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Lebanese youth narratives: a bleak post-war landscape

Roseanne Saad Khalaf*

Department of English and Creative Writing, American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon

To identify the themes that define the lives of a generation living in a conflict-ridden post-war society, I explore the changing views of Lebanese students through an analysis of the personal narrative texts that they created during my creative writing workshops over a 16-year period (1997–2012). Increasingly, young Lebanese feel trapped in a violent past, a threatening present and a hopeless future. As traditional forms of stability and loyalty (family and state) become more dysfunctional, modern alternative sources of education, employment, security and public discourse remain absent, creating an ever-widening disjunction between expectations and disheartening lived realities. Since 1998, student texts have focused on three salient thematic groupings: Idealism (1998–2005), Activism (2005–2008) and, most recently, Disillusionment (2008–present). In an atmosphere of escalating intolerance and hostility, it is hardly surprising that students are currently escaping to spaces of indulgence and personal gratification. As ongoing regional conflicts fuel local sectarian rivalries, I argue that reengaging educated young Lebanese in non-confrontational narratives that challenge dysfunctional systems can play a vital role in disrupting a dangerous sectarian narrative that is fast threatening to entangle Lebanon in yet another brutal war.

Keywords: Lebanese post-war; student narratives; bleak landscape

Introduction

This paper is a reflexive, exploratory study into the changing views of Lebanese students at the American University of Beirut (AUB), a post-war, post-memory generation, from Lebanon's diverse religious, political and social groups, who have participated in my creative writing workshops over a period of 16 years (1997–2012). Their discussions and narratives are shaped by intense lived experiences that draw heavily from family, social settings and political circumstances. In this fast-shifting terrain of escalating social ills and sectarian violence, students feel increasingly trapped in a violent, unresolved past, threatening present and hopeless future.

*Email: rk04@aub.edu.lb

Although the narratives crafted by my students are characterised by different writing styles and distinctive voices, they typify the views of young people who have moved beyond a previously explored terrain that existed during and immediately after the 2005 Lebanese Youth *Intifada.* Today, prospects of a more tolerant, plural and diverse political and social culture are fast fading. The futility of efforts to restore trust and dialogue in a country plagued by unresolved conflict and unappeased hostility makes students uninterested in becoming change makers engaged in the crafting of a new political culture. Instead, they are desensitising from traumatic events both internally and regionally, while rejecting any form of public discourse, civic engagement and participatory democracy. An escalating frenzy to indulge in pleasurable activities by cultivating spaces for self-gratification has become evident. Currently, the most striking narrative theme focuses on having as much fun as possible while planning exit strategies from a country that has so cunningly and successfully silenced youthful voices.

With the 1990 Taif Accord, the Lebanese Civil War was officially brought to a close and post-war Lebanon was optimistically perceived as a period when the violence that pervaded almost two decades of strife could be forgotten, leaving the Lebanese to focus on reconstruction, reconciliation and revamping a decaying political system. Yet none of the issues that instigated the war have been adequately addressed. Crucial questions regarding inter-communal conflict, accountability of wartime atrocities and nation building continue to be conveniently ignored. On February 14, 2005, the brutal killing of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and the subsequent string of political assassinations and disquieting public protests that followed Syria's withdrawal, threw the country into further disarray. A year later, the devastating 2006 summer Israel-Hezbollah War intensified feelings of hate and hostility between sectarian groups. Currently, these tensions are being fuelled by regional conflicts, particularly the spillover from Syria's relentless civil war.

Throughout this long, turbulent post-war period, and in direct response to the unfolding political circumstances, participants in my AUB workshops engaged in insightful conversations. To best explore relevant concerns, I engaged in close readings of students' personal narratives in 25 creative writing sections from 1997 to 2012, before applying narrative analysis to isolate salient and recurring themes. The themes constituted three distinct categories: *Idealism* (1997–2005), *Activism* (2005–2008) and *Disillusionment* (2008–Present). Although each of the three is analysed separately alongside narrative excerpts to capture the shifting voices of students over the years, my paper explores the latter in more detail. It touches only briefly on the first two since they have been the focus of previous publications, most recently, *Youthful Voices in Post-war Lebanon* (Khalaf 2009) and *Idealistic and Indignant Young Lebanese* (in Khalaf and Khalaf 2011).

Dozens of conversations and debates were recorded during workshop sessions.

Literature review

Recent studies on Lebanese youth have elucidated specific attributes and behaviour associated with and resulting from a troubled post-war setting. In 'Between Silences and Screams' (2011) Craig Larkin concentrates on the post-war generation of Lebanese youth trapped between conflicting forces of collective memory and collective amnesia. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's concept of *Postmemory* (Hirsh 1997, 1998), he examines the memory of a generation struggling with narrative accounts of events that preceded their birth. Bereft of meaningful narratives to explain Lebanon's post-war realities, young people remain unable to reconcile their past in order to live for their future. Larkin's findings correspond to the concerns of my students during the earlier post-war years (1997–2005), when the most striking themes explored feelings of marginality and entrapment, being abandoned in a country characterised by a violent past they could neither understand nor come to terms with.

