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Individual and Society
in the Mediterranean Muslim World

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Intertextuality and Gender Identity in Hudā Barakāt's *Ahl al-Hawā*

"After I murdered her, I sat down on a high rock." This is the opening line of Hudā Barakāt's, *Ahl al-Hawā*,¹ which then continues with three pages of reflections by the unnamed male protagonist about how he murdered his female lover by smashing her head against a rock. He reminisces, "I knew when I murdered her, I saw that I murdered her, I drank her spirit, I drank up all she had and it became a part of me."² On the last page of the novel, the narrator recants this testimony saying, "Perhaps I did not kill her. I seriously doubt that I held her head and smashed it against the rock until it split open and she died."³ Thus, the assumptions which the reader carries for 180 pages throughout the work are called into question. When one actually reads this novel, however, this may not be as dramatic and shocking a contradiction as it is when juxtaposed here out of context. This is because the unnamed male protagonist who narrates most of the text from a first and second person point of view, mixed with some sections of third person narration, is mad, lives in a mental asylum and often does not always present a clear view of events. This man embodies contradictions: he is violent and tender, wants to embrace and reject society, wants to control and dominate women but wants to be a woman and, most importantly for this discussion, at times, believes that he is a man and that his lover is a woman but, at times, is not sure if they are even two separate people.

This is a simplified and reductive introduction to a complicated novel. This brief introduction is provided here, however, to highlight some of the main features of the plot of the novel and to highlight some elements

important to understanding how several critical concepts used below suggest possible readings for the manner in which Hudā Barakāt questions gender and gender identity in this novel, *Ahl al-Hawā*.

Individuation

The study is part of a collection which investigates marginal voices and individuation in literature. The work discussed here, Hudā Barakāt's *Ahl al-Hawā*, can be regarded not only as being written by a marginal voice in that it is written by a woman, but also in that it speaks through a marginal voice - a man who is incarcerated in an insane asylum and is unable to integrate into mainstream Lebanese society. Though women writers are often considered as writing from and on the margins of Arab society, this is changing and the use of the term, *marginal*, for women writers of Arabic is debatable. A writer like Hudā Barakāt published her two novels with major Arab publishing houses and won a mainstream literary prize for her first novel, *Ḥajar al-Ḍaḥak*.⁴ In addition, her work has been embraced by the establishment and is easily available in bookshops in the Arab world and abroad. Leaving aside the question of marginality for a moment, however, this study explores the idea of "individuation" and how it be used to see how Hudā Barakāt's novel challenges some of its underlying assumptions.

Individuation is an idea developed in both psychology and psychoanalysis as paired with the idea of separation. These two interrelated and complementary processes first occur in the early development of children's sense of themselves as people. For example, M. Mahler delineates these processes,⁵ explaining that individuation refers to the processes by which children distinguish their own characteristics so that the sense of self becomes differentiated from objects and is represented intrapsychically as a series of self-representations. According to Mahler, this process begins at five or six months of age and is ideally accomplished by twenty-four months. In psychological terms, the other important period of human life in which a process of individuation occurs is adolescence. It has been argued that the primary task of adolescence is that the representations of the self in early life coalesce into a coherent sense of identity. Adolescence is the period when humans complete their full development as sexual beings and the formulation of a gender identity is particularly important in it. Thus, the end of adolescence is the period when the individual should have developed a coherent and unified sense of gender identity.

This is a somewhat simplified account of how psychologists see a coherent sense of individuated identity and gender identity in a normal human individual. Hudā Barakāt's novel, *Ahl al-Hawā*, explicitly engages these ideas

through her exploration of the inner workings of an individual's psyche. This particular man is not psychologically healthy by the normative standards either of his society or of mainstream psychology. This is partly due to the chaos of the world in which he is living. In most of the present action of the text, he exists as a victim and survivor of kidnapping, torture and madness in the Lebanese Civil War. Thus, not only the individual but the society and seemingly the whole world has broken down and nothing at all is normal and ordered. With the war as a backdrop, this novel explores the male protagonist's mind through its confusions and convulsions. One of the most important areas of exploration is gender, not only in how the protagonist defines his own gender identity but in how he relates this to that of his female lover and how his sense of gender identity is linked to his perception of her. The individuation process of the protagonist in *Ahl al-Hawā* that I will discuss in this study, thus, is linked not only to his own male body and its female characteristics, but a specific female whom he feels is a part of himself and her gender characteristics.

