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Recovery of Voice, Agency, and Mental Health Through Autobiography in *Nadia, Captive of Hope*

by

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The Simurgh, a fantastic bird thought to have originated in Iranian mythology, is a religious and spiritual symbol for the journey of self-growth and exploration of faith an individual embarks upon throughout their lifetime (Tüfekçi). Successful travels of the semiotic ‘road’ meet at the end of the road the Simurgh, which is really no other than themselves. As Tüfekçi states in his analysis of Farid Ud-Din Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds*, “...there are no paths, no travelers, and no guides now. Just like the disappearance of our shadow as the sun sets, they all disappear within the body of the Simurgh and become one with it” (4). In connection with the self-discovery necessary to find the Simurgh within oneself, I want to highlight that women’s narratives have not historically received the attention they have deserved as critical works impacting the individual, society, and history. How often have women been given the chance to speak on issues integral to their lives without being dismissed, silenced, or ignored? Why were they historically denied this opportunity for self-growth and independence? Particularly alarming are the blanket stereotypes applied to large groups of women from societies less commonly studied in Western academia and more often stereotyped as passive victims such as the women of the Arab and Muslim world. Autobiography serves as a unique opportunity for Arab and Muslim women to narrate their own stories and experiences rather than be narrated by

others. Fay Afaf Kanafani's *Nadia, Captive of Hope* (1999), demonstrates this reclaiming of narrative well. Through the recounting and narration of her life journey, Afaf Kanafani 'finds' the Simurgh, and her story is proof that the ability to self-narrate and self-define is paramount to the happiness and peace an individual can find in their life (Kanafani, ix-x).

### **Section 1: Introduction**

Fay Afaf Kanafani was a Lebanese woman born to a Muslim family in 1918 and wrote an autobiography entitled *Nadia, Captive of Hope* about her life experiences in Lebanon, Palestine, and beyond as an Arab Muslim woman creating her own independent and autonomous life. The autobiography spans Afaf Kanafani's lifetime and was written after she arrived in America in the 1980s, detailing the many physical, emotional, and spiritual journeys she has made throughout her life to achieve self-determination and autonomy. Afaf Kanafani's story is one of perseverance: she continuously pursues her education and an independent path forward despite experiencing societal limitations as a Muslim woman in the twentieth century, and physical, verbal, and sexual abuse at the hands of her family as well as her husband and the men around her throughout her life who weaponize gendered power hierarchies. Despite the pain and injustices Afaf Kanafani experiences, she continues chasing her goals.

After abuse and mistreatment at the hands of her parents, she is involuntarily married to her cousin in Palestine as a minor. Despite having no choice in the timing or person she marries, she still attempts to maintain autonomy and independence by adamantly defending her right to be treated with respect and not be sexually assaulted by her husband in the name of the consummation of the marriage and continued marital relationships. Regardless of the opinions or power her parents, in-laws, and husband have, Afaf Kanafani never gives up on herself or her right to autonomy despite the many challenges life throws her way.

Life in Palestine in the 1900s before and during the mass displacement of Palestinians and the creation of the state of Israel was one of the first major struggles Afaf Kanafani writes about, as she spends several of her formative years in Palestine, learning about the complexities of Palestine-Israel relations and beginning to formulate an understanding of Arab and world politics as a teenager (Hasabelnaby and Nasr 231-232) (Kanafani 107-110, 127-128, 133-136, 174, 190-193, 225-250). However, as Geraldine Forbes states in *Nadia's* "Afterword", the perils of hypocrisy become clear to the writer as her roots and time in Palestine deepen and continue. Kanafani emphasizes in her autobiography how the impact of political beliefs, ideology, or a total dismissal of politics can be deeply personal and dangerous (336). Her husband, Marwan, is shot and killed due to inter-communal violence when he ignores safety protocols, not taking the threat of physical harm or his children losing their father seriously and attempts to walk to work. Afaf Kanafani is widowed and her sons are left without a father. Her journey of autonomy and independence is only emphasized when she is raising her sons before and after her husband's death - from letting her oldest choose his name as a baby to refusing to enter another marriage until they have all grown up, she emphasizes not wanting to repeat cycles of neglect, lack of prioritization, and control with her children (Kanafani 182-183, 270-272, 288). When Kanafani no longer lives with her in-laws and is not required to structure her life around her husband, she begins fashioning a future for herself – pursuing a job that gives her meaning and the funding to independently raise her children, pursuing her career, and pursuing an education for herself and her children no matter what it took. Kanafani establishes herself as a self-reliant, strong, and loving woman throughout her autobiography, and her journey of self-determination is an everlasting one.