In the aftermath of the brutal assassination of Rafic Hariri in 2005, my students quickly became involved in the surge of political activism calling for participatory democracy and reform. Many joined the Youth *Intifada*, demanding that Syrian forces leave Lebanon, calling for the resignation of the Lebanese government and the revamping of a dysfunctional political system. Of course those who joined March 8 had a different political agenda but were equally vocal and active in demanding change. The consequences of such momentous mobilisation on reshaping the collective identity of Lebanese youth (Gahre 2011) were immense. Initially, despite diverse backgrounds and ideological leanings, involvement in the uprising heightened national consciousness and the primacy of Lebanese identity among youthful groups. However, two years on, the youthful enthusiasm that had inspired the massive mobilisation was derailed by self-serving politicians, along with future prospects of a more tolerant, plural and diverse political culture.

During subsequent years, my students' gaze shifted inward, blocking out the dangerous sectarian Lebanese narrative and the desire to formulate strategies against the rigidities of confessional politics. By 2008, bold themes of defiance began to take shape: recreation, pleasure, self-indulgence, having fun and emigration.

Current research suggests that they are not alone in seeking pleasure spaces of indulgence. Such hedonistic activities are perhaps a way to defy the battleground that Lebanon can so quickly become. Nicolien Kegels (2011), in her study on nightlife in times of war, focuses on a group of Lebanese upper-class young adults before and during the July 2006 Israeli war

on Lebanon. Upper-class nightclubs, Kegel argues, become one of the best places to show off riches because they are designed to optimise flaunting wealth and confirming social status. Despite the devastating war, leisure, conspicuous consumption and an excessive display of privileges continued to define the lifestyle of this group of young Lebanese.

Much like Mahdavi's (2011) argument that 'having fun' in Iran is a direct challenge to the moral paradigm of the regime and a way for young people to assert their agency against its restrictions, my students are carving out pleasure spaces, not only as acts of defiance but to escape the never-ending political tensions and ills alongside the overwhelming sense of helplessness due to circumstances beyond their control. As they assume bolder stances, daring personal stories of desire and gratification are starting to map a radically different, more fluid (Bauman 2000) landscape. Strictures aiming to silence, uphold moral judgment or hypocrisy; mindsets seeking to control private lives are presently fiercely contested and ignored.

Methodology and content

This paper explores the changing views and attitudes in the personal narrative texts of AUB students who have participated in my creative writing workshops over a 16-year period (1997–2012). Although my sample comes from a private university, efforts in recent years have greatly enlarged the pool of unrestricted financial aid to ensure that students in need of financial support are not turned away. Consequently, my students increasingly reflect Lebanon's diverse socio-economic and religious composition: Christian, Druze, Shiia and Sunni Muslims.

Nonfiction workshops are held over a 14-week period (one semester) and consist of 15 students, between the ages of 18 and 21, men and women from numerous academic disciplines, meeting once a week for two and a half hours to focus on discussing required readings, crafting narrative texts and self-expression outside the strictures and constraints otherwise present in mainstream Lebanese society.

Quite often, my students become 'imprisoned' by their own stories (Gill 2009), unable to escape a given script, or boundaries resulting from barriers imposed by family, religion, culture, personal trauma and other forces seemingly beyond their control. Understandably, stories of devastation and pain or ancestral memories may unconsciously influence their narratives (Asseily 2009). Pain's inexpressibility, its ability to destroy language (Scarry 1985), can make the narrative process exceedingly slow, riddled with silences, stops and starts. Negotiating this essential struggle (Goodson 2009) through the 'narrative maze' requires a sensitive process of de-stabilising and re-stabilising (Goodson and Gill forthcoming 2014) that is necessary for awareness and transformation.

Openly exploring complex, volatile issues, deep inner feelings and personal views can be a daunting experience in a diverse classroom setting defined by strong views and differences. Creating spaces for honest discussions and critical debate is possible because our *contact zone* remains protected from the threatening outside gaze by the *safety net* of our classroom, where critical exchanges that deal with difference serve primarily to instigate debate and broaden awareness in a tolerant academic setting. Our autonomous *comfort zone* becomes a participatory *contact zone*, where conflicting attitudes are openly addressed and awareness heightened through imaginative text creation and critical discourse. To protect confidentially, real names have been changed. Reassuring students that strict anonymity will be observed creates an atmosphere of trust and an eagerness to share moving personal stories.

In my workshops, the importance of context anchored in Lebanon is paramount. Instead of constantly 'filling up' the curriculum, I encourage students to draw freely from day-to-day lived experiences alongside what is occurring locally, regionally and globally. In relocating the personal within broader cultural and political contexts, students move from that which seems completely private to broader historic and political contexts (Kamler 2001). Soon, personal experiences begin to enter into a realm of shared discourse that is wider and more social than that which characterises the individual.

