CHAPTER-2

LIFE AND WORKS OF ELIAS KHOURY

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2.1 Life of Elias Khoury

Elias Khoury is a Lebanese novelist whose work is known worldwide. For more than three decades, he has been active in cultural, political, and academic circles in Lebanon and the Arab world, defending the Palestinian cause, secular and democratic values, and the idea of a new Arab renaissance.

2.1.1: Early Childhood of Elias Khoury

Elias Khoury, the leading personality of modern Arabic intellectual of Lebanon, was born in 12th July, 1948, the year of the Palestinian catastrophe. He grew up in a Christian Orthodox family, with all the myths of oriental Christians, mainly the myth of being the descendants of the Arab tribe of Ghassan, who came from Hauran in Syria and who were kings. His native village was situated in the Beiruti neighborhood Ashrafiyyeh, which is also known as Little Mountain because it is a small hill in east Beirut. Ashrafiyyeh was like a village inside a city where mainly a Christian orthodox neighborhood was lived. It was a village which was full off with the yellow Beiruti houses surrounded by trees.[99]

The Christianity of his childhood was religious, not political. In this religious middle-class family he discovered Arab culture through his maternal grandmother where he used to read classical Arabic poetry. She was about eighty years old, and she would recite most of the classical poetry by heart, all the poems of *Imru' al-Qays*. [100]

With the religious atmosphere there was also influence of story- telling. The stories of his childhood were a popular version of "The thousand and

[99] Sonja Mejcher, *interview with elias khoury, Reichert, Wiesbaden, Germany, 2001*
[100] Famous poet of Muallaqah in pre-Islamic period.

one night's" (Alf-laila-wa-lila).[101] With the stories of his grandmother and Syrian servant from Hauran he discovered the pleasure of story-telling. Thus he grew up in a literary atmosphere in his own house.

2.1.2: Personality of Elias Khoury

As a person, Khoury is genial and a fine conversationalist, speaking English gilded with a pronounced Arabic accent. He wears glasses and is noticeably cross-eyed (he was injured during the Lebanese Civil War and temporarily blinded). His hair is a thinning silver brillo pad, and his belly juts forward from beneath his suit jacket.[102]

Elias Khoury has the curiosity of a child, an asset in a journalist. He is a lively conversationalist who speaks his mind without imagining an auditorium filled to capacity. He is erudite: Christian tradition in the Middle East is more than a passing interest. To his students at NYU, where he spends the spring semester, no doubt he feels like a natural teacher. He is always amusing.[103]

2.1.3: Early Education of Elias Khoury:

Elias khoury started his early education by attending in a protestant school in Ashrafiyyeh, which, like most Lebanese schools at the time, followed the French curriculum. He studied his primary and secondary education in this school with the Palestinian refugees. After completing his secondary education, he moved to Beirut University where he completed his under graduation course in history and sociology and at that time he was just 19yrs old. After completing his graduation, he was gaining his M.A. with a thesis about the *nahda,* the so-called Arab

[101] *a collection of Middle Eastern and South Asian stories*
[102] Jacob Silverman: *Elias Khoury: Profile of the Essential Arab Novelist Today,* article of the daily beast, 08-03-2012
[103] Jeremy Harding. *London review of books* Vol. 28 No. 22 · 16 November 2006 p-9

renaissance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's, and the Muslim intellectual and reformer al- Afghani (1838-1897). Then he went to Jordan to visit a Palestinian refugee camp and then enlisted in Fatah, the largest resistance organization in the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Then he left Jordan in 1970 after the Palestinian guerilla forces in the kingdom were crushed in Black September and travelled to Paris to continue his studies. At the Sorbonne University in Paris, he wrote his dissertation on the Lebanese civil strife of 1840-60, a period of Druze-Maronite rivalry inflamed by Ottoman rule. It struck him how little had been published by Lebanese about the conflicts they'd experienced.[104]

2.1.4: Academic Career and Political Engagement of Elias Khoury:

Elias Khoury was one of the pre-eminent intellectuals of the Arab world. He began his academic career in the early 1980's. He has taught modern Arabic literature at different universities in Lebanon and the United States. He taught literature and comparative literature at the Lebanese University, the American University of Beirut, and the Lebanese American University. At the end of 1990s, he began teaching at Columbia University and New York University, where he is a global distinguished professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies.

Elias Khoury is a public intellectual who plays a major role in the Arabic cultural scene and in the defense of the liberty of expression and democracy, and he is a cultural activist who directed the theatre of Beirut and co-directed the Ayloul Festival of Modern Arts in Beirut.

He was became a member of the editorial board of the journal "Al-Mawakif" where he joined in 1972. The other members of this journal

[104] Ibid,p-10

was ‘Adonis’ ,[105] ‘Hisham Sharabi’ [106]Mahmud Darwish, the Palestinian national poet. He was the director of the theatre of Beirut. In 1975 Khoury became an editor of “shu’an filastiniyya” (Palestinian affair reviews) and an editorial director of “al-karmil” (Palestinian literary review) in 1981. Between 1983 and 1990, he was editorial director of the cultural section of Lebanese daily ’al-safir’ , and since 1992 he has been the editor of ‘al-mulhaq’ , the cultural supplement of the leading Lebanese daily ‘an-nahar’. In 2004, Khoury was involved in founding of the Democratic Left Movement. Then in 2005 he helps to launch the Samir Kassir Foundation (September) and in 2007 he became the president of the jury for the Carthage Film Festival [107]

Elias Khoury’s political engagement started in the late 1960s and developed along with his cultural and literary productivity in 1970s. He found himself traveling to Jordan to visit Palestinian refugee camps and joining Yasser Arafat’s *Fatah*, the largest resistance movement in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). He was Leaving Jordan in 1970 after Black September, a conflict between Palestinian guerrilla organizations and Hussein bin Talal, the king of Jordan.

For a time Khoury frequented the “Arab National Club” founded by the Palestinian intellectual George Habash. He sympathized with the ideas of Arab nationalism but was not part of any political group in particular. This changed with the Arab defeat in the June War of 1967. Shocked by the political events, he joined the *fidayyin,* the Palestinian resistance fighters in Jordan. While pursuing his studies in Beirut, he repeatedly took part in military actions in Jordan and southern Lebanon. After the “Black September” of 1970, he saw the expulsion of the Palestine

[105] Distinguished poet of Syria.
[106] Palestinian Historian
[107] http//encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages5793

Liberation Organization (PLO) and its *fidayyin* from Jordan by the Jordanian Army.

He returned to Beirut from Paris in 1973, when the political situation in Lebanon had changed dramatically. The PLO now had its headquarters in Beirut and the Palestinian resistance was operating solely from Lebanese territory. The country's internal political crisis erupted into civil war in April 1975: Khoury again joined the *fidayyin.* After being severely wounded and gravitating towards an increasingly critical stance towards the civil war, he withdrew from active participation in 1976. The fighting had gained such momentum that it was now obeying its own logic, decoupled from the ideological goals the parties had formulated at the outset. The Damour massacre in January 1976, where the *fidayyin* killed hundreds of Christian civilians in revenge for the siege of the Palestinian refugee camp Tell al-Zaatar (undertaken by Christian militia with the support of the Syrian Army) and the massacre of its civilian inhabitants, profoundly shocked Khoury.

From 1973 to 1979, Khoury worked at the PLO Research Center in Beirut where, together with the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, he was in charge of editing the monthly journal *Shu'un filastiniyya* (Palestinian Affairs Review). In 1974, the center published Khoury's first book: a study in literary criticism about the Arab novel after the defeat of 1967. Due to the increased political involvement of the PLO in the center's intellectual work, Khoury and Darwish decided to leave in 1979. Khoury took on the post of editor-in-chief of the culture section at the Lebanese daily *al-Safir,* a position he kept until 1991. Throughout these years, the cultural journal *Mawaqif* (Positions), founded by Adonis and the literary critic Khalida al-Said, was the most important avant-garde platform for intellectuals, writers, and artists across the whole

region. Khoury joined its editorial board in 1972. In retrospect, he considers the latter half of the 1970s to be the decisive formative phase in his intellectual life.

