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Feminism throughout Laylá Ba'albakī's Fiction

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Abstract

A number of Lebanese women writers of the period of 1950s and 1960s have received considerable attention by scholars. This is not the case, however, for Laylá Ba'albakī, whom the field has failed to address in any substantive manner. In not paying sufficient attention to Ba'albakī, the field has failed to appreciate the distinctly feminist dimension of her work. To date, most scholars have only repeated commonly held views about her and her fiction. At her trial in 1964, Ba'albakī became a scapegoat for all the feminist women writers in the Middle East. Her attempt to improve the lives of Arab women and her opposition to patriarchy had made her a target. Her writings raised the taboo topic of female sexuality, and constituted a revolutionary attack against the patriarchal culture, values, and institutions. Ba'albakī is a significant and fascinating figure within modern feminist Lebanese writing and strongly deserves to be studied more closely. By addressing feminism throughout Ba'albakī's fiction, this article hopes to contribute to a fuller understanding of Lebanese women writers of 1950s and 1960s. This article investigates which and how feminist agenda and issues are reflected in Ba'albakī's writings.

Keywords: feminism, feminist writing and issues, Laylá Ba'albakī, Lebanese women writers

1. Introduction

This article discusses the ways in which Laylá Ba'albakī's writings engage with feminist issues. It explores the different ways in which feminist issues are addressed in Ba'albakī's work, in order to determine the nature of the writer's feminist agenda, focusing on the issues of sex, marriage, and mothering or child bearing. I will begin by discussing the women's need for the other/the man, before turning to woman's ownership of her body, and then to women–men sexual relationships inside and outside of marriage and by single and married males and females. I argue that these feminist issues are connected to each other across the author's different stories and novels, in such a way as to weave together different aspects of her feminist perspective and so provide a complete engagement with the issue, divided between the different works. The need to lay emphasis on the feminist aspects of Ba'albakī's work is all the more significant given that some Arab women writers, such as Ghada Al Samman, refuse to use literature to serve the cause of feminism or women's issues. Di Capua (1992)has argued that the genre of literature in which Ba'albakī's writings are located is a vigorous, liberal, and outspoken style of literature which covers a significant period of time in the Arab literary feminist movement, but does not itself contain significant engagement with feminist themes. It amounts only to a protest against the conditions faced by the Arab woman, and does not offer any coherent alternative social proposals. In contrast, the argument of this article is that the writings of Ba'albakī do in fact reveal a sustained effort to raise the banner of feminism, and a strong desire to liberate Arab women from the domination of patriarchy. This stance also implies a commitment to free women from social and religious constraints, and to this end Ba'albakī sometimes portrays women as independent and free, and sometimes represents them as victims of the social traditions of Arab societies – that is, as people needing help, support, protection, and liberation.

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The short story "I Was a Filly, Now I'm a Mouse" illustrates both of these aspects, showing the protagonist both as suffocated in her life under her Arab husband (that is, as a victim), and also as having liberated herself from this situation by leaving the husband (that is, as an active agent) (Ba'albakī, 2009c). Here, I argue that the writer employs her stories, novels, and published lecture to focus upon and explore feminist campaign against male domination. This article is not about feminist theory in general, but specifically about how feminism is reflected within the fiction of the writer, and thus for some of the discussions there are few relevant sources available. There is no specific and thorough study on the writer which discusses feminism in her fiction. Thus, I refer mainly to the primary sources of the writer, in addition to several sources in Arabic and English.[2]

2. Feminist Issues

Ba'albakī's novels, short stories, and her published lecture focus on several feminist issues in particular. I will begin with the issue of the woman's need for others/for men, because Līnā, the protagonist in *Anā aḥyā* [I live][3] (1958) the first novel of the writer, denies her need for a man at first but later retreats and admits indeed she does need a man. Having made her first character admit this, Ba'albakī makes her later heroines turn to focus more upon the issue of their right to control their bodies, which was also one of Līnā's main concerns before she realized her need for a man. This theme of the realization of a need for a man is so prominent in *Anā aḥyā* that it is reasonable to take it as a basis of Ba'albakī's thinking about feminist issues and experiences. Alongside this, the second novel as well as the short stories explores desire, and the experience of several kinds of female–male relationships. So, to proceed logically, we must first begin with an analysis of what leads to the heroine denying that need for a man, then discuss how she comes to acknowledge that need, and then turn to the woman's right to control her body. Finally, this study will turn to a discussion of the search for a relationship that can satisfy these needs. In particular, the question will be posed: Which relationships are most relevant here? Finally, this article will investigate whether the female protagonists succeed in attaining the relationships they seek, and especially whether they enter into marriages which meet their views of how marriage ought to be. The relationships to be explored are romantic, with a focus on the sexual dimension, and take place both inside and outside marriage and among single/married females and single/married males. I begin with marriage because the protagonist in Ba'albakī's first novel seeks a marriage relationship with a single male. Then, I will turn to the issue of giving birth, since this is one of marriage's aims.

2.1 The Woman's Need for the other/the Man

Within the author's writing, a prominent role is given to the issue of the need of women for the other/the man. In *Anā aḥyā*, Līnā initially denies this need. She says: I do not care about men. No educational attainment has any attraction for me. I try in vain to look for any relationship with these persons. I am in touch with them but I don't sense them. I look at them but I don't see them. For me they are just like trees, rivers, stars, stones.(Ba'albakī, 2009a, p. 25) This passage shows how resentful Līnā is of the woman's need for the man/the other. Thus, she does not seek to join with a man for any aim, whether entertainment, romance or sex. This passage thus represents a rebellion against the concept of the "family" as a coherent unit in Arab societies. This is the place to draw attention to the views of other Arab feminist writers on this issue. Bazzah al-Bāṭinī, for instance, within her collection of short stories *Al-Sayyidahkānat* [Mrs was] (1998), portrays in striking terms the woman's innate need for the man/the other. Her short story "When the Cold Comes?" is about a woman who loses all sense of ease and security after her lover's departure, despite the abundance and leisure which surrounds her.She says: "Where are you my love? Who now will give me tenderness? Who will give me protection" (al-Arnā'ūṭ, 1993)? Here, the female heroine clearly expresses her need for her male companion. Ba'albakī's characters tend to reject this sort of relationship. For example, the female protagonist of "The Cat" refuses to be a victim of madness or obsession with lust. Here is how the heroine portrays the relationship with her lover in assertive, uncompromising words: "I made him understand from the start that I knew what I wanted. I told him that I did not fall madly in love with him, leaving my world and flying behind him" (Ba'albakī, 2009c, pp.44-45).

