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Postcolonial Feminism and Political Injustice in Huda Barakat's The Tiller of Waters

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Abstract:

This research offers a argumentative examination of femininity and political injustice in Huda Barakat's The Tiller of Waters, a novel that unfolds within the chaotic landscape of the Lebanese Civil War· Through evocative prose and fragmented narrative structure, Barakat crafts a deeply symbolic exploration of how women navigate and endure the political and emotional ruins of conflict· Although the novel is narrated by a male protagonist, the presence and memory of women pervade the narrative, functioning as emblems of both loss and endurance· Also this research focuses on how the novel reconfigures traditional gender roles and challenges patriarchal authority by presenting feminine figures not as passive victims, but as silent yet resilient bearers of cultural and emotional continuity .The analysis highlights the subtle yet profound ways in which Barakat embeds femininity into the geography of war-torn Beirut through abandoned domestic spaces, dislocated familial bonds, and the unspoken emotional labor of memory preservation· Moreover, the research underscores how political injustice in the novel is not only tied to institutional failure but also to the erasure and marginalization of feminine voices and experiences . By weaving together themes of displacement, silence, trauma, and identity, The Tiller of Waters exposes the gendered dimensions of political turmoil and suggests that any true reckoning with injustice must include the often overlooked narratives of women. This research thus contributes to broader discussions on gender, memory, and resistance in Arabic war literature.By weaving together themes of displacement, silence, trauma, and identity, The Tiller of Waters exposes the gendered dimensions of political turmoil and suggests that any true reckoning with injustice must include the often overlooked narratives of women. In this way, the novel aligns with postcolonial feminist theory by showing how women's silencing is tied to both patriarchal power and colonial legacies.

Key words : Postcolonial Feminism , Gender roles, Lebanese Civil War , Memory, Patriarchal Authority, Political injustice , Resistance.

Introduction:

Huda Barakat, a leading contemporary Lebanese novelist, uses her fiction to explore the gendered dimensions of war, and highlighting the experiences of women amid political violence. In The Tiller of Waters, she depicts the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) not only as a backdrop of societal chaos but also as a context in which women endure, resist, and negotiate their marginalization.(Al-Samman,2015,p.19)Through her narratives, Barakat emphasizes how patriarchal structures and sectarian conflict intersect to produce both personal and collective trauma, revealing the intertwined nature of femininity and political injustice. (Ashour, 2008, pp.31, 132)

War literature in the Arab world has long served as a lens for examining the intersections of identity, memory, trauma, and resistance. Among contemporary Lebanese voices, Huda Barakat stands out for her introspective narratives that confront human suffering amid national crises. Barakat‘s The Tiller of Waters (2001), set during the Lebanese Civil War, navigates a landscape of destruction, displacement, and political fragmentation. Although the story centers on a male protagonist, feminine presence emerges as a haunting and symbolic force, integral to the novel’s exploration of loss and injustice. Barakat resists conventional portrayals of women as passive victims, instead depicting female figures, mothers, lovers, and spectral presences as quiet yet resilient anchors of memory, moral conscience, and continuity. Their presence disrupts the narrator’s descent into despair, reclaiming space for feminine subjectivity in a narrative dominated by masculine violence and political disillusionment.

This perspective aligns with recent scholarship in Arab literary studies, which reinforces the relevance of examining women’s roles in conflict narratives. Al-Sari (2025) demonstrates that Iraqi literature portrays female characters navigating political oppression, presenting them as symbols of resilience against patriarchal authority. Such findings resonate with the concerns of this study, as they highlight how women’s endurance is framed not only as personal but also as politically symbolic. Likewise, Mahooder and Abdul Hassan(2025) argue that gender discrimination in literature contributes to psychological distress among female protagonists. Their argument underscores the extent to which political injustice intersects with women’s lived experiences, a dimension central to understanding both identity formation and trauma in war narratives. Taken together, these studies provide critical support for the present research by showing that femininity in literature is not a marginal theme but a crucial lens for analyzing the sociopolitical and psychological dimensions of conflict.

