Article

Situating Arab women's writing in a feminist 'global gothic': madness, mothers and ghosts

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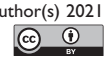

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Abstract

This article sketches a new way of approaching some contemporary Levantine (Egyptian and Lebanese) feminist texts. Extending Glennis Byron's notion of the 'global gothic', I examine Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* (1986), Mansoura Ez Eldin's *Maryam's Maze* (2007) and Joumana Haddad's *The Seamstress' Daughter* (2019) as examples of an Arab feminist Gothic approach, which serves as a framework to theorise difficult and pressing questions that feminism poses regarding women's rights. Arab feminist Gothic writers use the *jahiliyyah* period, or the 'time of ignorance', as a folkloric referential backdrop for texts which theorise the female condition under contemporary patriarchal society. The presence of ghosts, madness, doubles in the form of the folkloric *qarina* spirit-doubles and dreams can be read as part of a local Gothic feminist mode. This as-yet unacknowledged Arab feminist Gothic tradition, while emerging from debates over statehood and postcolonial subjectivities, delves into the intensity of personal traumas through the lens of women's relationships to other women, especially mothers and daughters. Taking Arab feminist fiction as its focus, this article models how feminist scholarship can use genre, particularly the Gothic, to trace artistic feminist theorising in non-western contexts.

Keywords

Arab feminism, Arab feminist Gothic approach, feminine Gothic, folklore, Gothic, international feminism, postcolonial Gothic, women's culture

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Introduction

We stood trembling behind the door. I was aware that my heartbeats mingled with the pulse in her hand as it stayed firmly pressed to my mouth. Her hand smelled of soap and onions. [. . .] "We hid in the darkness behind the door slightly ajar. Sounds of footsteps and loud noises drew nearer, before the door fully opened and light streamed into the room. Instinctively we glued ourselves to the wall behind the door and a current of fear ran through us as if we were wired together" (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 1).

Often discussed as a significant feminist novel in Lebanese literature, the atmospheric opening paragraph of Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* (1986) depicts a mother and a daughter hiding together in the dark as they share a sense of dread. This passage is evocative of the Gothic, using imagery which could have been lifted from the writing of Edgar Allan Poe: doors left 'ajar', 'footsteps' that draw ever nearer and light streaming into a room to reveal its secrets within. Images of currents and wires might even evoke the moment that the creature is given life in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Following these evocations, I argue that *The Story of Zahra*, like many western texts that we readily refer to as examples of the Gothic, functions as a theoretical intervention, in this case in answer to some Lebanese feminist questions. The trappings of the Gothic, when domesticated in Arab feminist literary context(s), serve as a framework to theorise the difficult questions that feminism poses, particularly around women's histories and mother–daughter bonds in patriarchal society. This as-yet unacknowledged Arab feminist Gothic tradition, while emerging from debates over statehood and postcolonial subjectivities, delves into the intensity of personal traumas through the lens of women's relationships to other women, especially between mothers and daughters. Al-Shaykh's text theorises elusive themes of generational trauma, female relationships – especially the paradoxical ambivalence for and drive towards a mother–daughter bond – ambivalent sexuality and exploring the private world of the individual psyche against a backdrop of national crisis.

Al-Shaykh theorises the Arab female condition in the context of the Lebanese civil war (1975–90). Against backdrops of states in chaos, as Alison Rudd puts it in her study of the postcolonial Gothic, 'what has been kept hidden as a personal trauma caused by historical events can, in the unhomely moment, be brought to the surface to make visible the link between that personal tragedy and a wider political reality' (2019: 73). The Lebanese Civil War, fought on the grounds of sectarianism cemented by the occupation of Lebanon by the Ottoman Empire and then by France, saw Beirut become an uncanny version of itself: 'decaying, bleak and full of hidden passageways' (Botting, 1996: 2). Al-Shaykh's seminal text follows the titular Zahra though episodes of her life, including her passive involvement with her mother's adulterous affair (from which the opening passage is drawn), to her emigration to Africa to live with her uncle whose lecherous ways cause her to have a nervous breakdown, to her eventual return to Lebanon at the height of the Civil War. The novel follows Zahra through numerous sexual and

moral transgressions, for which she pays the price with the toll on her mind and body, and eventually with her life. Following Fred Botting's well established assertion that the Gothic genre is at once a genre of 'excess' and of, at least by a Gothic text's end, ultimately a conservative return to established norms (1996: 1), we can read the complexities of excess and ambivalence in *The Story of Zahra* as part of what I term an 'Arab feminist Gothic approach', one which utilises and transforms western Gothic expressions of excess and ambivalence to explore feminist struggles against erasure in the Arabic-speaking world.

Gothic interventions typically emerge, as Fred Botting notes, when 'imagination and emotional effects exceed reason [. . .] Ambivalence and uncertainty obscure single meaning' (1996: 3). In the opening passage of *The Story of Zahra* we can trace the uncanny – the *unheimlich*, or 'unhomely' (Freud, [1919] 2003) – where the familiar and the fearsome meet as a consequence of passion-fuelled impropriety. Zahra's narration in the opening to *The Story of Zahra* conveys her mother's fear of being discovered to be having an affair, which is overshadowed by Zahra's sensory pleasure at the familiar smell of 'soap and onions' on her mother's hand (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 1). The pleasant sensation and emotional bond that she feels with her mother morph into fear. The gruesome electrified imagery of 'a current of fear' that 'wired together' Zahra and her mother foreshadows Zahra's eventual breakdown and treatment with Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 1). Such a therapy mirrors the inciting moment of madness in the novel, the current of fear that Zahra shares with her transgressive mother. Zahra's ambivalent relationship to reality in the text is characteristic of the Arab feminist Gothic approach that I outline in this article, expressing contention with a context in which women's experiences have been excluded from historical records and repressed in patriarchal codes of social propriety. If women's thoughts, desires and traumas are not widely acknowledged, then their representation in feminist art renders them irreal and uncanny. Without firm facts and histories about women's lives, the Gothic mode offers an artistic point of entry.

