobhi marries Aaliya at sixteen; divorces her at twenty, and dies “at sixty-one” as an unnoticed “solitary passenger on a public bus” (15). In the novel, Sobhi is qualified as “a man small in stature and spirit”, “an impotent insect”, “listless mosquito with malfunctioning proboscis” (13) for the fact that he is impotent and does not fulfill his role as the 'completor' of the 'lack' (Potts).

Regarding Lebanese patriarchy, Suad Joseph sees patriarchy in the Arab context “as the prioritising of the rights of males and elders (including elder mothers) and the justification of those rights within kinship values which are usually supported by religion” (Joseph 14). Joseph contends that kinship is the center of Arab society, and that the family is its basic unit, not the individual. Thus, kinship sustains the individual's sense of self and identity, and shapes their position in society. She adds that kinship transports patriarchy into all spheres of social and political life, even though patriarchy may also be produced independently throughout social life, when the privileges of males and seniors are justified in terms that are not bound up with kinship, such as administrators, professionals, politicians, religious leaders and the like (15-16).

This means that men and senior women, such as old mothers, have agency over the younger individual, and that the family is the main unit in Arab patriarchal societies. Family and kinship have a dominant role that classifies, justifies and supports the individual's social position and sense of identity – along with the help of religious institutions in the same society. Other administrative, professional, political, religious and educational authorities may play a dominant role also, due to their leadership positions and their power over the individual who is the smallest and weakest unit in society.

At the psychological level, Joseph argues that patriarchy works and endures because “it becomes part of the psyche, one's sense of oneself as a person” (Joseph 18). In some Arab countries, patriarchy is linked to a 'connective' or relational notion of the self, which is embedded in relationships. And contrary to the “individualist, autonomous, bounded, contractual self valued in the West”, some Arab men and women are encouraged to see themselves in relationship to critical others who are social role models, especially in their families. Thus, the boundary between one's sense of self, and other people, is relatively fluid because it is “a sense of selfhood that emphasizes the connectedness of individuals to each other” (18).

Joseph takes this notion of connectivity even further and explores the brother-sister relationship in reproducing patriarchy. In another article entitled: “Brother/Sister Relationships: Connectivity, Love, and Power in the Reproduction of Patriarchy in Lebanon” (1994), Joseph demonstrates how the brother/sister relationship becomes “a critical vehicle for the socialization of males and females into culturally appropriate gender roles” and thus, helping to reproduce patriarchy. Cross siblings, in her opinion, use their relationships to learn and practice socially acceptable notions of masculinity and femininity, dominance and submission, and “commitment to patrilineal structures and morality” (56).

Henceforth, this same Lebanese patriarchy that cherishes connectivity and lack of individuality, and values a person in relation to established social role models, stands here as the backdrop of Alameddine's novel. It causes Aaliya's seclusion and “internal migration” as a woman who does not abide by family and social rules (Creswell). Aaliya, as a Lebanese woman, does not accept authority coming through her brothers, husband, (elder) mother and society. She rebels against phallogentrism which is the psychoanalytic definition of male dominance or phallic superiority which excludes women from social and political life. According to Freud, phallogentrism cannot exist without an already existing and supporting

patriarchal system such as the Lebanese one in Aaliya's case (Grosz 67). Phallocentrism as a term, mainly evolves around the phallus that determines a woman's exclusion from society by considering her a 'lack'. Accordingly, in Lacanian terms a woman becomes a social lack because she does not possess the phallus (Grosz 7).

From a psychoanalytic view, Elizabeth Grosz contends that psychoanalysis provides an explanation, or the beginning of one, of woman's social and psychological positions within patriarchal cultures even if, "it has contributed to women's increasing hystericization and their subsumption under male norms"(Grosz 7). This implies that psychoanalysis qualifies women as hysterical in a world dominated by male norms. Additionally, Grosz blames psychoanalysis for assuming women's 'castration' and passivity as one of its fundamental principles (Grosz 7). In *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (1990), Grosz states that psychoanalysis articulates that women are culturally constructed by negative definitions, and that psychoanalysis should be placed in the context of "a history of misogyny"(7).

Although Rabih Alameddine explores a variety of themes in his novels, most secondary literature written about his work tends to foreground the experience and implications of exile and displacement of his protagonists caused by the Lebanese civil war, family conflicts or sexuality (Pickens). Regarding *An Unnecessary Woman*, few literary articles and reviews have been written about the novel. Literary critics have analyzed a narrow range of aspects in the novel, mostly related to literary appropriation, intertextuality, and war as a common background in Alameddine's novel and in Shakespeare's tragedies: *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.

