

GULF WOMEN'S LIVES

Voice, Space, Place

edited by Emanuela Buscemi,
Shahd Alshammari and Ildiko Kaposi

First published 2024

<https://doi.org/10.47788/OIJE8138>

ISBN 978-1-80413-108-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-80413-109-1 ePub

ISBN 978-1-80413-107-7 PDF

9

Palestinian Women in the Gulf: Gender, Sexuality and Alienation in Selma Dabbagh's Fiction

Nadeen Dakkak (0000-0002-7514-6747)

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

DOI: 10.47788/NZQW3091

UNIVERSITY
of
EXETER
PRESS

9 Palestinian Women in the Gulf: Gender, Sexuality and Alienation in Selma Dabbagh's Fiction

Nadeen Dakkak (0000-0002-7514-6747)

Introduction

Any understanding of women's lives in the Gulf is incomplete without encompassing the stories of migrant women, expatriate women or, for lack of a better umbrella term, non-citizen women who have resided there permanently or temporarily. In the realm of Arab literature, the stories of non-citizen women in the Gulf are rarely acknowledged. Even if gender, sexuality and women's experiences have a large presence in works of fiction by Arab male authors, these do not adequately convey the voices of women and they often narrate personal journeys of migration for work in the Gulf. Unlike male migrants, Arab women, many of whom migrate as dependants rather than on work visas, additionally occupy the roles of housewives and mothers who build the families and communities that have become part and parcel of Gulf societies. They are also there as daughters and granddaughters in multigenerational migrant families for whom the Gulf is both a semi-permanent home and a temporary space in which non-citizens ultimately do not belong. With increasing scholarship on Gulf migration in recent years, the urgency of tackling marginalization amongst migrant workers from lower socio-economic groups, including female domestic workers, may have inadvertently diverted our attention away from the experiences of these multigenerational communities (Ahmad 2012; Babar 2017), which makes it all the more important to look at how they appear in works of fiction.

I focus in this chapter on the work of British-Palestinian writer Selma Dabbagh, namely her short story 'Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji' (2006) and one section of her novel *Out of It* (2011). The former is set in Kuwait during the period of the Iraqi invasion in 1990, and the latter is partially set in an unnamed Gulf city. A human rights lawyer before becoming a writer, London-based Dabbagh grew up and lived in different Gulf countries, hence her interest in the region and particularly in the space it offered to Palestinians since the 1948 *nakba* (catastrophe) and later on, the 1967 *naksa* (setback), both of which saw the dispossession of thousands from their homeland after the establishment of Israel, their displacement in neighbouring Arab countries and their subsequent migration to the Gulf.¹ In an interview with Lindsey Moore, Dabbagh comments on the familiarity of the diasporic Palestine–Gulf trajectory and on why the Gulf 'intrigues her':

I have spent almost half of my life, nearly 20 years, living in the Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain) and I have experienced these places as non-places to the foreigner: impersonal, featureless public spaces that you pass through, but are not expected or encouraged to impact upon in any way. It's an alienation from one's environment and an increasing sense of only being valued as a producer and consumer of wealth that is heightened in the Gulf but is increasingly found globally. (Moore 2015: 328–29)

Dabbagh here pinpoints the temporariness of life for foreigners in the Gulf. In one sense, the alienation she describes is a by-product of modern urbanization, which transformed Gulf cities into transient non-places that hinder feelings of attachment and are designed to accommodate temporary residents (Elsheshtawy 2019; Khalaf 2006). We see this Gulf city in *Out of It* (2011) where skyscrapers, shopping malls and huge billboards overwhelm Iman, the Palestinian protagonist, but simultaneously urge her to look beneath this façade and observe how it was made possible through excessive exploitation of depletable energy sources and migrant labour. Dabbagh's condemnation of the capitalist logic that underpins global cities in the Gulf and elsewhere thus corresponds to frequent critiques of the economic and

1. As Shafeeq Ghabra notes, the Palestinian presence in Kuwait and the Gulf is the result of voluntary migration and needs to be differentiated from the displacement Palestinians experienced in countries bordering Palestine (2018: 16).

environmental unsustainability of a profit-oriented urbanization that alienates Gulf inhabitants and ultimately produces fragile cities (AlShehabi 2015; Elsheshtawy 2019).