As a result, workshops are guided and informed by a basic premise: how to use narratives – articulated in an uncensored classroom setting – to shed light on broader socio-cultural and political transformations. To make seemingly marginal and private matters become closely connected to broader societal transformations so that individual stories start to form a collective narrative of a larger journey through linkages of particular cases (Ewick and Silbey 1995). Apart from defining the views of a new generation, texts highlight significant youth experiences outside the hegemonic influences of public transcripts (Boym 1996). They provide counter-narratives, digressions and detours from the dominant story or accepted biography of a fast-changing post-war society.

Although the findings of my study represent the views of students in the *comfort zone* of workshops at an elitist university, the significance of the results, limited as they may seem, should not be undermined. Even marginal views, when given voice, inevitably begin to circulate in the mainstream where they are taken into account and recorded (Pinar 1997). Finally, the author acknowledges the limitations of this reflexive, exploratory study, resulting from the potential for bias on my part. Intentionally, I have not adhered to the notion that scholarly writers should erase their voices from the work they produce. Because I share the lived experiences of my students, it is near impossible to work silently on the sidelines (Charmaz and Mitchell 1997).

Idealism

In 1995, upon returning to Lebanon and AUB after an absence of 10 years, it became evident that my returnee students harboured feelings of 'betweenness', marginality, hybridity and exclusion alongside idealistic dreams of instigating change. The difficulties required in adjusting to a scarred, fragmented and highly unstable post-war society, unable to come to terms with its turbulent past, were immense. Although the 1992 Tiaf Agreement officially brought the Lebanese War to a close, young Lebanese remained devoid of war memory, trapped in the pain resulting from over a decade of protracted violence. Worse still, competing memories and stories complicated the confusion. The post-modernity experience of fragmented (Giddens 1991) and non-unitary (Bloom 1996) identities, of living in multiple places, in between cultures and juggling hybrid identities was a condition my students had clearly internalised.

The re-entry of young Lebanese who, together with their parents, had temporarily relocated abroad to escape the dangers of the Lebanese War, became a hugely complex and sensitive process. Issues of reconciliation and nation building, attempts to understand and move beyond the pain of the past were persistent and recurring themes during our weekly workshops:

> I remember the way my mother used to speak of this country, eyes downcast, trembling voice, as though the words threatened to choke her. She would speak of a time before war as though in a distant dream, as though the country had never witnessed demolition and spilled blood. (Alyan 2006, 192)

Students challenged the pervasive conspiracy of silence, the nostalgic attitudes and collective amnesia embraced by so many older Lebanese:

> My parents avoid talking about the Lebanese War. They refuse to discuss the violence that destroyed their 'perfect' country. They dwell in a make-believe land where the real past is completely obliterated. (Hanan)

Students struggled with conflicting pre-war accounts as no national or collective narrative exists. When asked about the war, they became confused, even bewildered: 'I have never known the reasons behind the Lebanese War. When I ask I get many contradictory answers,' Hussein movingly explains. Rana feels the same way: 'I don't know much about the war, in fact barely anything. Rarely has anyone told me stories about it. My family never mentions it. Still, it hurts to know that the war happened.' Leila feels betrayed by Lebanon:

> My country has beautiful scenery, perfect weather and wonderful food. It should be the ideal place to live but it's not. It's a sad and dangerous place. I opened my eyes to the final phase of a war that I never understood: a war that I consider to be useless. How can I feel I belong to a country that has caused me so much pain? (Leila)

Caught in fragmented, inconsistent, often irreconcilable scripts, students during this period eagerly explored issues of identity and belonging and grappled with ways to understand a bitter war, in order to embrace new possibilities. During the writing of *Transit Beirut: New Writing and Images* (Halasa and Khalaf 2004) the post-war period seemed to me an exciting, promising time when the war-torn past and subsequent regeneration made Lebanon unique among contemporary Arab countries. The legacy of violence, alongside the resilience it created were powerful factors in the search for a new Lebanese identity, shaped through public discourse and civic engagement.

Initially, my returnee students felt the same way. It was refreshing to witness their determination to challenge rigid strictures imposed by those who had decided to safeguard inflexible ways of thinking. Students were not potentates guarding territory or upholding tradition. They exemplified Edward Said's (1991) notion of a traveller who depends not on power but on motion and a willingness to go into different worlds to experience constant displacements and interruptions to keep views from solidifying (Bauman 2000), thus reinforcing a state of post-modern hybridity, openness and a restless opposition to all orthodoxies.

During this time, class discussions and narratives focused relentlessly on the tensions caused by this invisible conflict but also on a deep desire for change. There was a refreshing sense of optimism:

> We are constantly put in a tug-of-war situation because we are a challenge, a silent invasion against unreasonable and enforced traditional values and ideas. Actually, we're a wake-up call that needs to be heeded before it's too late. (Nabil)

> It seems like people in Lebanon have spent decades resisting change. They use the excuse of tradition and outmoded values to ensure control. (Suha)

> I know we can create a new and improved Lebanon. (Samra)

Clearly, a collective narrative was taking shape – one that transcended the prevailing culture of impotence and exclusion. It challenged rigid attitudes that blocked change, while focusing on new ways of seeing. In this unique space, bold views could be analysed in articulation with others as they optimistically moved closer to disrupting and discrediting the dominant Lebanese narrative.