Jonathan Galassi in "Reviews" (2015) considers Aaliya a refugee of Middle-Eastern hegemony whose life is a part of the turbulence of the Lebanese civil war, violence and Syrian political captivity. He claims that her behavior is "generically self-reliant but with a particular cast". It is more Middle-Eastern and European than North American, and more nihilistic than self-centered. For him, Aaliya's attitude is not selfish but asocial, and her actions or rejection

of activity lead to “no ameliorative delight except in a repressed pleasure of nihilistic masochism” (164). Galassi further, argues that in spite of her nihilism, Aaliya refuses to surrender her “one unwavering role in life”, that of being a translator and never a writer or creator. She has always been “an outsider taking part in an insider's work”, and that “that achievement is her validation” (165). He also mentions the role that memory plays in this novel, for Aaliya's story is filtered through her memories whose routing is circular. This technique allows the author to display “an amazing show of erudition as he backs up every moment of memory with a parallel in literary and artistic culture (164).

Furthermore, Dina Al-Khatib and Yousef Awad come closest to the study of Aaliya's identity as a socially marginalized woman; yet, they do not analyze the social effects and marginalization upon Aaliya from a psychoanalytical perspective. They study the representation of the female journey and its interconnectedness with female development in *An Unnecessary Woman*, and base their study on Maureen Murdock's theory in regard to the journey paradigm that condenses the female journey into three essential stages: the Separation, the Descent and the Rebirth.

In “Unfolding the Female Journey in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman*” (2019) Al-Khatib and Awad study Aaliya's (or the heroine's) journey that begins when she becomes conscious that she has been living on the margins of her own life and society. Consequently, she becomes determined to challenge the conceptualization of a traditionally-defined femininity. Then, she breaks free from the oppressive gender roles that are prescribed for her by patriarchy in society (1).

However, secondary literature regarding *An Unnecessary Woman* takes different directions in studying Aaliya's character and makes no contribution in particular to this thesis. It does not reveal any studies related to the psychological or psychoanalytic basis of Aaliya's and Sobhi's exclusion from the Lebanese society. It does not analyze Aaliya's marginalization

on the basis of her being a woman who lives in a patriarchal value system, and where she is considered a social 'lack' because she does not possess the phallus. Neither does it study Sobhi's character as someone who possesses a dysfunctional phallus. Thus, the articles mentioned above analyze Alameddine's novel from different perspectives, far removed from the central concerns of this thesis. Jonathan Galassi considers Aaliya as a nihilistic masochist who never gives up translating translations, and who is always an outsider and not an insider to the creation of the literary text without taking Aaliya's gender and social context into consideration. Equally, Dina Al Khatib and Yousef Awad focus on the female journey and its experience in Aaliya's character as a woman who wants to break free from the gender roles prescribed to her by patriarchy, and define herself as whole (Al Khatib and Awad 6).

As a response to this literary gap, this thesis will focus on the psychoanalytic significance of the phallus which is the supreme symbol of masculine power and feminine lack, the axis of phallogentrism and its application to *An Unnecessary Woman*. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the phallus is the 'signifier of signifiers'. The phallus symbolizes power, desire and sexuality according to its contextual position in the novel. The phallus also functions as a social definer that determines the individual's social position and rank. Hence, Aaliya and Sobhi Saleh are both excluded and marginalized in the Lebanese patriarchal value system for not possessing the phallus. Subsequently, Aaliya's position is empowered as a woman who reacts to the oppressive social demands by possessing several phallic objects that will provide her with agency. Sobhi Saleh however, is permanently feminized in the novel for the fact that he is sexually impotent; thus he owns a dysfunctional flaccid phallus. Henceforth, this thesis will demonstrate how the psychoanalytic symbols of the phallus empower and dis-empower Rabih Alameddine's two characters – Aaliya and Sobhi – in *An Unnecessary Woman*.

The Agency of the Phallus

Phallocentrism indicates the cultural centrality of the male experience and the primacy of the male phallus/penis (McHugh 95), which is a social definer and the symbol of power, desire and knowledge. Phallocentrism is articulated on the belief in the superiority of what is masculine over the feminine. Sigmund Freud states that phallocentrism is always based on an already existing patriarchal system in a society, without explaining the 'event' at the origin of patriarchy in a society where the father's position and control over his children and women is “pre-eminent” (Grosz 69).

According to Freudian psychoanalysis, the girl soon discovers that she is castrated and does not possess the phallus and the power that it signifies. Consequently, she comes to accept – through resistance sometimes – her socially designated role “as a subordinate to the possessor of the phallus” (69). By accepting this submissive role, the girl occupies “the passive, dependent position expected by women in patriarchy”, and that role becomes crucial to her “subsequent development [... and to] the question of who has the phallus and who is the phallus” (69). This means, that the female girl, accepts her subordinate, passive role and realizes how the masculine agency is distributed in society.

Originally, Jacques Lacan uses the term 'phallogentric' to refer to the Symbolic order that privileges masculinity over femininity (McHugh 95). The phallus for Lacan, is the 'signifier of signifiers' and the term which defines the subject's access to the Symbolic order which excludes women from its reign. For Lacan, the phallus is an emblem of the structure of language and the gap in it which “makes the sliding of the signifier over the signified and the regulation of the polyvalence and play within language possible” (121). This gap for him, is the “founding trace of the unconscious constituted as such by the repressed signifier” which is the “ultimately significative object which appears when all the veils are lifted” (Grosz 121).

