Agonistic Pluralism as Counterhegemony: A Reading of Raba'i al-Madhoun's *The Lady from Tel Aviv*

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Abstract: The current paper adopts a poststructuralist political framework, specifically Chantal Mouffe's subversive political concepts regarding agonistic pluralism, to analyze Raba'i al-Madhoun's novel *al-sayyidah min tal abīb* (2009 [*The Lady from Tel Aviv*]). Given Mouffe's concepts articulated in a number of her books, it is posited that the novel advocates for the inclusion of suppressed voices to be articulated within the hegemonic hostile sphere of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Following Mouffe's theory, the novel acknowledges conflict and explores, through personal relationships and intimate dialogue, the potential for, or the legitimacy of, post-conventional identities and authentic understanding to transform enemies into adversaries and antagonism into moral agonism. Though inherently humanitarian, moral agonism–a byproduct of agonistic pluralism–fails in taming hostility and the associated hegemonic structural determinism within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the study demonstrates. The particularities of the conventional relational identity constructs of the concerned individuals and communities are revealed to be obstructing any claims to pluralist democracy and the rational selves. These conventional relational identity particularities are foregrounded as tied to a long historical legacy of bloodshed, assassination, destruction and genocide, which are never abandoned.

Keywords: Agonistic Pluralism, Raba'i al-Madhoun, *The Lady from Tel Aviv*, antagonism, post-conventional identities

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Introduction

Raba'i al-Madhoun (1945) is a Palestinian award-winning novelist who personally witnessed the devastation of *al-nakba* (catastrophe or calamity) and the subsequent physical exile. His novel, *al-sayyidah min tal abīb* (2009), a personal elegy concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its concomitant horror, was short-listed for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2010. In 2013, Elliott Colla translated the novel as *The Lady from Tel Aviv*, reorganizing certain events and omitting others, based on thematic and character-driven considerations, likely to suit the preferences of the target audience. This paper is grounded on a reading of both versions, with cited materials drawn from the English translation.

To the researcher's knowledge, prior studies on this novel are infrequent, predominantly cursory, and lack systematic analysis, focusing on general thematic and technical concerns. These studies briefly discuss how the main characters grapple with their identities amidst political conflict, the dual experiences of belonging and alienation faced by both Palestinians and Israelis, and al-Madhoun's narrative techniques, including his language and structure. These issues were primarily outlined in brief reviews or in comments on the novel within the context of narratives by Palestinian authors. Serious investigation of the novel is, unfortunately, limited. There exists a paper by Priti Bala Sharma titled "Narrative Study of Raba'i al-Madhoun's *The Lady From Tel Aviv* (2018). Sharma seeks to elucidate the function of the novel's narrative structure in "portraying the personal experiences and pangs of exile" (205). Even so, the novel deserves an in-depth, systematic and theoretically informed analysis.

Consequently, this paper sets out to adopt a poststructuralist framework, specifically Chantal Mouffe's subversive political philosophy of agonistic pluralism, to analyze the novel in question. "Mouffe's work has been key to exposing (the limits of) dominant narratives and critiquing dominant

theories" (Tambakaki 1). Anchored in Mouffe's views, the argument, undeniably fraught with danger and risk, posits that the novel foregrounds a message that dovetails with the philosophy of radical or pluralist democracy. The novel attempts to evaluate the legitimacy of giving space for the suppressed voices calling for post-conventional identities and coexistence as an alternative to the essentialist and hegemonic we/they binary. This hegemonic we/they binary, sustained by liberal democracy, is argued to be a breeding ground for discord and antagonism. Over years, liberal democracy "assumes the representation of a totality that is radically incommensurable with it" as it gives voice to only the hegemonic parties with their dogmatic ideologies (Laclau & Mouffe x). This form of democracy has failed–in Derridean terms–to deconstruct the hegemonic undecidable political aggression and military confrontation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It has, in reality, exacerbated the manifold ethnic, religious and nationalist antagonisms, undermining all calls for the triumph of universal values and ideals. On top of all, this form of representation "allows no room for negotiation, no possibility for compromise, no hope for progress toward a reconciliation" (Acampora 5). The agonistic policies, in contrast, are anticipated, in the words of Vincent August, to narrow down "polarization" and endorse "social cohesion" (183).

These concepts inspire the major inquiries which guide the analysis of the novel under consideration. The inquiries revolve around the efficacy of post-conventional identities and authentic understanding in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as proposed in the novel. And, to what extent may pluralist or radical democracy, or agonistic pluralism, be regarded as a means to destroy the conflictual hegemony, and cultivate instead a discourse of civility and mutual empathy? In other words, the paper investigates the suggestion raised by the novel in question through which the clashing parties are invited to allow for other marginalized or excluded solutions or voices to exist and be heard so that the conflict would take a different moralistic trajectory. Admittedly, this is intriguing. The novel thereby unsettles

established perceptions and raises issues of representation and critique of power dynamics.

