

# Ba'albakī's Influence on 1950s and 1960s Lebanese Women Writers

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**Abstract**—While Ba'albakī ceased writing or publishing since 1964, it is considerable and significant to investigate Ba'albakī's influence on others. This paper examines her influence on three Lebanese women writers: Emily Nasrallah, Muná Jabbūr, and Hanan al-Shaykh. However, the aim is not simply to examine the influence of the writer on these three authors, but rather to note similarities and differences in the challenges they faced and the agendas they followed in their fiction writing. For each of these writers, this article will describe elements of their literature, and then sketch out the influence which Ba'albakī has had on them. This paper relies on material from Sidawi because it includes interviews with the female writers discussed that are relevant to the current discussion. Sidawi asked them about Ba'albakī and her influence on them, the challenges they faced, and how they coped with them. This paper points out their comments using their own words. To be clear, examining these writers' notes and works is beyond the scope of this paper. To sum up, there are significant parallels between the life and work of Ba'albakī, and other Lebanese women writers such as Nasrallah, Jabbūr and al-Shaykh. Like Ba'albakī, Nasrallah and al-Shaykh also suffered in their struggle against their families. Nasrallah and al-Shaykh, like Ba'albakī, suffered because their society did not trust in their abilities and creativity. Ba'albakī opted for isolation because of her conflict with patriarchal society including the Lebanese women's groups, while Nasrallah's isolation was because she preferred individualism and autonomy, and Jabbūr, as could be speculated, was not able to cope with the suffering caused by her role as a woman writer within Lebanese society. Whereas Ba'albakī isolated herself from the Lebanese women's groups, focusing instead on her feminist writing and joining the Shi'r group, Al-Shaykh and the Lebanese women's groups are able to cooperate in harmony. Furthermore, while Nasrallah and Al-Shaykh continued to publish fiction, Ba'albakī stopped publishing fiction in 1964. All of the above confirms not only that it is worthy to investigate deeply and academically both the biography and the works of Ba'albakī, but also that she deserves to include her throughout the top great Arab female writers, at the time, like Al-Shaykh and Nawal El Saadawi.

**Keywords**—Feminist writing, Hanan Al-Shaykh, Laylá Ba'albakī, Lebanese women writers, Muná Jabbūr.

## I. INTRODUCTION

IN Lebanon, a great revolution for women's novels in Arabic language came during the 1950s. Laylá Ba'albakī's 1958 novel, *Anā ahyā* [I live], was the first Lebanese print, written by a woman, to be impartially treated as a momentous contributor to the advancement of women's fiction [1]-[3]. In addition to *Anā ahyā* [4], her second novel, *al-Ālihah al-mamsūkhah* [The disfigured gods] (1960) [5], as well as novels by other Lebanese women writers, made a considerable contribution to Arab women's writing at the time.

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Ba'albakī is a key mid-twentieth century female Arab novelist, who has established a reputation beyond the expectations of her native country. Her works have been translated into French, English, and other languages. In 2009, the Arab Writers' Union in Damascus placed her first novel, *Anā ahyā* (1958), on its list of the top one hundred Arabic novels. In addition to her two novels, Ba'albakī published a book-length lecture, *Naḥnu bi-lā aqni'ah* [We are without masks] (1959) [6]; and a collection of short stories, *Safīnat ḥanān ilā al-qamar* [A spaceship of tenderness to the moon] (1963) [7]. Roger Allen suggests that Ba'albakī contributed significantly to the creative writing at the time. He says:

It seems reasonable to suggest that the writers such as Ba'albakī, Ghāda al-Sammān [b. 1942] and [Nawal] al-Sa'dāwī [b. 1931], whatever one's verdict may be about the literary merits of their fiction, have considerably expanded the creative space within which contemporary writers of both sexes may portray their worlds [3].

Interestingly, Allen places the writer alongside the other Arab women writers he assesses, whose fictions and biographies, unlike those of Ba'albakī, have received much attention and have been thoroughly studied by scholars such as 'Abd al-'Azīz Shabīl [8], and 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Arn'ūt [9]. Allen adds:

The fictions that they [Ba'albakī, Ghāda al-Sammān and al-Sa'dāwī] create and the narrative strategies that they employ to bring them into existence are to be regarded as contributions to the technical repertoire of Arabic fiction [3].