As a psychology major and English literature minor and an Arab-American woman with an interest in the Middle East and the United States, I am approaching Kanafani's autobiography from an interdisciplinary perspective. I am studying Kanafani's work to better understand why she turned to autobiography and how she used this type of writing. I claim that Kanafani's use of autobiography is intentional. It is through this type of personal writing that she reconstitutes her autonomy and agency in the face of traumatic personal and social experiences and injustices.

## **Section 2: Autobiography**

Autobiography has shifted in its definition over time, but one current definition describes autobiography as signifying a "retrospective narrative that undertakes to tell the author's own life, or a substantial part of it, seeking (at least in its classic version) to reconstruct his/her personal development within a given historical, social, and cultural framework (Schwalm). Typically, as Schwalm notes, autobiographies are written after points and events of significance in the autobiographer's life, since "only at the end of one's story can it be unfurled from the beginning as a singular life course, staging the autobiographer as subject".

Autobiographies are also known as 'life-writing'. The act of writing one's own story is not a novel idea, and deeply rooted in literary history (Smith & Watson). The act of writing autobiographies has historically been reserved for those of higher socioeconomic status – it can be argued that most people who must work to survive do not often have the time or opportunity to reflect on important life experiences, write about them, and then get them published. Typically, upper-class individuals had the tools and the downtime to take on such a project, and this has led to an overrepresentation of wealthy and privileged perspectives in literary canons across the world (Smith & Watson). Most women most of the time did not have the luxury to write and publish their autobiographies.

## **Women's Autobiographies**

Before the 1980s, critical analysis of women's autobiographies was not recognized as a legitimate literary field (Smith & Watson). Clearly, some women wrote their autobiographies and even found audiences, but their work was not valued in academic circles to the degree that men's self-writing was. As Smith and Watson argue, 'serious' autobiographies that were worthy of critical literary attention came from men with historically acknowledged significant life accomplishments. Other life stories that weren't written by 'great men' held less literary merit, and as Al-Hassan Golley highlights in her critical analysis of Arab women's autobiographies, entitled *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies*, the lives of women historically existed outside of the male-dominated public sphere. Due to the presumed dichotomy between the private and the public spheres of life, women's stories were viewed as narratives that belonged to the private sphere and therefore were insignificant and inappropriate for public sharing. Antiquated beliefs such as this have shifted dramatically since the 1980s, and along with the rise of literary analysis from a feminist critical perspective, the voices of groups and intersectional identities that were marginalized or ignored have found more of a platform to share and uphold their experiences and life stories through the medium of autobiography (Smith & Watson).

## **Arab Women's Autobiographies**

As *Nadia, Captive of Hope*, is an autobiography by an Arab-American woman, it is also important to acknowledge Arab women's intersections with the genre of autobiography. Women have historically been less visible in literary and social circles, with their lives impacted by sexism and patriarchy everywhere. Arab women constitute no exception to this. In acknowledging, analyzing, and interpreting an Arab woman's life and experiences through autobiography, I do not wish to contribute to stereotypes around the subjugation and supposed

helplessness of Arab women. Golley of *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies* notes that “we should bear in mind ... that women’s oppression cannot be simply measured and compared between cultures, as if all women in a certain culture or country lived under the same conditions regardless of class, education, religious affiliation, or other social factors” (p. xii). Just as one person’s experience cannot be an exact one-to-one representation of another’s, Arab women do not all have the same experiences, traumas, and lives as each other. Representing Arab women, particularly those that come from Muslim backgrounds, as voiceless victims serve only to further their marginalization. Kanafani’s autobiography speaks precisely against the image of Muslim Arab women as silent victims.

Arab women’s autobiographies began to be noticed by Western academic circles in the 1960s, and as each decade has passed, more work is acknowledged, and the field continues to grow (Forbes 336). In *Nadia's* “Afterword”, Geraldine Forbes discusses the temporal alignment of prominent women’s autobiographies with Arab women’s social movements, such as the Egyptian women’s movement around rights and feminism. These autobiographies demonstrate individual Arab women’s voices and experiences to the larger literary community. Furthermore, they highlight perspectives that are essential to defeating generalizations and harmful stereotypes. Golley and Forbes survey similar prominent Arab women’s autobiographies, such as Huda Sha’rawi, Fadwa Tuqan, and Nawal el-Saadawi’s works.

### **Why Kanafani and Her Autobiography?**

This thesis highlights Kanafani’s autobiography and life story as its primary source due to her experiences with familial, emotional, and sexual abuse, and subsequent connections with the discourse around mental health, as well as her utilization of the literary form of autobiography to create self-healing and self-narration of her life story. In searching for a



primary source, I sought out narratives from Arab women that experienced and dealt with traumatic experiences that impacted their mental and emotional health. My interest in Lebanese and Palestinian history and literature due to my cultural background makes Kanafani's story a personally compelling one, as she was a Lebanese woman who spent a significant time of her life in Palestine before and after the Palestinian Catastrophe of 1948 and experienced the impact of civil wars and political conflicts within twentieth-century Lebanon.