Thus, the phallus is always disguised and acts through the unconscious as the object of lack and repressed desire.

Additionally, Lacan specifies that the penis which is a Real object, becomes an imaginary or a symbolic object and divides the sexes according to its presence or absence: it becomes possessed by some and desired by others. Thus, the penis takes the function of the phallus only because it is able to mark, trace, signify, and produce the exclusion of half the population. Yet, the penis is not the only 'object' that is able to serve as its metonym. And, based on socio-political structures in society, the phallus signifies the presence or absence in self-definition, power, desire and knowledge.

Lacan also believes, that the penis and the phallus can only be aligned “if there are those who lack it” (Grosz 102). It is assumed only on the basis of division and dichotomy which is represented by the lack attributed to women, and which is “the most basic feature of desire” (102). Paradoxically, this same phallus which initially marks lack, can also mark a hidden desire in the individual (Ragland-Sullivan 42). Nèstor Braunstein defines desire as the lack in being, and the craving for fulfillment in the encounter with the lost object. Hence, desire points towards a lost or absent object which is a signifier or a phallus that represents the object of desire (Braunstein 106). Desire is the third term in Lacan's libidinal trilogy and the Symbolic 'equivalent' or counterpart of need and demand. Like both need and demand, desire exhibits the structure of the wish, and it is based on the absence or privation of its object (Grosz 64).

Lacan here, considers the phallus “nothing other than the point of lack it indicates in the subject. And that desire manifests the structure of the wish since it is based on the absence or privation of its object and that “the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing” (Grosz 61, 64). Lacan derives his conception of desire from Hegel, where desire is considered as lack and absence. Desire is a fundamental lack, a hole in being that can be satisfied only by one 'thing' or another('s) desire. It is beyond conscious articulation, for it is

repressed and barred from articulation. Its structure is like language, but it is never spoken as such by the subject (64). And, its production through repression is one of the constitutive marks of the unconscious, upon which it bestows its signifying effects (Grosz 64-65). Hence, the phallus is a hidden unconscious desire and what the individual wishes or lacks.

On the other hand, Luce Irigaray claims that phallogocentrism qualifies a woman negatively, it objectifies her body and expresses female sexuality through masculine parameters. Irigaray argues against Western philosophy and psychoanalytic phallogocentrism – as embodied in the work of Freud and Lacan. She accuses Western thought of reducing woman to a series of negative qualities such as “lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject” (Irigaray 25). She believes that “the production of truth and of a meaning [regarding woman] is excessively univocal, which presupposes that women do not aspire simply to be man's equals in knowledge” (25).

Finally and in a different vein, Eugene Monick considers the phallus or the phallos, a “God-image” and the seed of male identity in society. In his book, *Phallos: Sacred Image of the Masculine* (1987), he introduces the terms “phallic visitations” and “phallic resurrection”, and considers them crucial in the life cycle of the male unconscious in establishing masculine identity. He views the phallus as the “God-image” which every male has to discover one day as part of the male ego, and he states that without the phallus “all is female” (13) – a fact that includes the “loss of masculine identity” (16). Here, Monick overstates the importance of male sexuality and its role in creating masculine identity and self-esteem. Such a loss or gain, according to Monick, is a religious experience as Jung uses the term, “[i]t is the crushing of soul or the making of soul as psyche, the invisible reality that supports and gives meaning to existence” (16).

Similarly, Annie Potts in “‘The Essence of the Hard On’: Hegemonic Masculinity and the Cultural Construction of ‘Erectile Dysfunction’” (2000) explores the condition known as male

“impotence”. She argues that the penis stands in for and up for the man which is popularly depicted as a miniature male person. The penis is distanced from its anatomical functions and it takes up a privileged central position in the sexual economy, and it functions as the woman's 'completer' (of the lack), and it has to be in its erectile form. Its failure to become erect signifies the downfall of the phallic economy as it dictates the sexual identities of both men and women.

Hence, the penis represents the phallus, and its failure denotes its failure in representing the deficiency of man and the phallus. In medicine, it is classified as erectile dysfunction. The erect penis corresponds to the sexed male body, and the “hard on” is the essence of male sexuality. “Masculine sexuality is valorized for being hard and fast: it strives to achieve the powerful proportions and position of the phallus” (Potts 87,88).

In conclusion, the phallus is the foundation of phallocentrism and the agency that oppresses woman in a patriarchal society and considers her a 'lack'. It is the symbol of the repressed wish or desire in the human unconscious. It can represent social status, desire, sexuality and knowledge. Phallogentric psychoanalysis represents female sexuality in masculine terms, and considers female desire inferior to that of man's. And, in masculine sexuality, the phallus is always triumphant and cannot be dysfunctional.