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[2] I rely mainly the primary sources of the writer because of the limitation of secondary sources which points out the issues discussed here.

[3] In this article, I referenced another edition, this is the recent edition, Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 2009.

The heroine does need the other/the man, but it is a circumscribed, well-defined, and limited need. She refuses to make sacrifices for this need. She will not take risks and is too sober to allow herself to fall into the snares of mad love or obsessive lust. And yet there are instances where Līnā retreats from this position, perhaps unconsciously, in a reluctant admission of a woman's instinctive need, or perhaps for other reasons. The novel *Anā aḥyā* abounds with passages that testify to this retreat. Līnā reveals feelings of loneliness and barrenness, saying "and I realized that I needed a companion, a man to interest my mind in matters unfamiliar to it. Why do I not then invite this single young man sitting in front of me to share the meal with me? I'll invite him!" And she also says: "The eyes were fixed on my rebellious daring bosom. I examined the eyes. They were all hungry. These men are quite ready to drink each other's blood for the sake of kissing an eager lip or touching a breast" (Ba'albakī, 2009a, p.176). There is a significant indication of Līnā's recognition of her instinctive desire for a man where she, reflecting on her perhaps unconscious retraction of her previous position, says, I will change the place where I sleep. I will steal my way in the dark to the highest floor of the highest building and slip into bed and sleep on Bahā"s chest. No, he will not hurt me; he will not exploit my conscious decision: he understands my awareness, understands my freedom. (Ba'albakī, 2009a, p. 196. She does not want a particular person whom she has fallen in love with; she is neither a captive of love nor of lust. All she wants is a man who can allow her to sense her own freedom; someone through whom she can feel that her existence has an importance of its own, and that she is an individual existing for her own sake, not an object of domination or possession. The kind of relationship she wants with such a man would be one of openness and freedom. She does not want a man who dominates or controls her, imposing limits to her being, her movements, and her thoughts. There is also her attitude to Bahā'. With him she wanted to build a distinctive relationship, but not one of marriage.

One more reason for retreating from the view that the woman does not need the man could lie in psychological factors and motives, in the sense that Līnā might want to remain free, living with whomever she wants, whenever she wants, and enjoying love and sex on her own terms. Notably, after the writer retreats from her view that the woman does not need the man, she does not return to this issue in her following works, and she does not mention this issue again after her first novel. Līnā denied her need for the man, although she later retreated, whereas Rīm not only does not deny that need at all, but also recognizes her need for a man, a companion. She says: "I recognized in him that I am afraid of loneliness. I was saying to him that I need to love a male person who stays a man and who could end my loss and my fears" (Khuri, 1959, p. 157). Thus, it appears that the discussed need was a feminist issue throughout the fiction of other female Lebanese writers, including KulitKhuri, and not just the work of Ba'albakī. However, Khuri could have been influenced by the writer. Khuri employs this issue to call on readers to take advantage of other cultures. Rīm says: "Why do people in Germany and the U.S.A. see that females must have a male friend? And why in my country do people strongly criticise a female if she meets and shakes the hand of a man in the street" (Khuri, 1959, p. 119)? Thus, female Lebanese writers at the time, such as Khuri and Ba'albakī, were mostly influenced by the foreign cultures of Europe and the United States of America.

2.2 Body Ownership

The novel *Anā aḥyā* again providesa good starting point for discussion of the theme of owning the body. The physical integrity of the woman's body, her sense of being the undisputed proprietor of her own body, is a question which this novel boldly addresses. The heroine, as a young Arab woman who is rebelling against the dominant ideology sanctioned by traditional modes of thought, cries out in anger against the way her hair comes to define her: "Am I not free to be furious with this hair which attracts so much attention that my existence has become bound up with its existence" (Ba'albakī, 2009a, p. 7)? This is a view with deep roots in the evolution of feminist thought. Margaret Sanger, for example, long ago asserted: "No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body"(1920, p.94). In Līnā the writer has portrayed a woman who desires to build an independent character, a woman sustained by her will and her insistence on self-assertion. Līnā wants everyone to see that she is free, unhampered by conventions and the traditional demands of family and society. She expresses her commitment to the cause of personal freedom wherever she has a chance. She decides, for example, to be examined and treated by a doctor other than the family doctor. Interestingly, Muná Fayyādh, who generally deals with this action, says: "Going to a doctor rather than the family is the beginning of the rebellious individual against one of the prevalent standards of measuring femininity"(al-Arnā'ūṭ, 1993). Līnā cuts off her hair because she refuses to conform to the stereotypical image of the attractive woman who earns attention by means of the hair that distinguishes her from men and by which her femininity is defined.

She adopts a defiant stance: she, and only she, owns her body and she is entitled to do with it what she wants. Accordingly, she wants to remove the socially recognized mark of femininity, to defy the convention which attaches more significance to appearance than to reality, and so challenge the inferiority of women. By cutting and scattering her hair she directs a blow against the symbols which hold a woman in bondage to the tyranny of traditions which rob her of her humanity: "I insist on removing the barrier that smothers my human value" (Ba'albakī, 2009a, p. 32). These barriers are the patriarchal view by virtue of which she is regarded by society as nothing more than a doll or a source of sensuous pleasure, and not as a partner or someone who can share in the determination of her own destiny. The ideas and the views she has now embraced are alien to her social environment, and yet she is determined to give no heed to all that surrounds her, having bent her will on gaining her ends by following the growing consciousness that had in the first place led her to discover her identity. And now it is time to fulfil those needs necessary for satisfying her identity – an identity which is thirsting for freedom. Fayyādh has this to say: It is the consciousness of the individual who rebels against the traditions shackling the woman or putting limits to her steps and direction, circumscribing the boundaries of her body and framing it within an area as narrow as those very same customs and traditions. (al-Arnā'ūṭ, 1993)

Līnā, as can be seen from her comments above, sees in her body a symbol of her freedom. Society has decreed a single, narrow road for that body, denying its owner the right to use it as she sees fit, for no reason except that she happens to be a female. If she deviates from this decree she will become anathema, a social outlaw, a symbol of disgrace, and a stain on her family's name. Notwithstanding all this, and despite her awareness of all the risks, she has dared to exercise her right to determine what to do with her body. Līnā says, "Standing before the mirror, I would hear news of far more seriousness and significance, news broadcast by my freedom-seeking body" (Ba'albakī, 2009a, p. 185).This, especially within the context of Arab societies, is a rare example of rebellion, a feminist declaration of individuality. By cutting off her hair, she hoped to make others pay attention to her thoughts and conduct, to invite their attention to her human essence and not her feminine appearance. Society banned her from doing with her body what she wanted, and she defied that ban by cutting off her hair. This was a symbolic rebellion against patriarchal traditions and the domination of male society. Ownership of one's own body is therefore a very prominent theme which Ba'albakī raises in her first novel. However, the woman's desire to own her own body comes into conflict with the woman's role as playing host, inside her own body, to the children who make up the next generation. The woman's role as child-bearer leads society to make conflicting claims for ownership of her body, and since it is through marriage that these conflicts are worked out, we now turn to a discussion of marriage within Ba'albakī's works.