Although The Tiller of Waters is celebrated for its innovative structure and philosophical depth, its narrative also carries a subtle yet powerful emphasis on the symbolic presence of women and their connection to political injustice. Most critical readings emphasize the male narrator’s psychological unraveling, often overlooking the subtle yet powerful presence of female figures and their symbolic weight. Addressing this gap, the present research is guided by the following questions: How is femininity represented in The Tiller of Waters? In what ways does the novel connect feminine identity to political injustice? How do female figures contribute

to its broader critique of war, loss, and memory? In addition to this, the research aims at exploring the symbolic roles of femininity in the novel, to investigate how political injustice is depicted through feminine absence, silence, and resilience, and to analyze how Barakat uses gendered imagery and emotional landscapes to critique war and societal collapse.

Theoretical Framework:

This resaerch employs postcolonial feminism as its primary theoretical lens to examine how the Tiller of Waters constructs femininity within the intersecting context of war, political injustice, and cultural fragmentation. Postcolonial feminism emerged as a critical response to the limitations of Western feminist discourse, which often universalizes women's experiences while neglecting the specific historical, cultural, and socio-political conditions of women in formerly colonized and conflict-ridden societies. (Mohanty,2003;Spivak,1988) It interrogates how gender oppression is shaped not only by patriarchal structures but also by the lingering effects of colonial histories, economic dependency, and political instability.

Gayatri Spivak's (1988) concept of the "subaltern" highlights how marginalized women in postcolonial contexts are systematically silenced by dominant discourses. In the Tiller of Waters, the silence of women should not be interpreted as a mere absence of voice, but rather as a nuanced form of expression revealing suppressed struggles and resistance. Linking this theory to the textual analysis, scenes of female silence or subtle gestures can be read as acts of covert defiance against patriarchal and colonial power structures.

In The Tiller of Waters, these female figures serve as carriers of memory, cultural continuity, and moral resistance, subtly undermining the disintegration brought about by political collapse. By applying postcolonial feminism, this research reveals how Barakat makes femininity as both a site of subjugation and a locus of agency, capable of contesting the political and ideological forces that perpetuate injustice·

Significance of the Study:

This research contributes to the growing body of literature that examines gender and war in Arabic fiction , the reseach offers a fresh perspective on the gendered dimensions of political violence and trauma . It also provides a nuanced understanding of how literary texts can serve as spaces for critiquing not only historical events but also deeply ingrained societal norms and gender roles . The reseach is particularly significant for scholars interested in feminist literary criticism, Middle Eastern literature, and post-war cultural studies .

Discussion:

The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) left a profound and lasting impact on Lebanon's cultural consciousness, reshaping the country's literary production and the way trauma, identity, and memory are represented in fiction . Some writers such as Elias Khoury, Rachid al-Daif, and Huda Barakat authors, who not only bore witness to the war's brutality but also interrogated its psychological and philosophical implications through experimental narrative forms, emerged from this tumultuous period. Lebanese war literature frequently departs from conventional storytelling, instead embracing fractured timelines, subjective recollections, and ambiguous

characterizations to mirror the disintegration of both the national fabric and the individual psyche. (Cooke, 1996,p.74; Harlow, 1996, p.121)

These texts resist the impulse to offer neat resolutions or heroic narratives; as Aghacy (2009) argues, postwar fiction often refuses closure and national reconciliation, maintaining instead a fragmented aesthetic that underscores the unresolved trauma of civil conflict· Huda Barakat's The Tiller of Waters is emblematic of this literary trajectory. The novel eschews chronological order and political discourse in favor of an introspective journey through the ruins of a surreal, depopulated Beirut, a city rendered almost mythic in its stillness and decay· The protagonist, a solitary man named Nicholas, navigates a landscape of memory, shadows, and silences, accompanied not by fellow citizens or political allies but by ghosts, dreams, and remnants of a vanished past.Through his wandering, Barakat constructs a deeply affective narrative in which the city itself becomes a metaphor for loss, identity dissolution, and historical erasure. El-Ariss (2013) emphasizes that such narratives are anchored in affect and embodied memory, revealing the erosion of public and private boundaries during times of war· The absence of coherent temporal markers and the dominance of sensory impressions scents, textures, and fleeting images further detach the narrative from historical realism and align it instead with a poetics of mourning and estrangement. In this way, Barakat not only critiques the sociopolitical destruction wrought by civil strife but also hints at the impossibility of rebuilding a unified national story in the aftermath.