Activism

The assassination of billionaire ex-premier Rafic Hariri on February 14, 2005, followed by a wave of assassinations from 2005–2008 that killed anti-Syrian journalists and politicians, prompted many students to join an active opposition group that called for national unity, while taking a strong stand against Syria and the Syrian-backed Lebanese government. Seeing this

as an unprecedented opportunity for mobilisation and activism, students in my workshops became suddenly energised. A widespread youth political culture seemed in the making, one that might alter or at least disrupt the status quo by playing a significant role in instigating broad social and political change. Young people felt empowered to take control of their own destinies and undermine a system starkly defined by sectarianism corruption and stagnation. 'It looks as if our chance to make a difference has finally arrived,' Nadim announced one morning in our workshop. This led to a detailed discussion of the serious ways in which students were becoming deeply involved in the *Intifada.*

Activism has had a long and illustrious history at AUB, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s when, as a cultural and intellectual sanctuary, the University fostered experimentation in ideological doctrines and political platforms away from the reach of oppressive regional regimes. In recent years, however, student generations have lacked such strong political convictions. Rafic Hariri's assassination instantly reversed this pervasive and apathetic trend. In her story, *Painted Reflections*, Hala Alyan (2006) movingly captures the waves of demonstrators demanding regime-change that brought Christians and Muslims together in Martyrs' Square:

> In the next picture a young man, in a sea of demonstrators, is holding up a crucifix in one hand and a Quran in the other. (192)

The Beirut Spring, which succeeded in ending Syria's 30-year hegemony over Lebanon, was largely instigated and sustained by youthful groups, across religious and sectarian divisions, desperate for justice and change:

> The entire country is bristling, a nation that is suddenly wide awake and furious. The stunned, controlled respect and grief that laces the city immediately following Hariri's death seems to have exploded. Scrawled writing appears on the sides of buildings demanding that Syria get out. Groups of young men and women flock to the downtown center near the grave of the political figure now transformed into a reluctant martyr; tents begin to pepper the area. At night cars whiz by with flags flying out, teenage boys stick their upper bodies perilously out of the vehicles as they yell random slogans in Arabic. Demonstrations and counter-demonstrations begin. (Alyan 2006, 192)

In class, earlier obstacles no longer appeared insurmountable. The desire to strip corrupt politicians and many octogenarians of power, eradicate an archaic, dysfunctional political system, instigate a new language of reconciliation, transparency and accountability and address the underlying sources of conflict became powerfully persistent narrative themes:

> The turmoil is due to sectarian divisions and political corruption and it's high time we insist on change through viable, peaceful solutions instead of relying on hate, conflict or unrealistic dreams. (Hani)

Students were quick to distance themselves from the mistakes made by those previously responsible in shaping the country's past:

> Politicians in Lebanon underestimate the swift changes that have occurred. They talk endlessly but in actual fact, they say nothing and think we will listen forever to their empty words. (Amina)

> Those in government must learn to address the concerns of the Lebanese in simple words they can live up to. A new political language is needed. (Raneem)

Sadly, by the end of this period, narrative themes began to drastically shift. The extraordinary enthusiasm initially experienced by student activists was fast dissipating, giving way to disillusioned accounts of what it means to be young and unable to alter a decaying system. A growing demoralising dissonance between expectations and actual lived realities visibly began to erode any hope students once had for change and a brighter future.

Disillusionment

As might be expected, the collective enthusiasm generated by the 2005 uprising did not materialise in any of the progressive transformations so keenly anticipated by youthful groups. The failure of the Independence *Intifada* to achieve national unity between Christians and Muslims, the persistence of sectarian and confessional loyalties in defining the political system and most aspects of life, suddenly left no feasible way forward. Active civil society had been dealt a fatal blow. Consequently, a growing number of my students became legitimately paralysed by the discrepancy between hoped-for-expectations on the one hand, and existing realities on the other. At present, these irreconcilable positions continue to foreground the conversation.

Orhan Pamuk in his 2005 memoir, *Istanbul: Memories of a City*, devotes a chapter to *Hüzün* (melancholy), a mood that casts a shadow of sadness on the cityscape and its inhabitants: 'The black mood shared by millions of people together, the *hüzün* of an entire city' (83).

Not surprisingly, students are now positioning their narratives in a scarred landscape heavy with *hüzün*. The waning of hope and rising tensions create an atmosphere of heavy sadness and melancholy: 'It's absurd to even pretend that change is at all possible. Welcome to the jungle,' Tariq wrote shortly after withdrawing from the Independence *Intifada*. 'I now realize that in no way can our generation alter the power structure.' Mustapha agrees: 'I'm fed up with politics. I don't watch the news or read the papers any more. It's all a waste of time.'