2.3 Marriage

Marriage is the only relationship between the two sexes in which sexual relationships or sexual activity is legal in Arab Muslim societies. According to the laws of Sunni Islam, permanent marriage is the only legal relationship in which sex can take place, and anyone practicing sex outside marriage is by definition committing adultery, which is said to be punishable by the Muslim Caliph and by God in the coming life.[4] However, while according to Sunni tradition fixed-time marriages are forbidden, these are allowed according to Shiite Islam. In the Shiite tradition of *Mut'ah* (fixed-time marriage) the period of matrimony is fixed: for example, the matrimonial relation is contracted with a woman for an hour, a day, a month, a year, or more.[5] We might wonder whether Ba'albakī, being a Shiite woman, may have been influenced by this comparatively more flexible stance. However, there is no indication that this is the case in any of her novels and short stories, nor in the available interviews with her. As already mentioned, Līnā in *Anā aḥyā* admits that she needs a man in order to escape from her loneliness. By this emphasis on the protagonist's own interests in seeking marriage, the novel indicates a break with established social practice.

[4] For further reading on marriage in Muslim world according Sunni law, I suggest the following reference: "On 'muta marriage' marriage from a Sunni view," Islam Opedia online, http://www.islamopediaonline.org/fatwa/muta-marriage-marriage-sunni-view (April, 22, 2010) (Accessed 8-9-2014).

[5] For further reading on marriage in Muslim world according Shiite tradition, I suggest the source: Sachiko Murata, Mut'a Temporary Marriage in Islamic Law (Qum: Ansariyan Publishers, 1986).

Judith E. Tucker, for example, comments that "Marriages [in Arab families in Arab countries] are arranged to suit the interests or needs of the couple's respective families and the young people, particularly the young woman, may be forced to marry their families' choice of mate" (1993, p.197). By asserting her own agenda for marriage, Līnā here may represent not only Arab women who struggle to choose their husbands without their parents interfering, but may also represent a more general criticism of society's viewing the woman as fundamentally nothing more than a wife. Līnā says, "if I am a woman it means I am a feminine … I am a wife … So, it means: I am a servant and he is the master who I must obey. He requires and I must apply his requirement …" (Ba'albakī, 2009a, p. 186).

Līnā not only criticizes how society views women, but she explains her view by saying, woman wants participation: to participate with her husband in the life which he lives, in listening to news, in reading a book, in going to cinema, in smoking cigarettes, in preparing food … and in everything regards their living together … and then it does not matter to me if they sleep at the side of the street or if their marriage is illegal … (Ba'albakī, 2009a, p. 187) Thus, Līnā seeks a marriage in which she would be equal to her husband in all life's spheres: education, entertainment, going out of the house, working outside the house, housekeeping, etc. She seeks equality of power, and to have the same economic status and enjoyment of life as do men: in other words, she wants to be a subject not an object in her husband's eyes. In seeking such a marriage, Līnā does not mind if the marriage is illegal, and would accept a civil marriage even though this is not accepted by Muslims. Similarly, in the second novel'Āydah in *al-Ālihah al-mamsūkhah* [The disfigured gods][6] (1960), Mīrā views marriage as a means of bringing a man and woman very close to each other, so that they can be two equal participants in everything in their life together. In this context, when her lover Raja asks her to marry him, she says, "have you enough ability and bravery to bear that another person should join you night and day: to eat with you, to sleep, dance, and to go to park with" (Ba'albakī, 2009b, p. 115)? Here, we see Mīrā being very careful in the way she approaches marriage, posing questions to the person who will be her husband, who she seems afraid will fail her ideals. She says directly, "how can I guarantee we will not fail in this step? How"(Ba'albakī, 2009b, p. 1116)? That is to say that while Līnā in *Anā aḥyā* fails to convince Bahā' to marry her, and while 'Āydah in *al-Ālihah al-mamsūkhah* has a failed marriage, here Ba'albakī presents a significant female character who is more careful and makes efforts and asks questions with the aim of investigating her future marriage's prospects of success.

The end of *al-Ālihah al-mamsūkhah* is left open, and readers do not know the future of the marriage between Mīrā and Raja, beyond the fact that Raja loves her and she loves him. However, we may expect that it will be a success, because there is harmony between them: both of them are anti-patriarchal characters, meaning that both of them seek freedom from patriarchal traditions which limit their freedom. This expected success of marriage balances the failed and tragic marriage of 'Āydah in the same novel. We may be led to conclude that Ba'albakī is drawing a link between the success or failure of marriage and the level of equality and participation between wife and husband, and the degree of agency the woman has in initiating the marriage. Although it would probably be too much to think that Ba'albakī is saying that all marriages characterized by equality, participation, and female agency will be successful, it does seem reasonable to say that this is the sort of marriage that has the best chance of success, on her view. Several of the short stories support this view, because they show the dramatic and traumatic endings of marriages which were not contracted in the same careful and cautious way as Mīrā's. Thus, the female protagonist in the short story "I Was a Filly, Now I'm a Mouse," who separates from her husband with her daughter because her husband does not grant her freedom, equality, and participation, indicates this metaphorically when she says to him, "I was in the far past a filly, but you changed me to a mouse." While 'Āydah in *al-Ālihah al-mamsūkhah*challenges the punishment being inflicted by her husband, who has stopped having sex with her because she lost her virginity before their marriage, the female heroine in the story "The Hero" receives the same punishment from her husband, but for a different reason.