*Nadia* also has a unique element in terms of reconstruction of identity through autobiography, which will be later explored in this essay: Afaf Kanafani refers to herself by the pseudonym Nadia and writes her autobiography in English rather than her native Arabic. After this point in my thesis, when referring to the author within the context of analyzing her autobiography, I will be referring to her as Nadia. The name Afaf Kanafani will be reserved for post-autobiography discussion and analysis so as to reduce confusion. The author experiences many complex and intertwined personal, familial, and societal traumas in the lifespan her autobiography traverses, and she does not pretend the pain she endures doesn't exist. Nor does she succumb to her pain – rather, she reconstitutes her journey into one of self-determination and creates a life of her choice through the relentless pursuit of her education, her independence, and the security and safety of her children's upbringing. Studying *Nadia, Captive of Hope* also reveals how one Arab woman processes and reframes the difficult experiences of her life by narrating them.

### **Section 3: Explication – Nadia's Individual Traumas**

In discussing the impact of trauma on Nadia, I will highlight people of significance and impact within the boundaries of her autobiography. Nadia's father is the first of several men in her life that violate her emotional and/or physical boundaries, rights, and consent. Her response

to each of these men and the actions that were continually taken against her help to demonstrate Nadia's strength of character and willingness to persevere no matter what. The sexual abuse Nadia experienced at the hands of her father as a child is a formative traumatic memory in the telling of her life story. This occurs near the beginning of the autobiography, and the scene holds a marked difference in comparison to earlier parts of the novel.

Nadia's storytelling typically begins with experiences she was not there for and may have fictionalized, such as her birth and her parents' relationship dynamics, but the night she was sexually assaulted by her father is the first in which an established gap of memory is demonstrated. While being carried away from her room by her father as a young girl to be molested, she writes that she "[has] no memory of that night – patches of some nightmare are still floating where our house used to stand, like leaves by the wind. That night, though, that night moved out of the house and, for years, locked itself in a corner of my soul, a dark and unvisited one" (Kanafani 52).

Though we never learn the intricacies of what happened to her, her relationship with her father fundamentally changes after this. Nadia's storytelling methods shift between this chapter and the next, and we do not learn much about what she experienced between seven and seventeen years old. This temporal gap signifies to Nadia's audience that this event has deeply impacted her, and we resurface on the other side witnessing her seething anger and lack of trust for her father or mother, Ban, who is thought to have enabled Karim (her father)'s behavior. Much of Nadia's anger is turned towards her mother's learned helplessness – no matter whom Karim (or, later, Nadia's brother, Anwar) violates, whether it be servants or family, she fears the consequences of defending her daughter and believes it would not change anything (Kanafani 95-96).

Nadia is taught early on in life that neither of her parents can be trusted to protect her or keep her safe, but this realization is not crippling to her. As she tells her sister Nora, "...our mother could have stopped him if she had the courage to stand by her child. She knew all along that he was a cruel tyrant by nature, especially with those who resist him, but she closed her eyes to the cruel measures of intimidation he enforced on me for resisting him" (Kanafani 78-79).

Karim's predatory and problematic sexual tendencies and power trips as the 'man of the house' continue to live on through Nadia's brother, Anwar, who bullies her and makes life routinely difficult for her throughout childhood and adulthood. Again, her mother Ban does not step in, a perspective Nadia begins to understand later when she is forced to marry her first husband, Marwan, and his abusive tendencies affect their children. Nadia makes an intentional choice in not including that ten-year time gap in her writing - perhaps because it may have been too triggering to relive - but she still demonstrates resilience through her experiences before and after continuing to stand up for herself and what she believes are a girl (and woman)'s rights in life. Her family unit does punish her for her (rightful) anger and frustration towards her father, and the assumption that Nadia is willful and difficult follows her for life in relation to her family. However, she does not allow this to get in her way, as Nadia knows herself deeply and intrinsically from an early age as smart, strong, and persevering. Despite Karim's attempts at control and punishment throughout her childhood, she still makes the best of the opportunities she has and continues to seek out more when possible (Kanafani 52-53, 82-83).