This endeavor of the novel, a perpetuation of previous Palestinian-authored works, such as Izzeldin Abuelaish in *I Shall Not Hate* (2010) and Sami al- Jundi in *The Hour of Sunlight* (2011), is woven in the narrative of personal encounters between a Palestinian-British Muslim immigrant, Walid Dahman, and a Jewish Israeli actress, Dana Ahuva. Both characters embody the dual aspects of the conflict. They meet aboard a flight heading for Tel Aviv from London airport. In a narrative structure that transitions from third-person to first-person perspective as Walid's journey unfolds, the novel explores themes of love and loss, the relevant effects of exile and occupation on individuals and communities, and the interplay between memory and experience. Most importantly, these encounters privilege discourses of civility, empathy and rationality. They also foreground themes of viewing the enemy as an adversary who still claims rights to express and views to defend in secure contexts. The novel adopts a post-colonial perspective, utilizing a combination of poetic language and sardonic humor to illuminate historical realities intertwined with race, religion, and political aggression, which ultimately stifle any potential for restrained or humane interactions.

The research proceeds in three parts. It begins with an overall view of Mouffe's theoretical concept of agonistic pluralism, articulating its assertions regarding the legitimate inclusion of conflicting voices as a necessity in the contemporary democratic polity. This is followed by an analysis of the novel in question informed by Mouffe's major premises. The conclusion articulates the findings of the study, offering insights and assessment of Mouffe's views as they pertain to the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, as proposed in the novel under scrutiny.

Chantal Mouffe's Agonistic Pluralism

The critical examination of the novel under study draws upon scholarship on political philosophy, namely the views of the

Belgian political thinker Chantal Mouffe regarding agonistic pluralism. Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism is mostly articulated in her works: *The Return of the Political* (1993), *The Democratic Paradox* (2000), and *On the Political* (2005), along with some other articles that largely reiterate previous knowledge. This postmodernist/poststructuralist approach to democracy represents Mouffe's critique of consensus-driven forms of liberalism, such as John Rawls' political liberalism and Jürgen Habermas' deliberative democracy. Political liberalism and deliberative democracy are both contended to be inadequate in grasping the dynamics of modern democratic politics and "the pluralistic nature of the social world, with the conflicts that pluralism entails" (Mouffe, *On the Political* 10). In this light, the consensus-driven democracy is negated as it is the expression of a hegemony and the crystallization of power relations which "exclude marginalized voices, exacerbate polarization, and celebrate consensus to a fault" (Wolfe 2). While Rawls and Habermas, so understood, "refuse to acknowledge conflict and pluralism, especially at the level of the ontological, and on the basis of excluding irrational and unreasonable views," Mouffe advocates for the essential inclusion of "a diverse body of subject positions," which is fundamental to the formation of a representative and inclusive democratic polity (Jones 1). Mouffe asserts that the incorporation of divergent voices, which she calls agonistic pluralism, within the democratic polity will not only ensure citizens' allegiance to the democratic polity, but also it will signal a remarkable movement towards what she refers to as emancipatory agonism. This emancipatory agonism chimes, to a great extent, with the modern view of the world with its strong emphasis on individual liberty and human rights, and also with its many perspectives and values. The objective is thus one of "seeing difference as ineradicable and therefore not as requiring transcendence but rather rearticulation from antagonism to agonism" (Budarick 20408).

According to Mouffe, conflicts, or antagonisms, arise from contact between boundaries of discourse, which may include

concepts such as 'meaning,' 'discourse', 'objectivity,' and 'society.' As these concepts are fundamental in politics, politics is therefore founded on "conflict and contestation,'' a fact that leads to the creation and distinction of "adversarial relationship to the other," or more succinctly, the I/you or the us/them clashing boundaries (Jones 2). In this respect, Mouffe battles for the incorporation of all conflicting views in an attempt to mitigate the construction of individual or collective identities. This very formation of collective identities is, in Mouffe's logic, a formative act of power that engenders enmity. Also, these views, pluralist as they are, represent various social identities and relations which cannot be excluded on account of being non-universalizable. Hence, the concept of agonistic pluralism emerges as a value in itself and a defining mark of modern democracy. Mouffe asserts:

> Envisaged from an anti-essentialist theoretical perspective . . ., pluralism is not merely a *fact*, something that we must bear grudgingly or try to reduce, but an axiological principle. It is taken to be constitutive *at the conceptual level* of the very nature of modern democracy and considered as something that we should embrace and enhance. This is why the type of pluralism that I am advocating gives a positive status to differences and questions the objective of unanimity and homogeneity, which is always revealed as fictitious and based on acts of exclusion. (*On the Political* 19)

Mouffe proposes the creation of a democratic sphere, which she terms radical and pluralist democracy, that accommodates differences and social and political antagonisms previously excluded by Kantian liberalism and liberal rationalism. Mouffe argues that pluralist democracy can convert antagonism into agonism, viewing enemies as adversaries. These adversaries are deemed "'friendly enemies,' that is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies

because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way" (Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* 13).