Khoury worked at the PLO's research center in Beirut with a large group of Palestinian and Arab researchers who settled in the prosperous Lebanese capital that attracted at the time dissident intellectuals from different Arab countries. Khoury participated in the 1975 Lebanese Civil War. He was seriously injured, even temporarily losing his eyesight, but eventually recovered. Many of his friends and comrades died in the first year of this war. In the 1980s Khoury wrote different Palestinian and Lebanese reviews and daily newspapers, especially *Al-Safir* until 1992, when when he became the editor of the weekly cultural supplement, 'Al-Mulhaq' became the "tribute of opposition" to controversial aspects of the post-civil war reconstruction of Beirut and the space for leftist political and cultural resistance against the Syrian political hegemony over the country that was getting more and more brutal after the mid-1990s. In 2000 and 2001, *al-mulhaq* was at the heart of the "Damascos Spring" and published tens of articles and papers written by Syrian opposition intellectuals calling for the end of the one party rule in their country and for a democratization process. In 2005, *Al-Mulhaq* covered the Beirut Spring, or the "Independence Intifada," without losing its cultural critical role and distance. Between 1993 and 1999, Khoury led the Theatre de Beyruth, where different cultural activities look place attracting plays, film festivals, and performances from a variety of artistic schools. The theatre transformed into a center of political activities and held conferences calling for democracy and reforms in the country. Khoury and the theatre committee organized in 1997 and 1998 two internationals events in tribute to Edward said and the commemoration of

the 50th anniversary of the Palestinian Nakba. Debates , music, book reviews, plays, movies, and lectures were presented in both events, gathering prominent figures in literature and social studies from the United States , Europe, India, and Arab countries. During this period, Khoury contributed to the writing of three plays and two movies that were produced and presented in art festivals in Beirut and different European cities (Paris, Berlin, and Brussels among them).

In March 2001, Khoury and thirteen other intellectuals signed a statement opposing the planned conference in Beirut on Holocaust denial. Their position was a strong collective message refusing to justify any Holocaust denial message and stressing the "important ethical dimension of the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation and racism" that cannot tolerate any compromise on universal values of freedom and justice. In 2004, Khoury was involved with other intellectuals and political activists (such as Samir Kassir) in the foundation of the democratic left movement. His election to its executive committee offer the movement additional credibility in cultural circles and a prominent voice defending its causes and those of independence, secularism, social justice in Lebanon.

In September 2005, Khoury participated in the launching of the Samir Kassir Foundation to commemorate the memory of his friend who was assassinated on 2 June 2005. Khoury continues to work with the foundation to organize yearly cultural and political events in tribute to Kassir. Khoury was named president of the jury for the 2007 cartage Film Festival participants and guests; he condemned censorship and despotism in the Arab World and called for the respect of public freedoms and cultural liberty.[108]

[108] http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/5793/Khoury-Elias-1948

2.2: Works of Elias Khoury:

Elias Khoury has written 12 novels, four volumes of literary criticism. He has collected some short stories. He has also written some plays. Elias Khoury's works have been translated into English, French, German, Hebrew, Portuguese, Italian, Catalan, Norwegian, Spanish, and Swedish. Here is list of his works which are given bellow-

- *'An 'ilaqat al-da'irah, 1975 (The circle of madeness),(novel)*
- *'Al-jabal al-sagirah' (The Little Mountain, 1977 (novel)*
- *Dirasat fi naqd al-shi'r, 1979 (criticism)*
- *Abwab al-Medina (The Gates of the City, 1981 (novel)*
- *Ujuhu al-Baidah (White Masks) , 1981 (novel)*
- *Al-dhakira al-mafquda, 1982 (criticism)*
- *Al-mubtada' wa'l-khabar, 1984 (short stories)*
- *Tajribat al-ba'th 'an ufq, 1984 (criticism)*
- *Zaman al-ihtilal, 1985 (criticism)*
- *Rihlat al-gandhi al-saghir (The Journey of Little Gandhi), 1989 (novel)*
- *Mamlukat al-ghuraba' (The Kingdom of Strangers), 1993 (novel)*
- *Majma' al-Asrar, 1994 (novel)*
- *Bab al-shams (Gate of the Sun) 1998 (novel)*
- *Ra'ihat al-Sabun, 2000 (novel)*
- *Yalo, 2002 (novel; Best Translated Book Award 2009 short-list)*

- *Ka'anaha Nae'ma,(As though she were sleeping)2007 (novel)*
- *Sinalkul, (The Broken Mirrors) 2012 (novel)*

Elias khoury is commonly known for his fabulous writings of Arabic novel. In most of his novels generally we have found about the Palestinian politics, culture and trauma and torture at the time of civil war.

Besides the novels of Elias Khoury, we are also able to read Elias khoury's some critical writings which are full of criticism on poetry of some poets. He has written four volumes of literary criticism. He has also written some collection of short stories. He is also a play writer and stage performer.

2.2.1: Elias Khoury as a Play Wright and Performer

In the early 1990s Khoury wrote his first play: directed by Roger Assaf, *Mudhakarat Ayyub (The memoirs of job)* premiered on the fiftieth anniversary of Lebanese independence in 1993. The theme of the play was wartime memory of Lebanese civil war. It contained a scene in which the face of a kidnap victim under interrogation was hidden by a mask. Khoury has based his character on a composite of several people who had disappeared during war. [109]

The Lebanese Job is cast as a traditional Arab storyteller, a figure usually entrusted with telling heroic legends as a form of entertainment; but this Job has no edifying stories to tell. Instead he relates the fates of three ordinary women whose husbands or children were abducted during the civil war and remain missing, thus addressing a taboo issue in the collective memory of postwar Lebanese society. [110]

[109] Michael Young, *The Ghosts of Martyrs Square: An Eyewitness Account of Lebanon's Life Struggle*, p-186
[110] Sonjha mehjer, *Birth of the novel in Lebanon,.*

Elias Khoury was also a director and performer of play. In 2000 Khoury undertook a similarly subversive confrontation with the memory of the civil war in *Thalathat al-musallaqat (Three Posters),* a video performance created in collaboration with the Lebanese actor *Rabih Marwa'* that was shown as part of the annual Aylul Festival, which he organized between 1996 and 2001. *Three Posters* critically tackles the issue of suicide attacks, which were initially carried out by secular, leftist movements resisting the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. Contrary to popular perceptions, these suicide attacks were not invented by Islamic fundamentalists; they began as a strategy of the national Lebanese left. The play is meant to provoke a discussion about how something which began as a secular fight for freedom could end up as an Islamist strategy. Even for the Islamists it is a military tactic. It reflects the utter hopelessness of a people that has suffered from the occupation for more than 30 years. Taking as its starting point an uncut version of a video in which a suicide bomber declares himself a martyr before carrying out his mission.

The performance of *Three Posters* is based on the video document of Jamal Satti, who blew himself up in 1985 in front of the Israeli military base in *Hasbayya*. Two hours before he went on camera to make a statement this as usual on Lebanese television was broadcast one time. Khoury and Marwa' do not confine themselves to a simple depiction and moral positioning of the suicide attacks and the criticism of a fatal political strategy; their piece is also a discourse on death, playing with different levels of reality and fiction, truth and illusion, documentation and manipulation.

The uncut tape of Satti, which came into the authors' hands by chance in 1999, indicated that Satti had made several takes in order to arrive at the

best possible effect. What astonished us was the repetition in the footage. We viewed the tape a number of times, and at every instance the extent of repetition left us with mixed feelings. Jamal Sati acted as a political leader. The operation was a suicide mission that sealed his fate.[111]

Initially Khoury and Marwa' only wanted to show the uncut tape, then they wanted to make a video of a stage actor playing Satti and give the audience the opportunity to take on the role of the future suicide bomber. Finally Khoury and Marwa' decided that It proposes three possibilities for perceiving death: one actor, one resistance fighter: Jamal Sati, and one politician. The actor and the politician are the two invisible faces in the footage. It tried to group the three faces at successive instances. The actor fools the audience in the beginning but he reveals his own truth. The politician narrates the other voice of the story: how a moral defeat produces a political defeat. The actor acts only insofar as to unveil the stakes of his performance and its limitation. As for death, can only be understood in as far as it is experienced and just then the need for expression dissipates.

