

THIS IS *HER* BODY

THIS IS *HER* BODY: THE EMBODIMENT AND DISEMBODIMENT OF MIDDLE  
EASTERN WOMEN IN THE POETRY OF SUHEIR HAMMAD AND SOLMAZ  
SHARIF

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the embodiment and disembodiment of Middle Eastern women in Suheir Hammad's *Breaking Poems* (2008) and Solmaz Sharif's *Look* (2016) to better understand how war, diasporicity, violence, and intimacy affect the socio-political subjection of Middle Eastern women in the United States. Through analyzing poetry, this thesis posits that Middle Eastern women's subjection to racism and sexism as diasporic subjects in the United States leads to their disembodiment, resulting in feelings of displacement, loss, and uncertainty regarding their identities, which parallels the disembodiment they experience in the Middle East as a result of war. The Introduction Chapter answers why this thesis focuses on diasporic Middle Eastern women and the poetry of Suheir Hammad and Solmaz Sharif. Chapter One provides a theoretical framework of the major themes discussed throughout the thesis, such as embodiment, disembodiment, precarity, and double consciousness. Chapter Two discusses Suheir Hammad's *Breaking Poems* with an emphasis on a hyper-individualized account of disembodiment. Chapter Three addresses Solmaz Sharif's *Look*, focusing on poetry's movement between different geographical spaces and time frames to present a wide range of disembodiment(s) experienced by not only Solmaz Sharif, but also by other Middle Eastern subjects. The Conclusion Chapter demonstrates that the theme of embodiment and disembodiment supports Hammad and Sharif's efforts to give voice to the silenced experiences of diasporic Middle Eastern women.

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## Introduction

### **“I am looking for my body”: Embodiment and Disembodiment in Suheir Hammad’s**

#### ***Breaking Poems and Solmaz Sharif’s Look***

*I am looking for my body*

*For my form in the foreign*

*In translation...*

*What am I trying*

*To say I sit in this body dream*

*In this body expel*

*In this body inherit*

*In this body*

*(Suheir Hammad)*

*You’re posing. You’re scared.*

*A body falls*

*And you learn to step over*

*A loosened head. You begin to  
appreciate*

*The heft of your boot soles,  
How they propel you,*

*How they can kick in*

*A face —*

*(Solmaz Sharif)*

Embodiment is an integral part of diasporic Middle Eastern women’s writing as well as the writing of other marginalized groups of people. Embodiment concerns the physical, temporal, and bodily state rather than the mental or spiritual state of the self. The personal, individualized understanding Middle Eastern women have about their own embodiments often becomes distorted as a result of Western, particularly American, impositions on what Middle Eastern female embodiment entails, which is either the oppression or exoticization of the Middle Eastern female body. This polarized distortion leads to the disembodiment of Middle Eastern women, causing them to feel a sense of loss, placelessness, and ambiguity about their identities and sense of belonging to a particular space. For Middle Eastern women, displacement is the same as disembodiment. Since embodiment is rooted in a sense of connection to a space, forced displacement, or

detritorialization causes disembodiment – a sense of disconnect from the body.

According to mainstream American society, following the 2001 September 11 attacks, the perception that the Middle Eastern woman as oppressed has been intensified (Khalid 21). Her oppression stems from the belief that she is uneducated, unliberated, and unimportant as a result of her religious affiliation and, inevitably, as a result of the men surrounding her in her “home country” (Khalid 21).

The epigraphs above are quoted from Suheir Hammad's *Breaking Poems* and Solmaz Sharif's *Look* respectively. *Breaking Poems* was published in 2008 in New York and *Look* was published more recently in 2016 in Minneapolis. Both collections feature free verse poetry that expresses Hammad and Sharif's sense of disembodiment as well as the disembodiment of other Middle Eastern people as a result of their lives' precarity, a concept central to the work of Judith Butler.

Suheir Hammad, a Palestinian-American poet, was born in 1973 in a Jordanian refugee camp and later moved to the United States with her family in 1978 (Knopf-Newman 71). A poet, performance artist, and activist, Suheir Hammad has this to say about her writing:

Why do I write? Cause I have to. Cause my voice, in all its dialects, has been silenced too long. Cause women are still abused as naturally as breath. Peoples are without land. Slavery exists, hunger persists and mothers cry. My mother cries. Those are reasons enough, but there are so many more. (Hammad, *Born Palestinian, Born Black* 11)



For Hammad, and for other diasporic Middle Eastern women, being silenced is normalized both in the United States and in their home countries in the Middle East by the racist and patriarchal institutions in place. Here, Hammad demonstrates that she can “save herself” by writing; indeed, she does not need to be saved because she personally is not oppressed, but rather, she is marginalized as a woman of colour due to the socio-political powers surrounding her. As a result of her marginalization, Hammad articulates her disembodiment in *Breaking Poems*, the feeling of her internal sense of self being separated from the externally imposed image of herself. For Hammad, disembodiment occurs when she is characterized as someone or *something* she is not, when society categorizes her as an “other,” whether that is an oppressed or an exoticized “other” woman.

This disembodiment results in feelings of displacement in the new country for the diasporic subject. In the epigraph, Hammad writes “I am looking for my body/ for my form in the foreign/ in translation,” which expresses the disembodiment and placelessness she feels as a result of being marginalized in the United States. Hammad is searching for herself “in translation,” which means that the new sense of self she seeks for in the United States is not her original self, but rather, it is foreign and translated – a negotiated fabrication of her sense of identity. Hammad’s translation of her sense of self from “Palestinian” to “Palestinian-American” is also a form of self-creation for Hammad. Hammad’s disembodiment results in her feeling of living in a distortion of reality; she claims that she is sitting in a “body dream” due to the fact that her body feels foreign and unreal in the United States.

The second epigraph comes from Solmaz Sharif's poetry collection *Look*. Sharif is an Iranian-American poet who was born in Istanbul in 1983 and moved to the United States with her family shortly after (Clemmons). In this excerpt, Sharif speaks directly to an anonymous soldier in the Middle East. The confident way in which Sharif speaks demonstrates that she has internalized the experiences of soldiers and can sense, understand and literally feel their fears. In *Look*, embodiment is often described from a violent perspective, usually featuring death and dismembered body parts. These uncensored descriptions of Middle Eastern bodies compel the readers to "grieve" for them, but also demonstrate disembodiment as a violent process. The internal disembodiment Sharif articulates in her poetry through double consciousness – a concept that is central to W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* – is visually accentuated through the violent dismemberment of bodies. Sharif writes this poem in the United States; although she is geographically distanced from the war scene, she is able to feel as though she is in Iran, experiencing war first hand. Hammad, however, feels caught in-between Palestine and the United States, unable to occupy either place entirely.

Sharif opens her essay on poetry, "The Near Transitive Properties of the Political and Poetical: Erasure," with an epigraph: "Every poem is an action. Every action is political. Every poem is political" (Sharif). Sharif's epigraph insists that poetry cannot be separated from politics since poetry is an action, not a passive piece of writing that must be read in order to *be* political. For her, the very existence of a poem denotes a political action. This thesis analyzes works of poetry in comparison to other forms of writing such as autobiographies, novels, or plays due to poetry's intimate form; compared to these

other genres, poetry expects the reader to fall in with the speaker's mind and way of thinking without explicitly providing an explanation or a narration. The intimate zone of poetry that Hammad and Sharif writes militates against double consciousness, because it centralizes meaning and subjectivity back in the intimate zone of the speaker's own consciousness, own body.

In this thesis, I will examine printed poetry as well as spoken word poetry. Although printed poetry is unique from other kinds of creative writing through its stanza structure, syntax, rhyme scheme, etc., spoken word poetry is distinguished by its performative nature. Through its contemplative and non-explanatory nature, printed poetry forces the reader (or listener) to absorb, analyze, and internalize its message(s). Subsequently, poetry becomes an act of meditation, a period of mindful self-reflection that contradicts violence. Spoken word poetry allows poets to speak on a stage to an audience. The sensory and performative elements of spoken word poetry, such as tone, sound, volume, and rhythmic emphasis allow poets to capture the attention of their audiences. More importantly, the performer can *see* if they have caught their audience's attention or not by observing them during the performance. Spoken word poetry exerts a different kind of intimacy than the experience of reading: here, the intimacy is embodied—the body of the performer imposes itself upon the audience, while the bodies of the audience are also present and readable to the performer. In comparison, printed poetry is disembodied since the poet is absent when her writing is being read. Moreover, printed poetry allows the reader more meditative time than spoken-word poetry since

there is not much time to contemplate what is being said as the poet moves on from line to line.

The purpose of this thesis is to address the conflicted embodiment of Middle Eastern women through an analysis of their personal experiences expressed in their poetry. Given that poetry is intimate, analyzing poetry counteracts the public, masculinized and militarized violence that neglects the experiences of Middle Eastern women. Middle Eastern women are often excluded from the militarized narrative of the Middle East, and their contributions to the war effort are disregarded. The intimate poetry of Hammad and Sharif present Middle Eastern women's experiences of war and amplify their various contributions. For myself personally, poetry is therapeutic; its ability to capture my thoughts and emotions with as minimal writing as possible allows me to communicate myself effortlessly and naturally.

This thesis addresses the embodiment and disembodiment of Middle Eastern women in an attempt to resist their ongoing silencing in the United States. This thesis argues that Middle Eastern women experience disembodiment – from their families, nationalities, cultures, and from their own bodies – as a result of Western-induced conflicts in the Middle East, which renders them diasporic subjects in spaces that suffocate them, reducing them to oppressed “others.” The notion that Middle Eastern women are “saved” and “freed” once they arrive in the West as refugees and become diasporic subjects is problematic as demonstrated with the passage below and must be challenged since the silencing, racism, and sexism they encounter is persistent despite their geographical positioning. In *The Gift of Freedom*, Mimi Thi Nguyen states:

...the gift of freedom is an insubstantial ruse for what might be called a liberal way of war, both then and especially now, has scarcely attenuated invocations of freedom as an institution, and an at-times blunt instrument, for the disposition of hope and despair, life and death. (3)

Indeed, the gift of freedom guarantees the “freedom” and “safety” of some at the expense of waging wars. Moreover, despite the “saving” and “freeing” the West does, refugees and other marginalized groups of people are considered to be indebted to the West (Nguyen 7).

As a diasporic Middle Eastern woman, I can personally attest to the feeling of disembodiment Middle Eastern women experience both “back home” and in the West. Due to my ethno-cultural identification, I face certain cultural and social obligations, a sense of duty to “my people.” As a Middle Eastern Canadian woman, I am asked about my “religious background,” and the inevitable question “where are you *really* from?” amongst others. Middle Eastern women are often pushed to the sidelines when they voice the unique racism and sexism they experience as a result of their marginalization. More often, Middle Eastern women are not given the opportunity to voice themselves, as Hammad points out in *Born Black, Born Palestinian*. This thesis focuses on Middle Eastern women as opposed to Muslim women because not all Middle Eastern women are Muslim and not all Muslim women are Middle Eastern. This thesis does not explicitly focus on religion, but rather, a region in the world that has been contested by the West. The homogenization of these categories has rendered all Middle Eastern women as Muslim or vice versa. Moreover, Middle Eastern women face overt racism as a result of

their cultural, national, and religious affiliations. Since their countries of origin have been categorized as enemy-states for the United States, they are dehumanized without question. By discussing the disputed embodiment of Middle Eastern women, this thesis seeks to shed light on the unique struggles of Middle Eastern women and provide a platform in which their silence can be voiced.

As for Suheir Hammad and Solmaz Sharif, I want this thesis to discuss the works of contemporary poets due to the intensifying tension over Middle Eastern people in the United States. Their poetry collections work well together to address the physical and mental disembodiment experienced by Middle Eastern women. Moreover, Hammad and Sharif's texts feature poems set in both the East and the West. Consequently, both poets are able to discuss their experiences living in both regions to provide a perspective that has geographical variety. More importantly, Middle Eastern women's experience of being displaced from the Middle East to the United States creates a feeling of disembodiment. Middle Eastern women's subjection to patriarchal powers both in the Middle East and in the United States demonstrates that the misrepresentation of Middle Eastern women is consistent throughout the diaspora. The current "Muslim Ban" in the United States (which will be discussed in the conclusion of this thesis) is one of the many attempts to undermine, unsettle, and control Middle Eastern women and their embodiments. Middle Eastern women are miscategorized as Muslim and their ethno-cultural backgrounds are homogenized when they become diasporic subjects.

According to the West, the Middle East is a mass of land where all women are oppressed by men, who are undeniably identified as dangerous terrorists, which will be

discussed in Chapter One. Consequently, from the perspective of Americans, there is no individuality in the Middle East. In their poems, Hammad and Sharif challenge this absence of individuality through presenting their experiences from a hyper-individualized perspective that can, nonetheless, be generalized to other Middle Eastern people. They demonstrate that, while their experiences are individual and unique, they are each one of the many millions of Middle Eastern women experiencing disembodiment as a result of their displacement from the Middle East and their process of “othering” in the United States. Since they present themselves as hyper-individualized subjects, they invite readers to think about the individuality of other Middle Eastern people and challenge their homogenized dehumanization in the West.

Hammad's *Breaking Poems* moves between different geographical spaces and different time periods to express Hammad's sense of disembodiment. The speaker of the poems (identified consistently as Hammad herself) travels between various cities and countries in the Middle East and the United States, from the 1980s to present day. In doing so, Hammad illustrates her sense of wandering, her eternal search for a confident embodiment lost amid the violence in the Middle East and the loneliness in the United States. Hammad's poetry addresses conflicts in the Middle East more broadly than Sharif's, discussing the War on Terror as well as the various wars between Middle Eastern countries. As a result, Hammad's poetry provides a wider time-frame and setting for readers, attempting to encapsulate the contemporary suffering of Middle Eastern people in her poetry collection.