Aaliya and Phallic Agency

Aaliya tells her lifetime story in Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman*. She was born and has lived in Lebanon for seventy-two years, before and after the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990). As a young girl, she is considered her “family's appendix, its unnecessary appendage” (*An Unnecessary Woman* 13). As an adult, Aaliya does not abide by the Lebanese patriarchal value system as she is childless and divorced, and she also lives alone in a spacious apartment. She says: “I am alone. It's a choice I've made, yet it is also a choice made with few other options available. Beirut society wasn't fond of divorced childless women in those days”(7).

Here, Aaliya who is defined in negative terms by society initially because of her gender, challenges the phallogocentric status quo and its rigid patriarchal schemes by living alone without a husband and children.

Moreover, Aaliya does not have a phallic procurer who justifies her social status as a woman. Aaliya is “alone”, “fatherless”, “Godless”, “childless”, “divorced” and “old” (7). These are the adjectives that qualify her in the novel. She has no father, no religion or God, no brother or husband, or phallic figures to define her social role or status in Beirut. Luce Irigaray believes that “women are marked phallicly by their fathers, husbands, procurers” who label and give them use-value in society (Irigaray 31). Irigaray demonstrates how a woman is socially valued in relation to a male procurer or the phallus, and the way she is used as a commodity or a “product of exchange” in man's world (Irigaray 31, 84). Thus, a woman needs a phallic figure to support and give her value in society. However, these phallic figures are absent in Aaliya's life.

As a child, Aaliya's father dies after naming her “Aaliya, the high one, the above” (11). Aaliya does not remember him because “[h]e passed away when [she] was still a toddler” (11). Aaliya's childhood is deprived of the paternal phallic figure and authority which paradoxically names her “the high one”, but he passes away when she is a toddler. As a consequence, she grows up without the male phallic presence and the social support of a father who represents the law, order and authority for a child; and, who is also the Symbolic Father according to Lacan (Grosz 68).

Similarly, Aaliya's stepfather who is another male or phallic figure is equally absent in her childhood. After Aaliya's father dies, her mother is married off to an uncle who becomes her uncle-father. The man is kind but “paid little attention to his children, [and] even less to [Aaliya]”(12). Aaliya says: “I'm unable to recall much about him. I have no pictures of him, so in my memory his face is always obscured” (12). The only thing she does remember about

her uncle-father is that “[h]is sole remarkable trait was his unremitting passing of gas, which he had no inclination to control. Lunches and dinners, as the family sat on the floor surrounding him, were unbearable.... [she] could barely eat after he broke wind” (12). At his deathbed, “[the uncle-father] called on each of his children to offer final wisdom, but he forgot to call on his youngest daughter or [Aaliya]”(12). This passage demonstrates how this phallic figure is associated with hostile memory: that of remitting gas and excluding her, as a girl at his deathbed – a metaphor for the exclusion of women from society and the ultimate rupture between the male and female world.

In such a patriarchal society, it is the father who represents and initiates the *Symbolic order* “within the confines of a nuclear family” and establishes authority for the child. The Symbolic order includes the law, order and authority in the family, and dates back to the dawn of history. Yet, sometimes this same paternal authority is deferred to the male son in his role of an heir or a substitute to his father, and as another possessor of the phallus. Or, this same authority is borrowed by the mother on the father's behalf, to exert authority on her children (Grosz 66-68). In psychoanalysis, this paternal authority is not necessarily exerted by the biological father; it can be the *Imaginary Father* who acts as an incarnation or a delegate to the *Symbolic Father* (68). Here, the Symbolic Father is the historical figure of the man who represents the law and regulates his children's desire. Whereas, the Imaginary Father is the imaginary construct of an ideal or bad father, built by the individual or the child. However, in case of the father's death or “failure to take up the symbolic functions, other authority figures – the teacher, headmaster, policeman”, or God may take this role and exercise strong authority and “instill in the child the sense of lawfulness and willing submission to social customs” (68).

As a result of the absence of the two fatherly figures in the novel, other authority figures overtake the role of the Symbolic father and tend to project authority on Aaliya, the young student. This explains the authoritative roles played by the Arabic and the Quran teachers in

disseminating fear in Aaliya. As a student, she is terrified by the Arabic and Quran teachers' authority and punishment. Aaliya describes her teacher's stick: “[t]he teacher's stick may have appeared dangerous, but it was not what she beat us with. If we made a mistake in reciting... she'd ask the child to come to the front and extend her hand, and would mete out punishment using the most innocuous of implements, the blackboard eraser. It hurt as much as any inquisitor's tool” (8). Then, regarding the religious study of the Quran, she concludes: “As if forced memorization of the Quran – forced memorization of anything – wasn't punishment enough” (8). These two passages show the strong impact of both teachers in imposing authority on Aaliya by using psychological and physical oppression in order to apply the Law of the Father which is the moral and religious law in Lebanon.