In another sense, the alienation that Dabbagh describes is an outcome of structural exclusion and the inevitable temporariness of non-citizens in the Gulf, no matter how integral their contributions are to the functioning of the host states. Nowhere did the inherent precarity of living in the Gulf become more manifest than in the experiences of Palestinians in Kuwait, who had built the country since the 1950s and taken it as a second home, only for thousands of them to be expelled in the aftermath of the 1990 Iraqi invasion because of the Palestine Liberation Organization's decision to support Iraq (Lesch 1991). This uprootedness and the hostility to which Palestinians were subjected in Kuwait for what was perceived as their betrayal of a long-standing political ally and generous host are central to the Palestinian protagonist's attempt to retrieve her memory and construct an alternative narrative of the invasion in 'Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji'. Contrary to migrants from other countries, Palestinians established a more entrenched presence in Kuwait and the Gulf because the prospect of return was contingent on the liberation of Palestine, and the formation of solid communities in the diaspora was essential to the survival of Palestinian identity and culture (Ghabra 2018). Their vulnerability at a time of political crisis shows how migrants generally become victims due to political alliances and disputes between states, but it also reflects the precarity of life in a place that has both offered Palestinians a safe haven and threatened to take away so much in return.

For Palestinians, the Gulf was simultaneously an alienating space of dislocation and further displacement, and an empowering place offering economic opportunities, as we see in earlier Palestinian narratives of migration to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, such as Ghassan Kanafani's *Rijal fil Shams* (1999 [1962], translated as *Men in the Sun*) and Jamal Naji's *al-Tariq ila Balharith* (*The Road to Balharith* 2016 [1982]). From the writings of Palestinian-Kuwaiti scholar Shafeeq Ghabra, we also know that Kuwait in particular was a primary location of Palestinian diaspora formation and thus promised political and social mobilization towards liberation before the Palestinian presence in the country was shattered in 1990–91 (2018: 53). Dabbagh evokes this history and, in a way, treads in the footsteps of these earlier Palestinian writers through the

dual image she depicts of the Gulf as a refuge and a site of alienation. However, she writes from the perspective of young Palestinian women whose unique experiences and observations allow her to centre gender and sexuality in how alienation is articulated. In 'Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji' and *Out of It*, the two female protagonists feel out of place because of the way in which their bodies are perceived by others and, in turn, because of their discomfort with their own bodies. Even though their feelings of alienation can be attributed to family circumstances and their sense of otherness as outsiders, it is in the sexualization and objectification of their bodies that alienation is most manifest. Dabbagh's fiction thus offers a much-needed reflection on how non-citizen women from middle-class and/or privileged backgrounds encounter the Gulf. Writing from within this positionality raises questions on intersections between gender, sexuality, citizenship and class in a context where the citizen/non-citizen dichotomy and the marginalization of workers dominate discussions on migration and power dynamics in society (Vora & Koch 2015), and where non-citizen women are often excluded from, if not further subjugated by, feminist discourses that are concerned with the struggles of citizen women (Kareem 2016).

At the same time, Dabbagh goes beyond the subjective lens that emerges from the particular positionality of her female protagonists. Whether through first-person narration in 'Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji' or the third-person subjective narrative tone that alternates between different characters in *Out of It*, there is a clear investment in pointing out other positionalities and subjectivities that fall outside the protagonists' own feelings and experiences, or even outside the scope of Dabbagh's representation of the Gulf. The reader is constantly pulled away from the main narrative and urged to observe other unexplored realities, including the struggles of migrant workers, of Palestinians from lower socio-economic backgrounds, or even of economically privileged but socially confined Gulf women. I understand this self-reflexive recognition of the limits of the subjective and of literary constructions of place as an important attempt to acknowledge the multiplicity of ways in which the Gulf is experienced, and the extent to which positionality shapes the narratives that could emerge from it. We therefore see different forms of marginalization and alienation intersect within the same geographic and/or temporal space in the two narratives. However, this emphasis on intersectionality is not without

limitations. I argue that Dabbagh's fiction demonstrates how critical engagement with social realities in the Gulf often faces the challenge of moving away from the essentialist terms with which the region has tended to be constructed in scholarly and literary writings (Kanna et al. 2020).