In "The Hero" the woman is being punished because her husband accuses her of disloyalty, meaning that she has had a sexual relationship with a person other than him. While Nadīm, 'Āydah'shusband does not divorce his wife because of her wealth and her house, the husband in the "The Hero" does divorce her, after accusing her of disloyalty. In this context, she says, "he did not return home, and asked for divorce. Since … I became alone, I am seeking a male hero" (Ba'albakī, 2009b, pp. 30-35). Here, the heroine testifies that she is seeking marriage in order to escape loneliness: she has experienced marriage, and when she lost her husband she immediately felt loneliness and so quickly began to seek to get married again. But at the same time she uses the term "hero" ironically, and so decreases the status of men. In contrast, in the story "The Explosion," the heroine succeeds in marrying the person she loves and who loves her, and they live together for years.

[6]In this article, I referenced another edition, this is the recent edition, Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 2009.

Her experiences of love and sex with him come mostly at nights because he is busy during the day with his business; meanwhile, during the daytime she experiences sex and love with her boyfriend who was also a friend of her husband. While the heroine fails in the story "The Hero," because her husband discovers her secret sexual relationship outside marriage and accuses her, in "The Explosion" the sexual relationship between the wife and her boyfriend is not discovered.

Furthermore, it seems as though she is the one who decides to separate, but that the husband is the reason for the decision: that is, she leaves because her husband did not welcome her in his office during the daytime. Interestingly, she goes to him there only when her boyfriend dies. She says to him, "I fall down among the shoes, when your secretary told me that you refuse to meet me because you have important business and you do not want to talk to anyone, then my sixth soul died" (Ba'albakī, 2009c, pp.126-27). Thus, in novels and short stories, it is mostly the case that the narrators blame their husbands for their failing marriages. The stories' actions and conclusions indicate that the husbands are generally the cause of the separation and divorce. In contrast, however, in the situation of romantic and sexual relationships outside marriage, there are in general no accusations levelled against males (here, as boyfriends) in the ending of relationships. For example, in the story "The Explosion" the relationship between the married female protagonist with her boyfriend ends because the boyfriend dies: that is to say, it is for a reason beyond their control, and so there is no accusation implied against the male. In this context, it is significant to explore how the males in Ba'albakī's fiction view marriage, to see if their views are what push them to end their relationships with their wives. Bahā', whom Līnā loves, sees marriage in different way than Līnā's view as set out above. Revealing his view on marriage, he says, "For me, marriage is gambling! And I am like every educated youth who if he does not find the woman who understands him, his tragedy will begin when he will be forced to buy a wife to participate with him in bed as a female" (Ba'albakī, 2009a, p. 186)!Moreover, when Līnā comments on his view by saying, "the tragedy of woman begins when the man believes that the woman accepted him as husband because he will give her a bracelet and let her live in a house … ," he says, "what does woman want more than this" (Ba'albakī, 2009a, p.187)?

Thus, we see an educated man who sees his wife as an object for sex and housekeeping, but not as an equal participant. We see very strong contradictions in the way Līnā and Bahā' view marriage, contradictions which lead to breaking off their relationship. While Līnā fails to convince Bahā' to marry her, 'Āydah quickly gets married (within some months) when she returns to Beirut, and indeed marries an educated man. However, while Līnā fails to marry, 'Āydah fails to have a successful marriage, as she has no sexual or romantic relationship with her husband. I have already shown that her husband Nadīm is patriarchal, because he is applying social customs and orientations regarding the virginity of woman, and he represents the patriarchal dominant husband who punishes his wife and oppresses her. Thus, in *Anā aḥyā* the female protagonist is defeated by her male educated lover before they conclude marriage, but in *al-Ālihah al-mamsūkhah* the female protagonist is defeated by her educated husband within the context of their marriage. While it is not clear that the educated husband in the second novel promised 'Āydah her freedom, equality, and participation, in the short story "I Was a Filly, Now I'm a Mouse," the defeat of the female heroine by her husband and his betrayal of promises to her is evident. He promised her to give her freedom, equality, and the opportunity to practice a Western style of dancing – as a representative of Western life – but after marriage he retracts these promises, asking her instead to be a wife for whom housekeeping is the first and most pressing duty. He shouts at her violently, indicating that she must know first how to be a mother and a housekeeper: "he says that I must be a mother before having a massage … and to be a wife who takes care of housekeeping" (Ba'albakī, 2009c, p. 158). Here, we see an educated husband who cannot fulfil the view of marriage he told his lover that he had before marriage. This may be an indication first of progress in representing educated husbands' views of marriage, but also may be an indication of the difficulty which men find in adapting to a new style of family life, and marital relationships with their wives, which could be contrary to the rest of society.

Moreover, this could be an indication of the difficulty of practicing social change, especially when this change runs up against the traditions of patriarchal dominance. By contrast, however, in the story "A Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon" there is a fulfilling of a marriage which succeeds without ending divorce or tragedy, despite differences of opinion especially as regards having children. They love each other, and have had a sexual and romantic relationship before their marriage. So, in this story we see a romantic and sexual relationship that continues or progresses to marriage, which does not have children, and in the end is a happy love, which represents a close, warm, romantic, sexual and intellectual harmony.

Allen says the latter story "is about a couple with no children, but the sexual allusions in the story are controversial enough" (1995, p. 82). This is a story which represents a successful model marriage which is in line with the heroines' view of marriage as focused on equal participation with the husband in life, and in which the woman experiences harmony, equality, and freedom. Whereas here there is a sense of justifying a sexual relationship prior to marriage, in *AyyamMa'ahu* [Days with him][7] (1959) Rīm strongly refuses to accept having sex with Ziyād before marriage. She says that one night when Ziyād came in her house: "I refused to kiss him when he asked me to, then he tried to catch me but I insurrectionally pushed him.

–Ziyād…You are wrong…Very wrong… Get away from me [...] He said: okay, as you want… I will leave...." (Khuri, 2007, pp. 113-14). This evidence indicates that, despite her social rebellion, Rīm still maintains some social norms, such as considering marriage the only social acceptable framework for a sexual relationship between the two sexes. Rīm is aware of this, as she says: "I accept some social norms, moreover I maintain them. For example, I must respect older people... I like also the tradition of generosity in my country and other good norms"(Khuri, 2007,p.88). Here, we see a selective perspective of social norms and, therefore, a sense of pride in these norms that does not appear in any of Ba'albakī's stories. To sum up, then, the female protagonists in the novels and short stories mostly seek marriage to escape loneliness and to have romantic and sexual relationships. These protagonists have a feminist view of marriage, the core of which is equality with the husband, and participation with him in all decisions relating to power and in all the spheres of daily life. The husbands are mostly blamed for the failure of marriages. This is because the females/wives' feminist marriage concept is contrary to the patriarchal view of marriage espoused by their husbands, who are mostly educated, which at its core is that the wife's role is mainly to take care of the house and to bear and care for children. On the other hand, there is also a representation of a successful marriage which is based on equality and freedom for the woman, who lives in harmony with her husband and participates in all spheres of life. However, the protagonists in Ba'albakī's fiction also seek marriage in order to have children. Consequently, I turn to the issue of child bearing in order to discuss and investigate its implications.

