

Abortion in Modern Arabic Literature

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ABSTRACT

The author examines themes in Arabic literature as identified in contemporary scholarship. After a survey of late-twentieth-century works that address the life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, the author conducts a close reading of the abortion passages in Leila Aboulela's short story "Make Your Own Way Home" (2001) and then evaluates the literary merits of the story. Finally, the author considers Qur'anic passages and aspects of Arabic history that may account for the differences in how abortion is treated in modern Arabic literature and its Western counterpart.

THE WEST'S EXPOSURE TO ARABIC LITERATURE, beyond the secondary school practice of referencing fantasy tales like those found in *The Arabian Nights (The Thousand and One Nights)* is a relatively new phenomenon. Cultural criticism has encouraged colleges and universities to diversify their literature programs by incorporating global ("multicultural") authors, and so the academy has embraced the Palestinian Ghassan Kanafani as much as Keats and the Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz as much as Milton. However, modern Arabic literature on the three right-to-life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia is an area still unknown to most Westerners. Arabic works have been considered from the variety of literary theories still practiced in academia, to the chagrin of some.¹ Many more Arabic works, especially those concerned

¹ Asserting his status as a "traditional humanist," M. M. Badawi challenges the tendencies of most literary theories to divert attention away from the entertainment and didactic purposes of literature while succinctly referencing the more prominent literary theories in the following passage: "At a more fundamental level, I cannot dismiss as irrelevant the question of value.... Nor am I capable of reducing to the status of a mere game of words, however intricate the rules, a work that grapples with the baffling mystery of human existence, exploring the dark recesses of the mind, trying to make sense of the intensity of human passions and suffering, or even endeavouring to lessen the misery of the

with the life issues, need an analysis from a right-to-life perspective, and I intend to begin the discussion by focusing on fiction by contemporary Arabic authors whose works have been translated into English.

REVIEW OF THE SCHOLARSHIP

While social science scholars have written extensively about abortion in Islamic countries (and often do so from an anti-life perspective²),

wretched of the earth by advocating political or social action. Literature is much more than entertainment: this was once regarded as a truism, but sadly it has to be repeated now, even at the risk of sounding too solemn. Modern fashionable French-inspired academic literary criticism, particularly in the United States of America—what Frank Kermode recently described as ‘high-tech, jargoned and reader alienating’—has, in my opinion, with its neo-scholasticism done a considerable disservice to literature by robbing it of its seriousness, even though as a rule it suffers itself from unbearable solemnity.” M. M. Badawi, “Perennial Themes in Modern Arabic Literature,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 20/1 (1993): 3-19, here pp. 5-6.

² See, for example, S.D. Lane, J. M. Jok, and M. T. El-Mouelhy, “Buying Safety: The Economics of Reproductive Risk and Abortion in Egypt,” *Social Science Medicine* 47/8 (Oct. 1998): 1089-99. The abstract for their analysis of abortion in Egypt ends with this decidedly anti-life statement: “Wealthy women can literally buy safety, while poor women’s lack of financial resources put [sic] their lives at great risk.” There are three things wrong with this statement; first, of course, the lives of the unborn children are ignored; second, abortion is considered as a benefit instead of the symptom of social ill health that it is; finally, while the focus of the abstract is on “poor women,” the more obvious factor is ignored (that abortion is a moral and biological wrong for women in any financial category).

Similarly, S. Singh of the Guttmacher Institute uses research to recommend the typical abortion agenda instead of life-affirming services to mothers at risk. S. Singh, “Hospital Admissions Resulting from Unsafe Abortions: Estimates from 13 Developing Countries,” *Lancet* 368, no.9550 (25 November 2006): 1887-92. While the abstract for the article suggests that there is a “need for improved access to post-abortion care,” the typically life-denying recommendations (written in highly connotative anti-life language) are that “increasing access to safe abortion services is the most effective way of preventing the burden of unsafe abortion, and remains a high priority for developing countries.”