Khoury sees only one chance to escape from the seemingly endless cycle of violence: In the struggle between two peoples in the same country Israelis and Palestinians have come to mirror one another. The first step toward reconciliation would be taken if the Israelis were prepared to see the Palestinians' pain and accept the fact that the Palestinians are victims too. On the other hand, of course, the Palestinians must also be aware of the Jews' pain and their history of victimhood. When both victims accept the fact that they mirror one another, we may come closer to a solution.[112]

Thus the play *Three Posters* opens a discourse about death that calls into

[111] www.kunstenfestivaldesarts.be/en/2002/spect/stl18.html
[112] Ibid,p2

question conventional distinctions between reality and fiction, truth and illusion, documentation and manipulation.

2.2.2 Elias Khoury as a Critic

Elias Khoury was also a critic of modern Arabic literature. He has written four volumes of literary criticism which are as follows: *Dirasat fi naqd al-shi'r, 1979 , Al-dhakira al-mafquda, 1982 , Tajribat al-ba'th 'an ufq, 1984 ,Zaman al-ihtilal, 1985.* Among these critical works of Elias Khoury *Dirasat fi naqd al-shi'r, 1979, Al-dhakira al-mafquda, 1982* are the famous critical works of Elias Khoury.

The book *Dirasat fi naqd al-shi'r* attempts to read the contemporary Arabic poetry. It is written on the poetry of on the poetry of Badr Shakir as-Sayyab, Adonis and Mahmoud Darwish. As Elias Khoury says in an interview that "Poets like Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Adonis and Mahmoud Darwish played a great role in pushing the Arabic language forward but I think that the real innovation in the language happens in prose and not in poetry.[113]

First of all he has criticized about the poem of Al-Sayyab named انشودة المطر (*The rain song).* Badr Shakir as-Sayyab was the famous Iraqi poet. He was one of the first Arab poets to break with classical form in and was known especially for his use of the ancient myths of rebirth and recreation. His poetry انشودة المطر was published in 1960. Elias Khoury says that the the poem "Rain Song" is al-Sayyab's most famous and most memorable. Any educated Iraqi and Arab can recite a few lines from it because it is one of the iconic poems and an integral piece in the canon of modern Arabic poetry. A careful reading of the poem will perhaps illustrate why it is still remembered and recited by speakers of Arabic

[113] http://www.banipal.co.uk/selections/48/151/elias-khoury/

today and why it continues to inspire and challenge--even half a century after its composition and publication--not only poets and musicians but also artists such as Mohammad al Shammary. It is important to note that it accumulates new meanings and readings, perhaps because it fuses the universal and the local and, to borrow Neruda's definition of poetry as combine's solitude with solidarity so well. The title, being the beacon that illuminates the reading of any text, is worth a pause. *Rain Song*. The rhythm of the rain itself and through it the cycles of nature and the set of binary oppositions they evoke are employed in the poem.

After that he discussed about the poetry of Adonis named as *single with the plural*. Ali Ahmad Said was born 1 January 1930 who is commonly known by the pen name Adonis or Adunis. He was a Syrian poet, essayist, and translator. He has written more than twenty books and volumes of poetry in the Arabic language as well as translated several works from French. Adunis is a pioneer of modern Arabic poetry. He is often seen as a rebel, an iconoclast who follows his own rules. "Arabic poetry is not the monolith this dominant critical view suggests, but is pluralistic, sometimes to the point of self-contradiction."[114] Adunis's work has been analysed and illuminated by the pre-eminent Arab critic Kamal Abu-Deeb, with whom he edited the journal Mawakif in Beirut in the 1970s.

Lastly he has criticized the poetry of Mahmud Darwish like the poem *Sirhan yashrabu al-qahwa fi al-kafatnya* (*Sirhan drink coffee in the cafeteria).* Darwish is considered to be the most important contemporary Arab poet working today. He was born in 1942 in the village of Barweh in the Galilee, which was razed to the ground by the Israelis in 1948. As a result of his political activism he faced house arrest and imprisonment.

[114] Adunis. *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, trans. Catherine Cobham, Saqi books, London, 1996 p. 10

Darwish was the editor of Ittihad Newspaper before leaving in 1971 to study for a year in the USSR. Then he went to Egypt where he worked in Cairo for Al-Ahram Newspaper and in Beirut, Lebanon as an editor of the Journal "Palestinian Issues". He was also the director of the Palestinian Research Center. Darwish was a member of the Executive Committee of the PLO and lived in exile between Beirut and Paris until his return in 1996 to Palestine. His poems are known throughout the Arab world, and several of them have been put to music. His poetry has gained great sophistication over the years, and has enjoyed international fame for a long time. He has published around 30 poetry and prose collections, which have been translated into 35 languages. He is the editor in chief and founder of the prestigious literary review Al Karmel, which has resumed publication in January 1997 out of the Sakakini Centre offices. He published in 1998 the poetry collection: Sareer el Ghariba (Bed of the Stranger), his first collection of love poems. In 2000 he published Jidariyya (Mural) a book consisting of one poem about his near death experience in 1997. In 1997 a documentary was produced about him by French TV directed by noted French-Israeli director Simone Bitton. He is a commander of the French Order of Arts and Letters.[115]

This aims of this critical work to exercise access readings cash from creative text. Then you link this text to the literary level, which is part of the ideological level, access to the ability to link text creative social practice. This book is not called, the ability to reach this goal. But try, from a set of concepts, a contribution in this direction. In order to be able to practice, be possible to read the text inside and outside creative.

Another famous book of Elias Khoury on criticism is *Al-dhakira al-mafquda (Lost memory)* which is published in 1982. This book is a

[115] http://www.mahmouddarwish.com/english/biography.htm

collection of readings that cash wrote a relatively long period 1972-1981, and includes a wide range of interests and pursuits, he doesn't aspire to be more than a literary career was marked by her shaking as the threshold of the transition from a so-called modern 1950s stage full of possibilities and questions, collect the essays in the book is in a sense an attempt to announce the end of the stage, trying to point to the new is ambiguous, the stage ends when finished or semi-finished references, stating Writing a reference itself, meaning that now must be present, and that is in itself a reference to read past and future, the Orientalism article within the search within the literary text itself. It does not mean that they are free from any ideological theme, each interpretation cash leaning one way or another, to ideological building, or to the general perspective, but the ambition is to reach the critical reading to transparent discovering structural composition of literary text, in the discovery process, not tried the cash only text interpretation, but also tried the same tools.

2.2.3: Elias Khoury as a Novelist

Elias Khoury has written 12 novels in Arabic. Most of his novels are translated into various languages, such as English, French etc. Among those 12 novels *Al-jabal al-sagirah' (The Little Mountain, 1977), Abwab al-Medina (The Gates of the City), 1981, Al-wujuh al-baida'* (*White Masks' , 1981), Rihlat Ghandi al-Saghir (The Journey of Little Gandhi, 1989), The Kingdom of Strangers, 1993, Bab al-shams (Gate of the Sun 1998), Yalo, 2002, Ka'anaha Nae'ma,(As though she were sleeping)2007, Sinalkul,2012* are most famous.