Sharif's *Look* also switches settings, primarily between Iran and the United States, between the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and her contemporary life in the present United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Of the war, historians Murray and Woods write:

The Iran–Iraq War was a struggle for dominance between competing regimes with deeply opposed worldviews. During the course of the eight-year-long conflict, the opposing sides inflicted hundreds of thousands of casualties on each other. The leaders of the two states, Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, each had ambitions greater than their national borders. For his part, Saddam and his Ba'athist colleagues calculated that victory over Iran would be the first step to leadership of the Arab world and to creating an Arab superpower. Khomeini, however, believed Iran should export its revolution to the world, beginning with the countries of the Islamic world. (Murray and Woods 1)

Given that Sharif was born in 1979, she would have been a young child during the Iran-Iraq War, yet she writes about the war often from a first-person perspective. In doing so, Sharif re-imagines herself in a different time period entangled in the war that she has learned about through the embodied memories of her family members and relatives. Sharif's ability to switch between time periods demonstrates the fact that although she was not physically present in war, the effect the war has had on her family haunts her.

In Chapter One, "Definitions: Embodiment, Precariousness, Double Consciousness, and the 'Orient'," I will discuss the works of Stuart Hall, Edward Said, Judith Butler, Sherene Razack, W.E.B. Du Bois, and others to theoretically ground my analysis of Hammad's *Breaking Poems* and Sharif's *Look*. As suggested in the title, the



first chapter will provide definitions of the key terms and themes I will be discussing throughout the thesis. Understanding the definition of these terms will allow for a more productive and generative reading of Hammad and Sharif's poetry. The notion of double and even triple consciousness will be discussed at length with reference to W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. In Chapter Two, "I will not dance to your war drum': The Resilience of Middle Eastern Women's Embodiment in the Poetry of Suheir Hammad," I will discuss Hammad's *Breaking Poems* and her spoken word poem "What I Will." The second chapter will discuss written and spoken word poetry together to illustrate the multi-modality of poetry. Given that Hammad is an activist, spoken word poetry is a political action she partakes in to voice herself in American society. Despite the fact that Sharif's *Breaking Poems* is out of print, the fact that she is able to perform her poetry demonstrates the resilience and ongoing relevance of poetic writing. This second chapter will place emphasis on embodiment from a hyper-individualized perspective to demonstrate that Middle Eastern people are individuals, despite their homogenization from the perspective of the West.

In Chapter Three, "life in the American Dream': Embodiment, Intimacy, and Violence in Solmaz Sharif's *Look*," I will discuss Sharif's *Look*, placing emphasis on double consciousness, intimacy, and violence. Sharif's poetry presents violence's intimate contexts to show the impact violence (past and present) continues to have on diasporic Middle Eastern subjects. Regarding the order of the chapters, Hammad's *Breaking Poems* precedes Sharif's *Look* due to its earlier publication date. While Hammad's 2008 *Breaking Poems* was published during the presidency of Barack Obama, Sharif's 2016

*Look* was published during the election campaign that led to a Donald Trump presidency. Although published eight years later, Sharif's *Look* demonstrates that the marginalization of Middle Eastern people in the United States has continued to intensify. The conclusion of the thesis, "'The Muslim Ban': The Current State of Middle Eastern Women in Trump's America," will address Trump's "Muslim Ban," the topics of the Syrian Civil War, the Syrian Refugee Crisis, the intensification of Islamophobia in the West, and the increasing victories of Middle Eastern women gaining their rights in the Middle East.

In addressing these contemporary issues and topics, I will conclude my thesis by validating poetry's connection to politics. I hope to demonstrate that the problems facing Middle Eastern women are contemporary, imminent, and vital in countering the masculinized Islamophobia in present-day United States. Although this thesis discusses the racialized and gendered discrimination Middle Eastern women face explicitly in the United States as diasporic subjects, it does not overlook or undermine the gender-based discrimination Middle Eastern women encounter "back home." As will be discussed in the Conclusion Chapter of this thesis, Middle Eastern women continue to encounter hinderances to their human rights in their home countries. The reasoning behind focusing on their discrimination in the United States is that despite the fact that the United States advocates for human rights, particularly for women's rights, it disregards the rights of women who identify as Middle Eastern. I hope this thesis sheds light on the discrimination Middle Eastern women face in the United States and the efforts of the poets Suheir Hammad and Solmaz Sharif to critique, challenge, and overturn that discrimination through poetry.

## Chapter 1

### **Definitions: Embodiment, Precarity, Double Consciousness and the “Orient”**

In Suheir Hammad's *Breaking Poems* and Solmaz Sharif's *Look*, the theme of embodiment and disembodiment emerges as a result of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East that render Middle Eastern people as diasporic subjects. Embodiment, as it is associated with the temporal, physical state of existence, acts as a metaphor in both poetry collections for the identity of Middle Eastern people, particularly of Middle Eastern women. In Western societies, particularly in the United States, Middle Eastern women are identified by what their bodies look like, which is an imposed construction of their identities. Consequently, Middle Eastern women's identities become equated in mainstream media representations with either exoticization or oppression (or both) in the United States, which amounts to an *attempt* to strip away their agency and subjecthood. In “Producing Alternative Media Discourses on Muslims,” Faiza Hirji states:

Following the events of September 11... U.S., Canadian, and Pakistani newspaper coverage of Afghan Muslim women found continued emphasis on stereotypes of the oppressed Muslim woman and the oppressive Muslim man, both rooted in Orientalist discourses of uncivilized and exoticized peoples.... (194-195)

She goes on to say:

...signifiers that are often used by the media to denote Islamic fundamentalism... can be seen on television to represent the Islamic threat, even when shown fleetingly: the *hijab* worn by some Muslim females, the Arab headdress and cloak, Muslims prostrating themselves in prayer, domes of

mosques, Arabic or Arabic-looking writing, and Arabesque designs, among others. (196-197)

The Western media's portrayal of Middle Eastern women, through their equation with Muslims, perpetuates the oppression and exoticization of the Middle Eastern woman. The dehumanization that occurs as a result of their "exotic" but "strange" and "dangerous" culture and religion results in this attempt to deny Middle Eastern people their subjecthood.

Embodiment tends to be associated with the female body, as women are defined by their physicality in a society that exoticizes them, identifying them as hypersexualized objects (rather than subjects). Since embodiment is often perceived through stereotypes and first impressions, both Hammad and Sharif tell their readers and viewers that their embodiment is theirs, not the United States', to construct, encouraging their audiences to critique the victimized and exoticized stereotype of Middle Eastern women. In doing so, Hammad and Sharif resist and reconstruct these imposed stereotypical identities through discussing their own experience of embodiment and resisting the stereotyped images of their bodies in American society.

In this chapter, I will provide a theoretical framework for the ensuing two chapters on Suheir Hammad's *Breaking Poems* and Solmaz Sharif's *Look* respectively. We can consider the theme of embodiment and disembodiment in both Hammad and Sharif's works and how it intersects with femininity, double consciousness, and precariousness to flesh out an understanding of Middle Eastern women's experiences of war, intimacy, displacement, and subsequently, diasporic subjectivity in the West. Building on Judith

Butler's main argument in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, that "some lives are grievable, and others are not..." (xiv), this thesis will shed light on Hammad's and Sharif's attempts to make Middle Eastern lives matter and grievable. This thesis will address why diaspora or displacement leads to disembodiment and why Middle Eastern women's experiences emphasize embodiment (relating to bodily and physical matters rather than mental or spiritual matters). The embodiment discussed in *Breaking Poems* and *Look* are intensely individualized; thus, this chapter will analyze the relationship between individual embodiment of the female speakers in the poems and the metonymic embodiment of the Middle Eastern community as a whole, whose bodies have been violated in what Butler categorizes as "ungrievable" wars.

First, it is essential to provide an understanding of embodiment and disembodiment in this chapter in order to better understand how the theme operates in Hammad and Sharif's poetry collections. On embodiment, Butler states:

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. (26)

For Butler, embodiment is complicated; it is in the domain of the private and the public simultaneously. While embodiment is individualized, it is also a way in which the public world identifies, understands, and processes human existence. Thus, embodiment entails

both an awareness of the self and outside the self, or the socio-political world surrounding the self. As Butler reveals, embodiment is a site of both intimacy (i.e. “touch”) and conflict (“violence”), making embodiment belong to “us” or the individual, and the public or “them” simultaneously.

In “Rethinking Diasporicity: Embodiment, Emotion, and the Displaced Origin,” scholar Bibi Bakare-Yusuf provides a conceptual understanding of embodiment which builds on Butler’s definition:

Embodied agents are always grounded in their lived experience precisely because they ‘inhabit’ their body in specific ways: inscribed and circumscribed, social and self-generated. The body referred to here is not the physical body conceptualised as an ‘object’, it is ‘not a collection of adjacent organs’, nor is it a thing that exists in the here and now in a discrete set of spatio-temporal slices. Rather, the existential phenomenological body is ‘the congealed face of existence’... The body is neither the subject, nor the object of experience. It is prior to both. It lies between and yet prior to inner and outer worlds. Through the temporal flow of lived experience, the body as self and the body as world folds and unfolds. (149)

Here, Bakare-Yusuf reaffirms Butler’s reasoning that embodiment is both a public and a private site. But, interestingly, Bakare-Yusuf claims that “embodied agents... ‘inhabit’ their bod[ies]” even when their embodiment is under public scrutiny. Bakare-Yusuf’s complex explanation of embodiment can be understood as occupying an imaginary space between the private “inner” world and the public “outer” world – or, a liminal state. This “liminal state” is constantly constructed and reimagined through dynamic temporal affairs

that shape both the physical body and the spiritual mind. In both Hammad and Sharif's texts, embodiment is certainly public and private; while the speakers in their poems attain a sense of self that is shaped by worldly affairs, their bodies are exposed to public affairs, and their embodiments are viewed from a perspective that can appear to be beyond their control. Oftentimes, the perspective in which Middle Eastern people and more specifically, women, are viewed is constructed by destructive stereotypes.

Bakare-Yusuf also claims:

...Being displaced or being out-of-place may have serious experiential and existential consequences for diasporic subjects. Because one is no longer in a geographical setting that is familiar, one can easily lose a deeply felt habitual connection to the world. Dislocated from the familiarity of place, the diasporic subject can therefore experience quite acutely the pain of being elsewhere. There is created the dilemma of being continually jostled by feelings of alienation from the body – being estranged by race, gender, generation, language, and geography. This conflict can be so devastating that it renders itself incapable of expression. In this case, diasporic agents can remain forever lost in translation, cut adrift in the interstitial. (152)

Here, Bakare-Yusuf discusses disembodiment, identifying “race, gender, generation, language, and geography” as categories within which alienation occurs for diasporic subjects. Bakare-Yusuf ties displacement and disembodiment together, demonstrating that embodiment, or a sense of physical existence, is connected to one's relationship with a physical location. This connection to location builds a sense of community, belonging,

and familiarity that shapes one's sense of embodiment. Bakare-Yusuf claims that diasporic subjects are "forever lost in translation" as a result of their disembodiment, evoking their ongoing desire to return to the lost "homeland." The categories listed by Bakare-Yusuf combine physical embodiment with social, cultural, and political embodiments – as expressed in Hammad and Sharif's poetry.

The dehumanization of Middle Eastern people as terrorists, or as "others" has become more pronounced following the September 11 attacks in 2001. In "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection," Julia Kristeva concocts and defines the term "abjection" – which is "neither subject nor object" but *something* in between subjecthood and objecthood (135). Indeed, the designation of Middle Eastern people as "terrorist" relinquishes them to a term that is both ubiquitous and non-existent. The word depicts an enemy that is indefinite and consequently, cannot be "defeated" or "eradicated" because the term has become universally applicable to all Middle Easterners. All Middle Eastern people are placed under suspicion within the umbrella term "terrorist," which serves to communally stereotype a group of people from the same geographical location or from the same faith. Consequently, Kristeva's term "abject" applies to the term "terrorist," which is neither "object nor subject" but a perpetual enemy of the West that must be eradicated under all circumstances. Historically, as Stuart Hall claimed in "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power, building on Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the West formed itself in opposition to the Rest" (or the East) (278). In doing so, the East becomes everything the West is not: uncivilized, barbaric, and backwards.