More examples of anti-life activities of conferences and research designed to legalize abortion can be found in the following articles: O. Asman, “Abortion in Islamic Countries—Legal and Religious Aspects,” *Medicine and Law* 23/1

scholarship on modern Arabic literature is relatively silent when mentioning the first right-to-life issue. Moreover, locating literary works for study is challenging for at least three reasons. First, as many scholars have stated, Westerners are only now beginning to immerse themselves in literature from the Middle East. According to Denys Johnson-Davies, “the birth of the Arabic novel is dated to 1929, with the second (and more successful) printing of *Zaynab* by Muhammad Husayn Haykal.”³ Mohammad Shaheen brings the chronology of Western interest closer by noting that “different genres (in the Arab world) such as the short story, the novella, the novel and free verse emerged almost at the same time. We can assume that the short story proper is not more than four decades old.”⁴

A second reason to account for the difficulty in finding modern Arabic literary works on abortion is that many fictional works are still available only in Arabic. For example, a short story apparently concerned with abortion in the anthology *On the Long Road* by Hind Azzuz is unavailable for purposes of this study because it still has not been translated into English.⁵

Third, it may be that the concerns we have in our Western literature are not as compelling as those for writers from Egypt, the Levant, or other regions of the Arabic world. Stefan G. Meyer concluded in 2001 that

The Arabic novel...has not exhibited many of the social themes central to Western modernism.... Arabic novels have tended to focus more on social conditions experienced *within* a particular class—whether bourgeois,

(2004): 73-89; L. Ercevik-Amado, “Sexual and Bodily Rights as Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa” *Reproductive Health Matters* 23/23 (2004): 125-28.

³ Denys Johnson-Davies, *The Anchor Book of Modern Arabic Fiction* (New York NY: Anchor Books, 2006), p. xiv.

⁴ Mohammad Shaheen, *The Modern Arabic Short Story: Shahrazad Returns*, 2nd ed., rev. and exp’d. (Houndsmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 153.

⁵ Hind ‘Azzūz, *Fī al-darb al-tawīl* [On the Long Road], 2nd ed. (Tunis, Algeria: al-Dār al-Tunīyah lil-Nashr, 1969, 1978). My thanks go to Dr. Mohammed Khadre not only for his kindness in reading Azzuz’s anthology but also for his assistance in collecting social science references.

peasant, or urban—and the relationships among members of the various classes, than on the movement of individuals from one class to another. Within this framework, Arabic experimentalism has focused on exploring ways of reconciling its deeply embedded cultural heritage (*turath*) with modernity, as well as on a quest for a renewed cultural and historical self-image.⁶

Even as recently as 2006 Johnson-Davies wrote that

Sex and love, for example, are handled differently in Arabic fiction than in Western fiction, for it should be remembered that Arab society is by and large conservative and conventional, with most marriages arranged, and sex outside of marriage regarded as sinful. When a writer oversteps the bounds as set by society, the work is often banned.⁷

When scholars do discuss abortion as a topic in modern Arabic literature, the results are minimal. Writing in 1993, M. M. Badawi identified several themes in the literature, collecting them in “pairs of opposites or polarities: for instance, town and country, tradition and modernity, East and West, or Arab and European, freedom and authority, society and the alienated individual.”⁸ His survey lists only one fictional

⁶ Stefan G. Meyer, *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant* (Albany NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 2001), p. 12, emphasis in original.

⁷ Johnson-Davies (2006), p. xix. Moreover, some claim that Arabic authors are not ready to discuss controversial issues such as abortion, and this opinion has force by virtue of its placement on a web source frequently used by students: “Of the three countries of the Maghrib, Tunisia has the largest number of women writing in Arabic. Although the mere fact of their writing is a reflection of change in society, the women do not always promote complete emancipation. Slowly but progressively their tone has become more daring. Raising certain questions is in itself a revolutionary stance: Subjects such as birth control and abortion, discussed by Hind Azzouz (b. 1926) in *Fi al-Darb al-Tawil* (1969; *On the Long Road*), are a novelty.” See his “Arabic, North African Literature: North African Writers Convey Their Ideas in French and Arabic in a Variety of Literary Genres,” Answers.com. (28 May 2007) at: <http://www.answers.com/topic/arabic-north-african-literature>.