5.2.4 Child Bearing

Maternity and child-bearing both occupy a great deal of space in Ba'albakī's fiction. She explicitly rejects and rebels against the limited function of maternity and child-bearing. The material rationalization has had the effect of evaluating human action in financial terms which are subject to the laws of supply and demand, an equation which excludes the function of motherhood and child care and similar domestic chores. Līnā illustrates this view, I need a man to get a child, within marriage with a man rather than Bahā' as a price for getting a child. And if this dream will be fulfilled and the child became of mine and of Bahā', will Bahā' accept to educate the child and prepare him for fighting against Jewish people for example …?(Ba'albakī, 2009a, pp. 303-4) Līnā seeks a child even outside of marriage by practicing sex with a man other than Bahā'. This is a rebellious desire which seems to be a symbol of her constant challenge to social and patriarchal norms, where pregnancy and birth before marriage are a stain on the honour of the woman and her family. Furthermore, Līnā wishes to have a child for political purposes. That is to say, for her it does not matter whether she has a child within or outside marriage; the priority for her is simply having a child. Interestingly, this priority is precisely in line with a comment by Sanger: "No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother" (1920, p.94). However, Līnā is aware that her dream is not acceptable to her lover Bahā' or to her parents (Ba'albakī, 2009a, p. 304). Similarly in *al-Alihah al-mamsūkhah*, the heroine 'Āydah is obsessed with motherhood. While in *Anā aḥyā* the desire to have a child outside of marriage is expressed by a dream, 'Āydah in *al-Ālihah al-mamsūkhah* talks openly and clearly about her desire, showing that it is a real wish and not a dream. She says: After my return to Beirut, I waited a few months for the examination result after I lost my virginity. I wished … that God will give me the chance to bear a child that would let me free from knowing a new man.(Ba'albakī, 2009b, p. 39) Here, the protagonist has waited a few months in accord with Islamic laws, which say that a woman should wait in order to know if she is pregnant or not.

This religious law is designed to avoid problems over identifying the father of the child, for if the woman does not wait for three months before learning she is pregnant, and then marries in the meantime, questions could be raised about whether the child's father is the husband or someone else. It seems as though 'Āydah wants to avoid marriage because she is aware of social norms as regards lost virginity outside marriage. The writer says, 'Āydahin *al-Ālihah al-mamsūkhah* is a continuation of the lifeline of Līnā in *Anā aḥyā*.

[7]In this article, I referenced another edition, this is the recent edition, 2007.

She extends this line to new experiences, to a new way of life, in order to achieve self-fulfilment, to seek another freedom, another kind of freedom, if you want: it is a return to the whole self, to love, to motherhood. (Ḥaydar, 1979, p. 75) On the other hand, Ba'albakī is also sceptical about having children inside marriage, since the mother in the story "The Cat" is portrayed by the writer as a cat in order to belittle her. A cat too practises love and sex with the male of her kind, and it too gives birth to kittens. "He gave her, this one who now roams around the barrel –more than love: he gave her the little ones; and for the sake of the little ones she will go on responding to him, to follow him" (Ba'albakī, 2009b, p. 49). Limitation of the number of children seems to be a theme in the story "I was a Filly, Now I'm a Mouse," in which the family still has one child even after five years of marriage. While in stories like "The Cat" and "I Was a Filly, now I'm a Mouse," the female protagonist seems to place a limit number of children, in the story "A Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon," she totally refuses to give birth to a child despite her husband's wish to the contrary. He says to her, "I want to understand here and now why you refuse to have children," and she answers later, "only the woman who is un-fulfilled with her man eagerly demands a child so that she can withdraw, enjoy being with her child and so be freed"(Ba'albakī, 2009c, pp. 276-78). Here, the woman refuses to have children in order to be with her husband all the time, because she loves him and does not want to let anything else take her away from him. And here there is also a combination between romance and sex. In this story, the female heroine succeeds in participating in making a crucial decision not to have children. Thus, there is a strong sense of rejecting raising many children, in addition to another voice which refuses to have children at all. This is based on the grounds that the children can become a factor of coercion, subjugating the mother to the husband/man, forcing her to follow him and to obey him for fear that the little ones, her children, would be lost.

Children could thus reinforce in the woman's mind the habits of submissiveness, servility, and subservience. Children as a factor of coercion are also mentioned in Al-Samman's short story "Nidā' al-safīnah" [The call of the ship] (1963), about which Ḥammūd says: "Here [in *Nidā' al-safīnah*] the writer [Al-Samman] rebels against her feminine nature through her cancelling a significant characteristic of her as a woman, which is sympathy for children, even if they are of the other wife of her companion"(2002, p. 175). Munīrāh Fakhrū argues that childbearing reduces the possibility of mothers going out to work, especially at a time when nurseries and kindergartens were unknown in the Arab countries, and makes them economically powerless (Al-Naqāwī, 1997, p. 204).In addition, refusing to have children could, for the woman, be a way to enjoy being with her husband and not also be too busy with her children. Yet Ḥammūd points out a different scene, in which the female heroine sees power in bearing a child, in the short story "'Aṣṣiyyu al-dam'" [Not tearing] (1976) by Ulfah al-Idlibī (1912-2007): "Child bearing gives the woman power; she sees it as her hope, she talks about it confidently and tells her husband she is pregnant" (2002, p. 184). To sum up, the female protagonists in the novels and short stories mostly seek and desire childbearing and motherhood, but on the other hand there is a sense of criticism of the idea of giving birth to many children, and a call for a limit of the number of children in order to let mothers work outside the home and so gain financial power in the same way as their husbands. It was shown how the protagonists often wish to have a child outside of marriage, which is in part a response to the oppressive role that children can play within traditional marriages, but is also an affirmation of the woman's desire for sexual freedom. This leads to turn to discuss and investigate the different sexual relationships running throughout the novels and short stories.