Khoury's novels are intricately intertwined with the Lebanese civil war or the memory of it. If at first he regarded his literary writing as a kind of sideline to his journalistic work, with *Little Mountain* he shifted his

priorities. Amidst the chaos of war Khoury's productivity as a writer rose. Whereas in most of his novels the war is dealt with explicitly, *Gates of the City* (1981) offers an allegorical reading of the war. Interspersed with numerous inter-textual references to Kahlil Gibran's *The Madman* (1918) and *The City of Brass* from *The Thousand and One Nights,* this novel transforms Beirut into a mythical city whose name is never mentioned. In highly poetic language, unusual for Khoury's fiction (and compared by Stefan G. Meyer to the Gertrude Stein), it describes the apocalyptic demise of a city in which all important topographical landmarks and inner reference points sink into oblivion an ending that Beirut was facing with the imminent Israeli invasion of 1982.

Since the end of the civil war, Khoury has published many more novels: *The Kingdom of Strangers* (1993), *The Gate of the Sun* (1998), *The Smell of Soap* (2000), *Yalu* (2002), and *As If She Were Sleeping* (2007). He was awarded the Prize of Palestine for his novel *Bab al-shams (Gate of the Sun),* which is based on the orally transmitted recollections and stories of Palestinians living in the refugee camps of Lebanon. The voluminous novel, subsequently made into a film by the Egyptian filmmaker Yusri Nas- rallah for the TV channel ARTE, and premiered in Cannes in 2004, is an epic account of the *nakba* (disaster), the exodus of the Palestinians caused by the creation of the state of Israel.

His first novel, *'An alaqat aI-da'irah (1975; About the Inter- relatedness of the Circle)*, tells of the life and experiences of a young boy, Mansour, at an orphanage, and his initiation into a world filled with social and religious authorities that eventually leads to his death. Elias Khoury published this novel at the beginning of 1975, just before the outbreak of

the Lebanese civil war. With piercing insight and sensitivity, he was able to foretell of the calamities awaiting his country at the time.

Elias Khoury's preoccupation with death is more poignantly apparent in his second novel, *Al-Jabal al-saghir* (1977; Little Mountain), which presents various portraits of the war connected through the themes of death and uncertainty. In this novel, Elias Khoury problematises issues of life and death, friend and adversary, truth and falsehood, fiction and reality, while implicating all Lebanese for their country's predicament: "the war refers to us."[116]

Al-jabal al-saghir, (Little Mountain, 1977) has written by the Lebanese man of letters Elias Khoury. It is a novel set during the early phase of the Lebanese Civil War, a war that lasted from 1975 to 1990. Paradoxically, the civil war in Lebanon has had a tremendous impact on Lebanese literature as it generated an unprecedented number of new works which were influenced by it, so much so that the civil war has been characterized as the "midwife" of the Lebanese novel.

The appearance of these novels about the civil war, which were written from the perspectives of those who fought the war as well as those who were devastated by it, is now considered to be a threshold for the start of fully fledged experimentation in the Arabic novel, or, to put it in generic terms, from the realist mode to the experimental one. Although this experimentation in form can be traced back a decade earlier, to writers such as the Palestinian Ghassan Kanafani (especially his formal experimentation in All That's Left to You), it is with appearance of these civil war novels that this mode of experimentation became normalized, or more accepted. Therefore, Little Mountain has come to occupy a special position on the trajectory of the Arabic novel's development. Given that

[116] Ibid,p545

the century-old Arabic novel is a relatively new form within the much larger Arabic literary tradition, the importance of this movement from the more or less traditional realist mode to the experimental cannot be understated.

In an essay entitled "After Mahfouz," Edward Said describes Little Mountain as the first departure from the style of novelistic writing that dominated the Arabic novel for much of the twentieth century. While it is an overstatement to claim that this novel is the "first departure," I think the general gist of Said's characterization is accurate in that it symbolically points out (as the title of the essay suggests) that Khoury's novel marks the break with the realist style which the Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz had mastered, or even perfected, as some would have it. Writing about this break that he locates between Mahfouz and Khoury, Said says that "from this perspective Khoury's work bids Mahfouz an inevitable and yet profoundly respectful farewell.[117]

It would be somewhat misleading, however, to say that Little Mountain is about the Lebanese Civil War. A more accurate way to describe it would be that it centers on the experience, told from hindsight, of an individual who gets implicated in this most horrible of wars. The novel tells the story (or to put it more accurately, the ramblings) of a fighter who has chosen to join the ranks of the fiddayyin, a group comprised of Palestinians and their supporters which fought in the civil war, despite the fact that this group fought against the Christian militias which were supposed to protect the interests of the minority to which the narrator belongs. Right from the outset, we come to understand the novel's main narrator as someone out of place, as someone who positions himself

[117] Said, Edward, *in Reflections on Exile and Other.*

outside of the locality to which he was assigned by virtue of being born in a certain neighborhood and to a certain family.[118]

This, of course, is never spelled out explicitly in the novel. We come to understand the precarious position of the narrator from the choices he makes and from his decision to affiliate himself with one group over another. To put it succinctly, his position is based on affiliation rather than on filiations. The difference between the two, of course, has great implications to the formation of the self as this makes such formation reliant on an ethic of movement or becoming rather than on that of being. Crucially, these decisions are never explained ethically or ideologically. While they certainly have these elements built into them, they are part of an underlying scheme rather than part manifesto-like, simplified explanations. These choices come to define the narrator's private narrative as well as the larger narrative that he chooses to become part of. In a situation such as a civil war, choices are not a luxury, but a necessity.[119]

Thus, the only thing that is captured of this narrator is a chaotic and disfigured narrative about an incomplete, incoherent life: episodes from a sheltered, confused childhood in the predominantly Christian neighborhood known as *little mountain*, episodes of street fighting without an apparent objective or justification, and finally a short episode about the fighter's time in Paris where he goes to be treated of his wounds.

Narration in Little Mountain, then, is always an organizing principle, regardless of the form it takes. In Khoury's novel, the principle of chaos or chiasmus becomes the device through which the self makes sense of

[118] R. P. Malhotra. *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Asian Novels and Novelists, edited* p-545
[119] Ibid,p-546

itself as well as of the incoherence in the midst of which it happens to be.[120]

Al-Wujuh al-baydah (1981; The White Faces) is a novel primarily about coping with war and its atrocities. It deals with death as a means to explore the vivid reality of everyday life. The plot revolves around an investigation into the death of a man whose body was found in the UNESCO, a residential district in Beirut. Elias Khoury weaves an intricate web in which the murder case is riddled with ambiguity and a lack of resolution. The novel presents a world where certain traditionally held eternal truths no longer exist; we are left only with assumptions and predictions.[121]

Elias Khoury's *Al-Wujuh al-baydah* charts the illusive search for narrative in the midst of the 1975-1990 Lebanese Civil War. Its characters weave tangential and crisscrossing narratives that invent explanations for inconclusive events and leave only one thing for them to control: the telling of their own story. Published in 1981 and set during Lebanon's civil war, Masks takes place among the sectarian rivalries that marked the conflict, leaving the characters—be they soldiers, housewives, or civil servants powerless, damaged, and struggling for survival. Save for one section, though, this is a novel of a neighborhood, and Khoury eschews the war for its legacy. The inconclusiveness of the war compounded by the obsessions of Khoury's characters makes for a book that avoids sweeping explanations and reveals uncertainties of war.[122]

Al-Wujuh al-baydah is structured around an unnamed narrator, a former journalism student who, to pass the time, investigates the murder of a

[120] Maia Tabet, *Little Mountain,* New York: Picador, 2007.
[121] R. P. Malhotra. *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Asian Novels and Novelists, edited* p-545
[122] Paul Doyle , *A Cacophony of Stories: White Masks*, April 26, 2010

middle-aged civil servant, Khalil Ahmad Jaber. The victim's death makes no sense to the narrator since the victim wasn't a soldier, and, more importantly, his son had been killed in the war, conferring great honor on him. The narrator hints at multiple if unlikely explanations for the murder, but from the outset he warns the reader that he is suspicious of the truth he is going to find. And, worse for a writer, he doubts anyone is interested in the story.[123]