⁸ Badawi, p. 4.

work that considers abortion, and its brief mention in Suhayl Idris's *The Latin Quarter* suggests that abortion is not a significant part of the plot.⁹ By 2001 Saad Elkhadem makes no mention of abortion in any of the novels discussed in "The Representation of Women in Early Egyptian Fiction," a chapter of his study of Egyptian novels. Although Egypt is considered the more literary avant-garde of the Arab nations with a significant literary history in the twentieth century, Elkhadem ends the essay with a reason that may account for the void of such controversial topics:

Egyptian novelist [sic] have, like their European counterparts, often included women in their stories, and some have even put women at the center of their tales. However, the social and religious climate of this Islamic country has imposed certain moral and stylistic restrictions on the authors of this early period [from the late nineteenth century to the 1950s]. Also, the fact that all the writers who have contributed to the rise and development of the Egyptian novel were men has given these works a biased, if not a sexist, attitude. Many of them have chosen non-Egyptian women for the love stories, or have depicted their liberated heroines as misguided women and neurotic creatures, thus reassuring their readers that in spite of the unconventional tales they have just witnessed, they still live in a proper and righteous society.¹⁰

⁹ Suhayl Idris, *The Latin Quarter* (1953), cited in Badawi, p. 16.

¹⁰ Saad Elkhadem, *On Egyptian Fiction: Five Essays. Arabic Literature and Scholarship* (Toronto ON: York, 2001), p. 44. I have noticed a disturbing tendency in some critical commentary on the fiction to reduce modern Arabic fiction as backwards in its view of women simply because it may not advocate the issues that concern certain categories of Western feminists. Sometimes the criticism is merely cautionary. For example, while praising Arab novelists who "felt free to experiment with techniques of narrative fragmentation," Meyer suggests that "this may not necessarily be read as reflective of progressive thinking in other respects. An example of this gap between formal innovation and ideology can be seen with respect to the expression of male Arab writers regarding gender issues and sexuality.... Formal experimentation is the particular obsession of male writers in the Arab world, and this experimentation is used more as a way of avoiding issues of gender and sexuality than as a vehicle for expression on these topics" (Meyer, pp. 12-13).

Another critic was bold enough to identify the backlash that Arab women authors mount against their Western feminist counterparts who try to impose their version of "feminism" on the Middle East. Elizabeth McKee claims: "Several Arab women writers that I know (including Layla Ba'albakki, Hanan al-Shaykh

ANALYSIS OF A REPRESENTATIVE WORK OF FICTION ON ABORTION

Some fictional works seem to address the right-to-life issue of abortion—"seem" is necessary here, for it is often uncertain if the action justifies the claim that a story concerns abortion. Ghalib Halasa's short story "Fear" documents a female character's plea that God will "not let it happen" and her hope that God would "make it all right."¹¹ Whether the woman uses "it" to refer to her love for a man or to her possible pregnancy is unclear. Similarly, other works appear to address infanticide and the value of imperfect human life, if not euthanasia explicitly. In her 2001 *Coloured Lights* anthology Leila Aboulela writes lovingly about handicapped children in "Visitors," the treatment that a visually-impaired man receives at the hands of his peers in "The Ostrich," and the emotion felt for the handicapped in "The Boy from the Kebab Shop." However, these works are decidedly tangential vis-à-vis the life issues.