> Suddenly I realized that politicians from all sides, from all sects: Maronites, Orthodox, Catholic, Sunnis, Shiites, Druzes, and God help me if I've missed

> any group, acted like the shameless, dishonorable men they are. They lied, they murdered and cheated. But it was us who committed the ultimate crime by holding on to them one more time. We committed a crime against ourselves, against future generations, by disbelieving one another and believing them. (Myrna)

> Life here is exhausting. It forces me to re-examine what Lebanon means to me. The future will never be bright. But right now I'm tired, tired of being asked why I refuse to join in the demonstrations, or why I choose not to watch political events on television for 24 hours a day, or even why I look at the sea of Lebanese flags with a vacant, unmoved expression. (Mariana)

Students are adamant when it comes to distancing themselves from politics and the politicians who seem only to perpetuate a corruption-ridden state. With resilient communal loyalties and fractious pluralism on the rise, there is alarm over the escalating language of *retribalisation* and political squabbling that crushes any attempts at a larger political discourse:

> Politicians are masterminds at deception and clever words that poison the minds of their blind followers. (Sula)

> We are brought up to worship corrupt and inept politicians who only pocket money and remain unaccountable. Honesty is not a virtue in Lebanon. A person is forced to keep quiet, to accept what is corrupt and illegal. (Ali)

> Nothing in my country is what it seems. On the surface it's beautiful but in reality it is rotten and ugly. People fight over religion and politics. The Civil War is still alive and well because if issues are solved and the system changes our dirty politicians will be out of work. (Sahar)

> I am ashamed to be Lebanese because Lebanon is a country that is built on false hopes and lies. Lebanon is a dead country. (Salah)

Seven years after the Youth *Intifada*, students like Ziad feel betrayed by the politicians who 'simply used us to regain their positions of power'. As revolts and uprisings against authoritarian governments spread across the region, politics in Lebanon is back to the semi-feudal divisions of power and Lebanon's onetime warlords and militia leaders are once again in control. 'The political elite do not address the needs or concerns of the citizens they claim to represent, let alone our generation,' explains Fadia. 'Politics in Lebanon is dirt and anyone who gets involved is corrupt,' insists Hadi. Texts decry the disappearance of youthful idealism and how attempts to redraw and re-imagine a dysfunctional system were made a mockery of:

> All our dreams of change are just delusions. Lebanese politicians used us to achieve their own ends. It's true that we accomplished a certain level of national unity after Hariri was killed, but that's it. His assassination was followed by one tragic event after another and now inept politicians are back in

> office. They have forgotten about their promises to our generation and to the people of Lebanon. What kind of Lebanon is this rotten political class creating for us? Day after day my friends are leaving the country. (Maher)
>
> I hate how all the political parties are at war with one another and all the problems they create. I force myself to stay ignorant. I don't listen to the news and I've stopped reading the papers. (Imad)

While the determination of courageous Arab youth to write their own narratives and challenge ruthless authoritarian regimes has brought a historic transition to a region frozen for generations, my students remain utterly disinterested and disengaged. Nicholas rarely checks the news to see what is happening politically, especially when it's news about the Arab world: 'This is probably the result of my lack of patriotism and disappointment as a Lebanese citizen. I am honestly indifferent about the Arab Spring and feel in no way involved.' Ali shares the same sentiments: 'Whenever I hear about the Arab Spring and the uprisings, I make sure to turn a deaf ear.' Nadia's views are even more telling: 'I don't know what the Arab Spring is and I'm not interested in finding out. It doesn't have any impact on my life.'

Such alarming reactions are undoubtedly linked with the failure of the Beirut Spring. As far as students are concerned, after all the clamour and hope, the change clock in Lebanon never seems to tick past midnight to a new day.

The demoralising dissonance between expectations and existing realities is sadly evident in Mohammad's riveting account of a rude awakening that stifled his youthful optimism:

> It was a sunny Sunday morning but I decided not to stay in bed with a cup of coffee while my country stirred with rage. 'Where to, my son?' My father smirked as I wrapped myself in a Lebanese flag, getting ready to free my country. 'Martyrs' Square', I proudly replied as if the future of the nation rested on my shoulders.
>
> A few moments later, I was there shouting at the top of my lungs. From enormous speakers bellowed the familiar voices of politicians who spoke of freedom and justice and independence and all the other 'illusions'. They spoke of the past and of our parents and grandparents who suffered and fought and endured and died for them. They spoke of our Lebanon and every time they paused, I shouted from the top of my lungs until I could no longer breathe. My heart was pounding harder and harder and harder. I painted myself with every color of the Lebanese flag. I became a puppet standing among a million other puppets.
>
> The thought of years and years of war and of my smirking father who had stood in my place a dozen times or more never crossed my mind; nor did the thought of the millions before me who had stood before these very same politicians blindly inhaling their words like the deadly smoke of a comforting cigarette. So I shouted and cheered with all my heart.

> By 2:00 pm the crowds started to drift away and I wondered if our cause would drift with them. When I got home my father was drinking a cup of coffee. 'Did you see me there?' I innocently asked. 'How could I? You were no different than the other million out there,' he sarcastically replied. But in his eyes I saw a different answer. Once, he had had the same feeling, believed in the same cause and been willing to fight and die for his country. It's just that he got bored of the deceitful voices of our corrupt politicians and their fathers before them, and, eventually so did I. (Mohammad)

Realistically, of course, my students know they cannot match regional youth uprisings. Even if feudal political affiliations miraculously disappear in Lebanon, religious sentiments are unlikely to dissipate. Jad is keenly aware of the religious divide: 'We had one shining moment during the Beirut Spring when we ignored religion. We all came together to demand a new beginning. But our cunning political elite managed to divide us by awakening religious allegiances.'