Hall claims:



The West and the Rest became two sides of a single coin... The so-called uniqueness of the West was, in part, produced by Europe's contact and self-comparison with other, non-western, societies (the Rest), very different in their histories, ecologies, patterns of development, and cultures from the European model. (187)

Consequently, as a result of the nature of its formation, the West does not have a concrete self-identity without comparing itself to the “rest.” In Hammad's and Sharif's poems, the “rest” is developed; it is not an amalgamation of stereotypes of the East, but rather, the “rest” is where their home countries of Iran and Palestine are present. The “rest” is developed in Hammad and Sharif's poems as a place of value that should not be destroyed through war. As Hall identifies, “the discourse of ‘the West and the Rest’ [is] so destructive - it draws crude and simplistic distinctions and constructs an oversimplified conception of “difference” (189). In their poems, Hammad and Sharif subvert the simplistic definition of the “East” as the binary opposite of the West. In *Breaking Poems*, Hammad describes Middle Eastern cities individually. Although war has ravaged all of the cities she mentions, the cities are described uniquely to demonstrate their difference not only from the West, but from one another as well to reverse their homogenization. In *Look*, Sharif describes Iran from a nostalgic perspective, disclosing its unique cultural and social elements to the reader. Sharif does not feel at home in the United States, but rather, she misses her home in Iran even though she has spent most of her life in the United States. In *Look*, the United States is not the “better-half” of the

“West and the Rest,” but rather, a place in which Sharif feels displaced, in exile from her homeland.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said provides a description of how Eastern or “oriental” women are viewed from the perspective of the West (that has been largely formed by early European writing about the East). Said writes about the depictions of Middle Eastern women in the works of Gustave Flaubert, which represented a popular understanding of Middle Eastern women for the West. A Middle Eastern female character in Flaubert’s writing is identified through her

...sensuality, delicacy, and mindless coarseness... ‘the oriental woman is no more than a machine: she makes no distinction between one man and another man’... less a woman than a display of impressive but verbally inexpressive femininity... all of the versions of carnal female temptation... a disturbing symbol of fecundity, peculiarly Oriental in her luxuriant and seemingly unbounded sexuality. (187)

Here, the Middle Eastern woman is reduced to her feminine embodiment; she is merely a physical representation of sex solely for the pleasure of the Western man. She is identified as unintelligent and is dehumanized as a (sexual) “machine” with no other function or purpose in life. She is identified only through her female sexual embodiment; she is fertile and capable of procreation, which reaffirms her limited identity. This superficial identification of the Middle Eastern woman is destructive for her as it reduces her being to strictly her sexual embodiment.

In “Introduction: Race Thinking and the Camp,” Sherene Razack states:

Gender is crucial to the confinement of Muslims to the pre-modern, as post-colonial scholarship has long shown. Considered irredeemably fanatical, irrational, and thus dangerous, Muslim men are also marked as deeply misogynist patriarchs who have not progressed into the age of gender equality, and who indeed cannot. For the West, Muslim women are the markers of their communities' place of modernity... In the unconscious structure of Orientalism, the veiled Oriental woman... signifies the Orient as seductive and dangerous, but the powerful allure and productive power of the fantasy of orientalism has meant that the European man must dream a dream of possession of the veiled woman if he is to know himself as modern, all-knowing and rational. (16-17)

Razack's observation builds on Said's observations in *Orientalism* that Middle Eastern women are collectively stereotyped as either exoticized or victimized. In *Look*, Sharif identifies this problem by writing about her personal experiences of being exoticized in the United States, of being reduced to merely her female embodiment. She writes, "Exquisite a lover called me. Exquisite," to demonstrate the uniqueness of her appearance in the perspective of the West (1-2). Like the woman in Flaubert's writing outlined by Said, Sharif is perceived as an exotic object of sexual pleasure for the Western man, nothing more than a sexual "machine."

The body of the non-white, "other" woman fits neatly into the stereotype of the exoticized and the eroticized due to her association with the "mystical" and "mysterious" East. While the stereotype of the exoticized Middle Eastern woman dates back to the colonial era (as Edward Said discusses in *Orientalism*), the stereotype of the oppressed

Middle Eastern woman persists and has grown stronger over the past few decades due to the War on Terror, which is arguably the most recent version of colonialism. The “veiled oppressed Muslim woman” has come to symbolize female oppression in the East, depicting Middle Eastern women in desperate need of being rescued and liberated by the West (Khalid 21). The Muslim woman, since she belongs to the East, represents the polar opposite of the “...educated [and] modern” Western woman who has “control over [her] own [body] and sexuality, and “the freedom to make [her] own decisions” (22). The oppressed Muslim woman is infantilized in the West; she is unable to speak up, she is dependent on others (particularly white men), and most importantly, she is incapable of “saving” herself. In *Breaking Poems* and *Look*, both Hammad and Sharif reveal the complex, multi-dimensional and multi-faceted characteristics of Middle Eastern women in order to defy the stereotype(s) that they need to be saved by white men. This notion of “saving” becomes problematic and counterintuitive for the West since once Middle Eastern women are “saved” and “liberated,” they no longer wear the veil or other forms of “oppressive” clothing and thus, lose their exoticization.

Feminist scholars Sherene Razack and Gayatri Spivak have argued that Middle Eastern women have been victimized by the stereotypical, Eurocentric narrative of the East. In the above named chapter “Race Thinking and the Camp” from her book *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics*, Sherene Razack identifies three allegorical characters that have been used to stereotype Middle Eastern (more specifically, Muslim) people: “the dangerous Muslim man, the imperiled Muslim woman, and the civilized European” (5). Razack’s configuration highlights the way in which

gender operates within western Islamophobia and reveals western Islamophobia's (mis)identification of the figure of the Muslim woman as 'imperiled,' a term synonymous with victimhood. Similarly, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak," Gayatri Spivak identifies the victimization of women by showing that they are treated as objects of exchange in a global context in which "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (48). Both Razack and Spivak reveal the identification of the "subaltern" woman (the non-white woman) as the victim, the Middle Eastern or "Brown" man as the criminal, and the white man as the savior, excluding all blame from the white man as responsible for conflict in and between countries and ethno-religious groups in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> In *Breaking Poems* and *Look*, Hammad and Sharif subvert the victimization of Middle Eastern women by discussing their strength, their endurance of war, suffering, and pain, and their ability to unite and empower.

Similarly, in *Belonging and Banishment: Being Muslim in Canada*, Natasha Bakht argues that there are two "typecast(s)" of Muslim, or Middle Eastern women:

The first typecast is drawn from the ubiquitous belief that Muslim women are victims. These 'imperiled Muslim women' are victims of a gender oppressive religion. They are in need of protection from 'dangerous Muslim men,' and 'civilized Europeans' are the ideal group to rescue these passive women and girls who are unable to help themselves...Muslim women and girls are...kept in a

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<sup>1</sup> However, it is crucial to note that there are cultures in the Middle East that *are* patriarchal: Middle Eastern women *are* subjected to gendered and sexist treatment in the Middle East as a result of the socio-political-economic organization of the Middle East, which is affected by the United States' intervention. Nor should we assume that there is no sexism in Western countries – on the contrary, both regions have sexism that functions in different forms and venues.

position of victimhood. They are prevented from taking their rightful place as active participants in society under the guise of guarding their safety. The second typecast is that of the aggressor — a viewpoint that has become particularly popular in the post-9/11 era and has justified the surveillance and control of Muslim communities globally. The suspicious Muslim woman covers her face possibly to defraud the... electoral system. Society must be protected from these dangerous destabilizers of the state who threaten to undermine the proper workings of the political system.... (112)

Here, Bakht points out a significant stereotype of Muslim women that goes beyond their exoticization and victimization; that is, she points out their criminalization as a result of Western interpretations of their religious beliefs. Although she is a victim, the Muslim woman is “ungrateful” once she is “saved” and as a result, attempts to deceive the West using her veil to cover up her real identity and true intentions. The veil becomes a piece of fabric that the Muslim woman can hide behind regardless of religious beliefs. The categorization of the veil as a tool of deception undermines the symbols of Islam, thus rendering an entire religion and its followers as dishonest and deceitful.

Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* addresses the themes of embodiment, disembodiment, grievability, and diasporic subjectivity and thus provides a better understanding of the context of *Breaking Poems* and *Look*. In her book, Butler asks these critical questions: “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, what makes for a *grievable* life?” (20). She continues: “Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to

others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (20). For mainstream Western society, the “other” – whether that be the non-white, non-heteronormative, or non-Western body – is disposable and thus, ungrievable. Through to the use of these stereotypes, Middle Eastern people have become demonized in mainstream Western society. The inability, or rather, the unwillingness, to grieve for the “other” renders their lives as unlived, unimportant, and useless. Hammad and Sharif are aware of this reality in their works; they both describe the “precariousness” of Middle Eastern lives. Both Hammad and Sharif write raw, uncensored descriptions of violence towards Middle Eastern bodies and the elimination of their futurity. These raw descriptions often convey violent images of blood, body parts, and suffering in the minds of the readers. In doing so, Hammad and Sharif attempt to make Middle Eastern lives grievable for their readers (and viewers in Hammad’s case). Moreover, through their detailed writing, Hammad and Sharif reanimate the suffering of Middle Eastern people for their readers. This serves as a testimony, or as an obituary for the forgotten, precarious lives in the Middle East.

The following excerpt from Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* identifies Middle Eastern lives as ungrievable, categorizing marginalized groups of people in the category of precariousness:

Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary

conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a liveable life and a grievable death? (Butler xv)

She goes on to say:

we seldom, if ever, hear the names of the thousands of Palestinians who have died by the Israeli military with United States support, or any number of Afghan people, children and adults. Do they have names and faces, personal histories, family, favourite hobbies, slogans by which they live?...To what extent have Arab peoples, predominantly practitioners of Islam, fallen outside the 'human'...? How do our cultural frames for thinking the human set limits on the kinds of losses we can avow as loss? After all, if someone is lost, and that person is not someone, then what and where is the loss, and how does mourning take place? (32)

Here, Butler discusses the dehumanization of Middle Eastern people – the denial of their subjecthood as a result of their objectification by the West. Since Middle Eastern people are collectively stereotyped as terrorists, their lives are not grievable; how can they be when their very purpose is to cause the destruction of Western values and to those who uphold them? Consequently, their deaths are not grievable; from the perspective of the West, they are not individuals, they do not have names or personal histories, they are collectively othered. This denial of Middle Eastern individuality is precisely why Hammad and Sharif hyper-individualize Middle Eastern people's experiences in their texts through an intensified focus on the body.

Both Hammad and Sharif attempt to present Middle Eastern lives as liveable and their deaths as grievable. They become individuals for the readers, with thoughts,



emotions, families, and interests. This attempt to humanize Middle Eastern people also aims to demonize the West for their pursuit of war in the Middle East. It is no longer acceptable to mass murder Middle Eastern people – they go through the individualization process required in order for their lives to become valuable. Deprived of Western individualization, Middle Eastern people are blurred together in one category where one, fifty, or a thousand deaths all equate to the same value. In both Hammad and Sharif's poetry, the individual, embodied experience is hyper-personalized, even as that individual experience is also shown to be collective. While the body in pain in these poems is most often Hammad's and Sharif's bodies, Sharif moves the "I" between different human figures in these poems to show that she can identify with the atrocities facing other people's bodies like her own. In this sense, Sharif (and to some extent, Hammad) use the intimate embodiment of Middle Eastern people to demonstrate that they are all valuable.

The individualization process is emphasized through the use of the singular pronoun "I" throughout Hammad's and Sharif's poems. The "I," or the speaker in a plethora of the poems that will be discussed in Chapters One and Two, constantly switches from the singular to the plural, from the perspective of the writer to the perspective of other Middle Eastern diasporic subjects respectively. Both Hammad's and Sharif's texts demonstrate that regardless of the speakers' physical location, they occupy a war-inflicted space due to the blurring of the intimate, private space they occupy in the United States where they retain lived memories of conflict in the Middle East. As a result, both Hammad and Sharif display an intense focus on the individual body (of the female speaker) in many of their poems. This phenomenon can be better understood through a

definition of metonymy. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the literary term “metonymy” as “a figure of speech characterized by the action of substituting for a word or phrase denoting an object, action, institution, etc.... a thing used or regarded as a substitute for or symbol of something else” (*OED Online*). In their poems, Hammad and Sharif use metonymy to demonstrate that their lives are livable – and their deaths would be grievable, which ultimately demonstrates that the larger body of Middle Eastern people collectively live valuable lives and die grievable deaths. In other words, through the personal and individual experiences of the female speakers, Hammad and Sharif do two things at once: represent specific, detailed, individual experiences at the same time that they also represent shared experiences of Middle Eastern people to their readers. The term “shared” is used rather than the term “universal” because Hammad and Sharif challenge the Western concept of the “universal human” that is based on the white, heterosexual, male subject by representing a broad Middle Eastern, female subjectivity that is profoundly human.

Female embodiment is intrinsic in Hammad's *Breaking Poems* and to some extent, in Sharif's *Look*. In *Breaking Poems*, it is from the perspective of female embodiment that the reader is confronted with the sufferings in the Middle East. Hammad also uses her female embodiment to discuss the concept of diasporic subjectivity. As a result, the readers are exposed to the world of the “Middle East” through agentful female embodiment, which is essential in a society that regards Middle Eastern female embodiment as powerless. Moreover, Hammad and Sharif revalue and reorient gender in the Middle Eastern context. In her spoken word poem “What I Will,” Hammad discusses

the collective (presumably) female embodiment of Middle Eastern women. She presents Middle Eastern women as defying Western-induced conflicts and violence through a feminized understanding of movement – dancing. Similarly, in *Look*, Sharif discusses the raw, uncensored violence and suffering in the Middle East through female embodiment. Even though Sharif has not conventionally been a combatant in a war zone, she reveals the horrors of war through the way she presents an imagined embodiment of living in the context of war to the reader. In both texts, female embodiment is intrinsic to humanizing Middle Eastern people, defying stereotypes about the Middle East, and communicating Middle Eastern people's experiences to readers in the West.