Other references to the life issues can be found in a popular current anthology. *The Anchor Book of Modern Arabic Fiction*, edited by Denys Johnson-Davies, contains 486 pages of representative writing from the Arab world. Some references to the life issues are unimportant, such as Nawal El Saadawi's specific mention of "abortion" in the excerpt from

and Emily Nasrallah), have expressed their irritation at the way in which Western feminist critics have appropriated their works and manipulated their contents to serve a feminist agenda that is largely alien to the authors themselves. They are disturbed not only by what they perceive as the antagonistic, overtly anti-male stance of some feminist critics, but also by a sense of frustration that their writing is somehow being marginalized, almost ghettoized, into a female literary enclosure in which they are disenfranchised from mainstream literature. They complain of not wanting to be known as "feminist" writers, but just as writers; not wanting to be renowned for their stance on women, but for their general outlook on life..." Elizabeth McKee, "The Political Agendas and Textual Strategies of Levantine Women Writers," *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, ed. Mai Yamani (New York NY: New York Univ. Press, 1996) pp. 105-39, here at pp. 133-34.

¹¹ Ghalib Halasa, "Fear" in *Under the Naked Sky: Short Stories from the Arab World*, ed. Denys Johnson-Davies (Cairo, Egypt: American Univ. in Cairo Press, 2000), pp. 74-94, here at pp. 85, 87.

*Woman at Point Zero*¹² or the casual mention of “right to live” in the excerpt from Latifa al-Zayyat’s *The Open Door*.¹³ Infanticide is not the topic in Elias Khoury’s excerpt from *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, where a reference to “the babies [who] died before being born” are obvious stillbirths.¹⁴ Daisy Al-Amir’s entry, “The Doctor’s Prescription,” documents a woman’s effort to commit suicide; her justification for suicide does not overpower the ironic purpose of the story.¹⁵ While Mohammed Barrada’s “Life by Installments” celebrates life in general,¹⁶ death is a welcome relief to a tired old woman in Brahim Dargouthi’s “Apples of Paradise.”¹⁷ Some stories depict mothers in danger of being forced into abortion or murdered probably because of their pregnancies. In Sabri Moussa’s “Benevolence,”¹⁸ a mother three months pregnant is murdered, and a pregnant daughter and her mother discuss the complicated situation surrounding her pregnancy in Alifa Rifaat’s “An Incident in the Ghobashi Household.”¹⁹ The solution is to send her to Cairo instead of stay in her home town. Other stories celebrate the unborn. An old man’s second wife is pregnant in Bensalem Himmich’s

¹² Nawal El Saadawi, “Woman at Point Zero” in Johnson-Davies (2006), pp. 371-73, here at p. 371.

¹³ Latifa al-Zayyat, “The Open Door” in Johnson-Davies (2006), pp. 462-67, here at p. 463.

¹⁴ Elias Khoury, “The Journey of Little Gandhi” in Johnson-Davies (2006), pp. 254-57, here at p. 257. The biography preceding Yusuf Idris’s entries briefly mentions a case of possible infanticide in the novel *The Sinners*, which is concerned with “the story of a young peasant woman from a group of migrant workers who accidentally smothers her illegitimate child” (p. 181).

¹⁵ Daisy Al-Amir, “The Doctor’s Prescription” in Johnson-Davies (2006), pp. 23-25.

¹⁶ Mohammed Barrada, “Life by Installments” in Johnson-Davies (2006), pp. 66-72.

¹⁷ Brahim Dargouthi, “Apples of Paradise,” in Johnson-Davies (2006), pp. 89-97.

¹⁸ Sabri Moussa, “Benevolence” in Johnson-Davies (2006), pp. 316-18.