Postcolonial feminism challenges the Western-centric notion of a universal "women's experience" by emphasizing the intersection of gender with colonial, racial, and cultural oppressions faced by women in formerly colonized societies (Mohanty, 1988). In The Tiller of Waters, Barakat (2002) illustrates this through the paradoxical "absence" of women: their disappearance from the narrative space functions as a "feminine shadow," a haunting presence that reflects both patriarchal domination and the lingering effects of colonial silencing. The novel's trauma-centered narrative demonstrates how storytelling, memory, and collective experience operate as tools of postcolonial feminist reclamation, allowing marginalized women to assert their presence and resist erasure (Rizk, 2022, p. 45)

Femininity in Arabic literature has often oscillated between idealization and erasure. Traditional narratives have either romanticized women as symbols of purity and sacrifice or marginalized them to the periphery of male centered plots .(Joseph, 1999) However, contemporary Arab women writers and a growing number of male writers, like Barakat ,have begun to reimagine femininity as a site of resistance, memory, and moral vision .(Al-Maleh, 2009) In Barakat's novel, feminine presence is spectral yet central.Women are not granted full narrative voices, yet their influence shapes the protagonist's understanding of self and loss.This aligns with Amal Amireh's (2000) observation that " the silence of Arab women in war literature is often more telling than speech". (Amireh,2000,p.45) Their marginality becomes a metaphor for the ethical failure of political structures·

In The Tiller of Waters, femininity operates as both an absence and a haunting force. Women are rarely at the center of dialogue, yet they linger in the textures of memory, domestic spaces, and lost intimacy· Nicholas's recollections are saturated with the presence of his mother and other unnamed female figures who represent a pre-war Beirut marked by cultural refinement, sensuality, and maternal protection. These women, though voiceless in the traditional sense, embody the emotional and ethical compass that guides the protagonist through his descent into a ruined world· Their erasure parallels the larger sociopolitical silencing of women during and after the war, suggesting that the neglect of feminine voices is symptomatic of a broader historical amnesia. (Amireh,2000,p.47) As Makdisi (2006) and Sbeih (2011) argue that the feminine in Barakat's fiction symbolizes both the fragility of the private sphere and the resilience of memory in the face of systemic violence· In this way, the novel critiques not only the brutality of armed conflict but also the patriarchal ideologies that continue to marginalize women's lived experiences, reducing them to echoes in the margins of national discourse .

The intersection of gender and trauma has gained increasing attention in postwar literary studies· As Caruth (1996) and Tal (1996) assert, trauma disrupts linear temporality and narrative coherence, which is evident in Barakat's fragmented storytelling· Feminist critics such as Lila Abu-Lughod (1998) and Miriam Cooke (2007) highlight how women's experiences of war are distinct not merely in degree but in kind, encompassing sexual violence, emotional labor, and social erasure· Barakat's portrayal of feminine figures,especially the protagonist's mother and the silent women in his memories, illustrates how trauma is gendered. These women are not passive but quietly resistant; they bear the memory of what has been lost and what the male characters are unable to reconcile . Their silence becomes an indictment of the masculinized war machine and the political injustice it perpetuates. (Mikdashi, 2012)

Barakat's fiction articulates a complex vision of femininity that is often marked not by presence but by absence. Within her narratives of war and displacement, women rarely occupy the center of the stage as speaking subjects. Instead, their significance emerges through a subtle poetics of silence, absence, and emotional dissonance. Silence functions not as mere muteness, but as a densely layered mode of communication that resists the violence of patriarchal and political structures. By refusing to grant women direct narrative agency, Barakat paradoxically foregrounds their power, transforming absence into a critical presence that destabilizes the dominant male-centered perspectiv the protagonist's mother, though largely confined to memory, serves as a repository of cultural continuity and affective resistance· Her presence hints to a lost order of meaning, one rooted in care, ritual, and embodied memory all of which are annihilated by war. The other feminine figures who populate Nicholas's recollections are similarly spectral yet symbolically potent, embodying the invisible wounds left by displacement, abandonment, and historical erasure· These women are not simply collateral to male trauma they carry a parallel burden that is often unspoken, yet inscribed in the very structure of the narrative's disorientation. Their silence, As Mikdashi (2012) argues, silence in this context should not be understood as emptiness, but as a form of protest. In The Tiller of Waters, this understanding of silence allows trauma to be reimagined as a gendered experience, one that critiques not only the