The desire of the writer to tell the story and the witnesses to tell their own are in conflict throughout the book, and the narrator, although he only speaks for himself in the prologue and epilogue, is always present, attempting to lead the reader to the end of the narrative. He's a kind of voyeur of pain who takes pleasure in changing the word dreadful to wonderful when he reads the newspaper. It is in the tension between the search for the victim's killer and the witnesses that the true narrative takes place.[124]

While the use of the framing interview isn't new, Khoury uses it well here. His cacophony of stories portrays a society that has fallen apart and whose protectors, the militias that claim to be fighting for a new society, take of advantage of the weak. Although the mystery of Khalil Ahmad Jaber's death languishes, the complexity of survival with its personal animosities is well-drawn.[125]

Al-Wujuh al-baydah is full of characters that represent different factions within the leftist PLO coalition. Khoury doesn't name parties or organizations, yet it is relatively clear which side he was on and, more importantly, what he thought of them. He depicts a one-armed veteran and party boss as corrupt and self serving, as if the continuing the war is

[123] Ibid,p-2
[124] Ibid,p-3
[125] Ibid,p-5

his only goal. His depiction of the factions was dangerous, and as Khoury has noted, it was considered to be very heavy criticism of what we our leftist and Palestinian camp were doing and I was considered against the revolution. Given this context, one can certainly read Masks as documentary or slightly veiled criticism. Khoury, though, is too good a writer to let only politics inform his work. It is in the not only the art of his storytelling, the sometimes fractured thoughts that his skills come out, but his interest in the structure of the stories that come out of a war.

Ultimately, the story not only questions the know ability of a story can one truly tell what happens during wartime but questions the author's ability to construct a story. If a story doesn't conform to convention does it matter? The narrator in the conclusion tries to understand his inability to construct the story he wants, what the narrator has missed is in there is no story, but stories that crisscross each other and it is the points of intersection that one can know. Perhaps it isn't the most fulfilling way of storytelling, but as a description of war with its multiplicities it works quite well. The strength, however, is also a weakness and occasionally White Masks can be a bit maddening because it isn't always clear why the witnesses are revealing themselves so readily and what it has to do with Khalil Ahmad Jaber. Once you let go of the murder story, though, White Masks reveals the complex lives and obsessions of those caught in a civil war.[126]

Abwab al-madinah (1981; Gates of the City) is the most abstract of Khoury's fictional works, a novel in which the dream verges on the real, while the real becomes slippery and intangible. This atmosphere nearly demands that the novel be read as a poetic text. Issues related to love,

[126] Ibid,p-8

security, search, death, authority, narration, memory, and writing are raised only to be interrogated and contested.

The plot in *Gates of the City* revolves around a stranger who keeps looking for his lost suitcase, which contains papers, a pen, and his father's picture. His persistent search for the suitcase signifies his urgent need to write down and register his experiences so that his ordeal will not be lost in time nor fade from memory. [127]

Elias Khoury's *Abwab al-madinah* is a fable, an exploration of themes rather than a clear-cut story. It largely eschews the principles of modern fiction such as plot and character for concepts that adhere closely to Arabic methods of storytelling. City Gates, while a very small novel – novella, even – is dense in its examination of the difficulty of a place steeped in history coming to terms with its troubled modern times.[128]

A stranger comes to a city. 'He didn't tell his story to anyone, he didn't know he was a story to be told.' He does not know how to enter the city, for the gates are closed and it seems that there is nobody about. But how could this be? The city is, of course, Beirut, in ordinary times home to roughly a million people. The man walks the empty streets and has rhythmic, repetitious conversations with statues and monuments to Beirut's historical past. Old women with strange white faces reveal tantalizing snippets regarding the identity of the city and, by extension, the man himself. 'The man felt the world was breaking into tiny particles that were planting themselves in the grains of sand that covered the square.' This feeling comes early in the novel, and stays with both the stranger and the reader throughout the piece.[129]

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[127] R. P. Malhotra. *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Asian Novels and Novelists, edited*, p-545
[128] Damian Kelleher, *Curled Up With A Good Book*, 2008,p-1
[129] Ibid,p-2

Khoury is not attempting to make the work easy to understand. And yet, it is easy to read. The rhythm of the work is found rather quickly, with sentences that hold to a particular theme appearing in subtle variations throughout paragraphs, pages and chapters, in much the same way that a fugue begins with a main theme to which successive instruments relate until the exposition is complete and the final entry returns to the opening key. This aspect of thematic recurrence, coupled with the surreal, almost magical quality of the city – talking statues, mysterious old women, dead kings come to life – assist in creating a Beirut that appears more as the soul of a city rather than its exact physical presence.[130]

Khoury's novella was published with the war ongoing. It can be seen, then, as a look back through the history of a city that had a very real danger of being destroyed. The novella is split into parts, each of which seem to examine the city from a different historical perspective and time. Numbers play a large part in the novella, with the eight parts being mirrored by eight women, eight statues and, later, a king protected with patterns of eight. In each part, multiple stories are told alongside the main thread of the stranger wandering through the empty city – it seems at times that everyone has a story to tell. Not only that, but stories interrupt stories, until so many broken fragments of begun but not finished tales litter the text that to wade through them all would be beside the point. A woman admits that a story she has begun has not turned out as she has planned, with the story transforming from a tale of the sea to one about her father, yet the story just as quickly shifts away from her father and back to the sea. This merging of stories, this sense of a constant fluid of fables, parables and tales, is a major theme throughout the work. Khoury seems to be asserting that a city as old as Beirut is made up of its stories

[130] Ibid,p-3

that even though the buildings may be destroyed and the king may be forgotten, stories live on through repetition and the homely comfort of a mother whispering to her child.[131]

The novella resembles all of the ancient stories you may have once heard but could never quite remember. It is not a piece to be read for the examination of character or the thrill of plot, but rather to immerse one's self in a sea of stories. It is a study of what a story means to a city and what it means to the inhabitants. It is an examination of what occurs to identity when the physical underpinnings of a life are stripped away but the memory remains. Khoury's work is surprisingly dense for its 96 pages, but well worth the read for anyone wishing to understand the primal urge of storytelling that seems to attract us all.[132]

Rihlat Ghandhi al-saghir (1989; The Journey of Little Gandhi) is the most acclaimed novel among Khoury's work to date. The novel opens with the death of its title character, a shoe shiner nicknamed Little Gandhi, then proceeds to explore the world in which Gandhi lived.

Elias Khoury's The Journey of Little Gandhi begins with the death of the hero in the first chapter, following which the storyteller, Alice, opens each of her stories in the remaining five chapters with a lament for his death.

The novel's characters tell their stories in their own peculiar language. The narrator as guarantor of one true version of the story disappears, while the names, voices, languages, and stories multiply, seemingly of their own accord. The novel is prefaced by a quotation from the Arab philosopher and mystic Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240) which can be understood as the novel's motto: "A face is only one, yet when it's

[131] Ibid,p-4
[132] ibid,p-5

seen in many mirrors, multiplies itself." Whereas Ibn Arabi used this metaphor to express the idea that the prophets and saints mirror God's transcendence, but that ultimately there is only one God, Khoury gives it a different connotation. He transfers it from the religious to the social realm, unmasking the idea of unity as an ideological construct that seeks to negate the existing plurality.[133]

The novel opens with the death of Abd al-Karim Husn, a Beirut shoeshine who was given the nickname "Little Gandhi" by a professor from the American University of Beirut and has been known solely by this name ever since. Each chapter except for the short first and last chapters starts with a description of how Alice, a former prostitute, found Little Gandhi dead, shot in the street, and covered him with newspapers, on the morning of the Israeli invasion into West Beirut on 15 September 1982. Each repetition gives the impression that his death is occurring all over again. Any chronological ordering of time is thus dismissed from the outset. Just as the beginning and ending of the narration cannot be determined with any certainty, so the beginning of the civil war cannot be identified, nor is there an end to the conflict in sight.[134]

Alice, a haggard woman in her mid-sixties wearing a long black dress, is seated in the foyer of a rundown hotel in downtown Beirut where she used to ply her trade before the war. Her hands shaking while drinking *araq* (an aniseed flavored liquor), she tells the narrator the story of Little Gandhi. The story goes back to his birth in 1915 in a small village in northern Lebanon, tells of his flight to Tripoli, and from there to Beirut, where he worked as shoeshine in front of the American

[133] Sonja Mejcher . *Birth Of The Novel, Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Vol. 262, p-167
[134] Ibid,p-167

University of Beirut, until his death on 15 September 1982.[135]

The story of Little Gandhi opens the door to a host of other stories, which Alice tells along with her own tales of Beirut's night life: that of the American professor Davies, whose shoes Little Gandhi used to polish; the story of Little Gandhi's son Husn and his girlfriend.