Related to the previous point, and the argument of the present study, is Mouffe's distinction between 'the political' and 'politics.' Despite considerable disagreement amongst political philosophers with regard to this distinction, Mouffe asserts that "politics refers to the 'ontic' level whereas 'the political' relates to the 'ontological' one;" "the ontic has to do with the manifold practices of conventional politics, while the ontological concerns the very way in which society is instituted" (*On the Political* 8-9). The distinction becomes more intelligible when Mouffe approaches the 'political' as "the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonism that can take many forms and emerge in different types of social relations" (*The Democratic Paradox* 101). In fact, Mouffe's realization of the 'political' aligns with that of Carl Schmitt who claims that the political "is a space of power, conflict and antagonism, where the potential exists for the 'emergence of the friend-enemy relation.'" (Jones 3). Both Mouffe and Schmitt acknowledge the fact that the enemy is usually constructed as the other, the stranger, the alien, and the victim of the formation of collective identities which use the 'we' reference as a form of solidarity and unification. The inability to escape such construction in radical democracy entails the necessity to admit conflict and antagonisms which should not be denied since its denial "leads to impotence," but should be faced with a new type of democracy that could domesticate hostility, lessen its corrosive impact and defuse the potential conflict in human relations (Mouffe, "Democracy in a Multipolar World" 550). In *The Return of the Political*, Mouffe makes the point clearer:

> The political cannot be restricted to a certain type of institution, or envisaged as constituting a specific sphere or level of society. It must be conceived as a dimension that is inherent to every human society and that determines our very ontological condition. Such a view of the political is profoundly at odds

> with liberal thought, which is precisely the reason for the bewilderment of this thought when confronted with the phenomenon of hostility in its multiple forms. (3)

Since it is unattainable to create a world without antagonism, Mouffe argues, there arises the need for a pluralist democracy that is to be "based on a distinction between 'enemy' and 'adversary'" where "the opponent should be considered not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated" (*The Return of the Political* 4). In other words, the enemy becomes a legitimate opponent whose ideas "we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question" (Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* 102).

On the other hand, 'politics,' for Mouffe, indicates

> the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflicting because they are affected by the dimensions of 'the political'" (*The Democratic Paradox* 101).

In other words, politics is "the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political" (Mouffe, *On the Political* 9). In this regard, Mouffe outlines that the central flaw of political liberalism is its conscious denial of the political in its antagonistic dimension, which in itself implies a denial of the pluralist, and hence conflicting, nature of the social world. Acknowledging this conflicting and antagonistic nature of the social world as an ontological reality, Mouffe explains, would enable politicians implement effective measures. Radical democracy, or agonistic pluralism, is thus to be promoted as it is concerned with both "acknowledging the friend/enemy and the we/they distinction, and trying to expand the contingent frontiers of this separation in order to incorporate part of the enemy into the friend" (Jones 4-5). This form of agonism is described as "emancipatory" as it allows for the diversity of thought which

shuns political/social exclusion, and works for "exposing and remedying the harms and injustices that are caused by violence and exclusion, which are themselves the result of liberalism's attempts to deny or restrict pluralism" (Jones 5). Deeper, agonistic pluralism seeks to diminish, or restructure, the hegemonic power relations and find alternative ways to encompass the multiplicity of voices, and constitute forms of power that conform neatly with radical or pluralist democratic values. Agonist pluralism is thus inclusive and, to a great extent, corrective and reformative.

Though inherently ethical in nature, Mouffe's paradigm cannot go without criticism. Anna Szklarska, for example, discredits Mouffe's idealistic presupposition of "the possibility of changing the identities of various groups so that their demands are correlated with each other" (99). Also, Szklarska notices that Mouffe's approach is originally Marxist, as it similarly longs for "the kingdom of freedom." Unlike Marx, however, who insists on the need for revolutionary acts for the sake of a "fraternal society," Mouffe turns a blind eye to historical class divisions and the claimed racial superiority of some people or nations over others (108-109). Sadly, these clashing narratives remain sources of dispute and hostility, aborting all attempts at mutual tolerance. Additionally, Mouffe's approach is not normative in practice; She does not provide cogent measures through which her assumptions are likely to lead to more order or social objectivity.