This argument demonstrates that some contemporary Arab feminist texts – here, Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* (1986), Mansoura Ez Eldin's *Maryam's Maze* (2007) and Joumana Haddad's *The Seamstress' Daughter* (2019) – can be read as part of what Glennis Byron calls the 'globalgothic', a tradition of locally inflected Gothics, which, Byron argues, are 'intricately connected to historically specific conditions, [and] to the development of an increasingly integrated global economy' (2015: 1). I extend this model to consider how these texts emerge as part of what Susanne Becker calls a 'female culture' (2017: 67). Specifically, the Arab feminist Gothic approach domesticates the trappings of the European Gothic tradition to the writer's cultural context, developing an indigenous style which is used to theorise Arab feminist questions. This article examines how an Arab Gothic approach references the history of *jahiliyyah*, or 'time of ignorance', and examines the presence of ghosts, women's madness, doubles in the form of the folkloric *qarina* spirit-doubles and dreams. These examples offer a framework to

understand how Al-Shaykh, Ez Eldin and Haddad use Gothic literature to theorise questions of female genealogies and subjectivities in a patriarchal society.

The Gothic as a theoretical tool offers to Arab feminist authors a distinctly useful generic form with which to theorise women's oppression. Feminism in Egypt and Lebanon, the countries Al-Shaykh, Ez Eldin and Haddad are from and where they set their novels, has faced an ambivalent reception. Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian journalist who now resides in the United States, recalls her personal discovery of feminist texts in 'the university library in Jeddah [. . .] They [feminist texts] filled me with terror. I understood they were pulling at a thread that would unravel everything' (2016: 20). Echoing Gothic sensibilities in her recollection, Eltahawy's paradoxical sense of terror and curiosity is evident, striking upon the special connection that feminism has with the Gothic: the sense of 'things not being what they seem' (Botting, 1996: 170). Eltahawy then describes her discovery of a long and rich history of feminist activism in Egypt, naming prominent figures such as Huda Shaarawi, Doria Shafik and Nawal El Saadawi, but at the same time she is critical of the fact that her discovery relied on her access to elite university education (Eltahawy, 2016: 20–21).

One of the most striking aspects of the Arab feminist Gothic approach is the attempt to recover women's knowledge and narratives, which is echoed in Eltahawy's discoveries. Despite feminist texts and histories being available, their marginalisation in dominant discourses leads scholars such as Jean Said Makdisi, Noha Bayoumi and Rafif Rida Sidawi to ask 'is there a genuine Arab feminist movement?' (2014: xii). To be clear, their question is not 'is there any such thing as Arab feminism?', but rather this question, and the edited volume that this question introduces, draws attention to the fact that while advances in women's rights have been won in the Arabic-speaking world, ambivalent attitudes towards feminism, and questions about how one might 'be' an Arab feminist, are still pressing issues.

Following Said Makdisi et al.'s assertion that 'the concerns and problems of Arab women in their various regions [. . .] and their various cultural histories, are translated into theoretical questions' (2014: xii), I assert that the Gothic genre offers one way of theorising such questions. In her excellent study of Levantine feminist literature, Kifah Hanna points out that scholarship must 'evaluate aesthetic tropes as transcultural phenomena, rather than as evidence for the extent to which an author has assimilated to European literary norms. I believe this approach to be critical not only in acknowledging these texts' right to aesthetics, but also to the assessment of their innovative artistic contribution to the canon' (2017: 8). It is in this spirit that I propose that we can identify an Arab feminist Gothic that demonstrates the indigenous, as well as the global, influences on this feminist aesthetic at the same time.

Arab Gothic influences

Byron argues that there is 'increasing evidence of the emergence of cross-cultural and transnational gothics' (2015: 1). The Arab feminist Gothic is its own

indigenous genre, but one which has not been spared from the ebbs and flows of cultural exchange. Byron also points out that 'globalisation is nevertheless transforming and defamiliarising these [Gothic] tropes as the increased mobility and fluidity of culture leads to the emergence of new gothic forms' (2015: 3). I would suggest that women's particular engagement with the Gothic sees the form, according to Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith, also 'reused and reinvented by women writers' (2016: 4, 11). The Arab feminist Gothic emerges as a response to specific Arab feminist approaches and local cultural histories, which incorporates aspects of the Anglo-European Gothic form for Levantine feminist artistic purposes. The Egyptian and Lebanese feminist authors discussed here have access to Anglo-European Gothic texts due to globalisation, and because the Arabic-speaking world is not, as many scholars would have us believe, hermetically sealed from western culture. For instance, Al-Shaykh mentions in an interview with the *New York Times* (2018) that her favourite heroine is Jane Eyre.