Cities are invisible stories, and stories are invisible cities: this is a dictum Khoury likes to quote. The city lives only through the stories of its inhabitants, who are as numerous and various as their memories. Alice epitomizes the oral memory of the city of Beirut, which, like the city's center, lies in ruins and is about to sink into oblivion. In turn, the narrator resembles the *hakawati* (classical Arab storyteller), the transmitter of collective memory. But while the message passed on by the *hakawati* in his stories remains embedded in the oral tradition, the narrator sets out to put Alice's stories in written form. He thus turns into the novel's fictive author.

When Alice disappears in the course of renewed fighting in February 1984, he begins to look for her. At a cemetery in Ashrafiyya he comes across a damaged gravestone with her portrait as she must have looked like as a young woman.[136]

The portrait refers not so much to Alice's youthful years but an idealized, nostalgic image of Beirut, of how the city might have looked like before the civil war. It brings back to memory by contrast the destruction of Beirut. The name engraved onto the gravestone is not mentioned in the novel. However, the affinity between the names "Alice" and "Elias", in Arabic consisting of the same letters, suggests that the name is that of the real author. Without explicitly mentioning his

[135] Ibid,p-167
[136] Ibid,p-168

name, the real author identifies himself with Alice as well as the narrator and fictive author, thus inscribing himself as a dead figure into the novel. Here, the novel's self referential character, aiming to blur the distinction between fiction and reality, reaches an artful peak.[137]

In *The Journey of Little Gandhi* reality is not presented as a given truth that the narrator is able to transmit or even approximate. Only the protagonists' memories, which break loose from the remembered events and take on an imaginative character, are true. Ultimately, truth and falsehood, reality and dream cannot be separated from one another. The narrator no longer even tries to tell a coherent story; he knows that all stories reveal inconsistencies.

On the day before the Israeli invasion, Beirut is engulfed in whiteness, as if the city in which the civil war seems destined to continue with no end in sight is drowning in silence, as if storytelling itself was coming to an end. Alice is aware of the fact that the ability to forget is a basic trait of humankind and quotes an Arab saying: "man is called man because he forgets"; a word- play between *insan* (man) and *nisyan* (to forget). The problem is not that we forget. The question raised in *The Journey of Little Gandhi* is what we forget and what we remember, whose stories are being told and written, salvaged from death and transmitted into the future. These are stories of ordinary people, of those on the margins of society, "the stories of those who couldn't run away". None of the characters in *The Journey of Little Gandhi* participate actively in the civil war, but all are exposed to and trapped in it. They, the ordinary people, are the real losers and victims of the civil war.[138]

[137] Ibid,p168
[138] Ibid,p-168

The journey is an obvious metaphor for writing as exploration and discovery. It is Gandhi's journey in the sense that it tells and retells his life from his birth in Mashta Hasan to his death when the Israelis reach Beirut on September 15, 1982, however this journey is also a way to tell other's stories as well as the historical events happening around them. As Ghandour points out, "the novel's structure with its embedded stories parallels the Lebanese war with its seemingly unresolved events.[139]

Ghandour identifies two principals in the novel: The first principal frame for this novel is the Lebanese civil war and the invasion of Lebanon by Israel, specifically its invasion of Beirut. This war atmosphere presents the main background of this novel for it grants or denies the characters life and death… the second frame…represents the narrator-author as a character in the novel. This frame intertwines with the third frame represented by Alice, who tells the stories to the narrator till she disappears during the events of 1984.[140]

Elias Khoury's The Journey, feigns to make its fictional world speak for itself, it narrates itself as a story. By situating himself inside his narrative the narrator-author accomplishes two goals: first, to dismiss the idea of the god-like author who knows everything, second, to invite us, the readers, to participate in the act of reading or writing, in the discovery of Gandhi's and other embedded journeys.[141]

Mamlakat al-ghuraba' (1983; The Kingdom of Strangers) won the University of Arkansas Press Award for Arabic Literature in Translation. Like *The Journey of Little Gandhi,* this novel defies a simple summary because of its embedded stories. *The Kingdom of Strangers* goes beyond the epistemological questions presented in previous works to explore

[139] Ibid,p-168
[140] History, *religion and the construction of subjectivity in Elias Khoury's Rihlat Ghandi al Saghir*
[141] *Elias Khoury's The Journey of Little Gandhi: Fiction and Ideology*

more ontological ones about the kinds of worlds we are living in, how they are constituted, and how we can improve them so that we do not feel like strangers as Christ did.

In his novel Khoury also blurs the boundaries between truth and fiction, reality and fantasy, past and present memory and narrative. Here all the characters are strangers, be they refugees, deportees, exiles, and converts. With his montage technique, derived from the classical Arab narrative tradition, he weaves together his protagonists' life stories in a number of plot strands. As in all his novels, Beirut is the real main characters. In Khoury's works the Lebanese capital often appears as a place of battling historical and political forces, as the scene of the Israeli-Lebanese war, breaking up into civil war along the lines of its different ethnic groups, languages and religions. [142]

Elias Khoury's novel, *Majma' al-asrar* (1994; Box of Secrets), questions whether it is possible to know the truth of any single story. One among a chain of related stones in the novel is that of *Hanna al-Salman* who is about to be hanged because he confessed to a crime he did not commit. The sentence "thus the story began," which is repeated throughout the novel, not only exonerates the narrator from assuming an all-knowing role; it also deludes readers from finding out what really happened. By conjuring up various possibilities from the silences and ruptures of the narrative itself, the real issue in *Majma' al-asrar* becomes how a story is told. [143]

Bab al-Sham's (Gate of the Sun) is another famous epic novel of Elias Khoury. When it was first published, it received high praise in the Arab world, especially among Palestinians. Palestine has produced some

[142] Khuory, Elias, (*Civil) war without beginning or end culturebase*@hkw.de, June 4, 2003
[143] Ibid,p-546

distinguished novelists, notably Emile Habiby and Ghassan Kanafani, both of whom explored the Palestinian condition of statelessness, exile and dispersion. Yet neither Habiby, with his absurdist vision of the experience of Palestinians who stayed behind in Israel (The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist), nor Kanafani, with his bitter tales of Palestinian laborers in the Gulf (Men in the Sun), wrote directly about the Nakba, preferring to examine its reverberations instead. Indeed, there are so few novels about the Nakba that many Palestinians were grateful to Khoury simply for giving voice to their memories of the most traumatic and defining moment in their history.

The Nakba has achieved such mythic dimensions in the Arab world that many Arabs are tempted to believe the events took place in one blow: One day there were Arabs in Palestine, and the next they were gone. In fact, for at least three months after the 1949 armistice the borders between the Jewish state and its Arab neighbors were open and Israel lacked the means to prevent the overwhelming majority of who were simply seeking to return to their land, not to carry out guerrilla attacks. Khoury suggests, continued until the mid-1950s. He writes not only of the expulsion of the refugees but also of those who, once in Lebanon, smuggled themselves back into Palestine for short periods of time.