Al-Madhoun's *The Lady from Tel Aviv* is examined from Mouffe's perspective on agonistic pluralism and the criticism launched against it. Through setting, characters and dialogue, the novel creates venues for more engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, acknowledging discord, and yet foregrounding a petit narrative of moral agonism which might undermine the grand narrative of the inescapable military confrontation. This is a theme of value, not because it configures an end to the struggle–this is much doubtful–but because it provides a different way of viewing and understanding conflict

and difference. In fact, the early sections of the novel are romantic and optimistic, as they tend to affirm that within this new era, politics needs to be envisaged differently to make the conflictual model of politics–the us versus them–obsolete. Politics should concern life issues, allowing people and groups to effect change; and democracy should be envisaged in the form of a dialogue that interrogates the hegemonic totality, and through which conflicting issues are to be resolved through mutual listening. These concerns are woven in a narrative structure that employs extensively the "stream of consciousness in the form of interior monologue, story within story and metaphor of house and shadow," which in their turn bring into the fore the pangs of exile and the devastating effects of the Israeli-Palestinian military confrontation (Sharma 205).

Establishing the Political: Agonistic Pluralism and the Suppressed Voice of Authentic Understanding

The narrative, relayed by third and first-person perspectives, moves in a nonlinear chronology. It circles back and forth, juxtaposing, and occasionally merging in a cinematic manner, images, characters and incidents from both the past and the present. All incidents, however, are focalized through the central characters' thoughts and perceptions, and emphasized through interior monologues. The framing narrative, Walid's homecoming, parallels the metanarrative or the story-within-a-story which the protagonist authors about Adel el-Bashity, his surrogate figure. Both Walid Dahman and Adel el-Bashity pass through similar life circumstances and places, and face similar clashing choices. Manifesting conflict, the setting changes across the protagonist's journey from London to the board of a plane and finally to a detailed description of Gaza, the occupied and tormented homeland of the major narrator. In all stages, the setting brings forth the idea of opposition and hostility fueled by clashing historical identities. The delineation of characters is achieved in the most generalized manner, reducing them to archetypes that are seen from a black-and-white perspective. The

initial contact between the two major characters, Walid and Dana, is soon reduced to such archetypes, and the conflict, or the way to dissolve it, is framed as one between ideas, rather than human qualities.

The prologue takes the readers into the dimension of the political: the Israeli-Palestinian antagonism and the pertinent metaphor of Palestine which has turned into a purgatory. Recounted in the third-person narrative, which allows for judgement and a tone of sardonic humor, Walid Dahman's homecoming, after thirty-eight years of exile in London, is seen as a "a rumor or legend," or a "fable," equally implausible as the narrative of the Palestinians eventually returning to their homeland (3). Evocative and scathing remarks to the antagonistic Jewish settlements surrounding Palestinian people are forcefully stressed to the extent that anti-colonial Palestinians need to imaginatively cleanse the dawn as it first illuminates Jewish residences before reaching them. Calling into memory *I Saw Ramallah* (1997) by Mourid Barghouti and *Out of Place* (2000) by Edward Said, familial loss and personal resoluteness are foregrounded. The narrative of Walid's cousin Nasreddine illustrates these concerns, since he has diligently served the Jews for ten years, performing menial tasks solely for survival. Nasreddine's youngest son was killed by Jews. Nasreddine's children were all deprived from their maternal grandmothers as they were all "swallowed up somewhere amidst the closures, curfews, checkpoints, aerial bombardments and recurrent ground offensives - . . ." (7). Walid's mother's home was blown up repeatedly by Israeli missiles, ultimately reducing it to a heap of rubble. Antagonistic sentiments are prevalent among the Palestinian organizations. The text conveys this message sarcastically as Muhammad Samoura, one of Walid's friends, marries two women whom the author compares to "any other two Palestinian factions [that] knew only envy, jealousy, competition and strife" (26). The state of surveillance and random murder is

also established. During his flight home, Walid harbors suspicions about his seatmate, an attractive Jewish woman whom he perceives as a honey trap dispatched by the Mossad to surveil him. He also contemplates the potentiality of being murdered due to mistaken identity in a scenario akin to that of the Moroccan busboy, Ahmad Bouchiki, who was erroneously perceived as a Palestinian operative.

Against this background of blood-shed and hegemonic binary oppositions, the text suggests a kind of agonistic pluralism which centers on mutual intimate dialogue as a mechanism that softens boundaries and fosters a sense of immediacy, respect, and connection with those previously perceived as Other. The action takes place on board of a plane flying from London to Tel Aviv, which is an objective correlative for shared risk and danger for all passengers, particularly the two principal ones: Walid Dahman, the Muslim Palestinian and Dana Ahuva, the Jewish Israeli. In fact, the presence of the two representative sides of the conflict is a distinctive and instructive feature of this novel, as it is quite scarce in Palestinian literature to give voice to a round Jewish Israeli character such as that of Dana, as opposed to a generic representation. Aida Bama observes: "The personality of the Jew is rarely portrayed in literary works; curiously enough the Jew is present more by his absence than his actual presence" (33). Contrary to Bama's view, the present novel celebrates the presence of Dana, the Jew, in a way to give her power and voice to direct, or channel, the protagonist's inclinations. Dana is the titular lady from Tel Aviv. Through Walid's interior monologue, Dana's seductive beauty is extensively detailed upon initial encounter aboard. The presence of Dana is then a rhetorical device that chimes with the message of agonistic pluralism which the text advocates. It is also a technical strategy that aims to, in the words of Ariel M. Sheetrit, offer "a perspective that is unanticipated and astonishing," encouraging readers to identify