In framing the concept of the 'globalgothic', Byron argues that the Gothic genre offers 'a ready-made language to describe whatever anxieties might arise in an increasingly globalised world' (2015: 2). To sketch the influences of the Arab feminist Gothic style, we must acknowledge how the rise of the Gothic genre in the West during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries developed alongside similar artistic innovations in the Arabic-speaking world in the same period. During this period, Europe had much colonial contact with the Arabic-speaking world. At the turn of the century, the question of women's liberation was enmeshed with questions and histories of nationalism, westernisation and preservation of traditional culture amid globalisation, including in its earliest iterations at the turn of the century (Al-Ali, 2000; Amin, 1899; Badran, 1995; Eltahawy, 2016; Hanna, 2017; Salam Khalidi, 1978). The nineteenth century, according to Joseph Zeidan, saw how 'increased contact with the West led Arab intellectuals to question the position of Arab women' (1995: 4). Incidentally, *Al-nahdah*, or the Arab Awakening, in the late nineteenth century saw the genesis of the Arabic novel form. This development was partially influenced by contact with the West and the Ottoman Empire (Patel, 2013; Zeidan, 1995); yet, Salma Khadra Jayyusi clarifies that the rise of the novel form in the Arab world was 'also because it was timely for the novel to appear in the Arab world. It represented an answer to a need' (2005: 14). I argue that an Arab feminist Gothic follows a similar path: while this genre incorporates some aspects of the European Gothic, it nevertheless does so in order to answer the specific artistic needs of feminism in the Levant.

We can trace a genealogy of the Arab feminist Gothic through recourse to the larger context of Arab women's literary history. Ghenwa Hayek writes on the '*nahda* sensation story' typically written by women, which also emerged around the nineteenth century and made use of 'the relationship between anxious emotion, specifically fear, and prose narrative' (2013: 250). Given Byron's assertions that 'globalgothics' emerge in 'an increasingly integrated global economy' (2015: 1), it is pertinent to note Hayek's assessment that the 'sensation story' in the Arabic-speaking world emerges during 'a time in which [...] the role of the woman

within the home, was being produced not only through a dynamic and active dialogue between [. . .] male and female citizens, but also in order to meet the desires and demands of an increasingly globalized marketplace' (2013: 259). As such, reading Arab feminist genre writing as theorising contemporary, sometime elusive, questions, is not a new scholarly practice; yet Gothic literary texts in the Arabic-speaking world have been underrepresented in scholarship on the genre. It is time to give Levantine feminist aesthetics an appraisal in scholarship that privileges the work of art, in this case the novel, and also does not exclude authors such as Al-Shaykh, Haddad and Ez Eldin from the exchanges of global cultures. Arab feminists are part of the world, and they are developing a Gothic mode in conversation with global feminist and literary discourses.

We must also sketch the cultural references used by Arab feminist writers to devise an indigenous Gothic approach. Botting points out that the European '"Gothic", a general and derogatory term for the Middle Ages [. . .] conjured up ideas of barbarous customs and practices, of superstition, ignorance, extravagant fancies and natural wildness' (1996: 21). There are analogous historical touchstones in the Arabic-speaking world that serve the same purpose that the medieval period provides for European and Anglophone Gothic writers. This is the pre-Islamic historical period of *jahiliyyah*, which has a similar cultural resonance as a pre-'enlightenment' period. The term '*jahiliyyah*' signifies the 'time of ignorance' before the spread of Islam, and thus shares with the European medieval period a sense of pre-enlightenment values. Writings and stories from the *jahiliyyah* period contain 'many myths and fabulous tales in which the jinn and supernatural creatures, uncanny beings, and events figure greatly' (Jayyusi, 2005: 5). Such a history and storytelling tradition provides Arab feminist Gothic writers with traditional folklore upon which they can hang their examination of women's suppressed histories and the dark depths of the psyche, and use supernatural figures such as the *qarina* to theorise realities that are otherwise too frightening to bear.

As an example of this positioning of Arab feminist Gothic writing against the backdrop of folkloric narratives, Haddad's multi-generational narrative in *The Seamstress' Daughter* moves between realist narrative and poems. A moment of childhood sexual abuse is signalled to the reader pages before it actually happens through the language of fairy tales. Haddad's novel is a fictionalised retelling of four female generations of her own family, and so it reflects and re-presents in fiction instances of real horror. In terms that echo both Western and Arabic fairy tales, the passage describes how Qana, a little girl, ventures into the woods: she notes that 'today is the first day of Spring and I am wearing my new red skirt' (Haddad, 2019: 157). Qana describes how she has filled her pockets with stones, 'which I tossed behind me on my way here to the woods [. . .] [to] easily find my way back home. Just like *Al-Ossaybe'h* did' (Haddad, 2019: 157). Her red skirt evokes 'Little Red Riding Hood', and a footnote clarifies that '*Al-Ossaybe'h*' is the 'Arabic equivalent of Little Thumb, the fairy tale character' (Haddad, 2019: 157). These evocations signal that Qana, the narrator, is very much in danger. A reader may also become 'nervous' when Jeddo Ameen, her friend's grandfather, remarks

'Is this skirt new? It looks so nice on you' (Haddad, 2019: 158), echoing the sexualised undertones of Little Red Riding Hood's exchanges with the Wolf and perhaps resonating with readers' own experiences. Qana then narrates how Jeddo Ameen began sexually abusing her that day, and concludes, 'Baba, you were wrong. Ghouls are real' (Haddad, 2019: 160). This scene demonstrates how the real and the unreal become paradoxically entangled when recording and retelling women's narratives through the Gothic mode.