2.5 Sexual Relationships

Ba'albakī clearly focused on sexual issues and scenes in her narratives (1958-1964). In 2007, Būshūshah Bin Jum'ah said: "In Libyan novels, talking about sex still happens through quick scenes of casual experiences which quickly changed to be a part of memory"(2007, p. 99). In this context of sex in recent Arabic novels, Joshua Finnell comments on the female narrator in Syrian novelist Salwa Al Neimi's novel *The Proof of Honey* (2009): "She [The female narrator] unlocks her own hidden sensuality through purely sexual relationships"(2009, p. 80).AmīrahSalām further says: "Salwa Al Neimi succeeded in her novel *Burhān al-'asal* [The proof of honey] (2007) to focus sex in the context of pleasure and satisfaction and to represent fairly desires and imaginaries of the woman without any shyness" (2012). Although Al Neimi exemplifies Ba'albakī in focusing on sexual desires and experiences, they have different targets. Ba'albakī employs her focus on sexual desires and issues on her feminist agenda, mirrored in her calls for women's complete freedom, including sexual liberty and body ownership as well as the ability to break social taboos regarding sex; meanwhile, Al Neimi's purpose is "to show the subtle tension that exists between today's conservatives Arab and Middle Eastern cultures and their lascivious literary past" (Finnell, 2009, p. 80).

This purpose is beyond the scope of this study, but it provides evidence that focusing on sexual desires and experiences in novels could be employed for different aims. The discussion herein demonstrates that Ba'albakī's works are still relevant after fifty years. Thus, it is still significant to investigate sexual issues and relationships throughout Ba'albakī's narratives. In *Anā aḥyā*, an example of an extra-marital sexual relationship between a married male and a married female is given by the relationship between Līnā's father and their older female, married neighbour. Līnā, as narrator, comments: "I hoped, while playing back in my mind a scene in which my father was furtively ogling our older female neighbour, who lived in a building with windows overlooking ours" (Ba'albakī, 2009a, p. 18). Noting the striking contrast between her parents, she says this of her mother: "Why doesn't she look after herself? She sits up all night, sleeplessly standing guard lest he should steal away to plot in the dark a tryst in some bed in daylight" (Ba'albakī, 2009a, p. 21). It seems as though Līnā's mother is sexually cold, so his father looks to his neighbour for someone to have sex with. Thus, the writer focuses on describing sexual issues and the fact that a husband can seek sex outside of his family (i.e., wife).

Later in the author's writings, the protagonist of the story "Your Chest is no Longer My City" says:

In the end you [married men] steal each other's women – and all the ends in your future are the same – and you have clandestine encounters with each other's women in some bathroom, car, and alleyway: how petty you are – petty like the future, like the past, like death. (Ba'albakī, 2009c, pp. 35-36) The female protagonist above is thus dedicated to making manifest a reality which, if left "unexposed," is petty. She strives to divulge the concealed, to make hidden things manifest. The following sexual scene is a further example of a sexual relationship among married males and females. Nadīm indicates, for months I have not drunk whiskey with a woman. The last one was a pretty married woman whom I joined for one night; she invited me to visit her the next day. Then, she opened the door for me; she covered her hungry body with a towel … She invited me because her husband spends all his time in his clinic as a doctor … (Ba'albakī, 2009b, pp. 45-46) Here, the doctor's wife, despite the fact that she is married, still needs sex – that is to say, her husband does not satisfy her sexual needs, because he spends his time in his clinic, meaning that his priority is business and money. Thus, the doctor neglects his wife who needs sex and passion, and she needs someone to be with during the daytime. Perhaps Ba'albakī here means to point out that one problem with their relationship is that the doctor's wife has no job. Having no job leads to loneliness which contributes to seeking sex and romance outside of marriage. Another type of relationship which Ba'albakī explores in her fiction is that between married males and single females. While in *Anā aḥyā* Līnā seeks to marry Bahā' as means to get rid of loneliness, in the story "The Cat" the heroine, with the same aim, seeks a man who will love her even outside of his marriage. She says, "I am not like mythical women who could live alone. Loneliness? It kills me and places which are empty of people terrify me." Then she continues, "consequently, I will marry … I am not able to breathe if there is not near me a man who loves me …"Later she says, "and now, I have a man who loves me. This love alone satisfies me" (Ba'albakī, 2009c, p. 43).Here, the female heroine assigns great significance to romance which could be an alternative to marriage in destroying loneliness. Furthermore, while Līnā does not succeed in marrying Bahā', the heroine of "The Cat" succeeds in having a relationship with a married man who is older than she by nineteen years.

She says, he's kissed every bit of my body, and when he kisses me I feel like bathing under a coconut tree … So we have never talked about his wife or home or work and I haven't told him anything about my life. We have dinner together, we dance and swim and climb mountains and get bored together. I am his spring and he is my summer. We are having fun. (Ba'albakī, 2009c, pp. 44-45) The above quotation represents an example of a single female who is proud of having love and sex outside of marriage with a married male. On the other hand, however, this situation is also one of disloyalty by the husband to his wife, since he is having sex with another woman. A further example of a sexual relationship between a single female and a married male is the relationship between Nadīm and his German girlfriend. Nadīm says: This blond German woman was volcano of passion which is burning, and in the beginning I was trying to decrease the burning of that volcano … but the volcano increases its burning and crying, so I left my job and began to spend all my time with her in her room, then the volcano calmed down for a while and I weakened too. Then I carried her to the mountain.(Ba'albakī, 2009b, pp. 46-47) Here, we have a representation of a cross-cultural sexual relationship: Nadīm, who is punishing his wife by ignoring her, is also exploring a sexual relationship with his German girlfriend. I suggest that this may be an indication by the writer that meeting people from different cultures could lead to having increasing degrees of freedom; but whether this is the case or not, there is certainly an indication of the role of the influence of Western culture in altering Arab gender relationships. In the story "A Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon" there is explicit evidence that the protagonists have had a premarital sexual experience.

Although this does eventually lead to marriage, it is nonetheless, at the outset, a sexual relationship between a single male and a single female which is pursued outside marriage, and so is forbidden according to both social customs and Islam's religious laws. The evidence that they have had this relationship outside marriage comes during an exchange between the protagonist and her husband, of whom she says: "I shouted that he too at one time refused to have them [children]. He was silent for a while, and then he said: 'I refused before we were married, when it would have been foolish to have had one.'" Her husband then says to her, "you were crazy about children before we married; and you were dying for them" (Ba'albakī, 2009c, pp. 275-76).