Thus, Allen indicates Ba'albakī's considerable literary contributions not just to Lebanese women's writing but to Arabic fiction in general. Ba'albakī's works have met with widespread critical acclaim, and reflect her engagement in social critique and in the struggle for women's sexual, political and economic emancipation. Furthermore, her works offer unique insights into the period in which they were written, and add to our understanding of the evolution of Arab Lebanese women's writing. Ba'albakī has a forthright, indisputably liberal, feminist writing style, which is nonconformist to a patriarchal civilization and to the idea that the nuclear household is the only appropriate social institution for human relations. Her work is not just a rejection of the Arab women's situation, as di Paola di Capua has claimed; rather, Ba'albakī opposes the patriarchal Arab society and calls for wholesale change in social, cultural and political systems [10]. Moreover, she not only explains why she is claiming such changes, but also articulates the ways in which they could be achieved and their advantages. Her literary

works express not only feminist visions, aspirations, and outlooks, but also criticize the political, economic and social realities of twentieth-century Lebanon. Moreover, Ba'albakī has been controversial; in June, 1964 she was the first Lebanese novelist to be prosecuted for writing which contravened social norms and morality. She was brought to trial because of her collection of short stories, *Safīnat ḥanān ilā al-qamar* (1963).

Although Ba'albakī terminated writing and publishing in 1964, it is highly probable that she still has had a substantial impact on others. Therefore, this paper will inspect the way in which she has inspired three female writers from Lebanon: Emily Nasrallah, Muná Jabbūr, and Hanan al-Shaykh. Conversely, the objective is not just to scrutinise her impact, but also to compare and contrast the adversity they had to confront and the agenda they elected to focus on in their written work. This article will describe the prose foundations of these writers and then outline how Ba'albakī had an influence. Relevant material, including interviews with the three writers, was collected and dissected by Sidawi, and therefore will be utilized as a base for this current paper [11]. Sidawi questioned the authors on the effect Ba'albakī had, the trials they faced and how they survived. The remarks from the women will be relayed in this paper using their own words. However, it should be noted that in-depth exploration of the transcripts and works of the writers would be exceeding the capacity of the essay.

## II. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Emily Nasrallah (b. 1931) devotes her first novel, *Ṭuyūr aylūl* [The birds of September] (1962), to the value of having a strong connection to the village, to the land and the homeland. In her novel, Nasrallah deals with specific social traditions, justifying some while calling for a rebellion against traditions which limit women to study, work and travel [12]. For example, her female narrator says: "The village reserves everything. Even, a person when they die it refuses to send them far." Here she points out that people in the village have considerable social connections, whereas elsewhere she criticizes: "This village limited my dreams and my thoughts, its traditions are strong enough to limit and control my doings; therefore, I do as they want [...]" [12]. Thus, we can see how Nasrallah distinguishes among social traditions: From one side her characters are bored of some traditions which seem not to discriminate against females; on the other hand, female characters complain about their society, criticizing norms which limit women in creativity and designing their future and life. In another example criticizing patriarchal society, a mother says to her daughter who has expressed a desire to study in the city [12]: "What will people say regarding your traveling to the city? And regarding your living there alone like males? You are surely joking." It is clear that Nasrallah employs her novel to call for social change and campaign against norms discriminating or limiting women to study, work and restricted movement. Consequently, within her texts, Nasrallah talks about feminist issues. For example, advancing women's education is one component of the social change for

which she called. While she does not concentrate on making the woman her main subject, she includes the whole of society within the process of change and social revolution she points towards. Furthermore, she calls for social change in a way that will lead to a better life in the village for both men and women. This suggests that in this area Nasrallah differs from Ba'albakī who makes the woman the main subject of her writing.

Nasrallah admires the courage and boldness of those feminist writers who broke the taboos about speaking of women's experiences. It seems as though she is referring to Ba'albakī when she says, "As for the female writers who broke the taboo, I admire their courage and boldness. In contrast, in some cases, this came at the expense of the concept of art and innovation." Nasrallah emphasizes that she differs from feminist writers who were influenced by the Western feminist revolution, like Ba'albakī [11]. She said:

Who is categorized or classified as a feminist writer is doubtless influenced by the feminist revolution, as it is defined in the West ... That is where I differ, in my opinions and vision of the sexual freedom, from the Western concept. I hope our female writers are aware of this difference [11].