Ez Eldin's *Maryam's Maze* also evokes Arabic storytelling traditions, in the style of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Short frame vignettes recount the titular protagonist's family history in ways that are surreal and supernatural, in some cases gory, and recall the oral style of storytelling in the *Nights*. The opening frame in *Maryam's Maze* begins with 'the story goes', and, recalling the tradition of an ancestral '*House*' in Joanna Russ's (1973: 667; emphasis in original) summation of the modern Gothic, recounts how El Tagi, Maryam's grandfather, 'brought several pieces of flesh, scattered them over various pieces of ground, and then chose the spot that had kept the flesh from rotting for the longest time' in order to decide where to build what would become an ancestral home (Ez Eldin, 2007: 1). Echoing sensibilities shared by American Gothic fictions, where buildings are haunted because they have been built on sacred ground, the El Tagi palace's very foundations have supernatural properties. It is unsurprising, then, that the palace is a site of excess: El Tagi 'filled it with as many cellars and corridors as he could, as well as spacious halls . . . and wide balconies' (Ez Eldin, 2007: 1). The vignette ends noting that the powerful jasmine that El Tagi grows 'turned into a curse for those with sensitive chests, making them gasp for breath' (Ez Eldin, 2007: 1). The palace, with its oppressive air and unsettling use of space, becomes the site of numerous and disturbing hauntings.

Ghosts

According to Botting, 'the bourgeois family is the scene of ghostly return, where guilty secrets of the past transgression and uncertain class origins are the sources of anxiety' (1996: 114). True to Gothic forms, in *Maryam's Maze* Ez Eldin calls into question the aristocratic status of the El Tagi family, firstly through the contextual underpinning of the 1952 Egyptian land reforms, which saw a redistribution of wealth from which the family finances never recover, and by revealing that 'Yusif El Tagi was a made up name, invented to make him sound like an aristocrat' (Ez Eldin, 2007: 28). This troubled family history frames the parallel feminine genealogy traced in the text. Maryam, the dead protagonist, attempts to remember that she is dead throughout the surreal novel; her mother, Narges, marries Yusif El Tagi, Maryam's father, and is haunted by nightmares in the fearsome palace; and finally, Sophia, Yusif's mother and Maryam's grandmother, suffers mental ill health, and eventually haunts the palace.

The women of the El Tagi family either are haunted or perform hauntings. As Botting argues, ghostly returns in the Gothic 'supernatural occurrences [. . .] are

associated with the forces and energies of a mysterious natural dimension beyond the crude limits of rationality and empiricism' (1996: 136). Given that the text is set against the backdrop of the depreciating wealth and status of the El Tagi family, which notably has no male heirs, as well as the question of women succumbing to madness in the family home, Ez Eldin's female ghosts offer to us a complex reading of women's status within contemporary upper-class Egypt. Gina Wisker points out that 'women have always written ghost stories, and they offer a chance to recuperate, revisit and replay, so they are equally popular among contemporary women writers, particularly those who wish to open up the popular historical versions of women's lives in the more recent past' (2016: 28). Ez Eldin, then, uses hauntings to imagine an alternative to the patrilineal El Tagi family tree. As Diana Wallace points out, much of women's Gothic writing around ghosts evokes the notion of 'woman as "dead" or "buried (alive)" within male power structures that render her "ghostly"' (2016: 26). Ez Eldin's female ghosts invite us to consider the 'herstory' of Sophia, Narges and Maryam which runs alongside the El Tagi patrilineal frame. Yusif El Tagi dies in the same car crash that kills Maryam, and during his funeral, 'everyone was startled by the heavy steps of Sofia's ghost [. . .] as usual it walked extremely noisily [. . .] Although Sofia had been mad, her ghost seemed extremely intelligent. The ponderous footsteps went out into the garden, following the noise of the shrieking' (Ez Eldin, 2007: 17). Ghosts and hauntings, while remaining distressing to the haunted, are nevertheless 'usual' in this novel (Ez Eldin, 2007: 17). Ez Eldin uses hauntings in this way to theorise how Arab women's repressed histories are nevertheless felt in society: as some impossibly defined 'forces and energies', suggesting that within a patriarchal society women's stories, genealogies and even women's psyches operate 'beyond the crude limits of rationality', of accounts of history and of the categories of the real and the irreal (Botting, 1996: 136).

Sophia's ghost defies even the logic of hauntings. Ez Eldin writes that 'it was quite understandable that the ghost should be walking about in the palace, but it was illogical for Maryam to feel the ghost pursuing her wherever she went', including to the women's hostel where she briefly lives (2007: 18). Sofia's ghost does not haunt the palace, but rather haunts Maryam herself. Sofia's history of madness, and being part of Maryam's female family with whom she strongly identifies, demonstrates an opportunity to 'recuperate, revisit and replay' a 'herstory' that is not bound to the ancestral house, but rather to Maryam's (arguably inherited) psychological struggle (Wisker, 2016: 28). During these hauntings, Maryam, 'almost dying of fright [. . .] would hide herself under the covers [. . .] her old image of Sofia would disappear from her mind, turning into nothing but some enormous feet that made a continuous clatter' (Ez Eldin, 2007: 18). The imagery of huge ghostly feet is confounding; ripe for psychoanalysis, this is not the quiet, eery apparition of western canon, but rather a haunting representation of the absurdity of suppressing women's histories: the huge weight of the inherited oppression and suppression manifests to Maryam as large and surreal.

Ez Eldin's text contains markers of the Gothic, but nevertheless includes elements of the surreal; why indeed does Sofia's ghost manifest as heavy-footed steps to Maryam? Wisker notes that 'for many whose stories remain unheard, there is also a triple marginalisation, that of form and voice' (2016: 118). It is notable that Ez Eldin is acutely aware of the conventions of the Gothic, as she published a short story entitled *Gothic Night* (2011), and has been noted to 'carry the mantle of Edgar Allan Poe in Egypt' (Eldein, 2016). In *Maryam's Maze*, Ez Eldin links these familial hauntings to a troubling of genre itself. The surrealism of this passage pushes us to consider the psychoanalytic relationship of the Arab feminist Gothic approach to instances of madness in these texts. We might consider such instances as examples of what Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe as anxieties that lead authors to envision 'an "outbreak" that transforms their characters into huge and powerful monsters' (1979: 86). For Ez Eldin, the mad grandmother who represents female histories of confinement within the family home becomes subsumed into a fearsome, and surreal, monstrous presence in Maryam's narrative.