The Gulf as refuge and loss

Out of It moves between Gaza, the Gulf and London where members of the Palestinian middle-class Mujahed family attempt to live away from the oppressive Israeli occupation and its constant bombardment of Gaza. Divided into five parts, 'Gazan Skies', 'London Views', 'Gulf Interiors', 'London Crowds' and 'The Gazan Sea', the novel is focused on the twenty-seven-year-old twins Rashid and Iman, who each escape Gaza temporarily and pursue education in London, but it also brings in the stories and perspectives of their mother and elder brother in Gaza, and their father, a former PLO member who resides in an unnamed Gulf country. 'Gulf Interiors' zooms in on the day of Iman's arrival to the Gulf for a short visit she is forced to make by her father after nearly becoming involved with radical Islamic resistance fighters in Gaza a few days earlier, and before leaving for London shortly after. *Out of It* is 'a self-consciously spatial text that questions the interrelationship between the contrasting spaces of London and Palestine's urban areas', as Elleke Boehmer and Dominic Davies (2015: 404) note in their postcolonial reading of Dabbagh's depiction of the former imperial metropolis. Here the seeming absence of political consciousness about the situation in Palestine both alienates Iman and allures Rashid with the possibility of really getting out of it, of being detached from the politics of Palestine. Although the Gulf is mostly left out of this reading of the novel, similar observations can be made about the clearly delineated contrast between Palestinian and Gulf spaces, the latter overwhelming Iman with their unrealness in comparison to the real events she had witnessed in Gaza and to which her mind keeps returning. As she is dragged by Suzi, her father's girlfriend (or wife), into shopping malls and beauty salons, her detachment from the place even leads her to imagine its destruction: 'Iman found the mall overwhelming. The amount of glass for a start. Even a weeny little bomb, Iman thought, would lead to carnage in there. She saw large jagged panes of it dropping down on the croissant eaters, the

lipsticked smokers, and the backs of adults bent over children' (Dabbagh 2011: 176). A violent scene from Gaza is spatially transported into a Gulf mall where the superficiality of consumption is complicit in, if not punishable for, continued atrocities elsewhere.

Unlike London, though, where we similarly see these 'geographical superimpositions' that reveal 'the banality of the apparently depoliticized everyday life of London's citizens' and connect it with life in Gaza (Boehmer & Davies 2015: 405), Iman's 'condemnatory perspective' on the Gulf, as Dabbagh describes it (Moore 2015: 328), harks back to earlier literary representations of it as a place that nurtures materialism and self-interest. These themes reflect the way in which the Gulf for Arab migrants and for Palestinians in particular, especially in early waves of migration in the 1960s and 1970s, was associated with betrayal of the homeland and symbolized further displacement, alienation and detachment from the Palestinian cause—as we see, for example, in the aforementioned Palestinian texts. 'Gulf Interiors' is as much about Iman's observations of a new landscape as it is a window, for her and the reader, into the seemingly materialistic life her father and other Palestinians lead in the Gulf and, accordingly, their distance from the reality in Palestine. Her father, Jibril, talks about Palestinian suffering while he wears branded clothes and indulges in a consumerist lifestyle that makes him buy unnecessary gadgets and think of shopping as a way to get his daughter out of politics (2011: 170, 172). The Palestinian waiter he meets at the airport while waiting for Iman, and whom he tries to introduce to her as a potential suitor, does not seem to mind working at a café that is known to support Israel and has been singled out for boycott, nor does her father mind getting coffee there (164).

Iman's own privileged background and the European schooling she received abroad was in the first instance made possible by Jibril's past work with the PLO, which often led to accusations of corruption (161). While she condemns the materialism she encounters during her visit, the middle-class life the Mujahed family has managed to maintain in Gaza is clearly dependent on Jibril's work in the Gulf. To this he 'offered a prayer of gratitude' (161) for taking him in despite his political background, and for allowing him to leave politics: 'He thanked the glittering forest of duty-free shops around him [...] *I'm so glad to be here. I'm so glad to be out of it*' (161). The Gulf with its glittering buildings and shops seems to be an escape for Jibril from political impasse,

although we find out at the end that he was actually forced to leave politics for other reasons. It is an escape as well for his girlfriend, Suzi, from the traumatic memories of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon (177). The Gulf has indeed been a refuge for displaced Palestinians who were betrayed by politicians and political organizations. Alienating though it may be, it is an everyday space of survival for them, as well as for Palestinians in Palestine and in refugee camps who have for decades relied on the financial support of those who migrated to the Gulf. Iman has a simplistic, if not reductive, image of the Gulf, hence her harsh perspective on what she sees as the complete dissonance between materialism and political commitment. At the same time, she is shown to be rightly exasperated at Jibril and Suzi's attempt to make the Gulf her escape too by immersing her in the superficiality of a consumerist lifestyle, precisely because this attempt takes the form of her feminization, settling down through marriage, and distancing from politics.