Karim's molestation of his daughter is not the end of his attempts to control Nadia and benefit from her existence – Nadia is betrothed to her Palestinian cousin, married against her will as an adolescent, and has her marriage rights as a Muslim woman violated by Karim. Though it is not a requirement for all Muslim couples to be able to get married, some Muslim men,

particularly those of higher socioeconomic class who can afford it, pay a *mahr* or set monetary amount to the wife as soon as the marriage has been made official (Amini). This concept is comparable to the Western dowry, but the main difference is that the *mahr* should be paid to the wife, not to her family, or kept by her husband after she is married. Her chance at economic independence not tied to her husband or father is taken away when her *mahr* is kept by Karim. There are even extra payments Karim and her brother, Anwar, tack on for imagined expenses – in short, Nadia’s father and brother view her marriage to Marwan as extremely profitable.

Nadia is aware of this unfortunate reality, noting that “a relentless voice in me argued, obsessively, that I had a brother who would have sold me for money or for favors – one who would do this in style, and with a smile that never deceived me” (Kanafani 85). Nadia is made aware at various points in her life that her opinion or desires would not change the fate that had been decided for her. She never stops fighting and does not succumb to the life path chosen for her. This opportunity at economic independence stolen away from her by Karim and Anwar may have given her the tools to escape difficult situations earlier on in her life, but it does not hold her back forever – she still pushes forward, pursuing her education and career in every way she feasibly can (Kanafani 259-267).

Nadia’s education is threatened in her teenage years due to her impending marriage, but since her education is an integral element of her journey of self-growth, autonomy, and transformation, this does not destabilize her forever. I would like to, again, note the higher socioeconomic status Nadia’s family retained during her childhood and before her marriage. Nadia was born at a time when there were historically more educational options for Lebanese girls and women than ever before, but it is important to note that these were closed systems in the form of costly private schools (Elsie). Many private schools serving different religious or

educational interests were created during the 1900s in Lebanon, but it was not until much later during Nadia's lifetime that a legitimate public school option was established – she even aided in establishing educational curriculums as part of her career later in life (Elsie) (Kanafani 312-313). Early in her life-writing, Nadia even points out and questions why other girls her age from poorer families are made to work until they marry and cannot go to school. She never wastes the opportunities that she was given, though, and excels in her education up until she is forbidden from going to her classes by her father and brother's behest since he sees no purpose in her having an education if she was to be a wife. Nadia does not give up, even in the face of this significant challenge – her best friend brings her homework and textbooks and assists her in sneaking out of the house in the final months of her school year to take her final exams. Despite how dismal her future seems, Nadia never gives up on her education, even when it seems pointless. She relentlessly fights for it, and even makes the best of her forced marriage to Marwan in the early days by taking college courses at the school near her in-laws' house in Haifa, Palestine (Kanafani 129).

Though her formal education pauses during the years of her marriage to Marwan and the concurrent systematic destabilization of Palestine, she still does not give up on knowledge and learning as tools of power and independence. Through all the people she encounters during her time in Haifa, she asks questions, maintains curiosity about world and political events, and strives to stay abreast of everything happening in Palestine. She is once again billed as stubborn, inquisitive, and willful by the men around her, but never attempts to make herself smaller for the satisfaction or comfort of others.

When she returns to Beirut later in life with her children, education is still a top priority. Nadia begins to build a career and takes courses to build herself up professionally, all the while

prioritizing her independence and ability to maintain autonomy from her family's expectations and restrictions. She believes that education is a fundamental right of each person, man or woman, and her sons are not exempt from this – she tells them, despite financial difficulties, that “education will be the only luxury I will always manage to provide you” (Kanafani 241). Nadia does not break this promise to her sons or herself. She propels herself and her sons' futures forward with the career she builds and takes all opportunities she has to continue educating herself.

Her academic and professional excellence and determination get her to a funded year in America where she attends several universities to further her education. Despite the lack of support and encouragement Nadia receives from her family of origin, her first husband, or her immediate environment, she never stops fighting for a future she has built herself, brick by brick, that no one can take from her. Her life writing does not narrate the difficult obstacles that arise with her family and being a young woman in the twentieth century as unsurmountable – she proves to herself and her audience that she continuously pursues education and independence in the innate knowledge that it will bring her what she desires and deserves in this life (Kanafani 306-311).