Madness

Maryam in *Maryam's Maze* identifies closely with her grandmother, Sofia, particularly in episodes of the text where she is seeking the truth about her own death. One such episode dissolves from Maryam attempting to collect papers in the street looking for information, to a description of how 'she would disappear for the entire late morning [. . .] she would come back with bunches of mint and sweet basil, and broad succulent leaves oozing with a bitter, sticky liquid [. . .] Narges dragged her to her room and gave her a sleeping pill. "Your mother will embarrass us", she would whisper to Yusif' (Ez Eldin, 2007: 19). Who exactly the 'she' is in this passage, whether this is Sofia or Maryam, is unclear: the passage initially follows Maryam, yet it mirrors other episodes where Sofia collects herbs in a fugue state, and Narges refers to the 'she' as Yusif's 'mother', Sofia. In the tradition of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), hauntings and madness are not always discernible from one another. In Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, it is unclear whether the so-called 'wallpaper woman' is a product of the disturbed mind of the narrator, or if she really does haunt the nursery to which the narrator has been confined. At the end of the novella, the narrator's identity fuses with that of the 'wallpaper woman' who has tormented her, narrating 'I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern' (Gilman, 1892: 17). We can read this account as either madness or a ghostly possession in the same way that we might read the above passage as Sofia possessing Maryam, or Maryam's fractured mind channelling her grandmother's struggles to come to terms with her own defamiliarised relationship with reality (being dead herself). Here, two women's subjectivities and histories are folded into one another, representing the repeated repressions of women's histories and the cyclicality of women's oppression across generations.

Feminist approaches to the Gothic often include a fracturing of the self. According to Botting, Gothic forms in the twentieth century are concerned with 'the loss of human identity and the alienation of self from both itself and the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured and [. . .] machinic doubles and violent, psychotic fragmentation' (1996: 157). This is a theoretical approach that is shared with much Gothic feminist writing. In their seminal study of nineteenth century female authors, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Gilbert and Gubar argue that in nineteenth-century women's writing, 'women writers continually imagine for themselves returns [. . .] to the mad double' for 'moments of escape' (1979: 85). In *Maryam's Maze*, Maryam returns to her 'mad double', her grandmother Sofia, in order to escape from her own reality of being dead. Her reality of being dead in the novel is itself unreal, and a potential reflection of the fact that, as a female heir to the El Tagi household, there is no clear place for her in patrilineal tradition. As Wallace points out, 'one of the most powerful metaphors in feminist theory, [is] the idea of woman as "dead" [. . .] within male power structures' (2016: 26). The Arab feminist Gothic approach also reflects Gilbert and Gubar's supposition that 'the violence of the double' demonstrates the author's 'own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts', that madness represents the ultimate noncompliance to patriarchy (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 85). Haddad's novel sees four generations of women grapple with the consequences of an aunt's suicide, which Haddad suggests is a result of the horrors that she saw during the Armenian genocide, including gender-based violence (2019: 223). By the end of the novel, a number of the daughters of seamstresses have fought mental ill health, culminating in a prose poem that describes 'a mother in Armenia dancing around her three kids' corpses [. . .] Soldiers were pushing her out of her home. But she wouldn't let them [. . .] she kept singing them lullabies, even after the soldiers shot her too' (Haddad, 2019: 209). Once again, it is unclear where the limits between madness and hauntings end and begin, but nevertheless Haddad uses this ambiguity to imagine a way of being noncompliant to violence, that madness and death offer an irreal mode of resistance. Scholarship on *The Story of Zahra* also notes that the oppression and confinement that Zahra faces 'by her father and mother and alienated by her traditional and conservative society' leads her 'into madness' (Abdo, 2007: 217). It is worth noting that, at the height of Zahra's madness when she returns to Lebanon, where days and nights blur in a 'nightmare', she narrates 'these days drew me closer to my mother and father, who seemed to realize, for the first time, that I was not a spectre' (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 110). Harking back to Wallace's assertion, the Arab feminist Gothic approach offers to Al-Shaykh a way to theorise how Lebanese women, against the backdrop of the civil war, resist their figurative death within patriarchal society.

In *The Story of Zahra*, Zahra has several nervous breakdowns. One of these episodes is relayed in the narration of her husband, Majed, citing both that her irrational behaviour was irritating, and that 'in her present state she would be incapable of looking after children' (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 76). This comment abruptly demonstrates the role that Zahra is expected to play in society, but I would also

argue that it offers a link to her own mother for her mental disturbance which, as noted in the introduction to this article, is incited by her mother's affair. The affair itself is transgressive, but it also asserts her mother's desires and personal needs beyond the patrilineal family. The narrative, then, follows Zahra attempting to consolidate her own desires and wishes around social expectations as well as undercurrents of sexual objectification at the hands of her lover Malik, her uncle Hashem, her lecherous cousin, her husband Majed and the sniper. To this end, Majed's narration relays that, once Zahra is discharged from the mental hospital, some friends visit, and her erratic behaviour culminates in references to her mother. Zahra demonstrates some delusions, where she 'began to draw imaginary patterns' on a wall, almost like a child would during imaginative play, perhaps recalling *The Yellow Wallpaper*'s allusions to the infantilisation of the narrator who is trapped in a nursery (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 76). Zahra tries to place flowers within the imaginary pattern on the wall, and when the flowers inevitably fall, she asks for glue, stating, 'can't you see that I am trying to decorate my mother's picture with flowers?' (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 76). In her deluded state, Zahra becomes fixated on her mother's image, particularly the static and pleasant version of her that would be presented in the imaginary photo. In her attempts to decorate the image, we are invited to contend with the fact that it was perhaps her mother's actions, that inciting 'current of fear', which led Zahra to this moment, but that she nevertheless wishes to enact devotion and affection towards her mother (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 1).