Dabbagh in 'Gulf Interiors' centres the Palestine–Gulf connection and raises questions about the possibilities and the losses that ensued from it, which can be understood as part of her desire to 'find a linkage between Palestinians everywhere' through the focus on 'political consciousness as the connector' (Moore 2015: 331). 'Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji' is an earlier reflection on this connection, but here loss is at the heart of the Palestinian experience in Kuwait, counteracting decades in which both Kuwait and the Palestinian community thrived through the former's support of the latter, and the latter's dedication and investment in their host country's development (Ghabra 2018: 16, 70, 83). The half-Palestinian first-person narrator retrospectively recalls the first few days of August 1990 when the Iraqi army invaded Kuwait during an otherwise boring summer which she, a teenager at the time, spent noting down unremarkable detective observations in her diary. With British passports and the financial means to live elsewhere, the narrator and her father manage to travel to Jordan a few days later, leaving behind a less privileged extended family who were later expelled from the country they considered home and refused to leave during the invasion. They also leave behind Bustanji, the Palestinian gardener at the centre of the narrator's diary, whose fate symbolizes the status of Palestinians as scapegoats at times of crisis. Bustanji's son, into whom 'he puts everything' (Dabbagh 2006: 64)—as is typical of Palestinian parents' dedication to building future generations who will work towards

liberation—is kidnapped and never reappears. Here Dabbagh refers to the hundreds of revengeful attacks Kuwaitis carried out against Palestinians, who became scapegoats for the PLO's support of Iraq after liberation in 1991 (Lesch 1991: 47–50). A former PLO member, Bustanji too dies after being held by the police upon reporting the disappearance of his son, suggesting another deliberate act of killing. As if anticipating this fate, the narrator's diary makes it possible to retell the story of the invasion. Years later, she writes, 'A whole occupation had occurred, but I have no note of it, as when I heard the bangs I had not logged them, as I kept forgetting to look at my watch when they happened' (2006: 63). Instead, the diary records the regular visits of Bustanji who refused to neglect the garden even after the invasion, making it a testimonial to his dedication to the land and the plants he nurtured (63). As in *Out of It*, Kuwait in this story is a refuge, a second home to Palestinians, but it is also a place where it seems that decades of hard work do not pay off or put them in a less precarious situation. They are welcomed as workers and consumers, but are not offered belonging and stability in return, hence the heightened sense of alienation that Dabbagh's story conveys.

Gendered experiences of alienation

Despite being centred on the Palestine–Gulf connection, Dabbagh's representation of the Gulf in *Out of It* and 'Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji' is entwined with the subjective experiences of the two female protagonists. The teenage narrator's foreign appearance and background in 'Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji' arguably determines how her body is perceived in public spaces in Kuwait, while Iman's already-existing feelings of insecurity about her body and sexuality in *Out of It* are heightened in the Gulf mainly due to her family's perception of her as in need of feminization. In both narratives, the alienation that ensues from the protagonists' evident discomfort with their bodies necessitates recognizing how gendered and sexual relations shape Gulf spaces and women's experiences of them.

In *Out of It*, Iman's vulnerability, or seeming readiness, to being recruited by Islamic resistance in Gaza is a sign prompting Jibril to decide that his daughter needs feminization and a husband—'the girl really should be thinking of settling down' (2011: 163). He gives Suzi the mission of 'sorting her out'

through shopping mall trips, what he happily thinks of as Suzi's 'adoption of Iman's upbringing' (163). Iman momentarily feels secure in the ability to be little again in her father's embrace (164), but the disconnection between them becomes immediately clear and she is struck, perhaps not for the first time, by his insensitivity to her actual feelings and needs, and his seemingly traditional thinking of a woman's body as a symbol of family honour and of menstrual blood as shameful. When she asks for some time to get changed in the airport bathroom after she arrives, he does not have the intuition to connect her period to this request which he immediately dismisses, even if he does find the time to introduce her to the Palestinian waiter he met earlier (164–65). Later in the car when he finds out that she had bled through her trousers because the Israelis at the Gaza border did not allow her to go to the bathroom, he has a fit of anger at the humiliation of being denied this need as a Palestinian, despite his insensitivity to Iman's same request shortly before that. When she tells him about worse kinds of humiliation other girls have gone through at the border, including being strip-searched, Jibril's eyes were wild and demanded one answer only' to his question of whether they searched her like that, a comforting no that would allow him to rest in the knowledge that his own daughter's honour, and hence his own, was not violated (167). Jibril's fury at Iman's half-satisfying answer of 'not this time, but before', an experience he does not even bear to hear about, suddenly but not surprisingly shifts the blame on her for allowing this to happen, and even for allowing her body to bleed, before he quickly realizes how nonsensical his anger is and explains that he is just upset at 'the situation' (167). This scene between father and daughter—interspersed with interjections from the radio playing in the car and with Iman's window observations of the foreign world around her—encapsulates the distance and tension in their relationship. Iman is frustrated at her father because, as Dabbagh explains, he 'has deserted the family for reasons she does not know or understand' (Moore 2015: 328)—hence her alienation in the Gulf. We do not know much else about this relationship before we find out at the end of the novel that Jibril's decision to move to the Gulf was a direct consequence of his wife's political activities that went against his own political work and caused his embarrassment in the party, which could explain his attitude towards his daughter's political engagement.