¹⁹ Alifa Rifaat, “An Incident in the Ghobashi Household” in Johnson-Davies (2006), pp. 360-64.

excerpt from *The Polymath*, and they are happy about it.²⁰ Similarly, Haggag Hassan Oddoul's "Nights of Musk," a man's reminiscence of his courtship, contains respectful imagery of the unborn.²¹

These citations, however, remain relatively minor items in the canon of Arabic literature concerned with the life issues. In contrast, another short story by Leila Aboulela, "Make Your Own Way Home,"²² is entirely devoted to the study of abortion in the characters' lives. The narrator relates the experiences and thoughts of Nadia, who is Muslim, and Tracy, her British friend who has aborted. The action of the story progresses from a Friday afternoon after Tracy has aborted to the next day when she will leave the nursing home in which the abortion has occurred. While there are many minor characters, the attention is clearly on Tracy and her abortion. Interspersed in the chronological order of the story are flashbacks to episodes and statements which indicate key decisions and influences behind Tracy's choice to abort the unborn child.

In some respects, Aboulela's work parallels the premiere abortion story known to Western readers, Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants."²³ There are two minor similarities and one significant comparison in both stories. The first surface similarity is that both stories deal wholly with abortion. Second, both stories are short; Aboulela's fifteen pages nearly double the quantity of Hemingway's masterpiece (eight).

The major comparison between both stories is the ambiguity of key terms. Hemingway uses two such key terms in "Hills": "fine" and "it." Jig's ambiguous use of "fine" refers either to her true state of being all right or her flip response to the American man for the purpose of stopping his talking. Likewise, the even more ambiguous use of "it" can refer either to the situation between the American man and Jig, to the abortion

²⁰ Bensalem Himmich, "The Polymath" in Johnson-Davies (2006), pp. 157-60.

²¹ Haggag Hassan Oddoul, "Nights of Musk" in Johnson-Davies (2006), pp. 339-48.

²² Leila Aboulela, "Make Your Own Way Home" in *Coloured Lights* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Polygon, 2001), pp. 83-97.

²³ Ernest Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants" in *Men Without Women* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), pp. 69-77.

which he would like her to choose, or to the baby him- or herself. Such linguistic ambiguity is evident in two sections in Aboulela's story, both of which help the reader determine the impact that the abortion has had on the characters.

When Nadia accompanies her friend as they leave the abortion center, Tracy's language is as brief and as ambiguous as Jig's. "No, I'm all right" is Tracy's response to Nadia's helpful "Let me carry your bag."²⁴ The burden that Tracy is experiencing becomes increasingly evident after only one substantial paragraph. Aware that her friend is waiting for her, Tracy says, "Go ahead, don't wait for me"—as though everything is "fine" with her. This response, of course, begs the question whether one who leans against a wall in such a pensive posture, smoking a cigarette whose purpose is either to enhance the pensiveness or to lessen anxiety, is feeling "all right" or not.

There are some stylistic features about Aboulela's story which differentiate it from Hemingway's. Unlike other stories in Aboulela's anthology, no direct dialogue is quoted. If it were not for new line indentation, it would be difficult to determine when one character's statement ends and another's begins. Moreover, Aboulela freely combines omniscient and limited narrative perspectives. The first page of the story makes it seem as though the narrator's attention is on Nadia,²⁵ yet in a pivotal section when Tracy reflects on the abortion of the past day, the narrator interjects Tracy's thoughts as efficiently as was done for Nadia, switching between perspectives and even crossing verb tenses: "It seems to Tracy that the station is too far away. Was it that far when she came yesterday?"²⁶

There is a significant difference, though, between Hemingway's classic tale of abortion and Aboulela's; while Hemingway's prose is minimalist, leaving, if not hiding, a moral interpretation, Aboulela's short story does not mask the moral considerations. One paragraph especially declares the moral urgency of the situation, the sentences of which, since

²⁴ Aboulela, p. 93.

²⁵ Aboulela, p. 83.