Finally, Nadia's arranged marriage to Marwan, her distant Palestinian relative, and the events that follow symbolize an impactful period of her life in which she experienced individual traumas but demonstrated her growth, perseverance, and belief in autonomy and independence for herself and her sons Ghassan, Usama, and Jamal. Nadia moves to Haifa to live with her husband and in-laws after her marriage to Marwan in Beirut, and though her father-in-law (Uncle Ahmad) takes care of her like one of his own, Marwan quickly proves himself to be both emotionally and physically unsafe for Nadia. After over a year passes with Nadia's staunch

refusal to consummate their marriage, lacking an attraction or desire for sex with Marwan, he becomes more physically abusive. He begins to drink heavily, seemingly self-medicating the mental illness and deep unhappiness that is both implied and discussed by Nadia in the autobiography. Marwan resents that she is more invested in his family and other pursuits rather than their marriage, and his doctor and psychiatrist friends are indirectly enlisted in shaming Nadia about her lack of fulfillment of her ‘wifely duties.’ This is the first direct mention of mental healthcare and treatment in *Captive of Hope*, and Nadia’s hesitance around Ralph, the psychiatrist, and Dr. Imad, the family physician, is warranted as Imad believes that she is “committing a crime by inflicting such strange rules [not having sex] on him [Marwan]” (161). This same doctor calls her stubborn and attempts to sexually assault her for her ‘willfulness.’ Ralph calls her a difficult case for her lack of intimacy with Marwan, and she faces repeated back-handed comments about her abstinence until the day that she unknowingly drinks too much at the hands of Marwan and their friends and is maritally raped by him with no memory of the incident (Kanafani 160-163, 166-167).

Nadia’s sexual assault at the hands of Marwan is the second significant trauma that the writer cannot recall. Even though she has experienced such a violation against her body once more in her life, over time, Nadia transforms her pain and feelings of self-loathing into forgiveness and love for herself and her child as she becomes pregnant with her first son. There is no one telling her that things will get better or that Marwan will have less control over her, and Nadia even acknowledges how stuck she feels in the marriage: she would now lose her children to Marwan and his family if she divorced him, as under some versions of Muslim family law, women did not have the right to raise their children past a certain age. Nadia is not made aware of the complexities of marriage, intimacy, or desire before being thrust into this marriage – she is

a teenager during her relationship with Marwan and is left entirely unprepared by her mother other than Ban's encouragement for her to 'temper her will'. She does not desire Marwan and doesn't know why it would be inappropriate for a married couple to behave as friends while she spends more time with her in-laws than with him. That does not change the severity of the violation that he inflicts upon her but serves to provide some context of the situation in which her relationship occurs.

Despite all these complexities around sexuality, consent, and marriage, Nadia charges forward, drawing on her faith and her spirituality in the comforting form of her late Grandpa Mehdi in times of despair. Due to her marriage to Marwan, her understanding of her mother's behavior begins to shift as she realizes that she was in a marriage with children to a man with abusive and controlling tendencies, just like her father. As Marwan began to abuse their sons physically and verbally, with Usama taking on the brunt of the mistreatment, Nadia feels an ever-present "mute rage over Marwan's tyrannical behavior towards [their sons] [tearing] through my soul as I began to see myself as helpless against my irascible husband as my mother was with my father..." (Kanafani 202). This realization does not seal her into a lifetime of enabling abuse against her sons or avoiding them to prevent feelings of guilt as her mother did with her. Her traumatic experiences show Nadia where the gaps in her parents' behaviors were, and she pours her love, knowledge, and support into her children – and in doing so, begins to do this for herself as well (Kanafani 223, 241-243, 282-283).

#### **Section 4: Nadia's Socio-historical Traumas & the Connection between the Personal and the Political**

The connections between the personal and political elements of Nadia's life in this autobiography are of great significance (Forbes 336). As briefly mentioned previously, Nadia



moves to Palestine during a particularly crucial period of history: she is there from 1935 until 1948, fleeing to return to Lebanon with her in-laws after the Palestinian Catastrophe of 1948 (*al-Nakba*), where, over the course of about two years, the state of Israel is established via the systematic displacement and ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians (Hasabelnaby and Nasr 231-232). Nadia and her in-laws are no exception to this historical event, and it comprises the backdrop of her autobiography during her time in Palestine.

The events leading up to *al-Nakba* are not distinct from Nadia's story, though – most notable of this connection between her personal life and the political world when she lived in Palestine is the sudden death of her husband, Marwan, who refuses to acknowledge the dangerous reality of Haifa at the time and is shot by rebels while walking to work on an unsafe road. Not only does Nadia lose the home she has come to know when her in-laws leave as the political instability worsens, but she also loses her husband and is quickly thrust into even more instability in an uncertain time.

With Marwan's passing, her sons lose their father, and Nadia quickly realizes that she has no guarantee that her sons will stay with her, as all that remains is the thread of

mutual trust my in-laws and I had acquired throughout our years together [to not take her sons from her]. I dared hope that we [Nadia and her sons] would continue to receive special treatment. I had failed to realize that privileges rooted in wealth would be swept away by a series of calamities that fell upon that wealth as churning winds fall upon a standing crop about to be harvested (Kanafani 244)

The intersection of Palestinian history and Nadia's journey is evident in her widowhood and the custody issue around her sons. Having invested solely within Palestinian banks, her husband's

family – the Rajys – loses their entire fortune. Meanwhile, Nadia, too, loses her economic stability, housing, and Marwan all at once while taking care of three children. This is a point in the book where the audience realizes how the process of writing creates a dialogue between the past and the present. Here we learn about the imminent collapse of Palestine Afaf Kanafani can see in hindsight, but Nadia can only guess at (Kanafani).