When she is sixteen, Aaliya acquires a husband who is a phallic figure and procurer. But the marriage fails after a few years. The man divorces her, leaving Aaliya economically and socially unprotected. Aaliya is “plucked unripe from school” and “married off at sixteen...to the first unsuitable suitor to appear at [their] door, a man small in stature and spirit”(13) who divorces her after four years by standing before her, “as the [Islamic] law required, and declaim the most invigorating of phrases: 'You are divorced'”(13). This paragraph in the novel shows the woman's role as an object of exchange whom a man decides to marry or get rid of as the “law required”. The law is derived from religion, and it enhances the power of patriarchy in society as Suad Joseph argues. Marriage and divorce are dominated by the religious law in Lebanon (Joseph 16).

By losing her husband, Aaliya loses her “phallic procurer” and becomes unprotected and lonely again. After the divorce, the landlord (Hajj Wardeh) who rents the couple the apartment, stops talking to Aaliya, yet he takes her side when it comes to keeping and staying in the apartment because it once belonged to her husband. Aaliya describes Hajj Wardeh as “generous and neighborly at first, but once my husband walked out, he wanted nothing to do

with me.... He forbade his children to interact with me” (18). Then she adds that: “Even though Hajj Wardeh refused to acknowledge my existence in person, he took my side when it came to the apartment.... The apartment belonged to my husband, and unless my husband claimed it,...he would not release it to anyone”(18). Thus, the landlord erases Aaliya's existence, once she is divorced and without a man who represents her in society. But he supports her right in keeping the apartment because it belonged to her husband.

Henceforth, Aaliya's life without a phallic figure reflects her subjective vulnerability in the Lebanese society. The phallic authority or the Law of the Father which comes through the father is absent in this novel. By losing her father and uncle-father, Aaliya becomes socially excluded as a female. Her Quran and Arabic teachers' authority take over. Then, by getting divorced at twenty, Aaliya loses touch with the phallus again, and is considered irrelevant as a woman in the Lebanese society. Consequently, the landlord who is a reverent religious person ignores her existence for not having a husband or a male figure who justifies her social position. Thus, Aaliya's social presence and definition are conditioned by the existence of a man who is responsible for her in society.

Re-possessing the Phallus

Lacan states that in our culture, the symbolic function of the penis enhances one's narcissism if it is distinguished from the organs and the body. It also gives (the child) access to one's sexuality and speaking position in society. The phallus designates also the object of desire. By means of which, the subject comes to occupy the position of 'I' in discourse (125). Thus, the phallus is the means through which the individual achieves identity and becomes the 'I' in society.

As a reaction to social and psychological threat, Aaliya thrives to possess two phallic objects that will provide her with phallic agency, as a woman who lives alone in Lebanon.

When Aaliya's husband divorces her by uttering: “You are divorced!” (13), nobody considers that Aaliya should keep her apartment because she is a lonely, childless woman without a husband. Her husband's family try in vain to take it away from her: “[m]y husband's family wanted it [the apartment], claiming I had no right to it”(18). Then, her half-brothers with the help of their mother try to convince Aaliya to leave the apartment: “[m]y own family demanded it, suggesting that any of my brothers was more deserving of it”(18).

Suad Joseph in this respect, explains 'economic patriarchy' in the Arab world as a concept that privileges males and elders in ownership and control over wealth and economic resources. Males and elders are considered to be financially responsible for women so that in the case of inheritance, Muslim or Christian women would not claim or obtain their full inheritance in deference to their brothers (Joseph, “Patriarchy” 15). Yet here, Aaliya insists on keeping the apartment which is her only home and shelter. When her brothers' threatening attempts and attacks frighten her and they do not stop, she carries a knife – a phallic object and symbol – around her spacious apartment in order to overcome her fears, defend her right to keep her home and stop their attacks: “My half brother the eldest frightens me.... My half brother the eldest banged his simian chest and cursed outside. He terrified me,.... He returned and returned, again and again, the big bad wolf scaring me with his obstreperous threats” (67). As a consequence, Aaliya carries the phallus and says: “I waited with a sharp chef's knife next to me... I waited, walked in circles, ovals, and squares, moved from room to room in my spacious apartment carrying the knife. Just in case” (67-8). Thus, Aaliya stops her brothers' intrusion to her apartment by carrying a knife – a phallic object.

Here, it is worth mentioning that in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the mother carries the Law of the Father within her in the form of her unconscious desire for the phallus. The mother invokes the absent father's authority whenever she threatens or punishes (the child) for wrong-

doing. So, she is positioned in relation to a signifier, the phallus, which places her in the position of *being* rather than *having* the phallus or the object of the other's desire (Grosz 71).

Having said the above, the Lebanese mother's role is crucial in undermining or shaping her daughter's personality. Even Joseph, believes that elderly mothers play a dominant role in patriarchy (Joseph, "Patriarchy" 15). Aaliya describes her mother as someone who "couldn't conceive of a world in which [husbands] didn't hold all the cards. In her world, husbands were omnipotent" (14). Aaliya says: "My mother couldn't look at me without trying to convince me to leave. My half brothers had large families living in small apartments. They needed it more than I did. They had more difficult lives, they deserved it... My mother was the young United Nations: leave your home, your brothers have suffered, you have other places you can go to, they don't, get out" (14,18). This passage shows the Lebanese mother's preference and support for her male children and not the female.