Iman is surrounded by expectations of marriage and femininity ever since returning to Gaza from education abroad with the hope of finding a new meaningful political role for herself, only to 'find that there was no role offered to her at all, except for that of wife and mother' (2011: 18). However, it is during her temporary passage through the Gulf that expectations of femininity become central to the narrative and to her perception of herself, heightening her self-consciousness of her body and her lack of sexual experience. As befits a place that is depicted as superficial, materialistic and detached from the reality of Palestine and political commitment, these expectations take the shape of compulsory visits to malls and beauty salons with Suzi, who is at home in these places. After a day of waxing and shopping in which each woman grudgingly tries to appease the other for Jibril's sake, Suzi decides that it is 'far better to just be rude' with a girl of Iman's 'type' and to spell it out for her when the latter objects to whatever her father and Suzi want her to become: 'if you take my advice you will start to work on developing yourself as a *woman* rather than [...] whatever it is that you are trying to do. You want to be a *politician* of some kind? Or an *activist*? Is that it?' (178). Iman is determined to get herself out of her father's place and of the Gulf, 'out of all this frippery' which Suzi has made her wear, but these words still trigger her insecurities (180). They make her self-conscious of her unexpressed sexuality, which she begins to think of as visible in how her own body appears to others: 'What had Suzi picked up on? Suzi knew, she was sure of it, of her inexperience and ineptitude in *that* way, in the sexual way; women like Suzi could sniff these things out' (181). Iman continues to be haunted by Suzi's judgement of her body after she moves to London and until she finally has her first sexual experience, with someone she immediately contrasts with the men Suzi had set her up with in the Gulf when she finds out that he does not have a car (206). These men, for whom fancy cars seemed to be an extension of their masculinity that needed her praise and recognition, are like her father and Suzi, an outgrowth of the same materialistic and alienating space that could not accommodate her political subjectivity, and in which she was expected to acquire and perform a superficial feminine one that thrives through a consumerist lifestyle. Her father is the one who eventually sends her off to London after a date in which Iman's vocal opinions, interpreted by the Palestinian-American man she meets as the 'dangerous beliefs' of a 'militant communist',

reach Jibril and appear to threaten his reputation and her own (195). As she laughingly tells her brother later in reference to the inevitable trouble she would have caused her father and herself by living in a place that does not tolerate her political opinions, 'there was no place for me in the Gulf', a sentiment she reciprocated by refusing to change and conform with how she was expected to behave as a woman and as a non-citizen (195).

The Gulf in Iman's experience is alienating because it appears to be completely disconnected from possibilities of meaningful political action. Yet her out-of-placeness derives in the first place from the gendered social expectations that surround her and make political commitment seem incompatible with being a woman, particularly when womanhood is equated with a set of predetermined feminine qualities as well as marriage and motherhood. Because of her confusion at her political role and insecurity about her sexuality, Iman struggles to reconcile her desires and feelings as a woman with her abhorrence of these expectations and resistance to being subjected to them. As she reflects later in London, 'It bugged her immensely that despite the disrespect she felt for every aspect of Suzi, the judgement had resonated and caused so much self-doubt' (205). She is only able to gradually move beyond this self-doubt after her sexual experience in London and after she finds out about her mother's past political activism, 'a discovery of a legacy that she deserved' and that goes against the 'woman' that Jibril and Suzi wanted her to become (208). In Iman's eyes, the Gulf embodies a life that is irreconcilable with both her political aspirations and understanding of herself as a woman.