²⁶ Aboulela, p. 93.

they will be explicated in detail below, are preceded by bracketed numbers. The omniscient narrator records Nadia's reaction to Tracy's abortion in language that is either condemnatory or an indication of the first effect of the post-abortion environment, the loss of friendship between the women:

[1] Pity for Tracy is superseded by illumination. [2] Nadia can see the silver drop earring nestle in Tracy's earlobe, entwined by a single stray hair. [3] She can see Tracy's eyebrow ruffled, the little hairs disturbed, askew. [4] Nadia can see Tracy's womb. [5] Bewildered, its mouth agape in a round full O. [6] It murmurs and drones reproach. [7] Pulsed its defeat, retreats. [8] Grudgingly contracts, adjusts. [9] Sheds, expels, but there is little left to shed.²⁷

This paragraph of nine lines ("line" being a better term than "sentence" since four are not complete sentences and read more as poetry than as prose) is a concentrated mass of semantic and linguistic cohesion that conveys the deepest respect for the unborn child, mirrored in the image of the earring shaped as an embryo, as much as it reenacts the abortion itself and comments on the aftereffects. While the first line is a prelude to the abortion itself, the shock of the language is hidden in a passive voice verb ("is superseded"). Nadia would feel sympathy for Tracy, the aborted mother, were it not for a moment of epiphany that Nadia now reaches, twelve pages into the story, only two pages before its end. If Nadia is "illumined," then she realizes what has occurred only at this late stage in the narrative, and the balance of the paragraph shows how shocking the event must now seem for Nadia. The second line encapsulates the mother and unborn child in the safe image of the earring, its shape a perfect metaphor for the unborn child carried safely in his or her protected world.

The third line of the above passage is a metaphor for the abortion procedure itself. Abortion is always a disturbance in the setting of any narrative, and the language reflects the disorder. The perfect syntactical pattern N-V-N (although the noun subject is replaced by a pronoun) becomes confused by the time the direct object is reached. Is it accurate to say "eyebrow ruffled" or "ruffled eyebrow," the past participle usually

²⁷ Aboulela, p. 95.

preceding the noun which it describes? Since this is a case of abortion, though, how appropriate it is to have used this change in syntactical pattern. The intensity of this one line on the abortion procedure is enhanced further because, of the remaining two past participles, only one has its noun specified, the last participle bereft of its necessary noun (another linguistic microcosm of the abortion procedure itself). The rhetorical effect of this sequence of participles is powerful for two reasons. First, the connotative value of all three participles is negative. Second, “ruffled,” “disturbed,” and “askew” gain in intensity, showing a chronological progression from merely being lightly touched (ruffled) to dislodged (disturbed) to being out of kilter (askew).

By the time the narrative reaches this third participle, of course, the reader can presume that the abortion has occurred, and the remainder of the paragraph documents the post-abortion environment. Interestingly, Nadia sees, not the aborted remains, but Tracy’s “womb”—a safe vision, displacing the reality of what has occurred. After this fourth line in the paragraph, the language further deteriorates. While the fifth line lacks a verb, the rhetorical intensity gains from the personification of a womb now described as shocked at what has happened. The womb becomes slightly depersonalized again in the sixth line only because it is referred to as an “it,” but the actions of this entity masked in the third-person pronoun are anything but nonhuman.

“It murmurs and drones reproach” is not only a clever way to personalize the nonhuman; it is also the beginning of a poetical rendition of the aftereffects of abortion. Although it may not have been the author’s intention to have produced lines so poetic, an argument can be made that the poetry of the line helps to organize the facts of the aftereffects of the abortion into a literary masterpiece. If “It murmurs” is considered an amphibrach for purposes of scansion of the lines, then the remaining words in this sixth line begin the largely iambic rendering that carries across two more lines:

- / - - / - /

It murmurs and drones reproach.

The seventh and eighth lines of this paragraph read like a heartbeat that has suffered assault. Each of the lines begins with a dactyl, which is a

poetic foot designed to contain an abrupt and emotionally heavy action. After these dactyls, though, the presence of two consecutive iambic feet in both lines makes it seem as though the body is attempting to restore its tranquility after the shock it has experienced. It is further significant to note that the subject for these lines is absent, as though the repetition of the pronoun “it” would defeat the effort to personify the womb:

/ - - - - / - /

Pulses its defeat, retreats.