immediate devastation of civil conflict, but also the deeper epistemic violence embedded in patriarchal and political systems that consistently deny women visibility and voice.

One of the most striking elements in The Tiller of Waters is the recurring motif of silence· Rather than depicting women as vocal agents, Barakat allows their absence to become a form of resistance· This technique echoes Spivak's influential concept of the "subaltern" who cannot speak within hegemonic discourses but whose silence marks a refusal to comply. Moreover, Belsey (1985) and Moi (1989) argue that feminine narratives often emerge through symbolic disruption rather than direct confrontation .

In this sense, the novel's use of feminine imagery abandoned dresses, motherly touch, erotic memory serves as counter-discourse to political brutality and ideological rigidity.These symbolic elements resist ideological rigidity and evoke a lost intimacy that haunts the postwar landscape, suggesting that femininity, even when silenced, retains the power to destabilize hegemonic narratives and preserve ethical memory.

Beirut in The Tiller of Waters is more than a setting; it is a gendered character. The feminized city is wounded, desecrated, veiled in layers of memory and silence. Scholars such as Najmabadi (2005) and Al-Ali (2000) discuss how urban spaces in Arab narratives often reflect the body politic, where feminine spaces are sites of both control and liberation· Barakat transforms the ruined city into a palimpsest of feminine memory. The textile shop once owned by the protagonist's father becomes a symbolic womb, housing not only bolts of fabric but layered histories, emotions, and identities.This aligns with the work of Lefebvre (1991), who contends that space is socially produced and ideologically encoded, especially during times of conflict · Beirut in The Tiller of Waters transcends its role as a mere backdrop and emerges as a feminized, wounded entity scarred by violence yet layered with memory, sensuality, and silent endurance. The city is not just a setting for loss and displacement; it is a living, gendered character whose body bears the marks of war and whose silence echoes that of the women in the novel .Scholars such as Najmabadi (2005) and Al-Ali (2000) have explored how urban spaces in Middle Eastern literature are often gender coded, with feminine spaces serving simultaneously as zones of control, resistance, and imagination · Barakat expands this tradition by transforming Beirut into a haunted palimpsest where physical ruins coexist with emotional debris. Within the textile shop, bolts of fabric evoke not only commerce and tradition but also sensuality, memory, and identity, blurring the boundaries between domestic, economic, and emotional realms. The novel presents Beirut as a gendered archive both desecrated and sacred where the feminine becomes a mode of both remembering and resisting . The city's destruction, then, is not just architectural but epistemological, severing the threads that once bound community, culture, and maternal heritage. Yet in its layered silences and hidden textures, Barakat preserves a distinctly feminine trace fragile, persistent, and politically subversive.

The mother in The Tiller of Waters never utters a word within the narrative, yet her presence permeates every corner of Nicholas's inner world· She is not simply a memory but an enduring force anchoring, nurturing, and quietly resistant· Her existence is mediated through rituals,

textures, and the intimate space of the home, which stands in stark contrast to the fragmented, war-torn city outside· Barakat offers a deeply evocative image: “She used to fold the silk as if she were folding time itself, wrapping it in layers of silence and scent· When I walk into that room, I still smell her perfume even now, when the walls are crumbling” . (Barakat, 2001, p·42)