A psychological conceptualisation of individuation is an appropriate lens through which to read Hudā Barakāt's *Ahl al-Hawā* particularly because of its specific engagement of coping with mental illness and questioning if one can become a whole and complete person, distinct from others in society. For example, one of the only lengthy critical articles written on the work deals mainly with the question of the human body, specifically, how the protagonist separates his body from others and from the rest of the world because of the traumas that he has suffered.⁶ Certainly, the ability to understand himself physically, through his body, as well as psychically in relation to others around him is a major problem and issue for the protagonist throughout the entire text.

Other critics have read this as a novel mainly as an expression of war.⁷ Gender and literature of the Lebanese Civil war have been explored by many Lebanese and foreign critics, particularly, in terms of commenting on gender roles in society. There are many ways in which this novel certainly can be read as a part of this tradition. Because the novel is set amidst the horrors of a civil war where life and death have taken on new meaning and people are compelled to radically readjust and reorder their lives, the questioning of gender identity may be simply one more way in which to look at how war affects people and, as M. Cooke suggests, a female rewriting of the traditionally mal-scripted war story.

Many writers, Arab women writers included, have experimented with inversions of gender roles in societies ruled by chaos. Novels set in the Lebanese Civil War, in particular, have included both male and female characters who engage in non-normative and non-socially acceptable

behaviour as well as adapting inverted gender roles.⁸ One of the most striking of these examples is also written by Hudā Barakāt. In *Hajar al-Dahak*, Barakāt's first novel, the protagonist, Khalil, is homosexual and is in love with two other men throughout the course of the novel, both of whom are killed in the war. Khalil explicitly adopts a female *persona* in order to survive the war. He is only able to cope with the destruction and madness around him by staying home, cooking and cleaning. These inversions can be read as a critical commentary both on the nature of war itself and also on gender roles.

This study argues that *Ahl al-Hawā* can be read as more than simply an exploration of the war and a profile of one individual's rebellion against gender roles but a more profound probing of gender and gender identity, underlined by the use of formal devices throughout the novel. In it, Barakāt explores the conceptualisation of gender, what a coherent gender identity is and how and if a certain individual can have and conceive of one. Below is outlined the critical tool of intertextuality which can provide a suggestion for reading how Hudā Barakāt formally organizes *Ahl al-Hawā*. Afterwards, Barakāt's use of intertextuality as a frame for the novel is then proposed and how it opens the text in on itself to mark gender identity as an important textual issue formally and thematically. Next, three specific passages which relate to the protagonist's struggles with individuation are then analysed and, finally, some suggestions about reading this novel as a radical comment on gender and gender identity are then made.

Intertextuality

To explore gender identity in this novel, possible intertextual readings are explored. It is argued that intertextuality in *Ahl al-Hawā* foregrounds questions and challenges to the idea that people should have clear, coherent, individuated gender identities. Though as a formal device, intertextuality is so commonplace to be almost a cliché, much controversy still surrounds it. There was a furore in 1996 in Great Britain, for example, because the winner of the Booker Prize, Graham Swift, was accused of plagiarising William Faulkner in his novel, *Last Orders*. This was because he had copied some characteristic formal features of William Faulkner's famous novel, *As I Lay Dying*. Many critics, authors and others then explained for the next few days in the media that intertextuality is not necessarily plagiarism but the conscious and often conspicuous borrowing from already existing texts and changing them to comment on them or on what they represent in some way. The idea which underlies it is an age-old idea: no texts in themselves are original but always borrow and rewrite already existing texts.

In literary criticism in the Arab world and in the west, intertextuality has

been the subject of many books, articles, debates and lectures both in recent years and throughout history.⁹ Though the issues are slightly different, a debate over what constituted good and bad literary borrowings has been going on in the Arab world since the days of the early Arab critics such as Ibn al-Athir. Elaborate typologies developed in Arabic literary commentaries beginning in the tenth century and continuing from then onward as to which literary borrowings were good and admirable and which were simply lazy copying equivalent to plagiarism.¹⁰ From the 1960s until today, intertextuality has been an important critical concept in modern Arabic literary criticism and criticism of Arabic literature. The critical work takes modern European theory and practice into account while, at the same time, often maintaining a deliberate link with Arab critics of the past. One key idea which underlines intertextual theory across the ages and cultures is that the value in this literary practice is to change already existing texts to create original and dynamic meanings in new texts.¹¹