Zahra's madness, then, lies in the fact that she does identify with and relate to a woman who is transgressive. Later in the novel, the narration returns to Zahra's own voice, where she recognises her own madness, recalling, 'I was not an easy person to cope with' (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 108). Perhaps recounting the tradition of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, in which the narrator, supposing that she might jump out of a window, knows 'well enough that a step like that is improper' (Gilman, 1892: 17), Zahra is, like Gilman's narrator, bound by social propriety despite her mental ill health. Madness in the feminist Gothic approach is fearsome not solely due to the fracturing of the self that Botting identifies, but because women's particular relationships to social norms, especially the awareness of the feelings of others, remain palpable, even while one feels one's sense of self slipping away.

Qarina doubles

The motifs of fractured identities and ghostly possessions lead us to consider the *qarina* in these texts. In Arabic folklore, a *qarina* is a spirit double that everyone has and must appease lest they become malevolent. Botting argues that in Gothic literary texts, 'the double is [...] used to present a more terrible possibility as a figure that threatens the loss of identity' (1996: 131). A *qarina* appears in *Maryam's Maze* and in *The Story of Zahra* during moments when Maryam and Zahra's identities are in crisis; each *qarina* reflects Botting's insight that as 'an uncanny figure of horror, the double presents a limit that cannot be overcome, the

representation of an internal and irreparable division in the individual psyche' (Botting, 1996: 93). We might read the *qarina* as a mirror image of oneself, the sister peer whom we fear, and to whom we are also paradoxically drawn. The *qarina* can also be seen as a figure who represents the fraught relationship that the Arab feminist tradition has with western feminist traditions. Maryam's and Zahra's *qarina* are not identical to them in appearance or demeanour, but they are nevertheless a troubled part of them; negotiating the differences between the self and the *qarina* causes distress to both protagonists. Arab feminism is often charged with being western, and so the spectre of western feminism haunts Arab feminist writing inasmuch as there is a pressure to remain 'authentically' Arab (Jayyusi, 2005: 13).

In *The Story of Zahra*, Zahra recalls the first time that she saw the *qarina*. When she was a child on an excursion with her mother, Zahra notes that she looked around and asked 'God, send me a companion to play with'; she looked into 'the pond and suddenly saw in the pond the image of a girl. I was not dreaming. I stared intently at the reflection, and it certainly wasn't me [. . .] the shape of the face was different. And I heard my name being spoken' (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 84–85). This episode happens when her mother is meeting with her lover. We might read Zahra's inaugural encounter with her *qarina* double as the fissure in her psyche due to her guilt. The manifestation of the *qarina* after she requests 'a companion to play with' may be read through Lacan's mirror stage theory whereupon she separates herself from her mother who is no longer her comfortable or constant companion while she is having an affair (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 84). The identity in the mirror of the pond is the ideal or better self, and she displaces the guilt that she feels onto the alternative self.

The *qarina* visits her again when she returns to Beirut as an adult. Zahra narrates that the '*Qarina* crouched in one of the room's corners and watched me' (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 122). This in itself is a horrifying image, reminiscent of the ghosts in dark corners throughout Gothic literature. However, perhaps as a fulfilment of her request of 'a companion to play with', the *qarina* is not alone on this occasion:

> [she] arrived in the company of a man [. . .] the weight of his body had contradicted any thought that I might be dreaming [. . .] I felt myself shiver with pleasure under the gaze of my *Qarina* as she watched me from her corner [. . .] I needed [. . .] to submit to my ecstasy even though I was still aware of my *Qarina* lurking in the shadows (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 123).

The arrangement of this scene, with the *qarina* in the corner, and the phantom man whose 'weight pressed down' on Zahra so that she could not move, is reminiscent of Henry Fuseli's Gothic painting 'The Nightmare' (1781). In 'The Nightmare', a young woman is pinned down on her bed by a ghoul-like incubus while a white horse looks on from a dark corner. 'The Nightmare' has sexual and psychological undertones, where there is at once a sense of 'dread' and of submission to pleasure

(Stewart, 2002: 282). It is as if the *qarina* is a proxy for the child Zahra here, who in turn is re-enacting her mother's sexual transgressions: Zahra would often be nearby when her mother was having an affair. Zahra performs psychological mastery over her sense of abandonment from her mother using her mirror image, the *qarina*, as a proxy.

Alternatively, we can read this moment as a scene of masturbation, in which Zahra circumvents her own desires and is able to blame the mischievous *qarina* and the phantom man for her arousal, thus transferring her sexual desires onto the *qarina*. Abdo argues that this episode can be 'seen as the result of a repressed homosexuality which begins when she was forced to accompany her mother to her sexual liaisons with her lover' (2007: 234, note 7). Zahra's relationship with her *qarina* is like that between the 'Modern Gothic' heroine and the 'Other Woman': according to Russ, 'the Other Woman is more worldly than the Heroine, more beautiful, and more openly sexual. The Other Woman is *immoral*' (1973: 670; emphasis in original). The *qarina* represents the parts of herself that Zahra most closely identifies with her adulterous mother, and her fear that she is her '*immoral*' mother's double (Russ, 1973: 670; emphasis in original).