On another occasion, Aaliya obtains a Kalashnikov – another phallic object – to defend herself during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990). When the city of Beirut is burning, Aaliya hides from the bombs in a garage nearby. She "used to descend to the garage beneath the building next door when the shelling began... until one day in 1977, while a group of Palestinians broke into the apartment, rummaged through [her] belongings, and one of them defecated on the floor of the maid's bathroom" (27). This aggressive invasion to her apartment by foreign militias, urges Aaliya not to leave her home again and to stay indoors in order to defend her apartment against foreign invaders. As a result, she acquires an AK-47 Kalashnikov from a young man named Ahmad. Aaliya justifies her choice of possessing and sleeping next to the weapon – the phallus – saying: "I slept with an AK-47 in place of a husband during the war does not make me insane. Owning an assault rifle was not an indicator of craziness. You had to consider the situation.... Someone shat in my home. I procured a Kalashnikov" (26).

Hence, the Kalashnikov which is a phallic symbol protects Aaliya against male invaders during the war.

Furthermore, Aaliya tells about the time when her brothers' banging and the harassing stopped; when people left their houses during the Israeli siege in 1982, and “squatters quickly took up residence in the empty homes” (19). Three men break into her apartment in the early dawn after weeks of being without water, Aaliya “picked up the AK-47 that lay next to [her] on the right side, where [her] husband used to sleep all those years earlier” (19). Aaliya says: “It kept me company in bed for the whole civil war” (19). Here, she admits her sense of protection by saying that she feels, “protected within the walls of [her] apartment, [where she] sat vigil with the Kalashnikov close to [her] bosom” (44). Accordingly, this long phallic object of a Kalashnikov is what provides Aaliya with the strength to stay in her apartment: it protects her against male invaders (brothers, squatters, militias and soldiers). Yet, the image of a woman sleeping next to a long rifle in place of a husband, also represents her sexual desire for a man, or to the phallus. Thus, the AK-47 serves as a symbol of protection, power and sexual desire for a man in the novel.

Female Sexuality and the Phallus

Luce Irigaray states that female sexuality has always been “conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters” and that woman lives her sexual desire expecting “to come to possess an equivalent of the male organ” (24). Irigaray accuses Freud of qualifying “feminine sexuality as the 'dark continent' of psychoanalysis” (77). She insists that a man's and a woman's desire speak a different language. Female sexuality for her, is “experienced fragmentally”, is equivalent to frustration and it “may be recovered only in secret, in hiding, with anxiety and guilt” (27-30). A woman is not supposed to express her own pleasure because a “woman's desire has been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the

Greeks” (25). And, that a woman's pleasure is “denied by the privileges of phallogormorphism” (26).

Irigaray believes that female sexuality is equivalent to frustration and that the female body is an object of exchange in a phallogentric society. A woman is traditionally considered a “use-value for man”, “an exchange value among men” and “a commodity” (31). She argues that a woman's pleasure is denied by a civilization that privileges phallogentrism, and that female sexuality has always been conceptualized by masculine parameters. A woman is ready for anything as long as a man will “take” her as his “object” when he seeks his own sexual pleasure (Irigaray 23-26).

Accordingly, Aaliya manifests her thwarted sexual desire in the passage where she writes about her frustration as a young woman who has not seen a naked man and his phallus before. She tells the reader: “As a young woman, I was so frustrated never to have seen a man naked that I used to wait until my husband snored before lifting the covers, lighting a match within the enveloping womb of the mosquito net, and examining his body under his buttoned cottons”(15). These lines highlight Aaliya's wish to explore her free sexuality by encountering the phallus – or the male organ in this case.

And when it comes to the knowledge about her female sexuality, Aaliya specifies that her knowledge about sexuality comes from books written by male authors. Before her intimacy with Ahmad, Aaliya feels like telling the younger man that although she “was by no means an experienced lover, [she] had been intimate with a few” (42). She wants to tell Ahmad: “I had studied Georges Bataille and Henry Miller, submitted to the Marquis, devoured the racist *Fear of Flying*, and cavorted with lewd Arab writers of the golden age who constantly thanked God for the blessing of fucking, al-Tafashi, al-Tijani, and al-Tusi,.... I wanted to tell [Ahmad] that it was Moravia,... who had written about the natural promiscuity of women. I did not, none of

it” (42). This proves how a woman learns about her own sexuality through masculine parameters.

Simultaneously, Aaliya's body becomes an object of exchange or a commodity when she decides to pay for the Kalashnikov provided to her by Ahmad. Aaliya is not surprised to hear the younger man ask for her body in exchange of the arm. This incident proves Irigaray's belief that “woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value..., a commodity” (Irigaray 31). Aaliya says that: “[Ahmad] suggested the AK-47: cheap, reliable, never jams, easy to use, lightweight... he had three of them in his apartment. I wanted to pay for one. He couldn't take my money, but I could give him what he'd always wanted....'You know what I want,' he kept repeating, 'you know what I want. ’” (39). Here, Aaliya is not amazed to hear that Ahmad wants her body in return: “I asked the most inconceivable of questions: 'you want sex?’” (40).