Hammad and Sharif focus on female embodiment as opposed to other forms of embodiments due to the neglect of Middle Eastern women's embodied experiences, in particular, in mass media depictions of the War on Terror and of the Middle East in general. Due to the sequestering of women into the world of the domestic and men into the public, women, in the popular stereotype, become "objects" rather than "subjects" of war. In war, the Middle Eastern woman is an object of exchange between violent men (both Middle Eastern and Western). Given that soldiers are largely male (especially in the Middle East), since militarization is masculinized, and the violence is inflicted on men's bodies, women often come along afterwards to collect the dismembered bodies and corpses in both the poems and reality. Both Hammad and Sharif reject this kind of stereotype by presenting women as subjects of war—their own bodies, their own minds and hearts and physical makeup are scarred forever by war. In *Look*, Sharif describes the violence inflicted on Middle Eastern soldiers from a first-person perspective. That

violence is, consequently, intimate—which is what the world of the domestic is, the space of intimacy, of the personal. The blurring of masculinized violence and the feminized intimate, private sphere demonstrates that these domains are inseparable for Middle Eastern people because they are constantly occupying a warzone. Despite the fact that Middle Eastern women are not conventionally “at war,” they are affected by war in the same manner as men – they suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as is evident in the poetry of Hammad and Sharif. This is demonstrated particularly in Sharif’s poem “Personal Effects,” which will be discussed in Chapter Three, in which Sharif experiences a visceral, embodied connection with her uncle who is at war in Iran while she is in the United States.

The title of her collection is a reminder of Sharif’s diasporic subjectivity; “look” implies both the action of gazing at others and being gazed at by others while also inviting the reader to “look” in her poetry collection by means of reading. The word “look” articulates Sharif’s sense of diasporicity, the fact that she is gazed at, analyzed, and racialized by American society as a result of her racial identity (Attewell). In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois discusses the concept of double consciousness, or the division between how a racially minoritized Black person sees themselves in comparison to how they are seen by white Americans (10-11). As a result, the racially minoritized person has two consciousnesses, or a feeling of two embodiments; one they create for themselves and one that is created for them by the dominant society.

Du Bois was curious about what happens to one’s internal identity when one becomes aware of the other’s gaze. He considered this “looking at oneself through the

eyes of others” to produce a pathological state of “two warring ideals in one dark body” that threaten to pull that body “asunder” (11). Double consciousness causes the individual to change the way they view themselves as a result of the way they are viewed by the world around them. Essentially, double consciousness is the inner division that occurs when a racialized person becomes conscious of being seen by a hostile external gaze. Rather than allowing a person to live within their own sense of themselves, the hostile gaze makes a person aware of a divided (or double) consciousness: aware of how one sees oneself, and aware of how others see the self, which is often negatively.

We could extend from DuBois to consider what we might call a “triple consciousness,” which alienates the racialized subject even further from the locus of their own experience of themselves within their own bodies. By triple consciousness, I mean the woman’s experience of herself within herself, the hostile public gaze of American mass culture (they are terrorists who cant be trusted), and the suspicious gaze from within the Middle Eastern diaspora that alienates them from their own community and from their own understanding of their love and support for that same community. In “The Triple Consciousness of Black Muslim Women: The Experiences of First Generation Somali-Canadian Women Activist,” Hodan Mohamed claims that Somali-Canadian women, as a result of their racial (Black), religious (Muslim), gendered (female) embodiment, experience triple consciousness in Canada (20). Building on Mohamed’s argument, yet being careful to not claim the term from Black women exclusively for Middle Eastern women, we could say that Middle Eastern women also experience triple consciousness due their racialization, gender, and supposed religious affiliation. In this sense, “triple

consciousness” characterizes the way in which Hammad and Sharif navigate through the world as diasporic subjects.

It is in this context that Sharif uses the title of her collection “look.” This act of looking is always embodied and always individualized as each person experiences the subject/object they are gazing at differently. Sharif’s poetry collection is a testament to the conflicts in the Middle East, particularly the Iran-Iraq War, and to American Islamophobia. In *Look*, double and triple consciousness are demonstrated through Sharif’s writing working against externally imposed ideas of what Middle Eastern women are like.

In *Muslim Diaspora: Gender, Culture, and Identity*, Haideh Moghissi claims that in the Muslim diaspora, there is an increasing shift to “religious exhibitionism” and “Islamic radicalism” (xvi). Moghissi states:

This shift to heightened Muslim identity, however, does not represent increasing adherence to Islam as a religion, but to Islam as an ideology of resistance and the only force that at present seems to effectively challenge global power structures and domination systems. This is the development of a politicized Muslim identity whose religio-cultural import is only symbolic. (xvi)

As Moghissi outlines, religion becomes a form of resistance for the Muslim diaspora, allowing various ethnically and culturally minoritized groups of people to unite under the guise of Islam. While Hammad does not explicitly mention religion in *Breaking Poems*, Sharif makes explicit references to the religion. In *Look*, Sharif mentions mosques, God, and Imams. Parallel with Moghissi, Sharif refers to religion to unite Middle Eastern people in her poetry, employing religion as tool of resistance rather than oppression. As

with other diasporic groups, finding a commonality becomes essential to building communities in a space they would otherwise be dispersed in.

Referring to the Iranian diaspora (or a wider Middle Eastern diaspora), in “‘Our’ Reflections in ‘Their’ Mirror,” Hamed Shahidian argues that Iranian diasporic women are denied representation. He claims:

There are rare accounts by women about their diasporic lives; we only read men’s descriptions of women, a description that emphasizes idiocy, deception and disillusionment in Iranian diasporic women... Immigrant women are frequently held responsible for the destruction of family life. They are blamed for being deceived by Western ideas and forgetting their native culture. (108)

The blaming of diasporic Middle Eastern women for failing to uphold their cultural traditions and values reveals the sexism Middle Eastern women face in both their own communities and in the communities of the West. This is precisely the reason why this thesis places emphasis on Middle Eastern female embodiment.

Hammad’s and Sharif’s personal accounts of their diasporic subjectivity in *Breaking Poems* and *Look* encourages the amplification of women’s voices and embodied experiences in marginalized communities. Much of their writing emphasizes female embodiment in order to reveal its strength and power. In the works of Hammad and Sharif, being embodied as a female is empowering; women unite together to mourn and to fight back by challenging the oppressive system(s) that marginalizes them and their children. It becomes evident that Hammad’s and Sharif’s individual experiences are

shared so they can be applicable to other Middle Eastern women who have faced war, discrimination, abuse, and sexism.



## **Chapter 2**

### **“I will not dance to your war drum”: The Resilience of Middle Eastern Women’s Embodiment in the Poetry of Suheir Hammad**

The infamous War on Terror began on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2001 – a “‘gender-ed’, ‘race-ed’, ‘sex-ed’ and ‘class-ed’” conflict that has rendered women who identify as Middle Eastern (either fully or partially) powerless in the eyes of the “West” (Pratt 1821). This (mis)identification of the female Middle Eastern body as powerless is challenged in the written and spoken word poetry of Palestinian-American activist and poet Suheir Hammad, which will be the locus of this chapter. In her poetry collection titled *Breaking Poems* and her spoken word poem “What I Will,” Hammad articulates the theme of embodiment and disembodiment of the Middle Eastern female in the context of the War on Terror and Islamophobia, threading this theme from the “homeland” through the diasporic subject to the “new land.”

While embodiment is associated with physicality, the embodiment discussed in Hammad’s poetry extends beyond the boundaries of the physical body, permeating through the categorizations of temporality to reach other kinds of embodiment. The embodiment of Middle Eastern female bodies in Hammad’s poetry extends to their social, cultural, spiritual, and political embodiment. This type of embodiment moves beyond the individual to the communal corporeality of Middle Eastern women, making explicit their collective and shared experiences of being positioned as female and Middle Eastern. In other words, the embodiment of the speaker in Hammad’s poems discusses an

individualized experience that is also generalized to include other Muslim women in the United States.

By analyzing the written and spoken word poetry of Suheir Hammad in relation to the embodiment (and the disembodiment) of Middle Eastern female bodies, this chapter seeks to address the following questions: is the physical body the principle signifier of identity? What happens when the body and its various physical signifiers, such as the very skin that holds people together as complete individuals are shed and are no longer a physical identifier of oneself? And, how does one experience embodiment without a body? By answering these questions, or at least, by seeking answers to them, I will attempt to cast light on other ways of understanding and seeing the Middle Eastern female body (both diasporic and not), beyond the Eurocentric lens that constricts their identity to exoticization and/or victimhood.

In *Breaking Poems* and “What I Will,” Suheir Hammad counters the victimized narrative of Muslim women identified in Razack’s writing by revealing their agency through poetry. Hammad subverts the Western stereotype of Middle Eastern women, that they are victimized by Middle Eastern men, by discussing the kind of embodiment(s) they experience as a result of the War on Terror. In each of her poems that will be analyzed, the disembodiment of the Middle Eastern woman is a direct result of Western induced violence. In her article, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf provides a conceptual framework for the disembodiment articulated in Hammad’s poetry as discussed in Chapter One, claiming “...Being displaced or being out-of-place may have serious experiential and existential consequences for diasporic subjects,” (152). Hammad’s feelings of disembodiment are

directly tied to her physical displacement from the Middle East. In her poetry, Hammad exerts a longing for the Middle East that is parallel to her desire to become embodied. It is in the United States that she feels disembodied, so in this sense, Hammad's embodiment is directly linked to her sense of belonging to the Middle East.

In “break,” Hammad addresses the concepts of belonging and *un*belonging to a space, a particular culture and society in order to express her diasporic subjectivity. Hammad's diasporic subjectivity arises from her ongoing displacement as a result of conflicts occurring in the Middle East, a situation which is intentionally made explicit in the poem. In “break,” Hammad discusses her polarized experiences living in Western cities, notably New York City, in contrast to various Middle Eastern cities. In New York, Hammad states: “I am looking for my body/for my form in the foreign... I can't remember where I left my body” (Hammad 4-5, 15). Here, Hammad experiences disembodiment—a state of loss, a state of separation from the material and temporal because she is in a ‘foreign’ space as discussed by Bakare-Yusuf. Hammad's search for “[her] form in the foreign” reflects her desire to belong, to find her identity constructed by and in the foreign space she inhabits. In this sense, Hammad seeks for rebirth — the formation of a new identity, forced to leave her old one behind (the one that was constructed in the Middle East) as a result of the trauma she experiences. Hammad's inability to remember “where [she] left [her] body” illustrates the disintegration of her sense of embodied identity — the very core of her physical existence. For Hammad, her physical body is a metaphor for her identity. Since her body is marked differently (racially and culturally), it has become a signifier of her identity both to herself and to the West. Hammad's search for her body

can be characterized as a wandering (to borrow the term from Robin Cohen's "wandering Jew" from his book *Global Diasporas*), the forced wandering Hammad experiences as a result of her family's displacement from Palestine. This "wandering" body is in a perpetual state of searching for a home, while the word "wandering" reflects being directionless or even being lost.

Hammad's phrasing also suggests that she experiences amnesia as a result of her traumatic experiences as a refugee. Her refugee status arises from the power and wealth imbalances in the world, largely as a result of the United States' intervention in the Middle East. Hammad's amnesia verifies the ongoing process of diasporic subjectivity, a constant state of remembering and forgetting memories in order to make sense of her being. Theorist Stuart Hall claims: "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (394). According to Hall, the past is always constructed through the ongoing process of memory, memory being a process of the mind rather than the body. However, memory itself can be embodied; memories can be visually represented by markings on the body, known as "body memory." Consequently, Hammad's constant remembering of the past shapes her identity in the present; therefore, her inability to remember her past renders her identity in a state of confusion. Since memory is not rigid, but is dependent on remembering and rearticulating the past, it is constantly remade.

In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" Hall claims: "The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual 'past', since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always-already 'after the break'. It is always constructed

through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (226). For Hammad, her memory of displacement is always being remade, so in this sense, she is constantly displaced, both from her “home” and from the place she occupies, which is also reflective of Hammad’s identity. Hammad’s understanding of her homeland is constructed by postmemory. In her article “Past Lives: Memory in Exile,” Marianne Hirsch defines the concept of postmemory as: “...the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor recreated” (659). This is indicative of Hammad as she has grown up in the United States but remains haunted by the experiences of her childhood and of her parents.

The separation Hammad experiences from her physical body illustrates her inability to have a unified self, resulting in the disintegration of her identity. Hammad concludes the poem with “i wrote myself out of damage/this is the body of words and spaces/i have found to re-construct” (20-22). Hammad’s only hope to find herself, to ‘re-construct’ her body, is through writing and situating herself in and between the liminal spaces of her words. Hammad claims that the re-construction of her identity is a result of her actively writing herself “out of damage.” To overcome the trauma she experienced, Hammad finds solace in writing. Through writing poetry, Hammad is able to erase and re-write her identity over and over again. For Hammad, the construction of identity is an active process through writing, not stagnant nor linear, requiring a process of *identification* rather than a static *identity*. Rather than speaking of a literal body only, in Hammad’s poems the physical body becomes a metaphor for continuity between

memories of the past self and the need to identify a new self in the present. Hammad's identification process is ongoing; it is not a solid state of being, but rather, a process of gradual formation.

In "Beirut," the capital city of Lebanon, Hammad claims:

the roads and bridges been hit

the airport been hit

where is a body to go

we lived there once my parents sisters and me

i left my skin there still boiling (5-9).