Gothic dreams

One of the core ways in which the Gothic calls reality into question is through dreams. Dreams are an opportunity in Arab feminist Gothic literature to uncover what has been repressed outside of the patriarchal order of signification, and to depart from the colonial 'paternal law' of the novel form (Becker, 2017: 67). M.J. Kister details a history of 'oneiromancy', or the interpretation of dreams, to uncover higher truths 'which may be traced to the first half of the second century' and into 'the period of the Jāhiliyya and Islam' (1974: 68, 69–70). 'Oneiromancy' is a hybrid of *jahiliyyah* traditions and Islamic philosophies of truth bestowed from God. According to Kister, 'Ibn Qutayba', a scholar of Islam from the ninth century, 'defines the dream as a "kind of revelation and a sort of prophecy"' (1974: 74). It is unclear whether any of the authors whose works are addressed in this article are aware of oneiromancy, yet what we can see here is that the Arabic-speaking world shares with its European cousins a desire to uncover certain kinds of truths from the rich symbolism of dreams, for which the Gothic genre offers a frame.

Since the daughter's relationship to the mother is not represented in mainstream patriarchal social arrangements, it becomes an abject or horrifying cultural anxiety: according to Luce Irigaray, this relationship 'remains in the shadows of our culture; it is its night and its hell' (1991: 35). Julia Kristeva draws upon Jacques Lacan's theory that sublimation, such as we might see represented in the dream, is an attempt to recuperate '*das Ding*', the 'true secret' (Lacan, 1978: 46). Much of Kristeva's work defines this 'certain relationship' or '*das Ding*' as the essential unrepresented experience of being *in utero*, which we attempt to replace with other relationships and objects (Lacan, 1978: 99).

In *Maryam's Maze*, dreams are haunted by the fearsome mother–daughter relationship. In particular, Maryam's mother Narges experiences abjection or a defamiliarisation from her body when she becomes pregnant with Maryam, which gradually leads her to dream about ants consuming her body. Ez Eldin narrates Narges' body as an uncanny object of excess over which she has no control, and indeed 'she didn't understand what was happening to it' (2007: 33). Her sense of abandonment by her own body is sublimated into horrific dreams to keep her taboo feelings of resentment about her pregnancy, that which she cannot express, 'under control' (Kristeva, 1980: 11). Narges begins to dream of 'a column of small black ants crawling up her' arm (Ez Eldin, 2007: 33). Eventually, the 'vicious, devious ants [. . .] left no trace outside the boundaries of the space that she herself occupied, as if they had sprung from a void with a single purpose that she [. . .] was afraid of even imagining' (Ez Eldin, 2007: 33–34). On the one hand, Narges' unspoken hatred of her pregnancy is sublimated in this dream, especially when she finds 'a small group of ants feeding from her left breast and another covering her mouth', where she believes 'that the smell of milk in her breasts was attracting the ants' and the covering of her mouth represents her stifling unspeakable feelings towards her pregnancy (Ez Eldin, 2007: 34). On the other hand, the 'void' might be read as the void left by '*das Ding*' (Lacan, 1978: 99). Narges feels that her pregnancy is taking up 'the space that she herself occupied', which reflects the child's consumption of her real body and her sense of self (Ez Eldin, 2007: 34).

According to Elizabeth Grosz, once a child recognises that the mother and itself are separate entities, 'the child is no longer in that happy state of satisfaction, protected by and merged with the (m)other. From this time on, lack, gap, splitting will be its mode of being' (1990: 35). Narges dreams about her own sense of boundaries lost until she becomes herself a 'lack' or a void left by '*das Ding*', or perhaps is herself her own '*das Ding*' (Grosz, 1990: 35; Lacan, 1978: 99). She:

> dreamed that she was walking naked along a dark road [. . .] whose borders were formed by giant ants preparing to consume her. Then her body, which had again become beautiful, began to change, each time assuming a form that was completely foreign to her. She raised her left arm to her mouth and began to consume it, oblivious to the blood that was flowing from it [. . .] She slowed as she consumed her trembling heart until she disappeared, leaving behind her a pool of crimson blood that the giant ants licked up until it was all gone (Ez Eldin, 2007: 34–35).

In this dream, the ants represent the feelings of being consumed by her pregnancy, which is heightened by her dreamed or imagined body returning to its previous 'beautiful' state, but then becoming an unknowable 'foreign' object (Ez Eldin, 2007: 34–35). Her response to the alienation from her body brought on by pregnancy in the dream is horrifying and echoes Victor Frankenstein's dream in *Frankenstein* where he dreams about his beloved Elizabeth, whom he kisses before she turns into his dead mother (Shelley, 1818 [2008]: 39). In both texts, the dream serves as a way of uncovering latent feelings of guilt which manifest as taboo inversions of social

order. In some readings of the *Frankenstein* dream, Frankenstein's mother's replacement of Elizabeth in his embrace signals a latent incestuous desire for the mother or a search for a return to the essential mother–child bond. In *Maryam's Maze*, Narges consumes her own body as an inversion of how her body is being consumed by her pregnancy: even when there is no body left, the ants 'licked up' the pool of blood left behind 'until it was all gone' (Ez Eldin, 2007: 34–35).

Eventually, this dream changes into a 'nightmare' once she has given birth, in which Narges would hold baby Maryam:

> and swallow her at a single gulp, turning herself into her graveyard. She was frightened by the idea of swallowing her baby, but she was at the same time frightened by the idea that her belly would fill with her again. Did this mean that she would be exposed again to the painful experience of childbirth? Did it mean that her daughter would die by her hands? (Ez Eldin, 2007: 35).