Thus, the novel demonstrates that female sexuality is not overt and it is a social commodity. Female sexuality in the novel is unknown to the woman, and it is expressed or explored through masculine parameters. A woman's body is also an object of use-value or a commodity used by men in a phallogocentric society in exchange for services.

Knowledge as Phallic

Aaliya attempts to achieve knowledge and challenge her phallogocentric environment by immersing her life in reading and translating Western literature into Arabic without publishing the results of her labor. Translating novels written by Western male authors or the dominant male literary canon, is the main motif in Alameddine's novel. In this sense, knowledge that comes through a man's world becomes phallic. Lillian Robinson sees the literary canon “as an entirely gentlemanly artifact” and she defines “gentleman” as “a member of a privileged class and of the male sex” (Robinson 84). According to Lacan, “away from nature toward the social”, a male is supposed to become the cultural symbol of knowledge by possessing the

phallus (Ragland-Sullivan 43). As Galassi affirms, Aaliya remains an outsider and she is never an insider to the creation of the literary text (Galassi). Here, Aaliya tells the reader: “I have never published.... Once I finish a project, ... I inter the papers in a box and the box in the bathroom....I create and crate” (106-7). This demonstrates Aaliya's exclusion from the phallic world of knowledge and the literary canon that are both dominated by men.

Aaliya who admires male writers as her source of enlightenment however, doubts translations made by female writers such as herself and Marguerite Yourcenar. Aaliya acquires knowledge from Fernando Pessoa, W. G. Sebald, José Saramago, and others. She translates books written by “Tolstoy, Gogol, and Hamsun; Calvino, Borges, Schulz, Nâdas, Nooteboom; Kis, Karasu, and Kafka” (63). Aaliya judges translations by Marguerite Yourcenar – a French female translator from the 20th Century – as inadequate. She writes: “Yourcenar also translated Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. I can't bring myself to read her translation, though” (106). Similarly, Aaliya fears Nabokov's judgment of her translations: “I hope that the lepidopterist Nabokov would have approved of my work, but I'm not certain” (106). In this respect, Robinson states that the “very conditions” that gave impetus to many women to write, “made it impossible for their culture to define them as writers”, and that women's literature and female tradition are evoked as “autonomous cultural experience not impinging on the rest of literary history” (Robinson 94). This shows the powerful psychological conviction in the supremacy of what is phallic.

In conclusion, Aaliya attempts to acquire and experience knowledge through literature and by translating Western male authors. Literature itself, is phallic here because it belongs to the world of men. As a female translator, Aaliya will never belong to the male canon, and in her turn, she will not bring herself to read other woman's translations such as Marguerite Yourcenar's translation of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*.

The Dysfunctional Phallus

Eugene Monick believes that, the phallus becomes the god-symbol for males, “over eons of masculine identification with its inner-directed comings and goings, its outer success and defeat” (16). In other words, as the phallus enters a situation, an apprehension of masculine divinity takes place that cannot occur without the phallus. And, that is “the horror of castration” (16). Thus, the physical phallus becomes a religious and psychological symbol because it can decide on its own, independent of its owner's ego decision, when and with whom it wants to spring into action. It is an appropriate metaphor for the unconscious itself, and specifically the masculine modern unconscious (17).

Monick introduces two psychic phenomena of “phallic visitations” and “phallic resurrection”. In his words, meeting, seeing or experiencing the phallus by the male, are called phallic visitations that come as surprise and grace, time after time, generation after generation in the same way, and in all cultures. Monick supports his idea by mentioning that, “Jung felt that archetypal patterns have coalesced in the psyche through just such constant and similar repetition” (16). Monick here, states the universality and the importance of the constant and repetitive encounter with the active phallus. The assurance, that the male sexuality is always functional, present and re-assuring to its male owner is fundamental, whereas phallic resurrection has to do with the capacity of the male organ to return to life successively, after defeat and death. He claims that, each phallus explodes in orgasm and dies: “[a]nd as Elder points out, phallos is erection, not flaccid penis” (16-17). Here, he points to the phallus's life cycle.

According to Monick's theory, Sobhi Saleh is castrated and feminized in Alameddine's novel because he represents failure in the phallocentric phallic economy. Sobhi Saleh is Aaliya's “impotent” husband who possesses a dysfunctional phallus: flaccid and impotent phallus (13). By being sexually challenged, Sobhi challenges the universal masculine

unconscious and psyche according to Eugene Monick's concept. Sobhi Saleh becomes castrated and feminized due to his failure to experience and live what Monick describes as “phallic visitations” and “phallic resurrections” that serve to establish self-esteem in man. So, the man who possesses a dysfunctional phallus does not meet the phallogocentric requisites, and thus, he is excluded from society. Monick's religious and divine ritual or metaphor that evolves around the erect, powerful phallus expels the defected and imperfect ones.