Political dynasties have long shaped Lebanese political history, with sons replacing fathers as MPs, ministers and party heads:

> Lebanon is a feudal democracy. When a political leader dies he is replaced by his son, daughter, wife, sister, brother, cousin or other family member. (Sabine)

> I hate Lebanese politics. I'm sick of all the same predictable surnames! Seriously, we need to get rid of them all. (Abdullah)

> I have come to loathe politics. At home, I avoid the living room when my parents are watching the news. I have completely given up hope so why waste time. Politics has failed Lebanon repeatedly. It's the mosquito that won't let you sleep in peace. As much as you try to squash or eliminate it, you always hear the buzz 10 seconds later. Eventually, you just shut your eyes because there is nothing you can do. (Hanan)

Unlike other countries in the region, in Lebanon, Layal points out:

> There is not one head of state or one person at the top to target and topple like in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya or Tunisia. Here politicians are like a hydra. Cut off one head and hundreds spring up. Reform would be awesome but it's completely impossible.

Even when it comes to job opportunities, religion, and not qualifications, acts as a filter through which young people are viewed by the government as well as most employers. Bassel complains bitterly about the need for patronage or personal contacts (*wasta*) to secure a job: 'I'm counting the seconds till I leave my country. I want to have equal job opportunities and not depend on *wasta*. I want a profession in a country where I'm rewarded for my hard work.'

> When I graduate I intend to look for a job abroad so my qualifications will count for something. (Adnan)

> It's unfair that my confessional and religious identity determine what job I get. I'll seek employment in a foreign company. (Siham)

Marked by cynicism and detachment, by a clarity and harsher truth, students succumb to the absurd dichotomy of life in a barricaded/hedonistic society; at once a battleground and a playground. Yet the calamity of civil war, the unresolved conflicts and tensions, the darker side of this Janus-like country, are now openly ignored. If there is one aspect that has come to characterise recent behaviour, it's the remarkable way students manage to immunise themselves against internal political conflicts, social ills and regional upheavals. The focus has shifted away from resentment and discontent to the pursuit of happiness and having fun, 'Otherwise,' according to Riad, 'We'll be waiting forever, just like our parents.' As Ghassan Hage, in the Preface to *Lebanon Adrift* (Khalaf 2012), suggests, young Lebanese are 'having fun to forget about the political situation or anything else for that matter: the miserable state of roads and traffic, pollution, chaotic construction, basic social services (rubbish removal, the electricity and water supply).' It's the withdrawal of youth from the social and political to a culture of narcissism and indulgence, a post-ideological, hedonistic life of unrestrained excess that seems only to intensify during periods of extreme uncertainty and danger. For Hasan, the frenzy to experience the good life is largely due to the underlying fear of looming disaster that might strike at any given moment: 'Who knows what kind of violence tomorrow might bring. I was nearly killed during the Israel-Hezbollah 2006 War. Now I want to have as much fun as possible before it's too late.'

Some cope by ignoring disaster when it strikes, even if it's a deadly war:

> The 2006 war with Israel did not affect my lifestyle. We'd go to the Movenpick Hotel. Since it was the main UN base, Israel couldn't attack it. After basking in the sun, we'd shower and go to an Internet café where we'd spend like three or four hours not even thinking about the war. At night we'd watch movies or sit in Starbucks Café. The war was just another summer for me. And it happened to be one of the best. (Talal)

> It was the best summer of my life. Like every summer, I was in Broumana. Honestly, I did not feel there was a war going on. Broumana was buzzing with people. There were fun events and excitement on the streets. Everyone acted like nothing was happening. People partied while the country was being destroyed. (Rawan)

Before themes of defiance began to define narrative texts, students led double lives to avoid inevitable clashes with their parents. Goffman's

(1971) metaphor of frontstage and backstage appropriately exemplified the contradictions they embraced. In *backstage* behaviour, nice personal scripts were relinquished by acting in ways that contradicted the polite moral front they maintained in public or *frontstage* situations. The jarring dissonance that ensued was, according to Reem, 'Damaging to my conscience and sense of wellbeing. It was exhausting to keep juggling and hiding my sexual orientation. Now I am completely open.'