The secret history of Palestinian border infiltrations into Israel in the early years of the state is a central element of Khoury's story, and it gives Gate of the Sun much of its novelty and power. The protagonist, Yunes al-Asadi, a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon, makes a number of secret trips to Deir al-Asad, the village he was forced to leave in 1948. During these infiltrations he has to watch out for both the Lebanese and the Israeli armies. As the novel shows, for those who, like Yunes, were willing to risk the journey in order to attend to unfinished personal

business, the Nakba did not immediately create an irreversible situation. By imagining the movement across the open border between Lebanon and the newly created state of Israel, Khoury brings out the complexity that is often suppressed in the official narratives of 1948. [144]

Gate of the Sun is a novel of prodigious ambition, seeking to evoke the full sweep of Palestinian history. Most Palestinian novelists have preferred to illuminate specific aspects of the Palestinian experience, and for good reason. That experience has been so eventful, so turbulent, so fragmented and so complicated intertwined with the two World Wars, the Holocaust, the cold war, inter-Arab politics, the events of Black September in Jordan, the Lebanese Civil War and the 1991 Gulf War--that it seems to defy dramatization, even while inviting it. The story unfolds on an almost mythic plane, a plane much faster than that of the novel. Khoury seems aware of this problem; his narrator observes at one point that the novelist Ghassan Kanafani didn't write about Yunes's experience of the Nakba because he was looking for mythic stories, and yours was just the story of a man in love. Yet Gate of the Sun is not so much the intimate story of a man in love as the allegorical tale of an entire people.

The novel opens, significantly, on November 20, 1995, two months after the Interim Agreement (Oslo II) was signed between the PLO and Israel, an agreement that addressed the condition of Palestinians in the occupied territories while leaving out the Palestinian refugees scattered throughout the Arab world. Oslo II was met with cries of betrayal in the camps, which have evolved into a permanent home to several generations of Palestinians, especially in Khoury's Lebanon, where as many as 350,000 Palestinian refugees wait to return home. In a sense, Yunes stands for all

[144] gate of the sun, *by elias khoury raja shehadeh,* the nation, apr 19, 2006

those refugees abandoned by the Palestinian negotiators at Oslo, with the stroke of a pen. (It is this same leadership that suffered a resounding defeat in the general elections on January 25 in the occupied territories.)

Khoury's depiction of Palestine was an endless hall of mirrors with little or no relationship to reality. To be sure, this is the experience of Palestine for those refugees who have been stranded for more than half a century (and, perhaps, for those Palestinians who have remained in what is now Israel, and watched their country progressively disappear over time), and Khoury's intention to assert the reality of the refugees and keep their stories alive is admirable. But he overlooks those parts of Palestine that remain formally outside Israel and where the majority of Palestinians are still living under occupation. For Palestinians in places like Ramallah, where I live, Palestine is a physical reality, not simply an endless web of stories.

The proliferation of stories also presents a problem for Gate of the Sun as a work of literature, and it is as a novel, not as a political commentary or oral history, that Khoury's book must be assessed. Reading Gate of the Sun, one has the impression that Khoury was so haunted by the anecdotes he was told that he could not bear to part with any of them--the story of the woman who left her home while the zucchini was still on the fire, the woman who lost her children while fleeing Palestine, the adventures of those who stayed behind and the hardships they faced, the journeys of those who acquired foreign passports in the West that enabled them to visit Israel. Palestinian refugees are all too familiar with these tales, but the urge to tell every one of them has produced a cluttered, crowded book. And the narrative conceit of having Khalil speak for the man in the coma and convey to us what he did and what he must have thought and

felt, while repeatedly asking for his reactions and posing questions that never get answered, makes this long novel feel very long indeed.

The Nakba was the formative event for the Palestinians as a nation, particularly for the refugees in Lebanon who remain in camps and whose fate has been darker than that of any other Palestinian group. Khoury listened to their tales with compassion and commitment. He is among the few who have given literary expression to their memories. Palestinians tend to expect that every work about Palestine must encompass the whole of the Palestinian experience. It is unfortunate that Khoury, who is not Palestinian, was also motivated to achieve this impossible goal. Still, Gate of the Sun is important for trying to capture the Palestinian experience during and after 1948. Although it overreaches, the novel is unique and powerful, and Archipelago Books is to be commended for making it available to an American audience. [145]

Elias Khoury's 11th novel starts in the middle of a series of forced confessions, which spiral in unending variation until the eponymous Yalo concludes that "no one can write life". Yalo is a thief and rapist, a security guard turned "hunter" in the forested hills above Beirut. Not only has he inverted his job, but he's fallen in love with one of his victims. The novel begins as Shireen denounces Yalo before his interrogators, setting in motion his desperate attempts at "singing" his story.

Khoury has described how he starts each novel in the middle of the story. In the middle of his last novel, Gate of the Sun, he wrote that words and language have been circular from the first; "No matter how hard we try to break its circles, we find ourselves falling into new ones." Yalo exemplifies this in ways that may appear dispiriting in a confessional novel but are mesmerising in their execution -as readers of Gate know.

[145] gate of the sun, *by elias khoury raja shehadeh*, the nation, apr 19, 2006

Daniel Jalao Habeel Abyad, aka Yalo, is a 30-year-old Assyrian and veteran of 10 years' fighting in Lebanon's civil war of the 1980s. As he circles back through his lives, Yalo revisits those years as a war-dog in that many-sided conflict. Finally sickening of it, he accompanies a friend to Paris after robbing the safe at their barracks, only to be left alone and begging at Montparnasse métro station. He's rescued from destitution by a Lebanese arms dealer who needs a guard.

Yalo's grandfather was a refugee from Ottoman massacres of Assyrians. He looms in a mystical guise throughout the novel as patriarch and priest of the Syriac Orthodox Christian Church in Beirut. When Yalo heads for Paris his grandfather counsels that emigration killed a man's soul. This is why he had learned to read what had been erased. He added that we are a people whose story has been rubbed out.

Yalo's difficulty with words and his smattering of a "dead" Syriac tongue; his ambivalence towards Arabic and struggle to narrate, begin here. Khoury leads us towards his displacement brilliantly, but it's only one of the big ideas to which he gives vivid life. Yalo the disaffected fugitive is part Everyman, part Lebanese Underground Man, and part the refugee as coming global citizen. Altogether he's a brilliantly individuated character who, despite constantly shifting versions and ecstatic visions of himself, is as urgently affecting as the brutal torture techniques recreated here with scrupulous exactitude.

Yalo succeeds in capturing the equivocity of things while it also bristles and breaths with unmistakable authenticity. The key to Khoury's writing is its rhythmic and arrhythmic repetitions; from scales that are formal and philosophical through events, memories and sentences to words themselves, which can constellate across whole pages. For every fracture

and fragment there is a riffing repetition and return which accumulates force until this exasperatingly unsympathetic man steps right out of the book and you want to offer him a chair at your table.

Yalo is a highly compelling performance, presented in beautifully crafted, often lilting prose, a tribute to Khoury's authorship in Arabic as well as to Humphrey Davies' translation. This novel is about a corrupted individual in a corrupting time, but it speaks of and to us all.[146]

As Though She Were Sleeping by Elias Khoury (translated from the Arabic by Humphrey Davies) is a work that seeks to make just such borderless transgressions. The book stands on the precipices of magic realism and the stream of consciousness. It is divided into three sections that chronicle three nights in the life of its protagonist, Meelya. The three nights are spent in a hospital bed in Jaffa in December 1947, just before the birth of Meelya's child, and each night deals with fragmented dreams and recollections that the reader must piece together. Meelya is born in Beirut and moves to Nazareth in 1946 when she marries Mansour, a Palestinian. The move from Nazareth to Jaffa, where charged political tensions between the European Jewish settlers and the dispossessed Palestinians have already resulted in the death of Mansour's brother, sparks off a series of intensely mythic visions in Meelya's sleep.

The book is non-linear and repetitive - a twice-edged sword. Stories are played out over and over again, encircling Meelya's moments of slumber and wakefulness with sharp new recollections that texture her existing, often disjointed, memories. Through a process of constant reinvention and expansion, the stories shift and crystallise slowly, sometimes even displacing earlier versions of themselves. What emerges is a dense

[146] Guy Mannes-*Abbott,from elias khoury a novel voice*,12jan,2010

layering of complex detail. Each time Meelya harks back to an incident, additional information is revealed, knotted up in the unclear divisions between the real and the unreal. Pointedly ambiguous, the book lays its stories out on a hybrid plane that suffuses dream and reality on the one hand and past and present on the other.