While Iman's temporary passage through the Gulf reveals how already-existing gendered social expectations become amplified in materialistic and consumerist spaces, Dabbagh depicts a different kind of alienation in 'Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji', one which ensues from the sexualization of the protagonist's body, particularly in gendered public spaces. The title of the story is itself a reference by the narrator to the hostile gazes and sexual harassment she received as a teenager in Kuwait, such as in the space between her house and the neighbourhood's grocery:

My bitch status was normally confirmed to me at least twice on the way back from Hajji's shop and more than that if I stopped for a cigarette [...]. Sometimes they were a joke, the lines coming out of the guys in the cars [...], 'Hey sexy,' weighed down with accent, sometimes the words were a

blur of consonants, sometimes it was just a horn, but it was always there, as an undertone, as an overtone, ever since I was a kid, even if there was no skin showing at all, it was always there, *Bitch, hey Bitch, yeah Bitch, I can see you. Bitch.* (2006: 60)

The suggestion here and elsewhere is that the narrator's foreign appearance, her fair skin and blonde hair, lead to her sexualization in a place where whiteness is fetishized and associated with promiscuity, hence the perceived sexual availability that is projected onto her body. The narrator's mother is Hungarian, although others casually refer to her as Romanian before correcting themselves in a sarcastic slip of the tongue that perhaps seeks to bring to the mind of the reader associations with sex trafficking. Her status as an outsider becomes most visible in contradistinction to the anonymity and easy mobility of Kuwaiti women in spaces where her body is marked not only for its foreignness, but for being dressed differently. When she finds the fancy lingerie store where her mysterious Kuwaiti neighbour shops—part of the detective investigation occupying her boring summer—she 'did not want to go inside because a crowd was gathering: *Bitch! Hey Bitch! We can see you. Bitch!* The black *abaya*-clad ladies had glided in and out like medieval princesses' (70). Evident here is the adolescent protagonist's increasing self-consciousness of her body, but also the retrospective narrator's recognition of how her foreignness and secular background intersected with her female positionality in gendered spaces and made her feel out of place. Even though Bustanji and the fate of Palestinians after 1990 are at the heart of the narrative and define the image of Kuwait that has remained in her memory, her perspective is dominated by subjective recollections of how she felt about her body as a teenager in Kuwait. Dabbagh weaves the political marginalization of Palestinians with the protagonist's gendered experiences to construct a subjective image of Kuwait as an alienating place.

The Gulf beyond the subjective

With their non-linear narrative structure and their reliance on the voices of protagonists, their impressions and memories of the spaces they encounter and inhabit in the Gulf, *Out of It* and 'Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji' do not exhibit a traditional realist mode of writing. *Out of It* in particular refuses to

pinpoint the geographic location of Iman's encounter with the Gulf, which allows it to construct a place that is a mixture of reality and fiction and whose petro-modernity is on the brink of collapse, almost anticipating its demise. At the same time, we see in both narratives a commitment to reflect on the Palestine–Gulf connection and to represent the reality of Palestinians and others in the Gulf. In this way, Dabbagh's texts share with other literary works on Gulf migration the urge to reveal and criticize political and socio-economic marginalization through subjective narratives. Yet we also see in her representation of the subjective encounter with the Gulf a similar urge to go beyond the stories of her protagonists and remind the reader of their limited capacity to adequately represent how a place is experienced by different people. In the same way in which literary realism as a mode of writing has the ability to examine its formal limitations and actively experiment with writing techniques that communicate to readers the challenges of representation, even while being committed to the necessity of representing the world (Beaumont 2007: 4), the narrative voice in both of Dabbagh's texts repeatedly directs the reader's attention towards other realities, and hence other possible stories, that intersect spatially and temporally with the protagonists' own experiences in the Gulf, but that remain outside the scope of representation.

In 'Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji', the narrator's self-consciousness of her sexuality and otherness is entwined with her interest in the Kuwaiti woman who lives across the road and whose movements in and out of the 'space station house' are recorded in her diary (2006: 59). The Sheikha, as the narrator calls her—a title symbolizing power, especially when preceded by the definite article that differentiates it from the more common first name Sheikha—embodies a juxtaposition that is stereotypical of the Gulf and often marks its perceived inauthentic modernity where conservative religious and cultural values, seen as backward, persist alongside material modernization: 'Her *abaya* was always black. Her face was always covered. Her bags were always full of high-class shopping' (58). The narrator is particularly interested in investigating the brands she sees on those shopping bags. When viewed in contrast to the black *abaya*, the lingerie items she finds in the fancy stores suggest the extent to which she is especially intrigued by the Sheikha's sexual life, a reflection of her own new adolescent concerns, but also of the seeming disparity between her own life as a young woman in Kuwait and that of the Sheikha. They are

two women who share the same neighbourhood but who come from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Indeed, if it weren't for the narrator's privileged economic status as the daughter of two doctors, she would not be living in this neighbourhood at all but in Hawalli, a non-Kuwaiti area where Bustanji and her Palestinian relatives live. Even if the narrator has access to a life not available to other Palestinians and migrants and she lives in the same neighbourhood as the Sheikha, their bodies do not inhabit the same social space, nor are they perceived in the same way in public spaces. References to the Sheikha are interspersed throughout the text, offering a distraction to the reader from the narrator's recollections of the invasion, just as the Sheikha herself offered a distraction to the bored protagonist and became the figure of the 'other' upon whom she could project fantasies of a mysterious and exotic life not available to her.