A detailed and technical explanation of the history and use of intertextuality as a literary term and the various ways in which it has been and can be interpreted will not be given here. Instead, an understanding of intertextuality will simply relate to borrowing and transposing a very specific part of one text into another: the title. Gérard Genette has argued that some of the most important and powerful elements of a text are actually paratext - titles, epigraphs, dedications and illustrations.¹² In addition, Genette, along with other intertextual theorists, has specifically explored the function of the title, even using the term, *titrology*, to discuss its importance in relation to the work.¹³ In Arabic literature, particularly, classical literature, titles play an important role. Clever word-plays referring to another title and making rhymes and puns have all been a part of titling in the Arabic literary tradition. An example where this is discussed at some length in the present volume is in G. J. van Gelder's article about al-Shirbīnī. Hudā Barakāt inserts herself into this long tradition of using a clever intertextual title by choosing to call her piece *Ahl al-Hawā*. The present study specifically discussed how this novel's intertitular reference relates to Hudā Barakāt's project of questioning gender and foregrounds the ambiguous and ambivalent gender identity of the male protagonist.

Connections to Umm Kulthūm

A possible reading for Hudā Barakāt's novel, *Ahl al-Hawā*, may be based on three sections of the novel: the title, the last line and a long passage which occurs about halfway through the novel.¹⁴ By connecting these three sections, one can read Hudā Barakāt's use of intertextuality as a strategy through which she comments on sexuality and gender. The title, which can be translated as

"The People of Love" or "The People of Passion", is used in Lebanese colloquial Arabic as a euphemism for people who have somewhat lost control of their mental capabilities almost always because they are in love. The title thus relates to the main character in the novel for he is both mad - as evidenced by his incoherent ramblings in and out of reality and his residence in a mental asylum - and in love as evidenced by his almost obsessive remembrances and contemplations of his lover and their relationship. The title's additional significance, however, lies in its intertextual reference to the well-known song of the same title by the celebrated Egyptian chanteuse and symbol of the Arab nation, Umm Kulthūm.¹⁵

Yā Ahl al-hawā, yā layl

The chorus of this song, as in many Arabic songs, is *yā layl* and it is repeated continually throughout Umm Kulthūm's incomparable rendition of the song. The words, *yā layl*, which literally mean "ô night", are also the two closing words of the book. The final paragraph reads as follows:

Perhaps she has returned to her husband. She did not come back to me after the night of bombardments just as my sister Asmā' did not check on me on her way home the following day. Perhaps she is with him now, near him - in their far away home which I will never be able to imagine - enjoying our country's peace which reigns violently, truly, finally. Meanwhile, I am still sitting during a night of bombings, where she left me, pondering my loneliness for her, a little before dawn, like all *Ahl al-hawā / yā layl*.¹⁶

Thus, Barakāt uses a further formal device in order to specifically highlight the intertextual reference to Umm Kulthūm's song. In addition, in this section, the words *yā layl* which end the novel are juxtaposed with the words *Ahl al-Hawā* which echo the title of the novel itself as well as the song.

The connection between the title and last line can be analysed on at least two levels - the formal and generic as well as the cultural level. Formally, this intertextual reference is blatant and not subtle so as to accent this connection. As a formal strategy, it also affects the generic identification of the work. The title of the novel is also the title of a song, a love song specifically which talks about lovers' meetings. The title which the works share also relate to lovers and being in love. This is reflected thematically throughout the novel which is a further reflection of the song. Moreover, the text is largely composed of free flowing first and second person narration which also makes it read like a song. Thus, the book reads like a love song, albeit a slightly warped love song, rewriting Umm Kulthūm's more traditional depiction of people in love in a mad society of torture and death. The connections that Barakāt draws,

however, also link genres and, thus, while the song/poetry is recast as a novel, the novel itself can be read as a song.