with the characters and align with the narrative perspective (25). Dana's Jewish identity is stressed as through her selective memory the text not only recounts aspects of life in Tel Aviv, but incorporates words and sometimes sentences in Hebrew transliterated into Arabic script (and not translated!).

Beyond their conflicting nationalities, both Walid and Dana are affected by liberal backgrounds. Walid is a British citizen and a London-dweller for long years. Dana is an actress and leftist in attitudes. They are thus are delineated as figures of rationality, mediation and pacification. They both share the cares of Walid's fictional characters in the novel he writes. Like Walid's fictional characters, Walid and Dana, the text narrates, "sit next to one another throughout the flight, each of them going over old memories . . . . Depressing, sad memories. Unsettling ones, haunted by feelings of fear and apprehension, curiosity and defiance" (54). Against established perceptions and enmity, the two strike a sense of sympathy for each other, fully aware that they are adversaries. In the thick of fears and doubts, Walid soliloquizes: "We're not in a position to console each other. She's Israeli . . ." (43). Nevertheless, both get engaged in amicable conversation, sharing secrets and personal details. He tabs her shoulders when seeing her cry, and she consoles him as he narrates his story of forced refuge; he remarks: "her hand creeps over and gently clasps mine . . . . Her fingers send warmth across my hand" (50-1). The woman expresses the suppressed voice:

> I hope that there can be peace between us and the Palestinians. We're tired of the situation, all of us. The problem is not the people, it's the politicians. Our politicians and yours. Sharon doesn't want peace, nor does Arafat. (51)

Walid shares similar sentiments; he tells her of his hope for co-existence: "I hope Palestinians and Israelis might leave the battlefield behind them and learn to share a life together . . . . No assassinations and no suicide bombers, no soldiers and no militants . . ." (51).

This compassionate and undogmatic encounter stirs Walid to a flashback memory. Walid reminisces about that Jewish man whom he encountered on a train in central London. The man prays for both Palestinians and Israelis, as he "loved Palestinians and hated war" (36). As he disembarked, the man dropped words of peace and tolerance on Walid: "Before he stepped off, he turned to look at me with a huge, genuine smile on his face. 'Shalom!' 'Salam!' I called back" (36). The encounter and the memory represent a revelation for Walid–and the readers–because they expose the disparity between official policy and reality on the ground. They also establish a coming-into awareness of the misrepresentations and deceptions the systems circulate in order to embolden a clear-cut binary between the conflicting sides by portraying all as dangerous enemies.

Congruous with this newfound understanding, Dana remarkably names Walid's novel *One House, Two Shadows*, which aptly encapsulates the tragedy she and Walid live in. Dana explains: "Walid, you and I are two shadows thrown together in a single place. We are two peoples who will never be at ease. And whenever things seem to be calming down, they get even worse" (55). Dana declares: "I love life and people and peace. . ." (56). She asks Walid to send her some of his writings, revealing a desire: "We might even become friends. Who knows?" (57). They both agree to email each other. They both start to question the heavenly claims of their two peoples for exclusive ownership of the land and the expulsion of the other. Employing conflict resolution tactics, Walid confronts Dana's rationale:

> Listen, Dana . . . if this land was promised to the Jewish people by your God, as lots of Jewish people say and even believe, what about the Arabs' God? If God exists he must belong to everyone. . . . there's no way God would take the land away from one people in order to give it to another. No God would ever do that. No God would ever don the uniform of a settler and send armies out to kill and oppress (58).

Walid's voice of agonistic pluralism is also evident in his critique of the Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's firing missiles on Israel. He finds this an act of madness as it drives the whole region, including Iraq, into hell. Interestingly, this voice is supported by his cousin Hassan Dahman, who works at a garment factory in one of the settlements close to Khan Younis. Hassan Dahman, apparently driven by pragmatic considerations, is regretful of the past bilateral relation between the Jews and the Palestinians, which was ruined by the Second Intifida:

> . . . If the Intifadas hadn't happened. If only we'd stuck to the old slogan of a secular, democratic state- the two peoples would have been assimilated into one another by now. You know, a lot of Palestinians married Jewish girls and got citizenship. (142)

Despite envisioning the potential for humanistic coexistence and authentic understanding, the text maintains a balanced perspective, acknowledging the numerous ideological, theological, political, and military obstacles that challenge the voice of moral agonism. In what may count as authorial self-subversion, intergroup and intragroup conflicts are foregrounded as power dynamics in the face of tolerance and coexistence. Palestine is revealed as not the sought paradise; it is a geographical reality ensnared in national, religious and tribal limbos, and ravaged by colonial history and diabolical power relations. In his journey home, Walid, in a first-person narrative perspective, recounts, in a state of despondency, several examples of cruelty inflicted on Palestinians by the Israeli army.