Dabbagh hints at the possibility that the Sheikha's life is not as mysterious and enviable as it appears in the eyes of her naïve protagonist. The brief detective notes in the diary build in the reader's imagination a set of stereotypical assumptions about what a Kuwaiti woman's life must be like in a patriarchal and oppressive society. These assumptions are solidified in a moment of epiphany for the protagonist, who realizes upon her departure from Kuwait that her gaze at the house across the road was reciprocated and that she may have similarly been the object of the Sheikha's envy. As they leave the neighbourhood, she writes,

my eye caught her moving behind the vent-shaped windows of her top floor. The Sheikha. The lights were on and her face was so close to the window, her hands pressed flat on it [...]. She looked so much younger than I had thought she was and I found myself thinking for some reason that maybe she had been watching me as much as I had been watching her. (72–73)

The Sheikha's unexpected young age and apparent longing for freedom suggest her marriage and subjugation to a life in which she lacks the protagonist's independence. Dabbagh makes room for another unwritten story that intersects with that of her Palestinian protagonist. It is a conscious and important literary attempt to recognize wider issues of gender and patriarchy that cut across citizenship and class but that manifest differently according to every woman's positionality in Kuwait. However, Dabbagh here falls into the trap of

reproducing the image of the oppressed and silenced Gulf woman who enjoys the comforts of material modernization and a consumerist culture but remains the victim of a conservative and backward society.

This depiction of material modernization as a façade behind which lurks a dark social reality is central to the image Dabbagh paints of the Gulf in *Out of It* as well, and which we particularly see in the chapter on Iman's first impressions after her arrival. Here, the father–daughter conversation that takes place in the car is interrupted a number of times by the characters themselves or the third-person subjective narrator to make room for observations about this dark reality. As the radio transports to them news from Gaza, Jibril speculates that the traffic must be due to construction worker riots. Venting off his frustration at the news, he unsympathetically calls them idiots when Iman asks for details. 'They'll all get deported in the morning, the lot of them' (165–66). As Iman observes the passengers of other cars stuck in traffic, her eyes immediately register a snapshot that captures both the cosmopolitanism and socio-economic inequality that mark this modern Gulf space, where

middle-aged Western men stared hard at the stationary traffic [...], women in black headscarves chewed gum with open mouths, East Asian women in the safari uniforms of the Chinese proletariat held toddlers in backseats, their foreheads slumped against the windows [...], two bearded men gesticulated to each other from either side of a suspended cardboard disc imprinted with the image of a Lebanese cleric. (166)

As in 'Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji' where the diary's record of Pakistani and Afghan migrants walking in the neighbourhood actively inserts them into the geographic landscape of Kuwait, references to the marginalization of migrant workers in 'Gulf Interiors' are central to Dabbagh's sketch of the alienating geographic and social landscape that Iman encounters. Unlike Jibril, for whom the plight of migrants seems like a taken-for-granted reality, even an insignificant detail of everyday life—he read and sought sections of the newspaper and only 'skimmed the runaway housemaids and discontented manual labourers section' (157–58)—the reader gets the sense that Iman's observations of this reality are part of her overall condemnatory perspective on the Gulf. Notwithstanding her own alienation in a place that seems to offer fertile soil for the negation of her political subjectivity as a woman, Iman experiences the Gulf

from a particularly privileged position. Dabbagh's investment in drawing the reader's attention to the realities of marginalized migrants thus reflects her attempt to go beyond the perspective that can emerge from her protagonist's positionality.

However, like in 'Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji', this attempt to condense what we can call the Gulf's 'problems'—migrant worker exploitation, but also alienating modernization, and economically and environmentally unsustainable urbanization—in a brief encounter has the effect of producing a reductive image in which the Gulf, a heterogenous and complex place like any other, loses its complexity and becomes only possible to conceive of through the extreme binaries of modernity/tradition, privilege/marginalization, amongst other apparent paradoxical features. Dabbagh's representation of the Gulf rightly sheds light on these urgent social realities in the same way in which it self-reflexively recognizes the different position the Kuwaiti Sheikha occupies in relation to the teenage Palestinian protagonist. Nonetheless, what we see in both texts is the difficulty of critically engaging with such realities in the Gulf without resorting to tropes and images that do not adequately convey their complex dynamics. Dabbagh's fiction demonstrates the challenge of writing about and representing a place that has so often been, and remains, the subject of essentializing narratives (Kanna et al. 2020).