This dream confounds the boundaries between life and death, between logic and irrationality. Her body becomes a site of life-giving as a mother who can 'experience childbirth', but at the same time her body is a 'graveyard' (Ez Eldin, 2007: 35). This dream is paradoxically both a perversion of natural order, and representative of Narges' real fears about childbearing. This represents a sense of inevitable cyclicality between generations of women – that Narges' body is subject to becoming a vessel of both life and death beyond her control or desire. Although Ez Eldin is not a diasporic writer, Al-Samman argues that similar 'graveyard' imagery in diasporic texts can 'articulate the attraction and ambivalence of diasporic haunting, of unearthing memory's "cemetery"' (2015: 103). For Al-Samman, this represents the unresolved relationship to the homeland; however, I would suggest that here we can identify a similar lack of resolution, combined with the 'recalling' of that which is suppressed in these texts. Arab feminist Gothic texts use dreams not only to invert the patriarchal symbolic order but to '[unearth] memory's "cemetery"' (Al-Samman, 2015: 103).

In *The Story of Zahra*, Zahra is able to 'remember' her mother having an abortion before Zahra was born herself. While this passage is not a dream that happens during an episode of sleep, the preceding passage contains numerous references to dreaming and sleeping: that her father had a 'dream' to send her brother to study in the US, her mother's pretence that her brother was 'sleeping' when he was out late at night and that Ahmed would steal from their mother 'as she slept' (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 20). Al-Shaykh writes of this 'memory' that: 'between us [Zahra and her older brother] there had been a set of twins, girl and boy, who lived but briefly in a porcelain soup dish after my mother aborted them. [. . .] I remember the neighbours pouring into the bedroom to greet my mother [. . .] "Why abortion after abortion?" [. . .] She didn't want to have children by my father' (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 20). The presence of the neighbours and their questions evidences Zahra's understanding that women's bodies, and their sexuality, are available for public commentary. She also notes that her mother's desires to not have children

with her father are betrayed by her body. The passage quickly moves on to the present day where Zahra feels 'disgust and fear' towards her lecherous uncle (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 21). Given that Zahra has had two abortions herself by this point in the novel, she is sublimating her own shame about her abortions, alongside the fear of her uncle and the potential consequences of his as-yet unfulfilled lust to the symbolic proxy of her mother's body.

This symbolic ambivalence towards the pregnant body in dreams is also experienced by children in these texts. In *The Seamstress' Daughter*, Qayah, upon being separated from her mother and subsequently adopted, is haunted by nightmares of an uncanny mother in a cave-womb space:

> [She] had a recurrent nightmare where she'd see herself sinking into her grandmother's well. The ghosts would catch her and take her into a side cave where her mother would be [. . .] next to a boy [. . .] who had red hair just like her. Soon she'd realize the woman wasn't her real mother. She [. . .] had black hands, as if they were made of tar. She would put those hands around Qayah's neck and start squeezing (Haddad, 2019: 41).

Qayah processes the trauma that she experienced when she and her mother were captured and abused by the Ottoman army in the Armenian Genocide of 1915 by subconsciously seeking out a return to the womb. Qayah sinks 'into her grandmother's well', a yonic opening tied to the ancestral land that she can now never return to in Armenia, which is also analogous to a drive to return to the essential moment of birth (Haddad, 2019: 41).

If we read the cave in Qayah's dream as representative of the essential relationship with the mother, or of being *in utero*, the space becomes horrifying to Qayah once she shares this space with her brother, Aslan, who was fathered by an Ottoman general who raped her mother. Aslan, with his 'red hair', a trait that she exclusively shares with him and not with her legitimate siblings, is her dreaded double (Haddad, 2019: 41). He represents the tyranny of the geopolitical forces that separated her from her mother in the first place, but additionally underscores the gendered consequences of colonial violence where even her mother's body, to which she feels an affinity, is occupied by a proverbial foreigner. Qayah's mother becomes an uncanny double, not 'her real mother', who represents the mother as a conduit of death, an inverse to the life that she first received in the 'cave' of the womb (Haddad, 2019: 41). In other words, the doppelgänger mother and the presence of Qayah's double, Aslan, in this dream become a metaphor for the 'divided, split subject' (Grosz, 1990: 15), but this dream also represents the repression of women's histories within dominant patriarchal narratives, especially as the consequences of conflict.

Conclusion

The Gothic genre, as Byron puts it, is indeed 'a ready-made language' (2015: 2), but what can be said with this language in the global feminist context has not yet

been discussed when it comes to Levantine authors such as Hannan Al-Shaykh, Mansoura Ez Eldin and Joumana Haddad. While these authors use the trappings of the Gothic, such as ghosts and madness, they also remake these generic conventions appropriately to their local contexts to contend with the questions that are pressing to their own feminist contexts and traditions. These elusive questions culminate in a sense that women's histories are sometimes buried or erased; and in response, Arab feminist writers in the Gothic tradition particularly theorise the relationships between mothers and daughters. These Arab feminist authors theorise the 'discontinuity and instability' of histories and literary traditions that do not adequately represent women's experiences (Sayigh, 2003: 6). Nightmares, the grotesque and a sense of dread allow for the crucial act of 'revisiting, revival, re-reading' (Wisker, 2016: 22). Through the Gothic paradox of attraction and repulsion, the works examined here offer us a complex insight into an experiential 'current of fear' (Al-Shaykh, 1986: 1) that is hard to define, but that nevertheless becomes familiar when rendered artistically in Arab feminist literary texts.

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