Here, Hammad reveals the destitution of Beirut as a result of Israeli intrusion, which has rendered her and her family placeless. Hammad demonstrates that her body has been broken into pieces, occupying different geographical spaces, unable to unify as a whole as a result of war. The image of "[her] skin there still boiling" shows that a part of Hammad — intriguingly the outermost layer of her body, the identifying physical feature of Hammad — is left in Beirut, in torment and anguish. In "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement," Sara Ahmed discusses the relationship of diasporicity with the skin. She claims:

The stories of dislocation help to relocate: they give a shape, a contour, a skin to the past itself. The past becomes presentable through a history of lost homes (unhousings), as a history which hesitates between the particular and the general,

and between the local and the transnational... Indeed, if we think of home as an outer skin, then we can also consider how migration involves not only a spatial dislocation, but also a temporal dislocation: 'the past' becomes associated with a home that it is impossible to inhabit, and be inhabited by, in the present....(343)

Ahmed's description illuminates Hammad's experience of feeling homeless; the image of her skin left behind in Beirut renders Hammad without a home in the United States. As previously discussed, the disembodiment Hammad experiences in New York City derives from the feeling that her body remained in Beirut. As Ahmed claims, Hammad's past, Beirut, "becomes associated with a home that is impossible to inhabit...". Through the different locations in which Hammad situates her poems, she reveals the bits and pieces of her body scattered in the places she once inhabited. Through writing, Hammad identifies her missing pieces and locates them as far removed from her present location, allowing her to understand why she does not embody a whole body. The blank spaces above and below the line "where is a body to go" visually accentuates the emptiness, loneliness, and disembodiment Hammad experiences. The absence of a question mark allows Hammad to assert "where is a body to go" to the reader rather than to ask them, giving her poem an authoritative voice.

In the two-line poem "Gaza," a territory in Hammad's ancestral homeland, Palestine, Hammad writes: "a woman's hand cups bloodied sand bits scalp ooze/ to the camera and says this is my family" (12-13). Here, Hammad moves the conversation beyond the individual, or herself, to other Middle Eastern women and to some extent, to children. Hammad's description of a Middle Eastern woman, gathering the remnants of

her family's bodies, depicts the eradication of Middle Eastern bodies as a result of the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The camera in the poem signifies the presence of an audience, raising ethical issues around spectatorship. It illustrates the desensitization towards war and towards the traumatic experiences of Middle Eastern people.

Moreover, the camera moves the discussion of embodiment beyond the physical to encompass an audience who is both physically disembodied, or distanced, from the war scene and figuratively embodiment as a distant spectator. The graphic description of blood and dismembered body parts, such as a "scalp" evoke discomfort in the reader, illustrating the horrors of war and articulating the woman's trauma. The dehumanization of the woman's family as "bloodied sand bits scalp ooze" reduces Middle Eastern bodies to dismembered body parts. The disintegration of the woman's family in the poem eliminates the futurity of the Middle Eastern family unit, foreshadowing their potential extinction. The abject descriptions of Middle Eastern bodies also facilitate the recreation of trauma, particularly for Hammad. By discussing the dehumanized Middle Eastern bodies, Hammad comments on their disposability and disembodiment to the West.

In "Baghdad," Hammad describes the city:

the children watch from bodies roasting by roadsides

they fall in love with the soldiers killing them

they see soldiers are bodies with orders

they wish for something to follow

a star an idea called hope sick as it sounds (1-5).



Here, Hammad directly refers to the War on Terror, the violence between the United States and Iraq, demonstrating the suffering of children as a result of this violence. Her description of the Iraqi children illustrates the disposability of their bodies to the United States and the cessation of their futurity. Hammad's portrayal of Middle Eastern bodies demonstrates their objectification by the Western soldiers. The descriptions of bodily decay and suffering experienced by Middle Eastern people subverts the Eurocentric narrative of the War on Terror that vilifies the East. Through her written poetry, Hammad exposes the suffering of Middle Eastern people as a result of Western violence. Hammad also perverts the notion of hope by calling it "[as] sick as it sounds" to demonstrate that the hopes Middle Eastern children possess are futile. The last line is preceded by an empty space, illustrating that the notion of hope is the last and only resort for the children – even if it only provides them with a deluded sense of comfort.

Lastly, rather than another city, Hammad addresses "Here" as the place she occupies. She writes,

[here] is my body...

an offering to give or to receive...

...in the ashes there

is my body (6,8,13-14).

The "here" Hammad addresses is an ambiguous, unknown location to the reader. Is she "here" in the United States, her current residence? Is she "here," in an unmappable, liminal, and transitory space where she is unable to fully belong to the East or to the

West? Is she “here,” in the Middle East? Or, is she “here” in an abstract, imagined place that is disembodied from temporality – the real, physical world? The uncertainty of Hammad’s location illustrates her placelessness, her sense of wandering, of desiring to find somewhere to fully belong. By identifying her body as an “offering,” Hammad presents herself as capable of disembodiment, her body as not belonging to her, but to her people, who are not “here” where Hammad is, but “there,” perhaps in Palestine. Moreover, the word ‘offering’ evokes martyrdom – a selfless sacrifice – which will be addressed in a later poem. When Hammad claims “...in the ashes there/is my body,” (13-14) she does not identify as belonging to Palestine nor the United States; she is figuratively removed from both places and exists in an abstract, unreal, and disembodied state outside the realm of violence. Intriguingly, Hammad concludes the poem with her body in the ashes, burning in the unmappable location, eliciting the notion that she cannot be found. Hammad’s deterioration in the “here” demonstrates that no matter where she is, she is *breaking* down (indicative of her poetry collection title) bodily, mentally, and spiritually – she is entering a state of disembodiment as a result of the ongoing violence in the Middle East.

Through the dichotomy between these places in “break,” Hammad bridges the geographically disconnected spaces in the East and the West to represent her diasporic subjectivity. The notion of her lost or wandering body illustrates her placelessness, her inability to belong — either in the place of the colonizer or in the place of the colonized. The plethora of Eastern cities, described in contrast to Western cities, illustrates the destruction and displacement of Eastern spaces. The destruction is often accompanied by

images of fire, burning, or ashes to illustrate the physical disembodiment of Middle Eastern bodies. Hammad's raw, uncensored description of violence unearths generations of trauma, suffering, and pain for Middle Eastern people and to some extent, for the readers. The poems carry a tone of hopelessness; Hammad perpetually remains in an unrecognizable place, perplexed about her state of (non)being. In the West, Hammad describes her sense of loss and loneliness whereas in the East, she discusses the suffering of Middle Eastern people. Although Hammad's "home" is in the Middle East, she cannot return due to the destruction of her lands as a result of Western neocolonial violence that hides behind the guise of Islamophobia. Hammad's location in the United States is ironic; she inhabits the space which is partially responsible for facilitating the destruction of her homeland in the Middle East. As a result, Hammad is conflicted, she does not understand where her body belongs, rendering her disembodied.

Hammad's three-page poem, "break (clustered)" further builds on the themes present in "break." In "break (clustered)," Hammad addresses war and conflict more directly, especially its effects on children and women. The title of the poem references the extensive use of cluster bombs in conflicts in the Middle East, suggesting that the bombs create a break – a disconnect – between people, through separation or death. She states:

limitless man's creative violence

whose son will it be

which male child will perish

a new day

our boys' deaths galvanize

we cherish corpses (5-10).

Here, Hammad identifies children as the combatants of wars fought in the Middle East, categorizing the West's 'enemy' as a male, Middle Eastern child. In doing so, she reveals the fragility of the Middle East's futurity, claiming, "we cherish corpses" to illustrate the normalization of their deaths. The last line, "we cherish corpses" also includes Hammad, and to some extent, the reader in the plural 'we.' Collectively, the world becomes numbed to the deaths of the child soldiers and 'cherish[es]' these deaths, demonstrating a normalization of the death of Middle Eastern people and the presence of their corpses. Moreover, the cherishing of the corpses evokes martyrdom, which transforms the corpse of the soldier (or "terrorist") into a kind of sainthood. This operates by a kind of opposite form of stereotype – it reduces the nuance and complexity of the person's life into a mysterious image that is desired by those who view the person this way. However, the word 'corpses' also evokes the disembodiment of Middle Eastern children, conveying a sense of detachment. Hammad blurs the boundaries between childhood and adulthood; "...salted lemon childhoods" evokes the sensory image of preservation and bitterness (15). Hammad also blurs the boundaries between combatant and civilian, to illustrate the culture of militarization in the Middle East. In the poem, Hammad demonstrates that when conflict becomes a part of every-day culture, war becomes ingrained in the mindsets of civilians, and the hope for peace dissipates.

In "break (clustered)," Hammad also discusses women— the forgotten victims of the war(s) in the Middle East. The line "girls spoiled before ripened" illustrates the suffering of Middle Eastern women and their exploitation as a result of the endless wars

(33). Hammad compares girls to unripened fruit to illustrate their youth and fragility, as well as their lost potential and hopes. The word “spoiled” implies rape, yet it is only implied, not explicitly stated. Hammad’s silence towards the subject of rape, her reluctance to name it is indicative of women’s silence concerning sexual abuse in the Middle East. Rape brings the themes of embodiment and disembodiment together; while the girls are raped because they are embodied as female, they experience cultural and social disembodiment as a result of their rape. Hammad continues by attempting to articulate the incalculable losses women endure as a result of war:

one woman loses 15 maybe 20 members of her family

one woman loses 6

one woman loses her head...

one woman no longer believes love will ever find her

one woman never did (38-40,48-49).

The unnamed girls and women serve to speak a collective narrative of female experiences of the war(s) in the Middle East, being careful not to essentialize the experiences by providing the reader with different ones. The loss of love parallels the loss of hope for the Middle Eastern women, perpetually rendering them in a place classified with hatred and hopelessness. Hammad asks “where do refugee hearts go,” then answers her own question, “broken dissed placed” to build on the theme of hopelessness (50-51). The words “dissed” and placed,” when read aloud, represent displacement and being dissed, or rejected simultaneously. The word “hearts” connotes the disembodiment of refugees; while their bodies occupy a space, their hearts are detached from their bodies and are

perpetually wandering in an abyss. “Heart” is also often a metaphor for the emotional center of human personality, so the physical body is again a metaphor for identity.

Considering the format of Hammad's poetry collection *Breaking Poems*, the absence of capital letters becomes evident, giving the poems a non-formal tone and allowing the reader to identify with the poetry, making the poetry flow like a conversation, as if Hammad is speaking with the reader. The narrow stanzas and the sudden breaks in lines do not conform to a particular meter or rhyme scheme, allowing each poem to be read as a free verse poem, defying traditional poetic genre conventions. The free verse categorization of Hammad's poetry is defiant; it does not follow rules and is Hammad's individualized expression. This poetic form also solidifies Hammad's poetry's performative aspect. In her spoken word poem “What I Will,” Hammad resists Western warfare through her solidarity with Middle-Eastern women. While *Breaking Poems* is out of print, Hammad has moved into the arena of spoken word poetry, performing poems from her out-of-print collection. Hammad's transformation of written poetry to spoken word poetry illustrates her adjustment to the shift from print to digital media. In this sense, the embodiment of her physical poems is able to shift alongside society. However, approaching this from the other angle, the fact that Hammad's poetry is out-of-print simultaneously reflects society's lack of interest and investment in attaining peace in the Middle East – if such an idea is possible.

While written poetry is unique through its stanza structure, syntax, sequence, rhyme scheme, etc., spoken word poetry *builds* on these forms to create sensory, performative and embodied experiences. Spoken word poetry is performed before an

audience in public spaces, and the sensory elements of the performer's tone, volume, etc. confront the viewer/listener in front of other audience members. So, spoken word poetry generates a sense of public response-ability to the poet's message. Digital poetry, performed on platforms such as YouTube and TED Talks varies in intonation, volume, enunciation etc., and possesses qualities similar to *both* written – and spoken word poetry. When audiences can watch the performance from private spaces, however, the performance moves back into the domain of the private and intimate. Viewer/listeners can respond freely to the performance since other audience members are not able to see their response(s), creating a sense of disembodiment for them. However, spoken word poetry evokes from the viewers a collective response/performance that may dissipate after the audience disperses.

In *American Poetry in Performance*, Tyler Hoffman claims: "...we can speak of 'performance' in two ways: bodies bring poems into being –that is, they enact poems– through a dramatic entertainment; and bodies bring subjectivity into being" (6). Here, Hoffman discusses the importance of the performer in relation to their poem, claiming that the embodiment of the performer is inseparable from the poem. The performer visually represents the poem, allowing for the poem to have an embodiment that cannot be achievable on paper. Moreover, "...what is performed at a poetry reading is both the poet *and* the poem...what is at stake in so much public performance poetry is cultural identity itself – markers of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and nationality" (7). Thus, the performer's presence and their type of embodiment contributes to the overall effect of the poem being performed, identifying the experiences of the performer with

their poems. Hoffman asserts that “...performance presumes an activated audience, and performance poetry presents itself as one of the most persistently dialogic of forms, embracing polyvocality and resisting as it does finality and closure...” (8). Indeed, the presence of a *live* audience is integral to the overall performance, with the audience becoming part of the performance (especially if the performance, along with the audience’s engagement with the performance is recorded), part of the embodied experience. However, if the audience are not present or audible in the recording, when the recording is played, they are not a continuous part of the performance.

In her written and spoken word poem, “What I Will,” Hammad states: “I will not dance to your war drum,” “I will not forget where I come from,” and “our humming will be drumming” (Hammad). Hammad’s verses establish resistance to the War on Terror and build solidarity between the female victims of the war by switching from the singular “I” to the collective “our.” Hammad’s use of the pronoun “I” reflects her agency, her ability to choose her position concerning the wars in the Middle East. Specifically, in “What I Will,” Hammad subverts the Eurocentric narrative that identifies Middle Eastern women as victims or “collateral damage” in the wars. Hammad claims: “life is a right not/ collateral or casual...” (28-29) to humanize the victims of the wars in the Middle East. She resists Western hegemony by stating:

...I will not side  
with you...  
...I  
will craft my own drum...