/ - - - - / - /

Grudgingly contracts, adjusts.

The last line of this paragraph can be scanned as a dominantly iambic line quite easily. The first word of this ninth line constitutes a monosyllabic foot to emphasize the term (“Sheds”). The second term (“expels”) continues the iambic pattern of the sixth through eighth lines, but there is a notable difference. A caesura, a significant pause, occurs immediately afterwards, signifying that the action of the abortion is finished.

/ - - / - - / - - / - - / - - /

Sheds, expels, but there is little left to shed.

That the last clause following the coordinating conjunction is perfectly iambic should convey the idea that life has returned to normal after the abortion. In fact, the final clause of this paragraph, lilting in its alliteration of “l” sounds, not only mourns, but also hides the fact that an abortion has occurred; the “little left to shed” refers to the uterine contents, the most important part having been the unborn child him- or herself.²⁸

²⁸ Tracy herself commented on a variation of these words earlier in the story. When she recounts the details of her abortion to Nadia, Tracy says: “They sucked it out. The vacuum roared and sucked and gobbled. It’s a very loud noise, I told the nurse. Not really, she said, you must be imagining it. All the painkillers that you took. She held my hand and chatted to me to distract me. I lay down and it was like an initiation rite in those weird ceremonies they have in horror films.

A subsequent paragraph illustrates the abortion's effect on the women's friendship, and the author makes no attempt to mask its didacticism:

When friendships run their course there are no rituals of mourning. There are no tears. There is not even a premonition of finality. So in the train as Tracy and Nadia sit in front of a woman in a sari reading the last pages of a library book, a man with a mermaid tattooed on his arm, they promise each other meetings and telephone calls. They will meet in college after the Easter break. Tracy wants to get a job with the Body Shop during the holidays, she will tell Nadia what it is like. Nadia will work in her father's travel agency; she will get Tracy brochures of Australia. They are not insincere in their promises but they will not keep them.²⁹

Finally, these paragraphs are especially important because the cumulative effect of the negative connotations, the characters weakened by the abortion experience, and the loss of friendship between the women is a judgment against abortion. Hemingway's story is bereft of moral bearings, and some critics have been quite creative in trying to determine its moral background.³⁰ One could argue that Aboulela's religion (Islam) colors her perception of the issue as much as evangelical Protestant writers would have their fiction colored by tenets of their religion. Conjecturing about an author's religion, however, especially when he or she writes about abortion, is tantamount to a literary red herring, distracting the reader from the text at hand. In my estimation, even if she were not a practicing Muslim, Aboulela's short story would make those Western feminists who choose to be anti-life extremely uncomfortable.

The contents of your womb, she called it. This is what they call it here. So many words for such a tiny thing." (p. 87; emphasis in original).

²⁹ Aboulela, p. 97.

³⁰ I recall Dennis Organ's creative effort to determine that Jig is Catholic because, after all, the setting for the story is Spain and Jig is fondling beads which, of necessity in the author's estimation, are symbols of the rosary. Dennis Organ, "Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants'," *Explicator* 37 (1979): 11.

CONJECTURES

This beginning study of modern Arabic literature on the life issues raises other speculations that cannot be accommodated in significant detail here, and so they must be relegated to those who not only have greater access to primary materials, but also more leisure in pursuing the topic.