Thus, Nasrallah rejects the concept of Western sexual freedom, while other female writers like Ba'albakī, Hanan al-Shaykh and others, embraced it, as will be shown later. This suggests that Nasrallah differs from Ba'albakī in her novels' contents, and in her rejection of the Western concept of sexual freedom. In contrast, though, she resembles her in isolation from not only the Lebanese feminist movement, but also political affiliation. Nasrallah demonstrates her search for individuality and autonomy:

I have friends from all political parties, directions and mindsets. I also have my patriotic and Arabic aspirations and ambitions, which sympathize with the Algerian revolution, the Palestinian case and all the other fair causes. On the other hand, I am not cut out to work as part of a group. It does not suit my nature. I love my individuality and my isolation passionately. I would not feel comfortable, if I became limited to an ideology. The writer should be concerned about his/her independence. I believe if you join a group or party, you come to see things from their perspective [11].

Consequently, while Nasrallah resembles Ba'albakī in her isolation and in not associating directly with the Lebanese feminist movement, she differs from her in the background which causes such isolation. We see Ba'albakī opted for isolation because of her conflict with patriarchal society and the Lebanese feminist movement. Unlike Ba'albakī, Nasrallah's isolation is because she prefers individualism and autonomy. Like Ba'albakī, Nasrallah faced challenges in her literature and journalism career path. It is obvious that such challenges were raised by her society, which is patriarchal as well. She explains those challenges:

Women did not get a chance, before this era [the sixties era] to publish, and to have their work accepted. I was aware of all that. I was not unaware, when I heard

the question about who you wrote for. That happened during my journalism career. Even among the majority of my male colleagues, I felt every second that I needed to clarify and give a proof that my existence, in the newspaper organization, was not to catch a 'husband' [11].

Nasrallah points out the challenges she faced as a female newspaper reporter and writer. For example, males regarded Nasrallah in an inferior way. Such society not only did not give females credit for their works and did not trust their abilities, but also was not happy when they succeeded and flourished. Those were the challenges Nasrallah faced before she published her first novel. Usually, both men and women writers must prove their abilities in the beginning as a first step. As such, it might be difficult for writers to publish, and we should take in account that it is difficult for publishers to accept unknown writers—both men and women. As for the challenges she faced after publishing this novel, Nasrallah discovered in 2005:

After I published my first novel, I was not safe from the inquiries in the newspapers and magazine pages such as where did she get that? We know her as an average reporter, so how did she make this noticeable step? That is, because the novel kicked up a fuss, when it was awarded two literature prizes [11].

Indeed, these inquiries could have occurred in the beginning, but nowadays we are aware of much concern and appreciation for her and her fiction. This appreciation is reflected in several dissertations and theses as well as books on her and her fiction written by both males and females. Thus, we can see that the writer, even if she said this in 2005, is still describing the situation she faced after publishing her first novel. However, Nasrallah faced difficulties both before and after publishing her first novel. Furthermore, According Nasrallah and Ba'albakī, Lebanese society did not believe in the female's capabilities in the fields of innovation and production of literature, in the time. In this context, then, Nasrallah is similar to Ba'albakī in respect of those challenges she faced in her patriarchal society.

Nasrallah perceives that the challenges she faced rose from her desire for social change, and because of her attitudes towards social customs and traditions. She revealed in 2005:

The extra challenges I faced are because of my insistence on not going down the traditional paths which were set for the girl's future in my environs. My struggle against my family branded my life. I lived in the capital, and my concern was that I needed to care for their concerns and dreams. I lived as if they were my conscience [11].

Thus, like Ba'albakī, Nasrallah suffered in her struggle against her family. She faced suffering because she wanted to make a difference and to be untraditional. Moreover, she wanted not only to be independent and educated, but also to work freely and to have a role in society. Nasrallah takes into consideration not only her relatives, but also her community's values, standpoint and hopes, bearing those values strongly in

mind when she lived away from her family and village, in Beirut.

It seems that Hanan al-Shaykh (b. 1945) resembles Ba'albakī in her feminist perspectives. Al-Shaykh's novel *The Story of Zahrah* (1980) represents a feminist rebellious agenda. Females in the novel challenge social and political ideas and patriarchal oppression overall. Zahra, the female heroine of the novel, grew up in the context of the Lebanese civil war and environment. She travelled with her husband abroad, where she entered a different war. When the writer was young, her mother would leave her daughter outside while she engaged in sex with her lover. Growing up in such a social and sexual environment influenced her significantly, as reflected in her mother's on-going sex with a soldier upstairs while claiming she was too sick to have sex with her husband. When she became pregnant, she told the soldier, who killed her because of his fear of scandals. This core environment is enough to demonstrate employing sex as a symbol and that a woman's body is her own—she is free to do what she wants and with whom. This is a rebellion against social and religious laws too. Thus, we see al-Shaykh employs her writing for her feminist agenda and with a strong sexuality dimension in her fiction. This is a feminist in conflict with her patriarchal society.