... I  
will not lend my name  
nor my rhythm to your  
beat. I will dance  
and resist and dance and  
persist and dance. This heartbeat is louder than  
death. Your war drum ain't  
louder than this breath ((24-25, 31-32, 36-43).

Hammad characterizes resistance as a communal and collective effort by employing rhythm, dance, and various other elements of music. Hammad's insistence on dancing – a sensual and traditionally feminized form of expression – strengthens the embodiment of Middle Eastern women. She voices the resistance as a chant; a loud unified voice that strengthens in number. In doing so, she incorporates the element of artistic creativity into the resistance against wars in the Middle East. She tells her oppressors "...I will/ not kill for you..." (19-20) to demonstrate that she will not allow herself to be influenced by the oppressors. Hammad's response to the War on Terror is embodied; the collective dancing, chanting, and other embodied elements demonstrate a resiliency of the female Middle Eastern body. The victimization of Middle Eastern women, as being suppressed by a male-dominated society is subverted. Hammad reclaims the female Middle Eastern body and uses it as a tool for resistance through movement.

Hammad performed "What I Will" in December 2010 on TED Talks. Hammad's "What I Will" performance communicates her frustration with the wars in the Middle

East through her enunciation, volume, and other sensory elements of her performance. In her performance, when Hammad states:

I will not  
dance to your war  
drum. I will  
not lend my soul nor  
my bones to your war  
drum...  
I know  
intimately that skin  
you are hitting. It  
was alive once  
hunted stolen  
stretched (1-6, 9-14).

she pauses between “I will not dance” and “to your war/drum,” which empowers the phrase “I will not dance,” and renders “to your war/drum” as a disempowered afterthought. Hammad also pauses between the words “hunted,” “stolen,” and “stretched,” to emphasize the intensity of her pain. Similar to her poems in *Breaking Poems*, Hammad mentions ‘skin,’ claiming that it is no longer alive because it was ‘hunted,’ ‘stolen,’ and stretched.’ Here, Hammad articulates the disembodiment she and other Middle Eastern people experience as a result of Western-induced violence. As her performance progresses, Hammad fluctuates her volume; she starts her performance

quietly and gradually increases her volume before ending her performance quietly again.

This mimics the musical elements Hammad incorporates in her poem.

Near the end of her poem, Hammad states:

...Gather my beloved  
near and our chanting  
will be dancing. Our  
humming will be drumming. I  
will not be played. I  
will not lend my name  
nor my rhythm to your  
beat. I will dance  
and resist and dance and  
persist and dance. This heartbeat is louder than  
death. Your war drum ain't  
louder than this breath (32-43).

The words “chanting,” “dancing,” “humming,” and “drumming,” are pronounced with an emphasis on their “ing” rhyme, giving her poem musical elements. In doing this, Hammad literally performs the chanting she envisions in her poem as a response to war. The word “I” is pronounced with intensity in volume to allow Hammad to assert her agency. The words “dance” and “resist” again perform a chanting, particularly through their repetition and rhyming. Hammad’s concluding lines “...Your war drum ain’t/ louder than this breath” is followed by Hammad breathing out into the microphone for the

audience to hear her “breath,” which demonstrates that her breath is in fact louder than the West’s “war drum.” Hammad’s breath adds the element of realism to her performance, allowing the audience to see and hear the loudness of her breath in relation to the absence of the “war drum.” Hammad’s breath and her overall performance give her poem an embodiment; visually capable of communicating with the audience through bodily movements.

Hammad’s physical appearance contributes to the overall performance of “What I Will” and her resistant spirit. In spoken word poetry, props or clothing are essential because it has “the effect of enhancing, illustrating, underscoring, or otherwise augmenting the words of the poem” (Martinovic 176). In her performance, Hammad wears a traditional Palestinian garment that is teal in colour, with a golden neckline and big, bright, colourful jewellery. Hammad’s traditional appearance contributes to her spoken word poem’s resistant attitude towards Westernization and its effects, such as militarization and war in the Middle East. Hammad tells the audience that she has been “...prepping [her] outfit...trying to figure out what [she] is coming behind and going in front of” because “poetry does that, it preps you, it aims you” (Hammad, “What I Will,” 2:10). The audience responds with laughter to Hammad’s comment about her outfit, indicating their engagement with not only her performance of the poem, but with the representation of her embodiment as well. Hammad’s interaction with the audience allows her poetry to become one with herself, demonstrating that her outfit is a reflection of her poem. The viewer/audience’s response is to some extent dictated by the performer and the reaction of the audience in the video. If “What I Will” were to be read privately,

the reader would not be able to connect Hammad and her physical appearance to the poem as intimately as Hammad has done in her performance. The audience, largely comprised of women, watch Hammad intently, responding favourably to her performance and the discussion following afterwards. In the same video, Hammad also performs “break (clustered),” but before beginning her performance, she asks the audience to “hold the woman who is not here...with you” – the absent, disembodied woman that represents the female suffering in the poem – to further their engagement with her performance, allowing their imagination to become a part of the performance.

Although Hammad's “What I Will” is a spoken word poem, Hammad performs her written poetry as well. The performative element of Hammad's poetry allows her to reach a wide range of audiences and convey her message via a variety of sensory outputs. While TED Talks can be elitist and exclusionary due to their ticket prices and performance locations, anyone with internet access is able to view their online videos. The spectator's location is essential in determining their reaction to the performance. This dynamic of embodiment and disembodiment in the realm of performance and digital space correlates to the way in which Hammad represents herself as embodied or disembodied in the poems. The politics of location informs her use of embodiment and disembodiment in the online world, the TED world, and her poems' content itself.

A discussion about how race, gender, and embodiment operate in new media—an expanding area of investigation—is integral to understanding the socio-political context of Hammad's spoken word poem, “What I Will.” In “Introduction: Race and/as Technology,” Wendy Chun asks: “to what degree are race and technology intertwined?”

(Chun 7). Indeed, while technology was (and to some extent, still *is*) used to exploit racially marginalized groups of people, digital space is a platform in which racially marginalized people can have visual representation. In “The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy, and Digital Art Practice,” Jennifer Gonzalez writes:

On the one hand, there is a recurring desire to see online digital spaces as sites of universal subjectivity that can escape the limitations of race...the apparently neutral space of the internet is viewed as a potentially progressive domain for overcoming barriers that may otherwise obstruct or restrict ideal forms of participation in the public sphere. On the other hand...race, as a set of visual cues operating in graphical interfaces, has literally become a fashion accessory to be bought, sold, traded and toyed with experimentally and experientially online.

(185-186)

Examining Hammad's performance from the critical lens Gonzales provides, it becomes evident that while Hammad is certainly more visible through her performances, her embodiment becomes a site of conflict for her audience. The visual representation Hammad presents is deliberately racialized through the clothing and jewellery she wears as well as through the texture and style of her hair. Consequently, Hammad's embodiment generates discussion between her audiences in different platforms, becoming part of the ongoing life of her poem.

In spoken word poetry, the poet can *see* if they have caught listeners' attention or not by observing their audience during the performance. This interactive element is key. It is also a different kind of intimacy than the experience of reading: here the intimacy is

embodied—the body of the performer imposes itself upon the audience, while the bodies of the audience are present and readable to the performer. So, reading in private is one kind of intimacy between reader and text and nobody else, while public performance is a kind of embodied intimacy, with the bodies of performer and audience in close, direct contact with one another.

Hammad's poetry from *Breaking Poems* and her spoken word poem "What I Will" reveals Hammad's embodied and disembodied diasporic subjectivity as a Middle-Eastern American woman living in a perpetual state of intermediacy. She is neither "here" in the West nor "there" in the East, but rather, she occupies the disembodied, liminal, and confrontational area between the East and the West. Her poetry discusses her individual experiences as well as the experiences of abstracted Middle Eastern women to demonstrate how Western induced conflicts affect the individual and the collective. Hammad's turn to the digital space correlates with the contemporary cultural shift to digitized media. This way, Hammad's poetry on the Middle East and Middle Eastern women specifically reaches a wider range of audiences, permeating time and space to (re)create the trauma and experiences of Middle Eastern women.

In an interview with Al Jazeera, a controversial Qatari-operated news media channel, Hammad claims that politics cannot be separated from poetry because when she "write[s] about a dining room table that's no longer there...the reality of that ... affects all of us" (Hammad, "One on One," 4:40). Socially, the dining room table symbolizes a familial or communal experience of gathering, of consumption, and sharing of food. When Hammad discusses the "dining room table that's no longer there," she evokes the

destruction of homes and the disruption of familial activities as a result of violence in the Middle East. Moreover, she expresses the disembodiment of the Middle Eastern family unit, demonstrating their state of loss. Although Hammad addresses her diasporic subjectivity in the United States through her poetry, she explains that despite the discrimination she encounters as a Palestinian-American poet discussing the Middle East, she does not wear a veil, nor a hijab, nor does she speak with a non-American accent (Hammad, “One on One,” 8:00). Here, she addresses the “levels” of diasporic subjectivity, or a hierarchy of diaspora within individuals due to the physical signifiers of their embodiment. Going back to the discussion on triple consciousness, Hammad’s claim demonstrates that the more signifiers one carries, the further they are removed from their own gaze, from their own perception of themselves. Perhaps as a Middle Eastern woman who does not “look” Muslim (i.e. she does not wear a hijab), Hammad might not experience triple consciousness the way in which a Middle Eastern woman marked as Muslim would.

In the second part of the interview, Hammad reveals that “there isn’t really support, within the American framework or with the smaller kind of Arab-American framework for a woman poet. They didn’t exist...” (Hammad, “One on One,” 12:50). Hammad brings the audience’s attention to the historically voiceless Middle Eastern women, particularly poets, which reveals why they have been victimized by Eurocentric narratives. After the September 11 attacks, Hammad’s poetry became popular because, as she explains, “people needed to hear something that wasn’t vengeful” (Hammad, “One on One,” 2:20). Here, the significance of non-violent resistance through poetry is evoked to



forge conversations between people. When the Al Jazeera reporter asks “Do you feel America is starting to listen? Do you think America’s mood is changing...? Hammad responds with “I think there is a greater willingness to *look* like we are, and I think that’s the start. I’m happy for that start” (Hammad, “One on One,” 4:30, emphasis added).

Of course, this interview was before the election of Donald Trump and the consequent intensification of Islamophobia and gender inequality in the United States. This interview took place before the Syrian refugee crisis, before the Travel Ban on Muslims, and before the diminishment of women’s rights under President Trump, which will be addressed in the Conclusion. However, this does not, at least in my opinion, mean that we should be in a state of hopelessness, incapable of imagining or unwilling to imagine what peace in the Middle East or what empowered women in the Middle East might look like. On the contrary, literature such as Hammad’s poetry invites us to build resistance and unite in the face of adversity. Her poetry offers a glimpse of hope for the disembodied, disempowered, and the displaced. In the ensuing chapter, I will discuss Solmaz Shari’s poetry collection *Look*, and address the themes of violence, intimacy, and double consciousness to nuance the larger themes of embodiment and disembodiment.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **“life in the American Dream”: Embodiment, Intimacy, and Violence in Solmaz**

##### **Sharif's *Look***

The premise of *Look* is certainly political; *Look* explores the relationship between embodiment, intimacy, and violence to posit that Middle Eastern people who have experienced war are always in a state of conflict, living in different bodies in different times and different spaces, never able to possess one whole body at one point of time and space. The relationship between intimacy and violence highlighted in the collection blurs the boundaries of the geographical locations of the diasporic subject. In other words, Sharif's life in the United States, her intimate day-to-day experiences are never private or “normal” because she is constantly in a state of war as a result of her past experiences and diasporic subjectivity. Sharif demonstrates that war results in the disembodiment of the individual due to its ability to make the person's physical and mental states deteriorate. The intimate, embodied experiences described in her poems are constantly and persistently interrupted by the feeling of disembodiment she experiences as a result of war. Sharif's disembodiment causes her displacement, as Bakare-Yusuf claims; she no longer feels in her body because war has removed her from her place, Iran. In other words, Sharif's figurative disembodiment is a metaphor for her literal displacement.

In a selection of poems from *Look*, Sharif connects war and intimacy with the theme of embodiment, demonstrating their complex entanglement for her (and for other Middle Eastern individuals) as a diasporic subject. In the title poem “Look,” which

appears first in the book, Sharif discusses her sexual embodiment alongside the trauma she carries as a result of the Iran-Iraq War:

It matters what you call a thing. *Exquisite* a lover called me...

Whereas *Well, if I were from your culture, living in this country,*

Said the man outside the 2004 Republican National

Convention, *I would put up with that for this country;*

...*You would put up with*

TORTURE, *you mean* and he proclaimed: *Yes* (1, 3-5, 6-7).

While Sharif's body is exoticized and identified as "exquisite" by a lover due to her racial identity, an American man tells her to "put up with that for [the United States]." To Sharif, her identification as "exquisite" is bound up with torture; her exquisiteness serves to both sexually exploit her and to remind her of her racial difference in the United States, of the fact that her body "belongs" to the Middle East where torture is an ongoing reality. Here, Sharif dehumanizes her body by referring to it as a "thing" in order to connect her body (or bodies like hers) with torture. When she claims "it matters what you call a thing," the word "thing" has two meanings; the first being herself and the second being torture. This blurs her experience of her body and war (her people's experience of torture) to remind Sharif that her body serves as a physical testament to warfare. Throughout *Look*, Sharif continues to blend intimacy and war together as essential to her diasporic subjectivity.