This brief moment encapsulates the entire affective universe that the mother represents one where time, memory, and emotion are preserved not through language but through bodily gestures and sensory traces· The silk, an object historically associated with femininity, softness, and care, becomes a metaphor for memory itself delicate, layered, and easily torn· In this domestic act of folding, the mother not only maintains the rhythms of a lost world, but also enacts a form of resistance against the disintegration wrought by war. Her silence is not absence but presence a resonant stillness that stands in sharp opposition to the noise and brutality of masculine conflict. Feminist theorists, such as Sara Ruddick (1989) and Julia Kristeva (1980) have noted that maternal labor is often rendered invisible in patriarchal narratives, yet it is foundational to ethical memory and cultural continuity· Barakat’s mother figure embodies this paradox: mute yet central, erased from the historical record yet preserved in the folds of silk and scent· Her influence is not vocalized but felt, and it reshapes Nicholas’s understanding of loss, longing, and identity· By centering the maternal as a source of spiritual and emotional orientation, Barakat elevates the domestic and feminine to a realm of quiet defiance· The crumbling walls surrounding the scent of perfume and the memory of touch mark the collision between private tenderness and public destruction.In this tension, the mother becomes more than a character. She becomes a moral compass, a symbol of what endures amid ruin, and a silent witness indicting the patriarchal violence that has rendered her voiceless ·

Through her, Barakat crafts a feminist poetics of memory, where silence speaks louder than words, and care becomes a radical form of survival ·Throughout The Tiller of Waters, silk and fabric emerge as dominant, recurring symbols that carry the weight of suppressed histories, feminine memory, and emotional continuity. These materials are not mere backdrops to the narrative; they function as living archives tactile repositories of what has been lost, ignored, or deliberately silenced. The textile shop of Nicholas’s father’s, once a vibrant center of commerce, is transformed in Nicholas’s recollections into a sacred, womb-like space infused with sensual memory and maternal presence. Barakat writes, “The silks whispered stories when no one listened· They retained warmth, the scent of hands that had touched them, the breath of my mother’s presence, the absence of her voice”. (Barakat, 2001, p·57)

It is a vessel for memory, emotion, and embodiment.The silks, soft and intimate, evoke a feminine language beyond speech, one that resists the harshness of war and the rigidity of patriarchal discourse through subtlety, scent, and touch·In this way, silk operates as a metaphor for women’s erased voices which are material, enveloping, persistent, yet rarely granted the authority of articulation . Their stories are “whispered”, not proclaimed, reflecting how female memory and labor are often confined to the domestic or aesthetic realms and denied entrance into official histories or political narratives .The folds of fabric become silent texts, containing

within them not only the sensual presence of Nicholas's mother but also the broader, collective memory of women's cultural contributions hidden, felt, but unspoken. As feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray (1985) and Ritu Menon (1998) argue, the female body and its labor have historically been rendered metaphorical or invisible in the face of national and patriarchal projects, especially during times of war. Barakat's invocation of silk as a symbol of both beauty and mourning reveals a deeper political commentary: in a fractured, patriarchal society, the preservation of fabric becomes an act of cultural and emotional resistance. Silk defies destruction· It folds but does not break. It absorbs scent, carries warmth, and remembers touch· In contrast to the noise and rupture of masculine war making, the softness of silk preserves continuity, care, and connection .Barakat's depiction of "material femininity" through silent fabrics and domestic objects evokes a form of embodied memory and ethical resistance. For Huda Butler (1993) , write "the materiality of bodies and their coverings are sites where power and resistance are negotiated". (p.15)

Within the devastated postwar Beirut landscape, these textiles become guardians of a feminine truth that persists through quiet endurance rather than overt confrontation. Through this poetic materiality, Barakat challenges dominant hierarchies by elevating the domestic and the feminine to a position of moral and narrative authority.

In The Tiller of Waters, Beirut is far more than a mere backdrop; it emerges as a gendered and embodied character, feminized, wounded, and layered with memory and silence. This conceptualization resonates with the insights of scholars like Najmabadi (2005) and Al-Ali (2000), who argue that urban spaces in Arab and Middle Eastern narratives often function as corporealized "feminine" spaces, sites fraught with contradictions of both control and resistance. Beirut's ruins become a palimpsest; a layered text where the city's physical devastation parallels the fragmented feminine identities shaped by war and displacement.The shop of the protagonist's father, therefore, embodies the paradox of femininity in the city: it is at once a site of protection and enclosure, and simultaneously a locus of absence and loss·