Even Aaliya as a woman and 'lack' in the Lebanese society feels superior to Sobhi. She calls him an “impotent insect” and falls into a state of disappointment when she discovers a “worm in place of a monster” (15). When Sobhi divorces Aaliya, she cleans and removes every trace of him in the apartment as a sign of disgust. She “cleaned and scrubbed and mopped and disinfected until no trace of him remained” (13) as if Sobhi is a dirty insect around the house. After the divorce, Aaliya removes a set of small objects that remind her of Sobhi's presence. She energetically removes “the nails on the wall where [her husband] used to hang his dirty hat and his pungent pipes that he thought made him distinguished” (13). Then, she immediately repairs “every hole in the doilies singed by the cinders of his pipe” with a “needle and spool of thread” (13). By removing every object that may remind her of her husband, Aaliya is cancelling Sobhi's presence in her apartment. Nails, needles, pipes are small phallic objects that parallel Sobhi's phallic insignificance.

In the novel, Aaliya does not mention her husband's name; she calls him “*my husband* and that defines him” (16). She justifies her choice by saying that “[t]here are many reasons for not naming a character or someone you're writing about. You might want to have the book entirely about the main narrator, or maybe you want the character to remain ephemeral, less fully fleshed” (16). Lastly, she mentions his name: “Sobhi” and follows it with: “Tfeh!” (16) an Arabic word for 'yuck' or disgusting.

Annie Potts, in her turn, specifies that the penis “stands in for and up for the man”. It is the miniature of the male person and it takes up a privileged central position in the sexual economy and functions as the 'completor' of the 'lack'. It dictates the male and female sexual identities and its downfall is the downfall of the sexual economy (Potts 87-88). Thus, at Sobhi's funeral, Aaliya chatters sarcastically and describes her husband's dead body in the coffin to the women sitting at his funeral in the following: “Seated all around me, the mourning women could not help but giggle and gossip. He had died with an erection that would not relent,...In death Eros triumphed, while in life Thanatos had. My husband was a Freudian dyslexic” (15). Here, she demonstrates her superiority – along with other Lebanese women – to him. Aaliya considers him a “Freudian dyslexic” because his male role of the 'completor' of the 'lack' fails in society.

As a consequence of his psychological and social exclusion, Sobhi Saleh dies unnoticed, on a bus at sixty-one. He dies as “a solitary passenger on a public bus, his head leaning at an awkward angle against the murky window. The bus drove two full routes, passengers ascending and alighting, before the driver realized he was keeping company with a lifeless man” (15). And here, Aaliya comments: “Sometimes death arrives quietly” (15). Sobhi's unnoticed death on the bus, is a symbol of his failed social existence in the Lebanese patriarchal value system.

Conclusion

This thesis proves how the phallus determines the individual's social position and importance in the Lebanese patriarchal and phallogocentric system. The phallus is the 'signifier of signifiers' and may represent anything from power, desire, sexuality and knowledge. The phallus is the gap in the unconscious. It represents 'lack' in those who do not possess it, such as women and sexually challenged men. In order for a woman to achieve social recognition, she must have a supporting phallic figure or procurer; such as a father, brother or husband.

By being a woman, Aaliya is psychoanalytically considered as 'lack' because of gender. Due to life and social events, Aaliya lives alone in her apartment in Beirut. She is not accepted by her Lebanese patriarchal society because she lives without a phallic figure who represents her in society. As a result, Aaliya challenges the Lebanese phallogocentric mindset by living alone as a divorced, childless woman, and by translating books that she will never publish.

Aaliya's society does not admit a woman the right to live independently in her own apartment. Thus, her husband's family, her half-brothers, foreign soldiers and settlers want to deprive her of the only shelter she possesses, after her divorce. Consequently, Aaliya rebels and protects her individuality and apartment by carrying phallic objects such as a knife and a Kalashnikov, in order to fight for her right to stay. Here, Aaliya has to fight against attacks that come from male figures along with her elder mother's support, who makes an effort to convince her to defer her apartment to her brothers who deserve it more than herself. By supporting her sons, Aaliya's mother borrows the phallic authority from her dead husband in order to coerce authority on her daughter.

Then, in order to acquire the Kalashnikov from Ahmad, Aaliya gives her body in exchange for the arm. Ahmad does not want her money, and Aaliya is not surprised when he asks for sex in return. This, proves Luce Irigaray's concept that a woman is considered a commodity in

the phallogentric system. And when it comes to Aaliya's sexuality, female sexuality becomes a mystery and its exploration is always through masculine parameters.

Finally, when it comes to knowledge and literature, Aaliya is fond of Western male writers who she admires and feels inferior to, in her translations. This, explains that knowledge and the literary canon are both phallic. They belong to the male world in Western thought. And, Sobhi Saleh, by being sexually impotent does not fulfill the phallic requisites of his society. He cannot be the 'completor' of women or 'lack'. Thus, his downfall is the downfall of the phallic sexual economy in phallogentrism.

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