The ambiguity endows the book with a vagueness that is best described by the author when Meelya tries to explain her dreams to Mansour: “She tried to tell him the story and it came out in no particular order, so he understood nothing… She’d skate from one word to another or from one word to a series of images, and then be unable to recover the end of the string that they call the story’s beginning. Her string had no end; she told stories like someone winding string, and would keep going without being able to tie things one to another.”

Khoury’s often purposeless ramblings are, in fact, like many strings left hanging loosely in the air, as though the author just let himself go completely without controlling the flow of interior discourse. Often, it is control that is sorely lacking in the new proponents of the genre, when compared to their precursors (I’m thinking of Joyce, Garcia and Borges, two of whom, like Khoury, I have only read in translation).

Khoury’s text is heavy with religious imagery that lends further indistinctness to his characters. Where the book is problematic, though, is not in its intentional ambiguity, but in the simple aspect of readability. There are several chunks of long-winded text, especially in the second and third parts, that simply do not contribute to plot progression and are characterised by little more than the indulgence of laboured description. When the formless gives way to the structureless, literature begins to

tread dangerous grounds and the decoding process can be disorienting and tedious.

Contemporary surrealism necessitates allegory and, in this case, political discourse. Meelya's persistent stupor is both an escape and an affliction. She finds herself overwhelmingly affected by the tragedies of life within the Palestinian state and the formation of Israel (which coincides with the birth of her child). She becomes so dependent on her dream-world that she is unable to step back into reality at all. Ultimately, her escape needs to be a return to reality. Through her dreams, she investigates the past, foretells the future and often entirely misses the present, as though it is far easier for her to pilot herself in such a world than in her own. Indeed, that is what all fiction is about.[147]

Sinalkul is a transparent portrayal of Lebanese society, expressing the loss of individuality and values at the time of the civil war. At the centre of the novel is the family of a pharmacist, Nasri Shamas and his two sons Kerim and Naseem. The story follows the aspirations of the characters, including our hero Kerim, which end in failure. Even escaping to France cannot erase the memory of society with all its tragedies.

At various stages of his life Elias Khoury has been a dramatist, a literary critic, a journalist and a professor of Middle Eastern studies. At the same time he has written novels, a number of which play out against civil war and political upheaval in his native Lebanon. In his latest to appear in English, The Broken Mirrors: Sinalcol, we see Khoury continuing this line of narrative inquiry and redeploying his trademark stylistic tropes and themes: backstory and shape-shifting perspectives, the illusoriness of

[147] Manasi Subramaniam, *The Asian Review of Books*, 29 September 2011

memory and the elusiveness of truth – and above all an emphasis on the power of storytelling.

As with Khoury's 1998 novel Gate of the Sun, The Broken Mirrors opens at the end of a story and then unspools to the beginning. Karim, a doctor, is leaving Beirut in the early hours of the morning. The night before he celebrated his 40th birthday alone which was far from his French wife and daughters in Montpellier and away from the three Lebanese women who have inflicted an emotional maelstrom. Why, he asks himself, did he leave France and return to Lebanon after all these years.

This question pops up again and again throughout the book. To start with, we learn Karim has returned to build a hospital in Beirut. Later we are told it is because of crippling homesickness. Later still we hear his intention is to track down Sinalcol, the mysterious "phantom" of the civil war.

These answers, and Karim's actions, come to us in a flood of recollections. After two months in Beirut – a place he vowed never to return to – he decides to "reopen his old accounts and recover the shadows of that past". He replays events from his youth with twin brother Nasim and their father Nasri – "the Trinity". The brothers' paths diverge: Karim goes on to mix in leftist circles, Nasim joins the Phalangists; Karim woos women, Nasim pays for them.

Along with the family Trinity there is Karim's messy love triangle with former fiancée Hend (now Nasim's wife), maid Ghazala and Muna, the wife of the architect designing the hospital. Karim regales us in tender and sensual detail of his amorous exploits and eventual heartbreak while trying to fathom "how this triangular relationship had taken shape in the midst of the dust of Beirut".

Each episode of Karim's life takes the form of a resurfaced memory. His adventures, together with Beirut legends and rumours and accounts of those around him, are presented as a series of "tangled" stories. There is the horrific story of Meena, the Sri Lankan maid, who learns about her new whereabouts ("We're not in the east, we're in the middle, which is why we live in a state of confusion over our identity") and her insignificant status there. There is the story of Nasri's slow decline, the joyful story of Karim's first encounter with his future wife, and a sequence of heroic stories about activists, militants and revolutionaries engaged in ideological debate or brutal conflict.

These latter tales comprise decades of struggle and can at times feel dense and meandering, requiring the reader to keep alert to each faction and movement, and to glance frequently at the book's extensive glossary. In contrast, Khoury's other stories, which deal with individuals and inclinations not parties or causes, are far more streamlined and have more success at evoking empathy.

Some tales veer slightly towards magic realism. Karim's pharmacist father concocts a green potion that, when drunk by women, renders him irresistible. And Ghazala's superstitious tale to Karim – "the strangest story he'd ever heard" – reveals that she is inhabited by two souls.

Cumulatively, Khoury's stories paint a fascinating picture of Beirut life, both during war and fragile peace. As many of his characters are prone to lying, and his slippery protagonist unable to candidly declare his motives, the stories also show that Khoury is not what Virginia Woolf called a "truth-teller", an author "who assures us that things are precisely as they say they are".

But who needs a truth-teller when they can have a wonderful storyteller. Regardless of authenticity, we hang on Karim's every word and reminiscence, from "chewing the cud of his memories" in France to finding out that Beirut's people "grind their memories underfoot". By the end of his journey Karim has absorbed enough painful truths about himself and realised that Beirut, too, for all its scars, will go on surviving as "each time the city died its population raised it from the dead against its will".[148]

Thus, Elias Khoury has been written some most famous novels which are become very popular in the world of literature. He belongs to a group of Arab writers that emerged in the 1960s and established what came to be known as the 'new novel' or 'new sensibility', a style that tackled the personal and political with fresh insight and introduced new techniques. In a 1993 interview, Elias Khoury spoke of the inter-relatedness of literature and politics:

> ".... in theory, we can separate literature from politics; but if you are in Lebanese or Palestinian society, this is impossible because everything is politicised and everything has to be re-thought; in rethinking society you cannot say '1 am not political'." [149]

Elias Khoury has probed existing models of Arabic literature to create new possibilities that enlighten the world we live in. Elias Khoury's project may be said to operate on two Levels. First, he wants to liberate

[148] Forbes Malcolm: *In Khoury's The Broken Mirrors: Sinalcol, Beirut takes shape within a tangle of stories,* February 12, 2015 Updated: February 12, 2015 03:49 PM
[149] Interview, *Elias Khoury*, 1993

the Arabic language traditionally divided into standard (written) and colloquial (spoken) from its rigid diction and syntax. [150]

This does not mean he disregards the classical idiom completely; instead, Elias Khoury introduces the spoken idiom into the written one. His interest in modernising the Arabic language is crucial to the second level of his project: a concern for recording the experiences of daily living. According to Elias Khoury, daily occurrences are best appreciated when the gap between orality and its written form has been bridged.

Although we cannot separate Elias Khoury's literary development from the history of the Lebanese civil war (1975-90), it would be extremely unfair to consider his writing important only as it relates to the civil war. While the civil war is a point of departure in many of his works, it typically functions as a vital locus to investigate more general the human conditions with specific questions pertaining to life, death, religion, and history.

Most of Elias Khoury's novels resist being summarised because they do not tell a single story with a clearly delineated plot. Instead, his novels are comprised of many intertwined events and incidents.

[150] Malhotra , R. P. *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Asian Novels and Novelists*: A-I, p544