This paradox is further illuminated through Henri Lefebvre's of space as socially produced and ideologically encoded (1991) illuminates how Beirut is not a neutral setting, but a contested terrain where gendered power dynamics are inscribed . The city's "body" is scarred by violence much like the women's bodies in the novel, and its silence echoes their own muted voices. This dialectical relation between feminine embodiment and urban space challenges traditional binaries of presence/absence and speech/silence, revealing how silence and ruin constitute active forms of endurance and resistance. Moreover, Beirut's feminization problematizes simplistic notions of victimhood. While the city is undeniably "wounded" and "desecrated," it simultaneously becomes a site of imagination, memory, and survival. The textile shop's fabrics, representing layers of history and femininity, resist erasure by encoding stories in material form, thus transforming silence into a language of survival. This redefines silence not as passive submission but as a potent, embodied expression of agency within oppressive spatial and political conditions.

In The Tiller of Waters, the character of Shamsa emerges as a compelling embodiment of feminist resilience within the war-torn urban space of Beirut· While Huda Barakat's narrative

focuses largely on Nicola's fragmented memory, Shamsa's presence disrupts the male-centered war narrative, asserting the agency of a displaced woman whose body becomes a site of political and existential resistance. As she declares, "I am fat because I have no country· I eat so my body will grow, so that I can plant its weight firmly on the ground; so that my body will sense the world there"· (Barakat, 2015) This articulation reframes the female body from an object of desire into a vessel of rootedness and defiance against erasure· For Taher (2013), Barakat's female figures disrupt conventional wartime gender roles by embodying "the marginalized self" as a counter-narrative to masculine heroism·(p·3) Shamsa's corporeal self-awareness thus becomes both a reclamation of personal identity and an assertion of women's centrality in post-war memory-making, situating her within an implicitly feminist discourse that resists both political dispossession and patriarchal invisibility·Therefore, The Tiller of Waters offers a complex, dialectical portrayal where femininity and the city are mutually constitutive: the gendered body of Beirut mirrors the fragmented yet resilient feminine subjectivities inhabiting it, and symbolic spaces, like the textile shop, articulate this intertwined narrative of loss, memory, and quiet resistance.

Barakat repeatedly describes Beirut in language that evokes the female body wounded, desecrated, and forgotten· The city is both lover and mother, intimate and devastated· One of the most poignant passages reads:"Beirut lay open like a violated woman, her buildings stripped of doors and windows, her alleyways echoing with abandoned footsteps, her silence a scream no one could hear". (Barakat, 2001, p.79)

This imagery collapses the boundary between city and body, woman and nation.The feminization of the city is not merely metaphorical; it is a political critique of how war turns spaces of nurturing and intimacy into sites of violence. In feminizing the city, Barakat underscores the complicity of political systems in the erasure and objectification of both women and homeland.

Nicholas's fragmented recollections of a former lover possibly imagined, possibly spectral serve as one of the novel's most emotionally charged motifs, anchoring his inner world in fleeting moments of sensual intimacy amid the overwhelming desolation of war. These memories are not presented as coherent narratives but emerge in dreamlike flashes, steeped in touch, scent, and lingering emotion .They function as psychic refuges, carving out spaces of tenderness and connection in a world fractured by political violence and existential despair . Nicholas recalls: "Her hair would trail over my chest like a veil of mourning. She never asked me to love her. She was just⋯ present. Like the night". (Barakat, 2001, p.63)

The language here is both erotic and elegiac. The lover's touch is likened to mourning, suggesting that even in intimacy, the presence of loss is inescapable· Yet this grief is not paralyzing; it is intimate, enveloping, and deeply human. The female lover in Nicholas's memory functions as more than a figure of romantic nostalgia.She becomes the embodiment of everything the war seeks to obliterate: sensuality, vulnerability, emotional reciprocity, and the simple act of being fully present with another. In a society consumed by masculine aggression, ideological

rigidity, and structural collapse, her unspoken presence and gentle touch represent a different kind of power; one rooted in care, silence, and shared humanity. Her refusal to demand love or voice expectation stands in stark contrast to the loud, coercive imperatives of militarized politics . Erotic memory, in this sense, operates as a quiet form of political subversion . It destabilizes the logic of domination by recalling a world where power was not exercised through force, but through mutual presence and bodily truth .