In an untitled poem, Sharif connects polarized physical locations together – the intimate space of her home and the public, violent space of a warzone. She writes:

CONTAMINATED REMAINS wash hands before getting in bed

leave interrogation room before answering cell

teach your mouth to say

*honey* when you enter the kitchen ...

DEAD SPACE fridges full

After the explosion the hospital

Places body parts

Out back where crowds

Attempt to identify those

Who do not answer their calls

By an eyeball

A sleeve of a favourite shirt

A stopped wristwatch...(1-4, 7-15).

In doing so, Sharif again brings war and intimacy together to demonstrate that the horrors of war become physical, embodied scars for diasporic subjects, who are never able to leave them behind. In the section CONTAMINATED REMAINS, Sharif inserts the line about the “interrogation room” seamlessly, as if it is an uncontested space in her home. She blurs together the actions of living inside a home, such as washing hands before sleeping to the actions inside an interrogation room, which serves to normalize the space to the reader. The washing of hands alludes to the attempt to rid the conscience of guilt, and in this case, the speaker in the home, Sharif, rids herself of the guilt of leaving Iran

whereas the soldier in Iran rids himself of the guilt of killing. In this sense, the two speakers become one as they both try to wash away their guilt.

The section DEAD SPACE transitions from the space of a kitchen to a hospital which houses patients who are injured as a result of the Iran-Iraq War. The disembodied patients are identified by their dismembered body parts or clothes, which indicates that their disembodiment is a direct result of conflict in the Middle East. The family members are forced to identify the patients by these dismembered body parts and their clothing, but are never able to unify their bodies as a whole. The dismembered Middle Eastern body represented in this poem is a repeated and therefore unifying image throughout Sharif's poetry. It also consolidates Hammad's claim to which I referred earlier, that the futurity of Middle Eastern people is disintegrating with their disembodiment. The words CONTAMINATED REMAINS and DEAD SPACE are isolated and capitalized, which emphasizes them to the reader. As Sharif indicates at the end of her collection, the capitalized words are taken from the United States Department of Defense's *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Sharif 95). CONTAMINATED REMAINS refers to body parts that are unclean and left behind, that are deemed useless and perhaps dangerous, since they are capable of contaminating the "pure." DEAD SPACE describes the conflict zones in the Middle East, rendering the entire region as non-living, empty, and forgotten. The integration of intimacy with violence blurs the boundaries between the United States and Iran for Sharif, demonstrating her perpetual occupancy of a war-inflicted space, regardless of her physical body's location. The fact that the speaker changes from Sharif, a female refugee poet, to various characters (usually male) who participate in war, on

opposing sides of the conflict, supports Sharif's emphasis on embodiment and intimacy in the context of a highly technologized war that tends to distance and abstract the physical and intimate violence. Although Sharif is not physically embodied as a soldier and is physically distanced from war, she is able to permeate the boundaries of physical (external) and intimate (internal) violence through her poetry.

Similarly, in "Theater" Sharif describes a boy/man in first-person to express the disposability of Middle Eastern bodies. She writes:

I dropped down against the mosque wall  
    Curled my shoulders in  
Let my feet fall apart...  
    As rifles came clanging in  
Their muzzles smelling out fear...  
I was playing dead  
    Between the dead  
A beast caught sight of my breath  
    Blew off my face  
Said

"Now he's fucking dead" (1-3, 6-7, 9, 11-16).

Sharif's vivid description of the Middle Eastern boy/man combines the elements of Islam (as he leans against a mosque) and war to visualize the effects of violence inflicted on Middle Eastern people to the readers. The intimate space of prayer – the mosque – becomes a space of violence for the speaker. Sharif speaks in the first-person to express

the experiences of a typical Middle Eastern male in a war-inflicted zone. She switches from her female embodiment in the United States to the embodiment of the boy/man in Iran to demonstrate their connection and intimacy as a result of conflict. She paints the person as a victim here, paying attention to his curled-up posture on the ground to demonstrate his embodiment of fear and terror. The last line “Now he’s fucking dead” is the voice of the American soldier that disregards the value of the speaker’s body, expressing relief that he has been killed. Here, Sharif complicates the stereotype of the Middle Eastern criminal or terrorist, inviting the readers to consider their “enemies” from a different perspective. Ironically, the “muzzles” of the rifles are alive in the poem, able to smell the speaker’s fear while the speaker himself is “playing dead/ between the dead.” The fact that the gun is described as being alive while Middle Eastern bodies are (becoming) dead demonstrates the disposability of their bodies and the persistence of violence. The description of the gun-bearing soldier is dehumanizing; he is called a “beast,” which undermines the heroism of American soldiers. The form in which the poem is written also reflects the speaker’s embodiment; the second line is condensed to visually demonstrate the curling of the speaker’s shoulders, the third line cuts off after the word “apart” to show the speaker’s feet falling, and the lines end after the word ‘dead’ to visualize an abrupt end. As a result, the poem visually embodies the speaker’s physical positioning, which combined with the content of the poem, conveys the embodiment of the speaker. Intriguingly, the speaker in this poem is a *dead* boy/man – a physically disembodied and dismembered voice. Yet, he communicates the story of his death to the reader, even quoting the words of the soldier who has killed him. This allows the speaker

to matter, to counter the soldier's claim "now he's fucking dead" by speaking for himself, even when he has died. Sharif's reanimation of the disembodied speaker also allows the readers to experience the intimacy of his death, to bear witness to his death, and to serve as an obituary, insisting that he is grievable.

In "Deception Story," Sharif calls her "life in the American Dream" a "DOWNGRADE of home. Correction: it satisfies as Drag" (19-20, 22). Sharif feels displaced in the United States, calling it, ironically, a "downgrade" from her home in Iran given that Iran is a war-inflicted country. Sharif's reference to "drag" has two possible meanings; first, the word is colloquial for her life being boring and uninteresting, where time literally "drag[s]," moving slowly. Second, the way she identifies her life in the United States as drag connotes an embodied and self-aware performance Sharif enacts – not reality. Both understandings demonstrate that Sharif's life is not authentic, but an enactment required by the social system that is unsatisfying and boring. Sharif's sense of placelessness in the United States and her longing for her home in Iran refers back to Hammad's poem "break." The mention of drag in the poem brings the theme of embodiment into the conversation, yet is a problematic integration given that Sharif is performing her assigned gender here, wearing a swimming suit made for female identifying persons. Here, Sharif uses drag to connote a performance (of any kind), in this case, her performance of her home and her sense of belonging.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler claims: "...drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted, and hence, of being implicated in the very



regimes of power that one opposes” (125). Here, Sharif’s “drag” is her performance of the “normalcy” of everyday suburban American life. Her use of the term “satisfies” demonstrates that she meets a minimum requirement to “pass” as a normal American to American society. It is also her performance of whiteness, to a certain degree, since American “normalcy” is equated to whiteness. Referring back to Du Bois’ double consciousness, Sharif is aware that the way she views herself is different from the way she is viewed by other people. Sharif puts on a performance to alter the way she is viewed by others as a Middle Eastern woman by conforming to their expectations of “normalcy.” Drag also brings intimacy into the poem, consolidating the relationship between war, intimacy, and embodiment. While drag operates as a distancing effect, one in which the drag performer is admitted to a site in which gender roles are policed and controlled, it also operates as a way of breaking or subverting boundaries, as when it is used as a form of undetected “passing.” Drag also has a complex relationship to embodiment in that an identity is constructed out of particular body parts that mask the biological body that is hidden for the performance.

Earlier in the poem, as Sharif swims in her friend’s pool, she claims: “My body breaking the chlorinated surface makes it, momentarily, my house, my DIVISION” (11). For Sharif, the physical interaction between her body and her surroundings makes her feel, only momentarily, at home. While the word DIVISION is a military term, Sharif subverts its militaristic use and appropriates it (and her friend’s pool) to her own home, to her intimate space. Here, Sharif’s diasporic subjectivity is highlighted; in her performance, she must become “one” with her environment (as her body breaks the

chlorine) in order to feel at home, or *appear* to feel at home. However, since she is aware of her performance, she cannot truly become one with her environment and feel at home. Sharif's diasporic subjectivity parallels Hammad's; both writers describe their sense of (mis)belonging in the United States from the perspective of their physical embodiment in relation to their surroundings.

In her poem "Free Mail," Sharif expresses the day-to-day discrimination she and other Middle-Eastern Americans encounter as Middle Eastern diasporic subjects. She connects the historical racism towards African Americans to the racism towards Middle-Eastern Americans in the present day. She writes:

In the fifties,  
People carried cards  
With conversation topics  
Appropriate between fallout shelters  
And *Whites Only* signs (6-10).

Following the section on racism towards African Americans, Sharif writes about Middle Eastern Americans:

ANTITERRORISM experts are talking  
About us again. Some news anchor  
Cussing during commercials.  
I saw your wanted ad at the subway station.  
I saw a young Taliban  
But couldn't see past his beauty... (30-25).

By connecting historical racism with contemporary racism and discussing them together, as if they are occurring in the same time period, Sharif compresses the boundaries of temporality to express the oppressive treatment of people of colour. Although African Americans continue to experience racism in the United States, Sharif's reference to the "fifties" alludes to historical instances of racism. She demonstrates that white Americans have not changed in their attitude towards "others" but rather, have added Middle Eastern Americans to their list of discrimination. The excerpt above uses the collective pronoun "us," which recognizes the binary between the "us" (or, Middle Easterners) and "them" (white Americans). The "young Taliban" identified by Sharif is arguably called a "Taliban" due to his racial identity, not because he is an actual ally of the Taliban. Yet, if he is a member of the Taliban, Sharif could be seeing the unlikely beauty of someone the American media devalues. For Sharif, Middle Eastern Americans are identified by their embodiment of racial stereotypes. However, by claiming that "[she] couldn't see past [his] beauty," she complicates his identification as a terrorist – she revalues his embodiment, changing its value from terror to beauty.

In the poems "Stateless Person" and "Family of Scatterable Mines," Sharif describes her diasporic subjectivity as a refugee in the United States. In "Stateless Person," evident in the title of the poem, Sharif experiences displacement; she blurs her surroundings between the United States and the Middle East to map the imagined space she inhabits. She writes:

Our phone would  
rarely ring. I have no ear

for the mu-  
sic here. They would  
bury one then another, the eldest son dropping  
in  
the grave to  
comfort the corpse, calling us  
months later  
because we were  
exiles, were vagabonds, fugitives, past Sierras,  
past...  
...here where the dead can  
not reach us...  
...mu-  
sic will not reach  
us here...  
I  
can't hear that  
music here (1-12, 20-21, 45-47, 67-68).

Sharif begins the poem by expressing her loneliness; the family telephone “rarely ring[s]” because her family is isolated in the United States, with the absence of ringing indicating their isolation. The gap in Sharif’s family’s telephone connection emphasizes the breaks

in culture and social relations. However, Sharif's family's isolation could also be a result of official restrictions, whereby their relatives and friends calling from Iran have to censor their conversations that might be considered as dangerous in the United States.

Throughout the poem, Sharif reveals that she is not compatible with the music present in the United States. For Sharif, music symbolizes belonging; in the United States, the music is in English, with different rhythms that do not translate to her native language(s).

Listening to Persian or Arabic music would allow Sharif to feel as though she is in Iran even when she is in the United States, but she is not able to relate to American music. The breaking of the word "music" into "mu/sic" visually accentuates Sharif's inability to hear music as a result of its distortion for her in the United States. Moreover, given that music is an embodied experience, the fact that Sharif is not able to hear music indicates her sense of displacement both from her body and from her country— she is unable to be in tune with her body or her surroundings. This inability to "tune in" renders Sharif disembodied and incapable of belonging.

Sharif connects intimacy and embodiment with violence in this poem, jumping from the absence of phone calls and music to mothers and fathers burying their sons as a result of conflicts in the Middle East. In doing so, Sharif indicates that even though she is physically distant from conflict, she lives in the midst of conflict through her family and through the connection she feels to her people in Iran. Sharif expresses feelings of estrangement both from back home and in the United States; she claims that because she and her family are perceived to be "exiles," "vagabonds," and "fugitives," they have been displaced from their people. This experience presents a conflict for Sharif; while she feels

a connection with Iranian people, they do not feel the same towards her, which renders Sharif confused about her identity and her sense of belonging. As discussed in Chapter One, Sharif's understanding of herself, her experience of a racialized gaze from Americans, and her experience of a suspicious gaze from her own community, whether in the Middle East or the United States, demonstrates Sharif's subjection to triple consciousness.

Perhaps Sharif feels a sense of guilt for having survived the Iran-Iraq War, a feeling that she has betrayed her people by moving to the United States. Sharif states that even though they are "safe" from the physical conflicts in the Middle East, "where the dead cannot reach [them]," music does not reach them because they are displaced. In this sense, they occupy a different kind of warzone, one where they are physically stable and safe but mentally and emotionally unsafe, unstable, and lost, as exemplified by the poem "Personal Effects":

According to most  
definitions, I have never  
been at war.

According to mine,  
most of my life  
spent there... (66. 10-15).

For Sharif, the constant reminder that her home country is war-torn, that she and her family are refugees, that she lost loved ones to conflicts in the Middle East, and that she

feels displaced in the United States makes her a “stateless person,” lost and constantly searching for a home – for a place to belong where the music *can* reach her.