These examples of cruelty occur routinely triggered by hatred and power execution. The example of border crossing to Gaza where his mother resides illuminates for Walid the intentional abuse and the oppressive measures which Palestinians, regardless of any obtained citizenship, must endure. The border-crossing scene brings into view the unjustifiability and arbitrariness of the long waits. For Israelis, it is an opportunity for self-aggrandizement, domination and authority, always validated

by the rationale of state security. For Palestinians, waiting, as suggested by Ashutosh Singh, can be expressive of "a power relation between the ones waiting and the ones who make them wait, and it is also a metaphor for the Palestinian predicament and the relevant life-in-abeyance" (322). Emoting bitterness and rage, the novelist delineates the border-crossing scene in the metaphor of a detention center where Walid and other Palestinians are to wait indefinitely and timorously under the burning sun for the border gates to open. Women, children and the elderly are ritually kicked off by the shouting Israeli soldiers for no other purpose than forced humiliation and perceived superior status.

The border crossing scene, in the words of Drew Paul, "unsettle[s] distinctions of fictional/real and author/text." It stages "a site of fantasy and a theatre of the absurd" (187). It brings into view "inconceivable violence" and the image of Gaza "dubbed 'the world's largest open-air prison,'" "with movement in and out controlled and monitored entirely by the IDF" (Alareer 39). Above all else, it provides the text with "a multi-vocal structure that supplants the political commitment of earlier Palestinian novels of return with a chaotic and ambivalent narrative" (Paul 188). There is the possibility that gates may open on another day which means that all the frustrated Palestinians have to go through complicated rigmarole just to get another entry permit. A Palestinian woman is about to detonate a bomb on her body. A disabled Palestinian man sitting in a wheelchair "swelters in the afternoon sun and is trying his best to gather his body beneath the shade of his hat" (85). There is also this little girl who "holds up her hands to shield her eyes from the glare of the sun" (87). An old woman, who had a bypass operation, "wraps her head in white gauze as sits on the ground" (87). In another shot, the scene depicts the image of an elderly man bent over a cane that trembles in his grasp. Palestinians are sufficiently objectified to acquiesce to the unwarranted wrath of the vociferous Israeli soldier who commands them: "Get the hell away from her! Get the hell back"

(89). In the metaphor of the waste land, Walid watches the rubble and debris of once-viable dwellings and Olive trees. All are destroyed by the Israeli tanks and bulldozers.

In the same vein, Walid never hesitates to criticize, rather symbolically, the chaos of Palestinian lifestyle, paving the way for declaring a rather different attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Distraught, Walid, conversing with his mother, makes fun of the Palestinian barking dogs, which, unlike the rule-abiding English canines, "have no compunction about breaking the law" (108). He criticizes the Palestinian "muezzins who cannot agree with one another on a singing work schedule" (108), which he likens to "the various Palestinian factions [that] have never joined hands in a single front" and have never listened to any other voices than theirs (109). He also declares missing the braying of donkeys: "such patriotic donkeys Gaza has!" (108). In a stream of consciousness, Walid, shocking and shaking readers, finds the Palestinians enamored solely with rhetoric and vacuous slogans:

> We are a society of gossips, of chitchat as twisted as those slogans we repeat and repeat until we begin to think they are fact. We are a people convinced that our blather pierces through fog and strikes at the heart of the grandest truths of all. (111)

The internal conflict between Palestinian factions, a telling example of intragroup conflict, is best exemplified at the level of characterization. Abu Ahmad, Walid's Mother's cousin, is a fervent supporter of Hamas, and is always at odds with Abu Khalil, a Fatah fan, over questions of loyalty to the Palestinian case. Always engaged in verbal sword fight, each mocks the other. Each harbors suspicion towards the other.