Feminist theorists such as bell hooks (2000) and Julia Kristeva (1982) have argued that eroticism, when separated from commodification or objectification, can serve as a radical space for healing and ethical encounter· In Barakat's novel, the lover's body becomes such a space a repository of feeling, memory, and resistance against the war's dehumanizing machinery. Her physical presence, whether real or imagined, restores a sense of dignity to Nicholas's fragmented identity· She anchors him not in ideology or national history, but in the immediacy of shared sensation and affect· As the novel unfolds, these erotic flashbacks reveal themselves to be not escapist but deeply political: they articulate a longing for a different mode of relation, one untouched by violence, hierarchy, or erasure· In remembering her, Nicholas also remembers his capacity to feel, to grieve, and to love and in doing so, he reclaims a part of his humanity that the war could not destroy.

Remarkably, most of the female figures in The Tiller of Waters do not speak directly. The absence of their dialogue is not a mere narrative oversight; it is a deliberate and powerful device. Barakat constructs their voicelessness as a form of active resistance, an unspoken defiance against the forces of war, patriarchy, and political violence that have shaped their lives. By refusing to enter into the verbal fray of male dominated discourse whether that of war, politics, or national identity, these women resist the structures that seek to define them. Their silence is not an absence, but a presence a refusal to be complicit in the ideologies that perpetuate destruction. This is shown in Nicholas' reflection: "I never knew what she thought about the war· She never said. But every night, she lit the same candle, even as the shelling shook the windows. That was her answer". (Barakat, 2001, p· 85)

In this moment, silence is not a passive void, but a symbolic act of resistance. The woman's refusal to comment on the war, and her steadfast ritual of lighting the candle despite the chaos around her, speaks volumes more than any spoken word could. It is an act of personal resilience and a subtle challenge to the violence surrounding her.This act of defiance echoes broader postcolonial feminist theories that assert silence is not always synonymous with oppression. As Gayatri Spivak (1988) argues, silence can be a refusal and a rejection of the dominant, often violent, structures that silence individuals in the first place. Barakat's portrayal of women's silence in The Tiller of Waters aligns with this view, reframing what might be seen as an absence into a radical form of subversion. In the novel the women choose not to engage in the language of war, a language steeped in aggression, destruction, and the disempowerment of the individual. Instead, they choose the language of ritual, memory, and care. The act of lighting a candle, which is an intimate, solitary gesture, becomes an emblem of persistence and dignity in the face

of devastation· In this way, Barakat suggests that true resistance does not always take the form of loud, direct confrontation. Sometimes, it is found in the quiet, unyielding presence of the feminine, in gestures that resist the dominant forces by existing beyond their control · The silence of these women speaks louder than any words could it become a subtle, yet profound, challenge to the social and political forces that have attempted to silence them, and it reclaims the power of non-verbal, emotional expression in the face of extreme violence. Their silence becomes a counter narrative, an ethical stance that undermines the male dominated discourse of war and power, offering instead a vision of the world rooted in endurance, memory, and moral integrity:

The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The figure of woman disappears, not into a pristine identity, but into a violent shuttling… of essentializing discourses. … If, however, we are concerned with the subaltern, feminist efforts must fail in their effort to centralize 'woman'. (Spivak ,1988,pp. 308-309)

Nicholas, disoriented by the ravages of war and increasingly untethered from temporal and spatial continuity, repeatedly turns to memories of women to navigate his inner turmoil· These women "his mother, former lovers, and other silent feminine presences" are not active participants in the unfolding events, yet they form the novel's ethical backbone· While they appear peripheral in terms of direct narrative action, they occupy the moral center of Nicholas's fragmented consciousness· Amid the noise, destruction, and ideological confusion of civil war, it is the memory of their presence not their political stances or spoken beliefs that orients him morally.Their emotional resonance becomes the only remaining compass in a world stripped of order and meaning· This is shown in Nicholas' words: "It was the women I remembered most· Not their words, but the way they looked at me· As if they were measuring my soul". (Barakat, 2001, p.98)