Despite so much going against her, Nadia is persistent: even when everyone around her begins to give up or fall deeper into ignorance about the dangerous state of affairs, she maintains hope and creates a plan for pursuing her education and career to become a financially independent and autonomous woman and mother. Not only does Nadia create this plan, but she also follows through and demonstrates to readers the hope and determination that fuels her through challenging times. Contextually, many Palestinians did not make it out of the country or thrive in the manner that Nadia eventually did. Not every woman may have had the same chances that Nadia had, but she does not squander any of them.

Nadia's experiences in Palestine are not the last time that political and social turmoil affects her life. One of the more notable events in her later life is the impact of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) on herself and her family. The Civil War occurred after a prolonged period of building tension between Muslims and Christians within the country and lasted for 15 years before a treaty to end the war was established (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). National instability is the driving force that pushes Nadia and her sons back to Beirut, where she (and successfully) pursues her education and career to build a life of autonomy for herself and provide for her sons, independent of her family.

After Marwan's death, Nadia has one notable yet short-lived courtship (Kanafani 264-272). The latter part of her autobiography introduces other men who either supported Nadia or

attracted her attention. Her second husband Fu'ad occupies a special place in her heart and life among these men. Nadia's relationship with Fu'ad represents a connection based on mutual love, devotion, and respect. They begin building a home and life together after Nadia has fulfilled her personal commitment to be fully present for her children while they were young. As she starts this penultimate chapter in her life with Fu'ad, "evil winds [begin] to blow..." (Kanafani 317), with the impact of the Lebanese Civil War approaching and threatening her newfound peace.

Nadia suffers a significant loss due to the 'evil winds' of Lebanese political instability in her later years: a burglary incident with armed robbers in her home with Fu'ad severely denigrates his health (Kanafani 319-321). The pair and their family fear the constant infighting, artillery, and general danger existing, particularly due to Fu'ad's previous political background. Several bombings and explosions due to the civil instability further serve to damage Fu'ad's fragile health beyond repair. Nadia and Fu'ad are even separated for a year due to Nadia's need for medical cardiology treatment in the U.S. and a lack of the necessary medical treatment in Beirut. After a brief reprieve, Fu'ad ultimately succumbs to a relapse of his condition and passes away in Nadia's arms (314-334).

With Geraldine Forbes' "Afterword", the audience is made aware that Nadia's life does not end when she loses her love. She continues to work towards a happy, independent, and intellectually fulfilling path for herself in America after Fu'ad's death. As the narrator of her autobiography, Nadia establishes an intentional gap of knowledge for the readers in the lack of writing after Fu'ad's death. In the moments between flipping the page to Forbes' "Afterword", it seems that Nadia's story has ended with this moment of deep and irreconcilable pain and heartbreak. Then, we are made aware that Nadia does continue to pursue her own narrative and

agency – but now, she has done it through autobiography and by following through on her goals in life.

Afaf Kanafani expertly weaves historical and political connections throughout her life-writing, and through reading *Nadia*, the audience not only learns about her traumas and life story but also the relevant political events of the timespan. These events do not constitute just a socio-historical backdrop; they alter the course of her life and touch her at deep personal levels. As Lisa Suhair Majaj states in reference to *Nadia*, "Afaf provides insight into the truth of that most famous of feminist dictums, that the personal is political. At the same time, tracing a struggle for autonomy played out within contexts of overwhelming political devastation and personal loss, she accentuates the often-forgotten inverse of this dictum: that the political is also personal" ("Introduction", *Nadia* xxx). Nadia's personal and historical pains and traumas cannot be cleanly cleaved from each other, and this is a significant sentiment in understanding Nadia's building of her narrative through autobiography.

Even as Nadia is betrayed in every sense of the word by her parents and family of origin, and married off to further the interests and material wealth of her father and brother, she does not lose faith or stop standing up for herself. When she moves to a foreign country with a man she barely knows who is now her husband, and must start all over again, she remains standing. As Nadia has more children with Marwan and their familial ties deepen, entrenching her further in his abuse and unhappiness, she still does not lose faith. When the home in Haifa that she has come to know and accept as her home is gone due to *al-Nakba* and the events preceding it, and she watches her in-laws fall from blissful ignorance to panic over the destabilization of Palestine, she does not give up.