Culturally, this link is important because it addresses a question often posed about marginal writers in the Arab world and women writers, in particular: who is their writing for? As will become clear with additional citations from this text, many sections of this novel are considered shocking because of frank and explicit discussions of sex and sexuality including what is considered non-normative sexual behaviour in the Arab world. There is a stereotype of women writers, particularly Western educated Christian Lebanese women who live in Paris such as Hudā Barakāt, that their works are not only the product of Western and, thus, non-indigenous and outside influences, but are written and designed for a Western audience.¹⁷

By reading her work as linked so closely to an Arab singer and not just any singer but with Umm Kulthūm, the most potent symbol of the Arab nation, Barakāt's novel consciously or unconsciously answers this criticism. This reading of the novel, *Ahl al-Hawā*, as linked to Umm Kulthūm's song shows possible connections between literature and music, a novel and popular Arab culture and Barakāt's self conscious link with Arab tradition. The connection of this novel to a figure as popular and universally listened to and revered as Umm Kulthūm valorises some knowledge of the Arabic musical tradition. This further underlines a commitment to writing for an Arab audience who would be familiar with the reference and for whom the connection is meaningful. In order to fully understand the complexity of how Barakāt's novel operates on the formal as well as the thematic level, the reader therefore must have some knowledge of Arabic music. Through the connection to Umm Kulthūm, this novel is also linked not only to an Arab creative tradition, but also is specifically allied with a *female* Arab creative tradition. The singer whom Hudā Barakāt uses is not only a woman who is incredibly popular and revered in Arab society, but a woman who, to some extent, was able to transcend traditional gender roles and boundaries in her society. This can be seen as a project with which the author connects herself as well as themes in her work.

Umm Kulthūm as a character

The relationship between Barakāt's *Ahl al-Hawā* text and Umm Kulthūm's *Ahl al-Hawā* text is further established by the third section of the novel mentioned above - the protagonist's brief contemplation of Umm Kulthūm as a personality and cultural icon. The issues raised here, namely, the protagonist's lack of a coherent and consistent male gender identity, is foregrounded by this explicit discussion of the person whose song is

reproduced as a frame for this novel:

I also knew that I was listening to Umm Kulthūm and that I was drawn to her because she is not a feminine singer. Not totally. Her face is not beautiful like the face of a woman should be and she has incredible lungs... Her breasts are big but her neck is thick in order to be able to encompass her throat. Because her voice is more than one gender it rises all the way up to the summit of the uterus and falls as low as the depths of the testicles. Sour and sweet. A voice with no gender and both at once... her nickname is "al-Sitt" (the Lady). Just "al-Sitt" - as though to confirm something that is neither certain, nor self-evident... Women hear her as a man and men hear her as a woman. Her voice gets angry like a woman's and yields like a man's when the two are in love... It is the voice of a man and woman at the same time. Do they not say that she was a lesbian?¹⁸

Thus, not only is the reader aware of the connection between Umm Kulthūm's song and the narrative of the text, but Umm Kulthūm plays a part as a character referred to by the protagonist as well. In the passage cited above, Umm Kulthūm is described as a sexually androgynous woman in no uncertain terms. Barakāt uses blunt words related to sexuality, uterus and testicles and also suggests that a prominent cultural figure who represented and represents the Arab nation to masses of Arabs throughout the world is a lesbian. Though she is certainly not the first Arab writer or Arab woman writer to use explicit language to discuss non-normative sexual behaviour, this passage is still somewhat shocking in the context of the conventions of modern Arabic literature.

In this same section, the protagonist is contemplating not only the questioning of his own gender and Umm Kulthūm's gender, but also that of his lover. Just before this discussion of Umm Kulthūm, for example, the protagonist contemplates his lover in comparison to other women whom he meets and is attracted to on the street. He notices that the women in whom he tends to have an interest are more masculine than feminine and that he is most attracted by people who blur the borders and boundaries between the sexes. Some of his contemplation of how he fancies women who have masculine characteristics and are not like his female lover or women at all:

The woman who attracts me in the street does not resemble her at all. She resembles men. I notice that when I think about this, I only see women who do not resemble her and who slightly resemble men. It is as though her sexuality were something working against me which I despise.¹⁹

He follows this by discussing his interest in the ways that living beings can deliver themselves from what he considers to be the torments of sex and

sexuality:

I listened avidly to the news of animals and plants which reproduce by themselves and who have both feminine and masculine sexual organs. This gender is free of its agony.²⁰

He then continues, talking about his attraction to androgyny in relation to his lover in the passage just preceding his discussion of Umm Kulthūm:

Perhaps because of this, I used to love to see the soft down which grew on her upper lip which would become black and the hairs of her eyebrows which grew and got a bit tangled again just above her nose when not plucked. I used to love her unpolished fingernails cut down to the flesh, and the protruding blue veins of her hands.²¹

Thus, like himself and his female lover, Umm Kulthūm is one more character whom the narrator identifies as androgynous, a mix of the two sexes. If the importance placed on Umm Kulthūm is not only as a personality, but also as the singer whose creative production forms the organisational framework for the novel as a whole - the title and the last line - it can be argued the narrator's self-identification with Umm Kulthūm, his identification of his lover with her and the ambiguous gender role which she symbolically occupies is highlighted.