In tandem with the above examples, Walid ridicules his relatives who change outer identity according to the dictates of time and place; nonetheless, they refuse to acknowledge the shifting power dynamics. In this context, Walid makes fun of his

cousin Samih Ismail Dahman, who, during his postgraduate studies in England, insists on having a beard to invent a persona of himself as a committed fundamentalist Muslim. Samih Dahman, to Walid's surprise, refuses to let his wife appear on a photo which he shares with Walid. In sardonic humor, Walid talks about this cousin as the "whiskered man among the beardless. He had been the Other. The Arab. The Muslim. He was Difference itself" (129). Playing the role of an evangelist, Samih Dahman used to lecture Walid on the history of Islam and its glorious past as if, Walid ruminates derisively:

> I knew nothing about Islam or history, as if he and his buddies were the first people to think up this revival stuff. As if it had never been attempted. As if the Islamic state he talked about had not risen and fallen many times already, just like many other ancient and modern empires. (129)

Back to Gaza, Samih Dahman becomes "clean-shaven- no beard, no moustache" in an attempt to appear as a "modern Muslim" (129). Walid refuses to subscribe to this hypocrisy. Extending indictment, Walid mocks those veiled women dressed in black acting out mourning "for those who have passed away and those who have not yet done so" (130). He also refers to the "currencies wrapped up in shekels," the religion "wrapped up in the notions of countless sheikhs" and the sun that is, "ashamed by what it sees," ". . . decides to hide itself again, tired and worn out by the effort of looking" (130).

Walid realizes that the Gaza people are themselves ravaged with internal enmity, aggression and clannishness. Family feud is raging everywhere. People from other families kill many of his friends. One of his old friends, Muhammad Rayan or Muhammad Khadija, who used to enjoy the hands of a great artist, is now turning that same hand into one for the most famous beggars in Gaza. Astonished, Walid, in a soliloquy, questions the colonial conditions that have humiliated his friend: "Who turned your artist's hands into a purse for shekels? Who made you sit there, asking for handouts, an object for scorn and pity? (147). Only

then does Walid realize that "I finally grasp that I live in a world separate from theirs, and that Gaza has gone backwards fifty years in time" (138).

Walid also realizes that the intimacy that has developed between him and the Jewish actress Dana is ephemeral, fleeting and mostly driven by individual emotions. During his twenty-one days in Gaza, Walid is regularly confronted with Israeli's attacks, spray bullets and "the cheap, unannounced death they bring" (151). Huge explosions shake the floor he and his relatives sit on. Sounds of helicopters and blasts of gunfire accompanied by screaming Palestinians dominate the scene. Some people die randomly; others go to death voluntarily. Amidist this permanent conditions of randomness and the unpredictable death, Walid cultivates feelings for escape. His buttocks, he reveals, "are looking forward to touching a real chair" to replace the tiring squatting on the floor in Gaza (151). In an interior monologue, Walid romanticizes:

> I now understand why, when you are here, it's impossible to catch a glimpse of the world outside. Now I understand why no one talks about 'happiness' or 'the future'. Only the last bachelor does, as he plans a wedding in this mass graveyard, in the hopes that he might father many children who will join him in waiting for a future that is always only murky. (152)

Walid's confrontation with mortality in Gaza compels him to reevaluate his harmonious association with Dana Ahuva and the pertinent advocacy for agonistic pluralism as a counter-hegemonic response to mutual antagonism. His responses to the Jewish women departure officers reveal much newly-born scorn and aggression towards the Israeli occupation. Walid realizes the impossibility of developing any peace with those stupid, racist and aggressive colonialists who only think of Palestinians as aliens, terrorists and suicide bombers. Walid transforms into a rebel against the Israeli existence. His language with the women officers uncovers much cynicism and violent confrontation: "I

told her I was born before the state of Israel was even founded. I told her that, judging by our ages, I was more grown up than her country" (١٥٦).

Dana, too, reaches the same conclusion. In her final email to Walid, she reports how, during her military service in Gaza, a twelve-year Palestinian rock-throwing girl was shot by her friend Pinchas. She reports how guilty she feels for not preventing her friend from so committing: "The spectre of the girl," Dana reports, "began to follow me everywhere. And inside me, a voice began to cry out, the voice of the girl asking me: why didn't you stop him? Weren't you standing right next to him? Why didn't you take his gun away? (١٥٨) Dana subscribes to her boyfriend Dani's condemnation of the occupation which has no justification for prolonging its stay. It is madness that Dana describes and decides to escape for anywhere else. It is true that Dana undergoes a moral transformation because of these encounters and stories, yet she condemns the stories and her own experiences to oblivion. The tragedy of the Palestinians' deaths is enhanced by the tragedy of her silence, her assumed weakness, perhaps cowardice, allowing for the Israelis' hostility to go unchallenged.

The voice of the possibility of agonistic pluralism which has initiated the novel fades away at the end. Dana's mysterious and sudden death, along with the consequent difficulty to reunite with Walid, exemplifies the illegitimacy of this philosophy in contemporary Israel and Palestine. Dana's death is left enigmatic. There is the possibility that she was killed by the intelligence operatives of her Arab lover, who is the son of a leader of an important Arab country. There is also the possibility of the Mossad getting rid of Dana due to her relationship with her Arab lover. It could also be self-murder as Dana gets disappointed achieving no progress in her relationship with this Arab lover who impregnated her and yet was unable to hold responsibility. Whatever the case, the incident bears evidence that it is not yet, and not on this occupied land can a voice of coexistence be heard or even debated.