These are dark periods in the writer's life, but she continues to hold on and be captivated, so to speak, by the hope that things would eventually get better and that she would have the life she imagined for herself and her sons all along. Her first husband's death rocks her, and yet, she holds on for the sake of her sons and her future. The loss of her second husband and true life partner could have been crippling, but Afaf Kanafani's postscript life demonstrates that she still finds happiness and independence. Her resilience and self-empowerment serve the underlying message that holds the narrative of these dark days together – though she cannot see what lies at the end of her path, she moves forward and knows that doing something to move forward, even just a little bit, is better than succumbing to a seemingly pre-determined fate of misery. The love and support she received from the symbolic spirit of her grandfather, the reliable and kind-hearted friends she'd made along the way that wanted the best for her, and the presence and flawed love of her father-in-law was part of what sustained Nadia and demonstrated to her that there were good people out there for her that would not hurt her or her children. All she had to do was keep going.

### **Section 5: Grandpa Mehdi, Muslim Reform, Arab Feminist History, and Nadia's Feminism**

How does Nadia survive adversity? What gives her strength so that she can reclaim the agency of her life and its narrative in the form of an autobiography? To understand how Nadia maintains her faith in herself, her sense of social and spiritual values, and her agency and autonomy, I would like to turn to the image of her Grandfather Mehdi as a source of shelter, resilience, and inspiration. Nadia's belief in equality and autonomy of all people is paramount even though she is not formally trained in feminist theory to be 'aware' of this ("Afterword" 337).

As previously mentioned, Nadia's late grandfather, Mehdi, played a role in influencing Nadia's beliefs and values as well as representing a sense of spirituality throughout the course of her life. Though Nadia never meets Mehdi as he dies before her time, she feels his presence intrinsically during her childhood and beyond and draws from him as a source of faith and comfort. Though it is only lightly touched upon in *Nadia*, her grandfather was part of a generation of Muslim clerics that sought to reform and unify Islam at the turn of the nineteenth century (Slota) (Kanafani 223, 327). This movement, referred to as the reform movement or Muslim modernism, was influential in opening up new social and spiritual spaces for women, their education, intellectual and emotional fulfillment.

Nadia's grandfather, as she notes, tries to unite various branches of Islam together through his theological work and essays (Kanafani 223). This attempt at unity is important in the context of the autobiography, as it sets the stage for Nadia's open-mindedness, views of equality, and the option of a more liberating view of spirituality and lived Islam that she could embrace (Reinhart 33). In "What is Muslim Modernism," Slota highlights researcher Adeeb Khalid's work to demonstrate that many clerics that were part of this reform movement argued for the right for women's education and for women to be more prevalent and normalized in male-dominated 'public' spheres. Nadia's lived experience after this reform movement shows that it was not all for nothing: though with difficulty, she can have a free and more autonomous life, one that her grandfather would be pleased to see her experience and the opportunities for freedom and education that she also provided to her sons.

A particularly memorable scene occurs with Nadia's parents and Fu'ad in which Nadia's mother Ban locates a picture of herself as a teenager with her father, Mehdi. Nadia notes that she feels filled with pride upon seeing "such vivid proof of the gentleness of the grandfather I had so

dearly loved. To see a thirteen-year-old daughter with no head cover or special attire attending this interfaith meeting presided over by that revered man filled my heart with pride” (Kanafani 327). Though Islam is not a central force, so to speak, in her autobiography, the complexities of her spirituality and the historical connections are still key in understanding Nadia’s resilience. Nadia intrinsically experiences a connection to her spirituality in the semiotic form of her grandfather, her Simurgh, who is available to her whenever she feels low or alone.

To further discuss the potential roots of Nadia’s feminist beliefs, we must also look at the history of women’s rights movements in the Middle East during Nadia’s lifetime. Nadia’s birth and life are concurrent with significant movements towards independence and expanded rights for women in the Middle East in the 1900s. Even before her birth, figures like Egyptian lawyer and feminist Qasim Amin, who published a book entitled *The Liberation of Women* in 1899, are beginning to question the status quo and argue for a change in women’s status and independence. Many countries such as Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey legitimize women’s suffrage during the writer’s lifetime, and both feminist and nationalist movements are occurring in the first twenty years of Nadia’s experience (“Events Related to Roles of Women”). Though we hear about Middle Eastern politics through the adults in her life when Nadia is an adolescent, as she ages, her awareness shifts and expands to learn about the world through her investigation. There is still relatively little talk of movements for equality in Nadia’s family of origin or with her in-laws. Lebanon’s secular and cosmopolitan nature makes it possible and, at the minimum, legal for Nadia to work and provide for herself, despite still having to jump through gendered legal hoops around her sons’ custody and her ability to travel by herself without a man’s permission.