> At the moment, students are no longer willing to 'live a lie'. (Ali)

> A friend of mine was telling me the other day that she leads a double life. She lives in the southern suburbs of Beirut (*al-Dahiya*) and must wear a *abaya* every time she leaves the house. Little does her family know that the second she's out, she turns into a fully-fledged lesbian. It's sad how people must lead two lives in order to satisfy family and community. I refuse to live a life of deceit. I'm constantly clashing with my parents who don't accept that I'm attracted to women. I'm not ashamed of being a lesbian. (Hala)

> When I first started writing my memoir I made sure to put 'I hope' after every paragraph. By the end of the semester, I removed them all and decided to keep only one. I realized it's not constant hoping that moves things forward, it's what I make of my gayness and how I decide I want my life to be. For a very long time I've been trapped in a shell so eager to come out. Now I'm finally out, and, to be honest, I've never been happier. (Suha)

Despite what is happening in Lebanon, or perhaps in spite of it, students are boldly asserting sexual identity openly and in frontstage situations. By pushing sexual boundaries and moving into new, forbidden territory, they are engaging in fluid encounters that sideline and render irrelevant the political change-struggles in the region, let alone the tensions in Lebanon:

> Enjoyment and the appetite for life are instantly gratifying. I go out with my friends every night. We don't think about what is happening in this miserable, failed country. We drink, eat, dance, have fun and sex because we might wake up to violence, war and death tomorrow. (Ahmad)

For Sami, indulging in the delights of physical pleasure provides a welcome escape and puts him in control of his life: 'I will write my own story and not let Lebanon write me.' In his racy narrative, writing becomes a metaphor for the manipulation of sexual desire and control over most aspects of his life:

> I love to write, especially in pencil. I scribble words in the margins or allow them to fall off the page. Writing frames my most severe problems, and packages them. I can read and re-read later. Just like writing, one's sex life should be in pencil. Progressing along effortlessly and happily until one decides to halt, at which point one can continue or go back and erase their steps. In this way, relationships can be easily reversed, one's sex life halted or altered in significant ways.

> I really did care for Aphrodite but she was older than me and had been with more men than the women I have been with. The funny thing is she has probably been with more women than I have too. I owe her everything though. She taught me so much including kinky and unorthodox sex. There were whips and handcuffs, etc. She is extremely beautiful and definitely out of my league. Occasionally, she'd take me to a gay club with her bisexual friends. I would be fed some ecstasy, some shots, then back to the hotel for more sex. She was the most seductive creature I have ever dated. I learned how to combine happiness and pleasure but eventually I couldn't stay with her anymore. The sex became too mundane and it was time to erase the relationship and move on. (Sami)

Riad has freed himself of all constraints, turning to 'the deviant, and insane to the mad, bad, and dangerous', to escape a society and political system 'beyond repair':

> After frequenting scandalous locations around Lebanon, I finally found myself within a social circle of transvestite prostitutes whose world was the polar opposite of anything I was used to. Together we went through dangerous adventures. This fascinated me immensely and fueled the writing of my short story *Alex of Berytus*. The story revolves around Alex, a runaway homosexual who sells his body to Gulf men in order to live. The details are partially made-up, but also drawn from the experiences I lived. I actually did befriend a transvestite prostitute by the name of Alex who I 'might have' had living with me in the AUB dorms, illegally, in the spring of 2009. The close contact with his world, though scandalous, was fruitful and beneficial.

Mahdavi (2011) insightfully shows how young people view changes in sexuality and social behaviour as a way of de-legitimising and de-stabilising the power of a regime claiming to have brought moral values:

> Perhaps there is nowhere in the world where the stakes of having fun are higher than in present day Iran. Young people from all socioeconomic backgrounds are increasingly seeking to carve out recreational spaces for themselves against the backdrop of a repressive regime. (149)

The formation of fun spaces is a welcome exit from a public/political arena that has manipulated and made a mockery of youthful views seeking change. It's an attempt to 'other' those who have so callously 'othered' and excluded them. By asserting agency in spheres they can control, students have created an alternative paradigm of youth culture that is unthreatening and, as a result, ignored by those in power. 'As long as we don't challenge anything political or religious we can do whatever we like,' Samia explains, 'Our families sometimes try to interfere in our private lives but they can't stop us from having all the fun, sex and plastic surgery we want.'

As Samir Khalaf argues in *Lebanon Adrift* (2012), the Lebanese have lost their moorings, direction and sense of control. There is a shift away from the social and political to a life of shallowness, consumerism and

pleasure. This provides 'a sense of immunity from a traumatizing environment' (Hage 2012, in Preface to Khalaf 2012, 8).

Billboards across the country advertise easily obtainable bank loans for plastic surgery. Rarely does a semester pass without four or five women students appearing in class with nose bandages. When the bandages are removed, their noses are usually identical. During one workshop session, when the conversation turned to the preoccupation with body image, Hadi said, 'There are new and "in" nose shapes every season. You know the year surgery is performed by the shape of the nose.' Manal expressed her pride at having undergone nose surgery twice because she 'hated the result the first time'. She's 'delighted to be young at a time when I can transform any part of my body that I don't like because beautiful women get what they want in life'.

Despite indulging in the good life, my students remain keenly aware of limited professional opportunities, a high cost of living and a deteriorating security situation. Recent statistics show that the exodus of young Lebanese college graduates has reached dramatic proportions.