Here, the ability to practice sex before marriage is represented as a model of the experience of sexual freedom, and we can describe friends' romantic and sexual relationships as being premarital in this manner.[8] There is also a sense that Ba'albakī is accepting of such premarital romantic and sexual relationships, as such relationships can lead to more successful marriages, but indeed, these relationships could end with separation prior any marriage too. In particular, in providing a model of a successful marriage, this story stands out among Ba'albakī's stories and novels: and we also notice that Ba'albakī chooses its title as the title for the volume of stories overall, suggesting that she assigns it particular importance. While the previous scene was concerned with sex between males and females where single, but who then go on to get married; there are scenes which call for sexual relations between single males and single females completely independently of marriage. One example comes where Līnā says, "my blond sister is in front of main doors of the girls' American college, her earrings call libertine young men who will invite her to go with to them to the beach quickly" (Ba'albakī, 2009a, p. 92). Here, males are calling females to have fun and sex outside marriage. On the other hand, the following is an example of females calling males to have fun and sex. Līnā says, Why does he not [Bahā'] have mercy on me and mercy on himself? Why not practice my right in life, and he practice his right too? Why does he not close his head to adhere to my face? Why does he not kiss my hot ear and decreasing hotness of my lips and to play with my fingers […] then invite me to his room and I will follow him to practice our freedom.(Ba'albakī, 2009a, p. 196)

The writer strikes a balance between males and females in showing their calling each other to have sex and fun outside of marriage, and so to practice sexual freedom, explore their individuality, and assert their autonomy over their bodies. While the above scenes concern singles, there are also married sexual scenes. In "When Snow Falls" – which concerns married couples cheating on their partners with lovers – the female protagonist says, I whispered that I was a wild cat, wandering in the city through streets leading to the sea, in the mud, under the rain, in the heart of the frost, shivering on her way to him, wet and hungry, seeking warmth. So why don't I try to be calm – calm, calm. (Ba'albakī, 2009c, p. 52) The previous sexual scenes concern sex between males and females inside and outside marriage, but all are consenting and cognizant of what they are doing. However, there is a crucial scene in *al-Ālihah al-mamsūkhah* in which the male antagonist Nadīm has sex with his wife, but, being drunk, thinks that he is having sex with his girlfriend. His girlfriend, we know, is a long-time sexual partner from Beirut's bars, and who has left him on the night in question. Coming home, drunk, he looks for his girlfriend but, being in his house, has sex with his wife instead, breaking the decades-long boycott that he has been inflicting on her. 'Āydah says, Nadīm came home two hours after midnight saying to me: "my love, do not leave me. I was surprised. I kissed his ear, his hair, his forehead, his chin." He said: "do not leave me, do not leave me," and then he slackened in my arms breathing slowly like a sick child, and I was lifting for the first time my big child, the dearest child in the world, and I take him to my room, putting him on my chest then his hands went to touch my back … on my bed, in my body, I lived the most strange sex play which Nadīm initiated in performing sex.(Ba'albakī, 2009b, pp. 79-81) The writer describes a situation in which a man has sex, but with no consciousness of what he, as a male, is doing.

Within the context of the plot, this situation contributes to give a victory of sorts for the main protagonist, 'Āydah, who desires above all else to have a child. Since 'Āydah has not sought sex with any person outside of marriage, in this narrative the writer is exploring the predicament of a loyal woman who remains faithful to her marriage, despite the fact that she needs sex in order to fulfil her desire to have a child.

[8] Note that by "sexual freedom" I do not mean to say that Ba'albakī imagines women having sex with many partners at once, as is sometimes associated with the permissive society that was prominent in the West in the 1960s. I mean only that the woman has the freedom to choose a boyfriend herself, and to explore a relationship with him without intrusion from her family or being judged by society.

This victory is achieved because ʻĀydah conceives as a result of that sexual act with her husband. While the writer grants the heroine both grace and good manners, her husband is represented as a drunken man who spends most of his time in nightclubs, drinking with women. Interestingly and similarly, the non-named female narrator in *The Proof of Honey* says: "Her male lover used to pull her to his chest and to kiss her eyes and lips. I used to suck him; he was putting his hands on my stomach. I opened my legs and asked him to open deeply" (Al-Qāsim, 2012). While we have just looked at an example of a relatively consensual sex scene between husband and his wife (insofar as the husband is able to consent), the writer is also aware that sex within marriage can turn into abuse in cases where a husband rapes his wife. Līnā says: No, you will not believe that my Syrian colleague who got married three years ago at the age of seventeen told me how her husband used to rape her every night without asking her to take part, without uttering a single word, without giving a kiss.

Just like that: he would rape her, swoop on her as if she were a corpse, toy with her and then throw her away on the bed and leave the room. (Baʻalbakī, 2009a, p. 107) Here, the narrator expresses clear criticism of those who consider the woman simply as a sexual object, implying that in all cases the husband and the wife should participate equally in the act of sex. The further point here, which is openly stated by the narrator, is that where sex is not mutually agreed upon, it constitutes rape even if it takes place inside marriage. Thus, in the short stories and novels of the writer there is a sense of the need for mutual knowledge and mutual agreement in having sex, and there is also an implicit call for better ways of practicing of sex within marriage. While in these scenes the writer exploring the sex which takes place inside marriage and which seems to amount to rape, in the following scene she is describing a married man's attempt to rape a single girl, Mīrā hurried to the lift, turning her back to the man and hiding her face from him in the mirror. Nadīm looked at her neck, and then to the prominent bone in that thin neck, and then he thought to touch her and to kiss her shoulders … he went closer to her, touched her hair carefully and began to play with it, and then Nadīm took her outside the lift to his house, when the lift failed to work because of the power cut … Mīrā says, "what lack of grace has stopped the electricity in this building? What foul thing? What evil?" (Baʻalbakī, 2009b, pp. 33-35)

While the previous sexual encounters have generally been shown to take place in the context of consent between the male and female, here there is an attempt by a married man, Nadīm, to force himself sexually on a girl who is much younger than him (he in his late fifties, she in her early twenties). Here there is clear criticism of such forced sex (i.e., raping), especially because it is in the strongest possible contrast with the sexual freedom that Baʻalbakī and her narrators seek for women. That freedom not only includes the right to choose one's own sexual partner, but also the freedom *not* to have sex, with one's husband or anyone else. In addition, in this scene there is a sense that Nadīm is revenging himself on society because he married a woman who had lost her virginity before marriage, and so he wants to make Mīrā lose her virginity before marriage as well. Mīrā is being used as an object in two senses: first as a sex object, and second as a tool of revenge. To sum up, the writer's fiction represents a consistent intellectual or ideological stance in favour of sexual freedom. It inveighs against the objectification of women whereby the female body is turned into a commodity for consumption by the rich or leisurely class: "No, I will not reduce my body to this level of vulgarity. I will not bare it to all eyes. I will take it away from the circle of the rich, decadent class of our society"(Baʻalbakī, 2009a, p. 228).