Perhaps literary scholarship on modern Arabic literature is silent because, as some scholars have indicated, the life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, while controversial for some in the West, are not so in the Levant, the Middle East, or other regions of the Arab (Christian and Islamic) world. Certainly, this is not to say that the entire Arab world affirms the first civil right to life. There are efforts to permit destruction of unborn and aged life in Islamic countries as much as there is a concerted effort by population control groups to target ostensibly Catholic countries for the public relations coup that would occur when one of them abandons its protection of the first civil right to life. However, there is a remarkable consistency in teaching on abortion within Islam which is dominantly protective of life. Admittedly, Islamic interpretation of the *Qur'an* on the issue of abortion is comparable to Judaism's understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures vis-à-vis ensoulment and formation.³¹ It would take mammoth efforts to persuade Islam to adopt Christianity's position that ensoulment occurs at the moment of fertilization.³² However, Arabic authors familiar with the *Qur'an*'s clear respect for the unborn child would find abortion legal throughout the nine

³¹ *The Qur'an*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004).

³² Ahmad Natour, Bakri Baha'eddin, and Vardit Rispler-Chaim note that the *Qur'an* has much to say about the creation of the unborn and that many suras address formation. Ahmad Natour, Baha'eddin Bakri, and Vardit Rispler-Chaim. "[The Beginning of Life] An Islamic Perspective," *The Embryo: Scientific Discovery and Medical Ethics*, ed. Shraga Blazer and Etan Z. Zimmer (Basel, Switzerland: Karger, 2005), pp. 53-73, here at pp. 56-57. "We created you from dust," sura 22 states, "then a drop of fluid, then a clinging form, then a lump of flesh, both shaped and unshaped: We mean to make Our power clear to you. Whatever We choose We cause to remain in the womb for an appointed time" (209). From my own reading of the *Qur'an*, the concept, and often the same language, is repeated in suras 23 (215), 32 (264), 35 (277-8), 39 (295), and 40 (305).

months of pregnancy for any reason whatsoever as it is in the United States as one of the most reprehensible features of Western democracies.

Perhaps Qur'anic passages which speak so lovingly of the poor, the handicapped, and the elderly have made such an indelible impression in the Arab world that it would seem almost sacrilegious to write anything opposing such core values by suggesting that infanticide and euthanasia could be solutions to humanity's problems. When the *Qur'an* chastises a man in *sura* 16 for contemplating burying the newborn girl "in the dust" (169) and, in *sura* 81: 8-9, "when the baby girl buried alive is asked for what sin she was killed" (unpaginated 411), how can one advocate infanticide? When the *Qur'an* is conscious of issues affecting the elderly, speaking in *sura* 16 about those who "will be reduced, in old age, to a most abject state" (170) or admonishing in *sura* 17, "be kind to your parents" (176), how can one advocate the killing of the elderly?

Perhaps Arabic literature is focused on the juxtaposition and resulting conflict between Western and Islamic cultures for one primary reason: Islam has not yet reached the crucial historical development that Christianity had in the West. Medieval Europe twelve hundred years after Christ was a culturally cohesive society, such unity lasting until the effects of the bubonic plague in the thirteenth and the exposure in the Renaissance to new ideas challenged the reigning milieu. Islam, twelve hundred years after Mohammed, seems locked in its own version of medieval unity and cultural cohesiveness. Islam needs the exposure to a globalism, the paradigm dominant now in the West, to challenge its beliefs. Aboulela's anthology contains stories set in the Sudan, her native land, for the purpose of expressing her devotion to her homeland, to its humble ways of life, and to her religion. However, could Aboulela's "Make Your Own Way Home" have been set in Iraq, in Palestine, in the Sudan? Her story, set in a society which bears not even a residual sign of the Christianity which is Britain's heritage, is evidence of at least one Arabic and Islamic author's exposure to and conflict against the sordid side of Western life, the killing of the unborn. The result is a life-affirming masterpiece of world literature.

Perhaps American scholars shy away from modern Arabic literature on the life issues like Aboulela's story because it would be unfashionable to promote works whose messages run counter to the dominant anti-life ideology in the academy. Perhaps, to counter this entrenched life-denying

ideology, we should identify, translate, and share such life-affirming modern Arabic literature with our students.