Highlighting Gender Identity

If Barakāt's intertextual reference to Umm Kulthūm's *Ahl al-Hawā* can be used as a frame for reading this novel, then a further exploration of gender identity is marked as an important issue to be explored. There are numerous passages throughout the novel which describe the protagonist's un-individuated self, balancing precariously somewhere between the male and female. Almost all of these passages are related to the protagonist and his lover, especially in the form of contemplating how the protagonist and his lover resemble each other and are or are becoming one entity.

Gender Confusion?

The first passage discussed here occurs in chapter three, section three of the novel. The protagonist has been thinking about how his lover abandoned him like a "naked worm with no family". He then flashes back in time to the war when he and his lover are crossing from one side of the divided city of Beirut to the other. The protagonist narrates his encounter with a man serving in one of the militias at the checkpoint as follows:

From that morning on, I knew that something was pounding inside me. That certain male hormones inside of me had been extinguished. And, if not, then why was I so extremely calm at the checkpoint at the entrance to the capital. Why, when the armed guard ridiculed me did I not feel the bitterness and pain in my stomach which afflicts me every time I am forced to be silent and obedient because I have little other choice. The armed guard said to me: Why is a well-built guy like you not working. You don't work and you don't carry arms. How do you feed your wife then... ? How do you sleep with her? Do you let her feed you... ? Is she your wife? Where are her papers? Both of you, get out of the car.²²

This is one of the many sections where the protagonist is shown to be a character operating very much on the margins of Lebanese/Beirut society. It is also one which highlights what is even more explicit in other sections - that the protagonist is not fully assured of his gender as a man. Here, he is aware that he has somehow lost the ability to act in a way which is deemed by society as male - to become aroused and angry when humiliated by a guard at a checkpoint. He attributes this to a loss of male hormones, giving his loss of gender identity a biological element. It is not only biology in this section, however, that indicates that the protagonist no longer knows that he is a man. It is both he, himself, who questions if he is a man or a "real man" as defined by a set of societal norms as well as other members of his society who are more fully participating in it such as the armed militia man at the checkpoint. Through the protagonist, Barakât thus raises questions about traditional gender roles, their relationship to hormones and society and how people perceive of their gender and that of others.

Another section where gender identity, ambiguity and confusion are accented is in a contemplation by the protagonist of his lover and how she forgets things whereas he remembers them. His questioning of his gender takes place when he is thinking about his lover and comparing himself to her. The many sections in the novel when the protagonist thinks about his own gender identity and if he is a man or how much of a man he is, are all linked to comparing himself to his lover. Again, biology is an important part of his reflections as he contemplates his situation and explains it in terms of scientific definitions of gender. For example, at the end of chapter ten in section two, he recalls:

I remember the reason I fell in love with her when I first existed. When I was first a foetus, in the early months, when my chromosomes were all female. All of them were "XX" before the "Y" came in a later period during my stay in my mother's belly, transforming me into a male. Even as a male, I was swimming in the female waters of the uterus and, even as a male, my masculinity was not a given. I remember what came before my heroic victory because

of being a man shortly before my birth, after it, and after my adolescence.²³

On one hand, this is clearly a questioning of biology and an investigation of the androgynous un-individuated and gender-less beings that one is before birth. The protagonist, as mentioned above, is fascinated by plants which can reproduce without being sexual. His discussion here also specifically mentions the two periods of human development which psychologists say are where individuation occurs - birth and adolescence. On the other hand, in addition to the merely biological level, psychological connections are also mentioned. This is sparked for the protagonist by his realisation that he has a much more accurate memory than his lover of their interactions and when they fell in love. He links the moment of falling in love with his first moments of existence as a foetus and, thus, when he was in the most un-individuated state possible, that is, before his biological gender assignment was even completed.