Al-Shaykh herself admits that she is proud that Ba'albakī's views and stories influenced her. She narrates her perceptions as follows:

I was so impressed and influenced by Ba'albakī. After reading the first phrase in her novel *Anā aḥyā*, I felt this is the world I like. I liked her revolt, as I was myself a rebel. I felt she was talking to me and that I joined her in a demonstration against all that differs from the two of us. I was influenced by Laylā Ba'albakī because not only was she a female writer, but also because she was different from the mainstream. I was impressed and influenced for the same reasons by Unsī al-Ḥāj's poetical work. My admiration started with the way the cover was designed, the way the letters were written, and how it differed from the norm. Then, I felt that Ba'albakī and al-Ḥāj resembled me [11].

Thus, al-Shaykh verifies that Ba'albakī influenced her, and, indeed, not only that she influenced her but that al-Shaykh merged with her in their spirit of rebellion against patriarchal society. She also affirms her pride in following Ba'albakī in her struggle, and in framing narratives aimed at the advancement of women. At the same time, she confirms that Unsī al-Ḥāj's poetry influenced her as well. Thus it appears that the poet al-Ḥāj influenced both Ba'albakī and al-Shaykh, through both his thoughts and his poetry. Just as al-Ḥāj was one of the people who encouraged Ba'albakī to write, so he inspired al-Shaykh too.

Al-Shaykh also experienced suffering because of her feminist views and the fact that in her writing she protested against patriarchal society. In her early childhood, she suffered because of her father's attempt to impose the headscarf on her, although she later succeeded in revolting against this. Unlike Ba'albakī, she also suffered when her parents got divorced, as

her mother subsequently remarried and gave all her attention to her new offspring [11].

Like Nasrallah and Ba'albakī, al-Shaykh openly discusses her suffering, which came about because her society did not trust in her ability and creativity. She recalls:

As I insisted on the challenge [in writing her first novel, *The Suicide of a Dead Man* (1970)] I fell into a great entanglement. Most people questioned my ability to write, saying, "We do not know who helped you to write this novel". There was astonishment and disbelief. They did not take me seriously, and they considered my novel as a onetime accident or incident. All their responses and criticism followed the same pattern [11].

It seems that al-Shaykh confirms Ba'albakī's and Nasrallah's views, as mentioned before, namely that male dominated Lebanese society did not believe in the female's ability to write. Lebanese female writers thus experienced pain caused by their society's lack of faith in their capabilities. The suffering of al-Shaykh did not stop at that point. Although she wrote her first novel in 1967, she was not able to publish it until 1970. Al-Shaykh does not explain why she did not publish it before 1970. What caused a three-year delay in publishing her work? Some might think this was to highlight her suffering within the patriarchal society and garner more support from readers. However, instead of explaining why she did not publish, she continues to talk in general about gender discrimination against women which she personally experienced:

I suffered because of discrimination against my gender. The society tied the concept of credibility to the male's writing. Only the man can think and all that he says is true. Because of this belief, and because of male authority, man does not face difficulties to publish his work. Unlike this, a woman like me is forced to prove her existence. Then, the people forget that a woman's success is the outcome of her hard fight, labor as well as her talent [11].

However, it appears that al-Shaykh went hand-in-hand with Ba'albakī in the suffering she underwent before being able to publish her first novel. Indeed, unlike al-Shaykh, Ba'albakī was able to overcome those obstacles and her first novel did not have to wait for several years to be published, as in the case of al-Shaykh. Nevertheless, Ba'albakī still had to face difficulties before she was able to publish her first novel. Like Ba'albakī, al-Shaykh moved to London in 1982. There she settled, and even made it clear that she did not want to go back home to her country. While al-Shaykh resembles Ba'albakī in respect of their views, life in London, and suffering, she differs from her in her relationship with Lebanese women's groups. The Lebanese women's groups cared about and were interested in al-Shaykh's novels and literature. Al-Shaykh revealed in 2005:

This [the interest of the Lebanese feminist movement in her literature] may be credited to my deep understanding of the female, and her world as I mentioned before. This does not contradict the fact that I care about the whole society. I do not write just from the

female perspective. In addition, I write on not only woman, but also general social issues. The interest of the feminist movement in my work can be summarized, in what one of the women said, "*The Story of Zahrah* opened my eyes on a lot of issues ..." [11].