Nadia’s awareness of the disparities between men and women during her time expands as she joins the workforce, and she may have learned about notable feminist figures in the

Middle East and beyond while spending time in Beirut, Baghdad, and the U.S. for work and education. These figures could include author, physician, and feminist Nawal el Saadawi, who publishes *Women and Sex* in 1972, Egyptian women's movement founder Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947), the previously mentioned Qasim Amin, or Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan feminist and writer ("Fatema Mernissi"). Though these writers and figures may have had an influence on her in some way, there is an element of Nadia's story that is exceedingly experiential, and much of Nadia's motivation comes from an intrinsic sense of justice and a desire for autonomy and independence. As Majaj notes in the introduction, Nadia's writing is neither strictly personal, academic, nor political – it is a mix of all of these elements, just as Nadia is a multifaceted and intersectional mix of her personal experiences and the world she lives in ("Introduction" *Nadia* xviii-xxx) ("Events Related to Roles of Women").

Where does Nadia's sense of justice and search for personal autonomy come from? Geraldine Forbes, the author of *Nadia's* "Afterword", highlights her perspective, feeling impressed with Afaf Kanafani and her "tenacity in the face of opposition, her survival skills, ... her frankness about intrafamily relationships and sexuality, [and is] intrigued by her experiential feminism" (336). I argue that Nadia's beliefs of justice, equality, and autonomy stem from a mixture of the cosmopolitan and secular Lebanon she grows up in, the spiritual guidance of her late grandfather Mehdi, as well as her innate sense of justice. Everything requires context, and Nadia's belief system is no different: she did not live her life within a social and political vacuum. Parts of her feminism and beliefs in equality and empowerment may be rooted in the experiential feminism Forbes highlights, but I would like to highlight that this is just one piece of what may have influenced a multifaceted woman's belief system. A discussion around the roots of Nadia's beliefs and sources of feminism and spirituality is important, but I do not attempt to



classify her life-writing as purely feminist or strictly a 'typical' Arab woman's autobiography. Nadia works to demonstrate, through the act of writing her life story, that working towards self-definition, autonomy, and the independence to pursue what makes you happiest is of the utmost importance and entirely possible, and that others – regardless of gender – can follow in her footsteps.

## **Section 6: Conclusion**

Both Afaf Kanafani and Lisa Suhair Majaj's introduction to Kanafani's work encourage the reader to reflect on the role of self-writing in establishing personal narratives. The audience begins reading the autobiography with the knowledge that, despite the loss of Fu'ad, Afaf Kanafani finds peace and happiness in her new home in California. She takes courses, paints, draws, and even composes music. A notable and heartwarming aspect of this final part of her life is Nadia's attempt at the unification of distant sects like her grandfather Mehdi – she even goes to reconciliation events between Israeli and Palestinian women. The death of her husband does not cripple her, rather, the everlasting bond with him and her sons stays in her heart wherever she roams (Kanafani x). She consistently defies stereotypes and expectations, and by establishing this 'road map' for self-construction through narrative writing in her autobiography, she can safely process her life and experiences.

Nadia's actions demonstrate that she is a survivor rather than a victim. Even when she is victimized by others, and hope seems entirely lost, she continues to chart a path for herself. Nadia's autobiography paints a clear picture of a resilient woman. Nadia's writing about her lived experience quietly answers known stereotypes or implicit perceptions about Muslim Arab women. As an autobiography, the work converses with the world about one woman's story. It represents how the author reclaims her voice, remains strong, and charts her own course; unlike

the image of the voiceless, submissive, victimized women we see in some of the mainstream representations. She answers implicit perceptions and stereotypes around what it can mean to be an Arab Muslim woman, and defeats them: Afaf Kanafani is not quiet, weak, voiceless, or submissive.

She calls herself Nadia, a pseudonym, within the autobiography and writes in English rather than Arabic as a sort of distancing act (Driss 298) to allow her the space to process her traumas in a way that still gives her ownership over her life and narrative. Not only does Afaf Kanafani demonstrate to other women how to survive, grow, and be autonomous, she provides this guide through her experiences for everyone reading her autobiography – a guide to being your own savior and Simurgh.

Most importantly, Afaf Kanafani is hopeful, and hope appears in many forms throughout this autobiography. It exists through the love and spiritual connection she feels with her late grandfather, through the love given to her by Uncle Ahmad, and through the love she gives to her children, her future partner, Fu'ad, and most importantly, herself. Like those in search of the metaphorical Simurgh in Farid Ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, Afaf Kanafani, as Nadia, a captive of her hope for a better future, embarks on a quest for self-growth, independence, and autonomy to get to a better life. She finds within herself all the answers and purpose she was searching for and shows her readers that they can do the same.

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