This places yet further emphasis on his relationship with his female lover as one which is at once not defined by or related to gender and one which is completely tied up in gender questions. His preoccupation with his own gender here, when he first developed "Y" chromosomes and for how long he swam in the "female waters of the uterus", means that this is a crucial issue. At times, however, this is expressed by what seems to be a desire to erase all notions of gender and see himself and his female lover as part of the same gender.

This second issue can be seen in a third passage in *Ahl al-Hawā* which is a more challenging and intricate discussion and exploration of gender. This passage is taken from a scene which takes place between the protagonist and his lover in chapter eight in the third section of the novel. Again, the issue of the protagonist's realisations about his gender identity are linked to his individuation or lack of it from his female lover. This section again shows the novel's concern with androgyny, questioning of gender identity and roles on a thematic level which reinforces and reinvigorates the intertextual frame.

In this example, the protagonist returns to the house that he shares with his lover one night and is angered to find her asleep on the bed. In this section, as well as in others, he wonders why she is not jealous of him being out of the house when this means he could be with other women and why she is not more concerned that he goes out at night when there is bombing. He thus is angry at her for not showing traditional female characteristics - or at least stereotypes of them - while this is, at the same time, what fascinates him about her.

In this passage, violence is a part of sex, the protagonist's brutal beating of his lover is commingled with his utter confusion and impotence, his rage is

mingled with his fear. He sexually possesses his lover with force but, while doing so, he highlights confusion about the gender of this woman once again:

I look at her and I know my misfortune, my destiny, the origins of my hatred. This woman is not a woman. And she is also not a man. My woman is neither of the two sexes...²⁴

Shortly after this passage is another where Barakāt graphically describes how the protagonist approaches his lover to have sex with her and insists on leaving the light illuminated. After he has turned on the light and his lover has switched it off, the protagonist says:

No, I want to see. I want to see that you see. I want to see that you see that I see all the inner depths that you want to hide and keep from me. I want you to see that I see that you have a sex. That you are a woman and I am her man. She put her arm over her eyes and I slapped her. Open your eyes. Open up everything that you have kept closed to me and face me.²⁵

It is here that the commingling of the sexes, the protagonist's fascination with his lover and her female/male characteristics takes a more destructive and distressing turn. The violence that is linked with sex here is most likely due to the protagonist's impotence in integrating successfully into the world outside of his own private thoughts. When he abuses his female lover, however, he also makes an explicit demand to identify her gender as solely female and his own as solely male. It is when the protagonist clearly declares without amendment that she is a woman and that he is her man, he beats her mercilessly and the chapter closes with her clinging to him, accepting his blows noiselessly so as to hide the shame from neighbours or other witnesses. Here, the stereotypical male-female gender role dynamics are played out in all their most violent manifestations. It is almost as if, in the course of the text, when the protagonist is not able to live out the contradictions that he feels and forces himself and his lover into certain roles, that even more violence and mayhem occurs - instigated here and propagated by himself.

Conclusions

The protagonist in Hudā Barakāt's, *Ahl al-Hawā*, explores his own gender identity, that of his lover and that of Umm Kulthūm in the examples cited above by looking at biology, comparing himself to others, observing how others in society regard him as well as through introspection, fantasies and interior monologues. This study uses the general psychological term "individuation" in conjunction with the formal literary critical

conceptualisation and practice of intertextuality to offer possible readings for Hudā Barakāt's *Ahl al-Hawā* in order to raise questions about it and suggest lines for further inquiry.

One question that may be raised is how far is this work related or not related to other novels written during the Lebanese Civil War? Much of the critical work on Lebanese war literature, particularly in English and French, has focused on the idea that women's writing acts as a counterdiscourse which challenges the male scripted and masculinist war story. Looking at several wars in the Arab world in recent years, M. Cooke argues that in today's post-modern wars, women are able to offer a counterdiscourse to disrupt the hegemony of men.²⁶ E. Accad takes a slightly different angle by showing how women have resisted war and the violence destruction and mayhem which it brings by comparing a selection of war texts written by men and women.²⁷ E. S. Manganaro has also written about sexuality and gender in Lebanese literature and suggests that it is important to remember that women's literature is not by definition anti-war and/or pacifist nor should it be read as necessarily opposed to men's literature.²⁸