This seemingly simple confession unveils a complex dynamic: the feminine gaze, in Barakat's narrative universe, functions as a mirror that reflects not judgment but moral truth . It penetrates beyond appearances, confronting Nicholas with the reality of what he has become in the wake of war. Femininity in The Tiller of Waters is thus more than a symbol of tenderness or loss it is a locus of conscience. While masculine figures in the novel are often associated with action, ideology, and violence, the women serve as moral which is silent yet penetrating, marginalized yet spiritually authoritative. Their memory endures not because of what they did, but because of the quiet intensity of their being. The female gaze, which Nicholas recalls as deeply intimate and soul searching, becomes a kind of ethical checkpoint, confronting him with the cumulative weight of betrayal personal, emotional, and political. It is not coincidental that Nicholas remembers not their voices, but their eyes: a non-verbal yet deeply affective mode of communication that transcends speech and ideology. This dynamic aligns with what theorists like Emmanuel Levinas (1969) describe as the "ethical encounter with the Other" (p.194), in which the face and by extension, the gaze of the Other demands responsibility.In Barakat's world, it is the feminine gaze that performs this ethical function. These women do not need to speak; their silent presence

compels Nicholas to reckon with the human cost of the war, the hollowness of inherited ideologies, and the personal failures that accompany political collapse. Their memory survives not only as nostalgia, but as a quiet demand for self-interrogation. In this way, the novel suggests that femininity though silenced, ghostly, and fragmented embodies the moral force that endures even after the structures of meaning have disintegrated. It is through the memory of these women that Nicholas glimpses what has been truly lost: not just the city or the past, but his own capacity for love, responsibility, and ethical clarity.

Conclusion:

This research explores the intertwined themes of femininity and political injustice in Huda Barakat's The Tiller of Waters through focusing on how the novel uses feminine presence, both symbolic and literal, as a critique of war and the sociopolitical collapse of Beirut. Through a descriptive analysis of the text, it became clear that Barakat does not center her narrative on outspoken female characters or overt feminist declarations. Instead, she constructs femininity as a spectral, emotional, and ethical force that exists in opposition to the masculine violence, ideological chaos, and national disintegration wrought by the Lebanese Civil War. The women in The Tiller of Waters rarely speak, yet their presence is felt through the textures of memory, the symbolism of fabric, the metaphor of the city, and the rituals of daily life . This silence, far from signifying passivity, becomes a mode of resistance and an intentional refusal to engage in a violent, male-dominated discourse . Their absence from the public and political realm does not suggest erasure; rather, it underscores the failure of those realms to accommodate female subjectivity, ethical vision, and emotional truth. Beirut itself, feminized and desecrated, becomes a physical manifestation of the violated feminine body, echoing the personal and collective trauma experienced by the nation and its people. Barakat's delicate weaving of intimacy, memory, and space constructs femininity as the moral compass of the narrative, offering readers a deeper emotional truth than any political ideology can. This analysis is inherently argumentative, as it engages in a critical dialogue with the text, questioning dominant war narratives and patriarchal interpretations. By positioning feminine presence despite its silence and invisibility as a deliberate form of resistance, the research challenges conventional readings that equate absence with passivity. It argues that Barakat's portrayal of women reframes the moral and symbolic foundations of the novel, thereby contesting the political and gendered hierarchies that underpin both the fictional and historical landscapes of the Lebanese Civil War. Also the reseach has demonstrated that femininity in The Tiller of Waters is not marginal, but foundational to the novel's ethical and symbolic framework. Feminine women may be absent from the battlefield, but they are central to the struggle over meaning, memory, and survival. Their silent labor emotional, domestic, and symbolic forms a quiet resistance to the brutal structures that dominate them . Ultimately, Barakat suggests that political injustice cannot be fully understood or effectively challenged without acknowledging the invisible yet enduring power of the feminine. In aligning with postcolonial feminist thought, this research further demonstrates that women's silencing in the novel is inseparable not only from patriarchal

domination but also from the lingering colonial legacies that continue to shape gender, memory, and resistance in postwar Lebanon.

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The researcher declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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