Conclusions

Considering the scarcity of writings on the Gulf from the perspective of non-citizen women, Dabbagh offers an important gendered insight into the alienation that tends to be associated with the region. Her representation of the Gulf in *Out of It* and 'Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji' evokes the feelings of ambivalence that we see in earlier Palestinian writings, and in which the Gulf is both a refuge and a site of alienation. At the same time, alienation here is most clearly articulated through the subjective experiences of her female protagonists from whose perspective an even more alienating Gulf is narrated, one where their bodies are subjected to sexual and gendered expectations. The narratives demonstrate that the Gulf is perceived and experienced in various ways that cannot be reduced to the status of non-citizens as outsiders, and that inevitably emerge from one's particular positionality; but I also argued

in this chapter that Dabbagh makes room in her narratives for other possible stories, other experiences of alienation. Even if this self-reflexive technique does not adequately capture the nuance needed when approaching the marginalization of women and migrant workers in the Gulf and even uncritically reproduces stereotypical images of the region, it highlights the limits of representation and the challenge of critical literary engagement when writing on the Gulf. This challenge is not unique to literary representation and can be examined within other kinds of writing, including scholarly knowledge production on the region. Yet it is in works of fiction like Dabbagh's, where the narrative form is just as central as the narrative itself, that the challenges and limits of representation are laid bare to the reader—thus inviting a broader discussion beyond literary writing on how contentious issues on the rights and freedoms of women, migrants and other marginalized groups can be tackled in the Gulf.

References

- Ahmad, A. (2012). Beyond Labor: Foreign Residents in the Persian Gulf States. In M. Kamrava & Z. Babar (eds), *Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf* (pp. 21–40). Hurst.
- AlShehabi, O. (2015). Rootless Hubs: Migration, Urban Commodification and the 'Right to the City' in the GCC. In A. Khalaf, O. AlShehabi & A. Hanieh (eds), *Transit States: Labour, Migration and Citizenship in the Gulf* (pp. 101–32). Pluto.
- Babar, Z. (ed.) (2017). *Arab Migrant Communities in the GCC*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190608873.001.0001>
- Beaumont, M. (2007). Introduction: Reclaiming Realism. In M. Beaumont (ed.), *Adventures in Realism* (pp. 1–12). Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470692035.ch>
- Boehmer, E.& D. Davies. (2015). Literature, Planning and Infrastructure: Investigating the Southern City Through Postcolonial Texts. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 51(4), 395–409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2015.1033813>
- Dabbagh, S. (2006). Me (the Bitch) and Bustanji. In J. Glanville (ed.), *Qissat: Short Stories by Palestinian Women* (pp. 58–77). Telegram.
- Dabbagh, S. (2011). *Out of It*. Bloomsbury.
- Elsheshtawy, Y. (2019). *Temporary Cities: Resisting Transience in Arabia*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429457838>
- Ghabra, S. (2018). *Al-Nakba wa Nushu' al-Shatat al-Filastini fil Kuwayt* [The Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait]. Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.

- Kanafani, G. (1999). *Men in the Sun and Other Palestinian Stories* (trans. Hilary Kilpatrick). Lynne Rienner.
- Kanna, A., A. Le Renard & N. Vora. (2020). *Beyond Exception: New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula*. Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501750298.001.0001>
- Kareem, M. (2016, 14 January). 'Manifesto Against the Woman.' *Jadaliyya*. www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32849/Manifesto-Against-the-Woman
- Khalaf, S. (2006). The Evolution of the Gulf City Type, Oil, and Globalization. In J.W. Fox, N. Mourtada-Sabbah & M. al-Mutawa (eds), *Globalization and the Gulf* (pp. 244–65). Routledge.
- Lesch, A.M. (1991). Palestinians in Kuwait. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 20(4), 42–54. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2537434>
- Moore, L. (2015). A Conversation with Selma Dabbagh. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 51(3), 324–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2014.954755>
- Naji, J. (2016). *Al-Tariq ila Balharith* [The Road to Balharith]. Amman, al-Shuruq.
- Vora, N. & N. Koch. (2015). Everyday Inclusions: Rethinking Ethnocracy, *Kafala*, and Belonging in the Arabian Peninsula. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 15(3), 540–52. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12158>