Sometimes the stories concern unhappy married males and females who seek discreet sex and romance outside marriage. There is sense of calling for, and practicing of, sexual freedom between singles, and between married males and single females and between married males and married females, and other combinations. All these sexual relationships reflect the concept of sexual freedom, meaning the freedom to have boy- or girlfriends for both single and married males and females. Furthermore, the writer is aware of the need to let her fiction represent a model of the successful sexual and romantic relationship between a single male and single female which leads to lasting marriage. Throughout Baʻalbakī's novels and short stories there is a clear focus on the importance of sexual freedom, which the writer maintains is reflective of reality, as she asserted in the context of her response to the charges of the public prosecutor during her trial. We might, on the other hand, view these passages not as descriptions of an actual reality but of a hoped-for reality which she envisaged as possible at the time of writing. The novels and short stories of the writer could be seen as a mirror for society, but if so, they are a mirror which shows not just what is the case but also what might become the case, and in particular what the writer wishes might become the case. Throughout those stories and novels, several concerns of societies are reflected, and the characters in these narratives embody social problems and crises. They passionately encourage greater social consciousness on the part of the reader.

On the other hand, the stories also criticize husbands who practice sex in a way that treats their wife as an object, without her equal participation and without romance. In addition, there is opposition to raping females because it is against both sexual and individual freedom, as well as being an act of violence.

3. Conclusion

This article has shown Ba'albakī's novels and short stories are filled with female protagonists who desire marriage, but not because of traditional social pressures. Rather, they desire marriage for personal reasons, such as to escape feelings of loneliness, or to find the right milieu for romantic and sexual relationships.

These protagonists have a feminist view of marriage which is closely linked to their personal reasons for wanting to enter into it: at the core of their desires for marriage is that they should achieve equality with their husband and participate with him in all the decisions that affect their lives together. Alongside this, where marriages fail, Ba'albakī's characters mostly lay the blame on the husband. This is because the marriages fail because the females/wives' feminist concept of marriage has run into conflict with the patriarchal view. Since these husbands are mostly educated, but still see the wife's role as mainly to take care of the house and care for children, Ba'albakī seems to feel she is justified in assigning them the blame for not respecting their wife's legitimate desires for freedom and equality: their education may make them especially blameworthy, since ignorance or lack of awareness cannot be pointed to as an excuse. On the other hand, Ba'albakī also provides a representation of a successful marriage which is based on equality and freedom for the woman. Childbearing is another feminist issue which is prominent in the novels and short stories. Since the woman's inescapable biological role in giving birth to the next generation is one of the ways in which society takes away a woman's control over her own body, Ba'albakī is especially concerned to find ways in which women can meet the deep need to have children without giving up their rights over their own body. In this context, we have seen that the heroines often wish to have child outside marriage. As regards the act of sex itself, Ba'albakī wants it to be an act in which men and women participate consciously and as equals, and she sets out through her different scenarios, various ways in which the act of sex can go wrong and women's equal participation can be undermined.

An ongoing theme in the author's writings, then, is that women are to be treated as agents in themselves, and as subjects, not objects. The importance of this appears most urgently with respect to the act of sex itself, but Ba'albakī also criticises other ways in which society objectifies women and turns the female body into a commodity. Although Ba'albakī is very concerned to show the violent and oppressive practices through which women's freedom is taken away from them, she is also aware of the need to let her fiction represent a model of a successful sexual and romantic relationship between a single male and single female which can be a route to a successful marriage. Throughout the novels and short stories there is clear evidence of the sexual freedom which the writer maintains is reflective of reality, as she asserted in direct terms in her response to the public prosecutor during her trial (Fernea and Bezirgan, 1977). Thus, Ba'albakī's feminist writing raised the taboo topic of female sexuality, and constructed a revolutionary approach and vision against the patriarchal culture and social systems. This intensity of feminism in Ba'albakī's work was unprecedented in the Lebanese women's movement at the time. We might, on the other hand, view the passage as a description of a hoped-for reality envisaged to be possible at the time of writing. In other words, her creative power transmutes the "imaginary" into the "real" before it becomes historical fact, a mark of outstanding originality, as imagination is the stage which precedes reality and forms a communicative link with it.

AbūNiḍāl gives a perceptive description of the writer's oeuvre in this context, Ba'albakī has used the shock technique to batter the taboos and conventions that have reigned for long and dominated the way that man viewed woman and, similarly, it put forward the question of how the woman views herself and the man, in an attempt to remedy the distortions bequeathed by the time of backwardness. (2004, p. 76) In the light of the foregoing, it is reasonable to conclude that the writer has turned her writing into a project of reformation and revelation, an endeavour to transform gender relations, to change the equation of power, influence, activeness, decision-making, and being. It is a project to end the patriarchal monopoly of authority, just as it is a project of revealing that man and woman can enter freely into relationships which resist not only the authority of the father, husband, brother, or the male in general, but also religious rules. These envisaged relations, giving no weight to old customs and social conventions, grant the woman the power and freedom of self-determination: her opinions, her desires, her body, her thoughts, her work, her writing are hers, and she is fully entitled to do with them what she wants.

Thus, we can conclude that the writer is greatly committed to feminist issues and that she employs her novels and short stories, and her lecture, as a way of promoting a feminist agenda. That is to say, di Capua's suggestion that the writer should be counted only as protesting against the conditions of Arab women, without offering a vision of what could replace those conditions, is not accurate. Interestingly, Niḍāl al-Sāliḥ says: "Except for a few works, focusing on women's issues is the prominent characteristic of the Syrian narrative in the nineties of the twentieth century, including criticizing the social patriarchal system prevents women from following their fathers, husbands or brothers" (2005, p. 18).Thus, Ba'albakī's feminist issues, views and writing are still relevant, although Arab (at least here Syrian and Lebanese) social patriarchal norms and systems remain considerably rooted and strong. As such, this situation still motivates women writers to oppose and criticize the system within their narrative writing.

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