Conclusion

The study reveals that al-Madhoun's *The Lady from Tel Aviv* tries to present an alternative way of looking at the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, one which chimes with Mouffe's postmodernist perspective on agonistic pluralism. Nevertheless, the novel ultimately shows that this approach, ethical and inclusive as it is, is in practice too idealistic and illegitimate with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the narrative encourages opening new spaces for participatory politics, incorporating the suppressed voice of tolerant co-existence and mutual understanding, it simultaneously orchestrates many contextual clues which suffocate this voice and prove its futility. The moralistic perspective constructed through Walid and Dana's petit narrative of co-existence is found flawed, as it cannot but remain blind to the particularities of collective and relational identities. These particularities continue to incite more hostility and difference from both sides. The novel makes clear that political and ideological indoctrination of both sides of the conflict aborts all attempts at a post-conventional identity construction.

In the same vein, the study uncovers a reality that there is much divergence, and sometimes dissonance between the official stance and that of ordinary citizens. The initial post-political vision articulated through Walid and Dana's petit narrative is solely derived from transient and subjective emotions. This vision, the novel shows, lacks generalizability at the official level, since it is undermined by the terrible legacy of colonial brutality. Walid and Dana, when in Gaza, experience the dimension of antagonism and so confront the truth that they both belong to ever-conflicting identities that cannot be dismantled or crossed over. Walid and Dana can never meet while in Palestine. They cannot even meet when they return to London. Their relationship is reduced to a few short emails. This is a narratological strategy that bespeaks criticism of the agonistic pluralism endeavor. Additionally, Walid's sympathetic eye-witnessing of the horrifying reality of Gaza under occupation and Dana's silence

over aggression against Palestinian children trivialize their initial voice for peace and mutual tolerance. The struggle is thus foregrounded as deep-rooted in historical and present contexts of continuous assassinations and power dynamics in the face of which the voice of authentic understanding fades away. The novel ends with the suggestion that the conflict remains between enemies who can never transform into legitimate adversaries; and all efforts at peaceful reconciliation succumb to a more grotesque and brutal situation than ever imagined.

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المستخلص:

التعددية النِضالية بوصفها آليّة مضادّة للهيمنة: قراءة في رواية "السيدة من تل أبيب" لربعي المدهون

يعتمد هذا البحث إطارًا نظريًّا سياسيًا ما بعد بنيويّ، مستندًا إلى المفاهيم السياسيّة النقديّة لشانتال موف، وتحديداً مفهوم "التعدديّة النِضاليّة"، وذلك لتحليل رواية "السيّدة من تلّ أبيب" (2009) للكاتب ربعي المدهون. وبالإستناد الى شرح موف لمفهوم التعددية النضالية كما قدمته في عدد من مؤلّفاتها، فإن هذا البحث يذهب إلى أن الرواية موضع الدراسة تدعو إلى تضمين الأصوات المقموعة في الفضاء الهيمنيّ العَدائيّ للصراع الفلسطينيّ-الإسرائيليّ. واتّساقًا مع منظور موف، لا تتجاهل الروايةُ جوهرَ ذلك الصراع، لكنّها تسعى، عبر العلاقات الشخصيّة والحوار الحميميّ، إلى تقييم شرعيّة الأصوات التي تنادي بهويّات ما بعد تقليديّة وفهمٍ أصيلٍ معتمَد يمكن من خلاله أن يتحول الأعداء إلى خصوم أو غرماء، ويتبدّل العَداء إلى نِضال أخلاقيّ .
ويبيّن هذا البحث أنّ النضال الأخلاقيّ، رغم طابعه الإنسانيّ الجوهريّ، وبوصفه نتاجًا للتعدديّة النِضاليّة، يعجز عن احتواء العَداء وكبح جماح الحتميّة البنيويّة الهيمنيّة في سياق الصراع الفلسطينيّ-الإسرائيليّ. إذ يتّضح أنّ الخصوصيّات التقليديّة للهويّة العلائقيّة لدى الأفراد والمجتمعات المعنيّة تعرقل أي ادّعاءات بوجود الديمقراطيّة التعدديّة والذوات العقلانيّة. وتُبرَز هذه الخصوصيّات بوصفها امتدادًا لإرث تاريخيّ طويل من سفك الدّماء والاغتيالات والدمار والإبادة الجماعيّة، وهي مظاهر لم يتم التخلّي عنها قطّ.

مفاتيح البحث: التعدديّة النِضاليّة، ربعي المدهون، رواية "السيّدة من تل أبيب"، النّزعة العَدائيّة، الهويّات ما بعد التقليديّة