During a discussion in the spring semester of 2012, I vividly recall how many of my bright students had already decided to join the Lebanese diaspora:

> My only hope for a decent future is to get as far away as possible from this oppressive country. (Dima)
>
> I, too, have lost all hope and am counting the days till I leave. (Ahmad)
>
> Lebanon is bubbly and beautiful but unstable and dangerous. I'm definitely leaving. (Farouq)

Anthony had developed a clever strategy. He's:

> Careful not to get attached. Distance and indifference on my part will make leaving easier. I've trained myself to let go of everything and everyone, even girls. My plan has been successful and now I can emigrate with no emotional ties or pain. Lebanon gives nothing to its citizens, even to the best. Instead, it injects us with daily stress.
>
> Graduation is upon me and I can't wait to leave this country I've lost hope in. (Amer)
>
> Our country is built on hatred, mistrust and corruption. People here do not accept difference. They are intolerant, violent and heavily armed. Conflict is inevitable. I'm not staying around to witness more death and destruction. (Rashid)

While orchestrating exit strategies, students continue to fiercely contest the denial tactics of older generations as well as their resilience and endless patience:

> My generation is leaving because we are disgusted with everything, especially pressure from our families to be patient and resilient. Right now, my solution is to have a good time until I can leave. (Yusif)

> As young Lebanese we are brought up to be patient about things that we know will never happen. We're conditioned to become desensitized and blasé. What most societies take for granted, we're still patiently waiting for. So we live with power and water shortages, threats of sectarian violence from militia groups, political and other forms of corruption, a confessional system, mad, unplanned construction, rotting infrastructure and the knowledge that history will continue to repeat itself. I'm not religious. I do not believe in Allah but if He truly does exist, then I can say with human certainty that he has forsaken this country a long time ago. (Leila)

Some closing thoughts

In most societies, the insecurities of young people are associated with the inevitable process of becoming an adult, particularly in post-modern settings where fluidity and uncertainty have replaced structure and tradition. For young Lebanese, roughly half the population, these tensions are hugely compounded. As traditional vectors of stability and loyalty (family and state) are being rejected, employment, security and public discourse remain absent. Within this void, the youth are trapped in a poignant, unsettling predicament. Ironically, they are celebrated as the 'hope of the future', yet deprived of a unified history, stable political system and employment opportunities. Worse still, their voices are silenced or marginalised at a time when Lebanon's historical legacy of unresolved conflict is desperately in need of innovative ways to move beyond a turbulent post-war era.

Within this context, narratives are hugely significant. They matter because they reveal what is and what could and should be. We are conditioned to 'expect' stories with a particular structure, with protagonists and villains, good and bad forces, battles to be fought and obstacles to overcome. Clearly, over the years, my students have abandoned such plots. Rife with a total negativity, disillusioned and defiant, they are busy creating pleasurable, even promiscuous spaces for narcissistic excess. Tragically, in this country of alarming contradictions, simultaneously a battleground and playground, playground activities have prevailed. The political activism, youth-led rebellions and change-struggles resulting from Hariri's assassination in 2005 succeeded, only briefly, in sparking optimistic themes of transformation that demanded an end to the decades-long political strife and altering a rigid, intolerant landscape.

Sadly, a glaring discrepancy between earlier expectations and today's harsh realities is currently defining the conversation, fuelling a mood of lethargy and indifference. Bitterness abounds concerning existing archaic institutions, corrupt, inept politicians and their refusal to address crucial issues. Obstacles to change are seen as insurmountable and, consequently, not worth fighting for. With enthusiasm dissipating, even ongoing regional uprisings seem only to strengthen youth apathy and post-ideological stances. Students, many of whom have the capacity to be effective problem solvers and change makers, are rejecting all forms of public discourse and civic engagement.

In such an anachronistic post-war setting, where sectarian tensions remain high in the wake of regional wars and conflicts, students are no longer interested in reclaiming an open, pluralistic environment conducive to a modicum of tolerance and coexistence. As they indulge in the trappings of a hedonistic culture, negotiable spaces are inevitably shrinking. Continuing the conversation of how and where to find enabling venues for youth citizenship, alongside new ways of articulating it, remains problematic. Genuine confusion abounds regarding how to re-energise students who lack serious concern and conviction, particularly given the legacy of exclusion, fear and mistrust in the country. What enabling venues, modes of solidarity, new concepts and discourse can be developed to reverse the absent nature of youth participation when past attempts to move beyond dysfunctional traditional and institutional frameworks and paradoxes have failed?

Admittedly, the decision of young people to withdraw from active citizenship will define the conversation for years to come, particularly given the absence of compelling new, non-confrontational views. Yet, narrative engagement, in a modest way, continues to open up enabling spaces in an atmosphere of growing intolerance and latent hostility. Making silenced voices heard remains crucial to a country in dire need of reconciliation and change. Through meaningful text creation students from diverse backgrounds challenge strictures imposed by exclusionary mindsets and replace them with innovative ways of seeing. As regional sectarian divisions fuel local sectarian rivalries, the need to re-engage citizen consciousness among educated young Lebanese is vital. Rekindling youthful participation can play a significant role in disrupting a dangerous sectarian narrative that is fast threatening to entangle Lebanon in yet another brutal war.

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