It appears that al-Shaykh succeeded in combining feminist writing and good relationships with the Lebanese women's groups. This could be because she wrote on different issues, including social and political issues, and not only from female or feminist perspectives. For example, she points out a national issue reflected in how Zahra's uncle (on her mother's side) looks at her, considering her to be his connection to his homeland Lebanon, from where Zahra just arrived. As a result, he takes care of her, giving her his own bed and waking her up every morning. We see al-Shaykh employing her novel to focus on the issue of nationalism and loyalty to the homeland. In addition, *The Story of Zahra* highlights a political issue in that some rebellious youth immigrate to Africa as an exile for escaping from dictators, rulers, and non-regimes in Arab countries/Lebanon. Al-Shaykh knows to complicate the same action (i.e., immigration to Africa) while looking for employment; thus, it can be said that the writer deals with socio-economic issues—namely, the regime in the homeland does not provide or have enough relevant employment for citizens.

Ba'albakī influenced not only al-Shaykh, but other writers as well. One instance is the writer Muná Jabbūr (1943-1964), who read the books of Ba'albakī including *Naḥnu bi-lā aqni'ah*. 'Abduh Wāzin insists that:

It is so clear that Jabbūr had read *Anā ahyā* by Laylā Ba'albakī, published in 1958, and succeeded because of its boldness and contents. Muná Jabbūr used *Anā ahyā* in different ways. She was bolder and more violent than Ba'albakī, in her language and text. Muná Jabbūr is a forgotten writer who wrote *Fatāh tāfīhah* [Insignificant girl] at the age of sixteen. She committed suicide at the age of twenty one [13].

Wāzin compares Jabbūr and Ba'albakī, discovering that Ba'albakī influenced Jabbūr, and that the latter surpassed her in language [13]. Jabbūr published her first novel *Fatāh tāfīhah* [Insignificant girl] (1962); her second novel, *al-Ghurbān wa-al-musūh* [The crows and the sackcloth], was published in 1966, that is to say two years after her death by suicide in January 1964. An examination of Jabbūr's background and the reasons for her suicide is beyond the scope of the present work. However, it appears that Jabbūr could not overcome the challenges she faced. In this context, it may be that while Jabbūr opted for suicide, Ba'albakī chose isolation from the cultural scene for several decades, as has been shown.

In *Fatāh tāfīhah*, the female heroine is Nadá Khūrī, who often expresses her need to have sex despite refusing to have sex with her lover Hinarī in the beginning of the novel. She imagines him sleeping with her while having sex in her bed. At the end of the novel, she runs out to find her lover, who tells her that he already has a girlfriend whom he is going to marry. The heroine challenges a very traumatic situation

caused by sexual and romantic disappointment. Thus, like Ba'albakī, Jabbūr employs seeking sex as a symbol for females' individual freedom which constructs a rebellion against the patriarchal society as well as social and religious laws and norms. Therefore, Jabbūr, like Ba'albakī, included her feminist agenda within her novel.

### III. CONCLUSION

In summary, there are numerous equivalences concerning the life and work of Ba'albakī and of the additional Lebanese writers, Nasrallah, Jabbūr and al-Shaykh. In particular, Nasrallah and al-Shaykh abided the conflict with their families and with society not placing faith in their capabilities and inventiveness, which were troubles Ba'albakī also encountered. All three women opted for isolation, but for varying reasons. For Ba'albakī it was due to conflict with the patriarchal society, including the Lebanese women's groups, whilst for Nasrallah it was because she preferred individualism and independence. Meanwhile, it could be speculated that Jabbūr chose this path as she could not handle the suffering brought about due to her engagement in Lebanese society as a female writer. Leading on from this, Ba'albakī cut links with the Lebanese women's groups and alternatively became affiliated with the Shi'r group, and dedicated her time to feminist writing. On the contrary, Al-Shaykh amicably collaborated with the Lebanese women's groups. Finally, in 1964, Ba'albakī ceased publishing fiction, whereas Nasrallah and Al-Shaykh continued along such a career path.

Overall, it can be concluded that it is well worth conducting an in-depth exploration into the life story and narrative achievements of Ba'albakī. Furthermore, it is imperative that she be included as one of the top Arab female writers of her time, alongside others such as Al-Shaykh and El Saadawi.

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