Barakāt's novel could be used as a part of any of these three arguments because it is a complex and ambiguous work. To say that it is simply a piece of resistance literature or that it offers a counterdiscourse to a male-scripted war story, though it does do this, would be a disservice. What Barakāt does in her extended portrayal of the war and the world through the perspective of a mad male character who may have - but may not have - killed his female lover in an extremely violent way, is to resist not only the war story, but the perceptions of what the counterdiscourse are and should be. For example, her protagonist is not a woman but a man who suffers. Though one can argue that it is precisely his female characteristics which cause this suffering, one can also see that the protagonist is not simply passive. He is a complicated character who truly does not feel that he is able to be only one gender. He is not like Khalil of *Hajar al-Dahak* who completely rejects his position as a man in society, opting instead to adopt another gender. What the protagonist of *Ahl al-Hawā* does is wrestle with how he can be a man and feel that he is a combination of the two genders at once just as he perceives both his lover and Umm Kulthūm to be.

This challenge to the counterdiscourse is also a part of the intertextual strategies of Barakāt's *Ahl al-Hawā*. Because the intertextual reference is not hidden and is reinforced by the last line of the novel, the reader is intended to notice it and grapple with the issues that it raises. This may be the conjuring up of an alternative version of Umm Kulthūm as an androgynous non-woman and perhaps a lesbian. In this reading, Barakāt does not make a simple statement about women's needs for more active roles in society and/or their

ability to do this or even about male homosexuality and a man's transformation into a female as in *Hajar al-Dahak*. The project of *al-Hawā* can be read as arguing for nothing less than a complete re-evaluation of gender and what it means in Arab society - questioning what it is to be a man or woman including what roles are expected, whom one is expected to love, what occupation one is expected to pursue and how one is expected to act in any number of situations.

In an article in which she discusses her childhood and awareness of being a girl in a society where boys are privileged and some of the challenges which she faced as a woman and as a writer, Barakāt states:

I cannot see the world except in terms of the masculine and feminine and the powerful, intricate and entangled relationship between them. Perhaps writing is where I can be the two together, totally.²⁹

This quotation shows that the blurring between masculinity and femininity and the ability to be both a man and a woman at once is a preoccupation of Hudā Barakāt not only in a literary text but also in her attitude and approach to writing in general. This study argues that *Ahl al-Hawā* is more than simply an exploration of the chaos of war, but, rather, is a detailed challenge to normative notions of gender and gender identity, a questioning of its coherence and the need for a unified single gender for an individuated person in society. The idea of individuation has been used here to grasp how a person who is considered healthy goes about this process as psychologists have defined it in what they consider to be healthy human individuals.

What Barakāt questions is if this definition of healthy human beings is valid, what does it mean to be categorised and classified as mad and what is a possible re/visioning of society in the future. It is with this last suggestion that *Ahl al-Hawā* can be read as a novel which can be looked at in conjunction with the critical and creative work of the Chicana theorist, G. Anzaldúa whose conceptualisation of a "new mestiza consciousness" is that a breakdown of western dualistic thinking is necessary for people to come to a new state of embracing and celebrating mixings of gender, race, identity, language and ethnicity.³⁰ According to Anzaldúa, this will permit more people to express who they truly are and thus will lead to a richer and more creative culture. An example of how Anzaldúa's critical work relates specifically to Hudā Barakāt's *Ahl al-Hawā* is found in the second chapter of *Borderlands La Frontera: the New Mestiza*, "Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan" where she talks about a person from her childhood whom people believed was half male/half female, called *mitá y mitá*:

There is something compelling about being both male and female

about having an entry into both worlds. Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and halves are not suffering from a confusion of sexual identity, of even from a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better. But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within.³¹

Anzaldúa discusses this half and half character in the context of her own life and her bilingual, bicultural and lesbian status. Barakāt's novel can be seen as part of a similar project, a struggle through novelistic expression to expand the limitations and borders of what is seen as acceptable and to challenge these notions at the same time. Similar to Anzaldúa, Barakāt's characters embody more than one gender at the same time and pose a threat to the dualism that orders and organises the way that gender norms are articulated in society.

Ahl al-Hawā is about war, it is about madness, it is about sexuality. As this study specifically discusses, it is also about gender identity and the processes of individuation. Alternative readings of this novel are stressed here which suggest that it also offers a radical challenge not only to conventional gender identity and the traditional gender roles expected of men and women in society, but of the very notion of gender itself.