As suggested in the title of “Family of Scatterable Mines,” Sharif reveals the disembodiment and displacement she and her family experience. She begins by listing food and clothing – items that are experienced through embodiment – to paint the beginning of her family’s displacement to the readers:

Suitcases of dried limes, dried figs, pomegranate paste,  
Parsley laid in the sun, burnt honey, sugar cubes hardened  
On a baking sheet. Suitcases of practical underwear,  
Hand-washed, dried on a door handle, stuffed into boxes

From Bazaar-e Vakeel, making use of the smallest spaces (1-5).

The food items Sharif lists are associated with Iran – the fruits and condiments are popularly consumed by Iranian people. Moreover, Sharif highlights the “hand-washed” aspect of the “practical underwear” again to expose the difference of her culture in Iran from the United States, where clothing would be washed in a washing machine. By doing this, Sharif demonstrates that the suitcases that will be going to the United States contain items that very noticeably and insistently belong to Iran. The items in the suitcase carry significance for Sharif and her family. In this sense, Sharif and her family carry Iran with them wherever they go; they do not need to be physically present in Iran to feel connected. This allows their embodiment to extend beyond their physical bodies to include parts of their country. Yet, Sharif also demonstrates that Iran, along with her and her family’s connection to Iran, is scattered; each member of her family packs a piece of

Iran that when combined fail to equate to the totality of Iran. The fact that food and clothes are items of bodily consumption highlight displacement and re-location as always embodied experiences.

In “Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement,” Sara Ahmed states: Migration can hence be considered as a process of estrangement, a process of becoming estranged from that which was inhabited as home. The word estrangement has the same roots as the word ‘strange’. And yet, it suggests something quite different. It indicates a process of transition, a movement from one register to another. (343)

In “Family of Scatterable Mines,” the fact that Sharif’s family brings “strange” items from Iran – the “dried limes, dried figs, [and] pomegranate paste” – that are uncommon in the United States “estranges” these items and consequently, Sharif’s family. While these “strange” items were common in Iran, they are uncommon and “abnormal” in the United States, and as a result, Sharif’s family is placed in a transitory state in which the familiar becomes unfamiliar symbols of strangeness or foreignness.

Sharif’s poem “Personal Effects” is the longest in her collection and expresses all of the different themes discussed earlier. The themes of war, embodiment, disembodiment, diasporic subjectivity, and displacement intersect to communicate the multi-faceted effects of conflict in the Middle East for Sharif. The thirty-page poem begins with the theme of embodiment, where Sharif describes a photograph of her uncle, “Amoo,” who is pictured as a soldier in Iran. In the poem, Sharif expresses a unique type



of embodiment where her and her uncle's bodies become one interchangeable body. She writes:

...Last night I smoked on one of the  
Steps outside my barn apartment. A promise I broke myself. He promised  
he wouldn't and did. I smell my fingers and I am smelling his.  
Hands of smoke and gunpowder. Hands that promised they wouldn't  
but did (4-8).

Here, Sharif claims that when she smells her fingers, she is able to smell her uncle's simultaneously; she is not only smelling the residue of the cigarette she smoked in the United States, but also the gunpowder that her uncle handled as a soldier in Iran. This bodily connection between Sharif and her uncle indicates that war has united them as one body, where his experiences of war are hers and vice versa. This kind of embodiment moves beyond the boundaries of the individual physical body to encompass a collective embodiment between Sharif and her uncle that is forged through conflict. While Sharif is in the United States, she is simultaneously able to travel back in time and space to embody her uncle.

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler writes:  
Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies,  
attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of  
violence by virtue of that exposure... Who 'am' I without you? When we lose  
some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or

what to do. On one level, I think I have lost “you” only to discover that “I” have gone missing as well. (20-22)

Butler identifies bodies as always in relation to others, or “attached to others” and when that attachment is lost or disconnected, the body loses a part of itself. For Sharif, the loss of her uncle, Amoo, complicates her sense of identity. The constant loss Sharif endures, of not only her immediate family, but of her fellow Iranians as well, rips away at her core, at her identity, depleting her sense of self until she is in a state of loss. While her uncle lives as a physical part of her (since she is able to smell his fingers), Sharif’s internal identity is destabilized with the loss of her uncle. Sharif’s individual disembodiment is in direct correlation with the communal disembodiment of Middle Eastern people.

In another poem, “Drone,” Sharif continues to discuss the theme of shared embodiment in which she is able to feel the physical sensations (in the United States) her uncle experiences at war (in Iran). She writes: “I burn my finger on the broiler and smell trenches” to connect her bodily experience with her uncle’s (92.21). The blurring of the space between the intimate and private, such as her kitchen, with the violent and public space, the trenches, indicates the integration of violence with intimacy in the lives of people who have experienced war. For Sharif, and for her family, the experience of war is never isolated from their day-to-day lives – they are in a perpetual state of conflict. Regardless of their current residence, Sharif continues to blur the embodiment of Middle Eastern people together. She writes: “we have learned to sing a child calm in a bomb shelter/ I am singing to her still” (93. 9-10). Arguably, the child that is being sung to in the Middle East parallels the person Sharif is singing to in the present day, away from the

Middle East – that is herself. She blurs her embodiment with the child's by shifting space and time to demonstrate that Middle Eastern children do not have childhoods because of the conflicts, and that she (as an adult) is still traumatized by her past, regardless of her current residence.

The trauma Sharif discusses throughout *Look* is a result of conflicts in the Middle East. In “Drone,” Sharif exposes the gruesome images of war to the reader. She writes from the perspective of a dead, disembodied speaker: “they put me onto a crooked pile of others to rot/ is this what happens to a brain born into war/ a city of broken teeth...” (93.5-7). Sharif identifies her home-city in Iran as “broken teeth” to indicate the transformation of the landscape as a result of war. The image of “broken teeth” contributes to the disembodiment of the rotting Middle Eastern body, indicating the impossibility of their futurity. Moreover, the word ‘crooked’ indicates a sense of carelessness towards Middle Eastern bodies. In “Drone,” Sharif also discusses the sexual abuse she faces as a Middle Eastern woman living in the United States. She claims:

: When the FBI knocks I tell them *I don't have to do*  
*anything I don't want to do* and they get a kick out  
of that

: she just laid there and took it like a champ

: she was dying for it

: at a protest a man sells a shirt that reads *My dick would*

*Pull out of Iraq* (91-92. 19-25).

Here, Sharif challenges the mainstream reputation of the FBI by discussing their verbal if not physical assault against her. She implies that she was, either literally or verbally, sexually assaulted by members of the FBI because she is a Middle Eastern woman. The fact that white men assume ownership over non-white female bodies is highlighted in Sharif's encounter with the FBI, which represents the American government. The man at the protest wearing the controversial shirt highlights the lack of sensibility and sensitivity white men demonstrate regarding conflict in the Middle East. The man undermines Sharif's and other Middle Eastern people's experiences of trauma by approaching it with a vulgar and condescending attitude. The poem is written with colons in front of the lines, which gives the effect of a list – Sharif lists her traumatic experiences to reveal their consistency. Since lists are open-ended and can always be altered, Sharif's list can go on and on – there is no end to her negative experiences. In that sense, the list visually embodies Sharif's traumatic experiences and thoughts.

In "Personal Effects," Sharif builds on her discussion of embodiment:

You're posing. You're scared.

A body falls

And you learn to step over

A loosened head. You begin to appreciate

The heft of your boot soles,

How they propel you,

How they can kick in

A face...

A body less and less yours –

A body, God knows

Is not what makes you

Anyway... (60. 1-8, 22-25).

Although Sharif is speaking to her uncle in this poem, she calls him “you” which directly points to the audience, making the person she is speaking to ambiguous and her message relatable, with the “you” making the readers place themselves in the subject position of her uncle. The gruesome descriptions of dead bodies as “loosened head(s)” disembodies Middle Eastern people and desensitizes the audience along with her uncle, who is able to step over them. The repetition of heads and faces indicates that the physical identifying features of the bodies are dismembered and no longer belong to an individual. Regarding the face, Butler claims in *Prekarious Life*: “Those who remain faceless or whose faces are presented to us as so many symbols of evil, authorize us to become senseless before those lives we have eradicated, and whose grievability is indefinitely postponed” (xviii). Since the face being kicked in is dehumanized, it is ungrievable and unimportant. Sharif claims that the physical body “is not what makes you,” but rather, she suggests (as Hammad has done) that the body is a metaphor for individual identity and that the person is actually

identified by their innerworkings. So, even though the body of her uncle becomes “less and less [his]” because of the violence in which he lives, her uncle still remains the same person within. In this sense, Sharif seems to suggest that even though Middle Eastern bodies are disembodied through violence by the West, their identities as Middle Eastern people remains.

In another segment of the poem, Sharif writes:

In 2003, a man held a fistful  
Of blood and brains to a PBS camera  
And yelled

*Is this the freedom*

*They want for us?* It was from his friend's

Head... (67.16-21).

Here, Sharif concentrates on the image of the head again in a vivid and gruesome manner to critique Western interference in the Middle East. The fact that the man holds the remnants of his friend's head on camera and asks the audience (probably in the West) about freedom makes the audience uncomfortable, and similarly to Hammad's poem “Gaza,” it raises ethical questions about spectatorship. The dismemberment of the friend's head is described in a similar manner to Hammad's description of the family in “Gaza” where “a woman's hand cups bloodied sand bits scalp ooze/ to the camera and says this is my family” (12-13). Both poets choose to describe disembodiment and conflict in a gruesome manner to visually amplify the horrors of the war(s) in the Middle

East. Moreover, this type of disembodiment dehumanizes the Middle Eastern bodies and reduces them to bits and pieces – to remains rather than wholes, such as blood, scalps, and brains. In doing so, it also confronts the viewers (both American and Middle Eastern American) with the destruction of intimacy, of the person's loved ones. Similarly, in another segment, Sharif describes “a middle-aged man with/ ground meat/where his foot used to be” (75. 5-7) to show the gruesome dismemberment of Middle Eastern bodies. Lastly, Sharif writes in another segment:

...whether or not

Earlier that day you saw

A friend's lungs peeking

Out the back of his throat (80.11-14).

Through passages like these, Sharif exposes the uncensored experiences of evisceration and suffering in the Middle East. She combines intimacy (“friend”) with violence (“lungs peeking out”) to demonstrate their interchangeability for Middle Eastern people.

In these segments, Sharif raises awareness about the lack of global and Western support and sympathy towards the Middle East, given that she describes the landscape as littered with deteriorating bodies. The lines are certainly uncomfortable to read, yet Sharif does not censor her diction; she provides raw descriptions of Middle Eastern bodies to expose the reality of their lives as a result of conflicts in the region. What happens to the discarded body parts? Sharif seems to suggest that sometimes they are picked up by loved ones, but oftentimes, they are left on the ground, acting as evidence of their

disembodiment, a testament to conflict, eventually becoming a part of the landscape of the Middle East.

In the poem dedicated to her uncle, *Amoo*, “Defenders/ Immediate Family,” Sharif highlights the diminishing futurity of the Middle East:

...boys would slam plastic cars together, their lips buzzing  
like copter blades. Boys, they dream  
of invisibility suits, explosive inks,  
then grow up to work in weapons research labs  
formulating rays to knock you out,  
rays to make you puke, rays to activate  
each nerve ending, gas to make you laugh

and boil. A soldier told me about *non-lethal weapons*.

He told me about the innards he scooped  
then sewed  
(with what)  
up the toddler and the smell  
of copper” (22-35).

In this poem, Sharif, similarly to Hammad’s “break(clustered),” exposes the diminishment of Middle Eastern childhoods and ultimately, the diminishment of the Middle East’s futurity. Sharif emphasizes the military culture that swallows boys from a



young age, paving the way for their contribution to future wars. Sharif's description of the capability of the so-called "*non-lethal weapons*" is haunting; the sensory details of the toddler's suffering paints a raw and gruesome picture of war. Moreover, the fact that Sharif is able to recapture the toddler's suffering extends her embodiment to the Middle East. When we think about Sharif's description of the toddler, we immediately imagine it occurring somewhere distant, away from the children in the West. Yet, because this horrific experience occurs within the circle of her friends, it brings it home to the daily lives of people like her who live in the United States. Here, Sharif highlights the normalization of suffering among Middle Eastern bodies, and that of a child –the metaphorical representation of futurity.

Throughout the collection, Sharif mentions corpses – discarded bodies – to evoke discomfort and express the disembodiment experienced by Middle Eastern people. While she mentions corpses in "Stateless Person" (as discussed previously), she brings up corpses again in "Personal Effects." She states, "*That's the house of a martyr.../That's the mother of a martyr*" (3,5) when she discusses the corpse of a Middle Eastern soldier. She describes the corpse:

White-shrouded, they circled  
His corpse, the ridge of his nose  
Peaking the sheet  
Or shaded by the boxlid.... (16-19).

Sharif's description of the corpse and the mention of his mother indicates how women are affected by conflict in the Middle East. When describing the "martyr," Sharif describes

his mother as “the mother of a martyr” to emphasize the intimate connection between mothers and their children. Sharif points out the fact that it’s women and mothers who suffer the losses of their loved ones. The people in the house say “*congratulations and condolences*” to sacralize the corpse, claiming that although he passed away, he passed away as a martyr. Given that the corpse is elevated to the state of martyrdom, which is an honorific way in which a Muslim can pass away according to some interpretations of Islamic ideology, Sharif presents the dead young man as a hero, thus making his lived life valuable and his death grievable. She writes: “They are building a museum/ For the martyrs” to demonstrate the heroization of the martyr for Middle Eastern society (6-7). Yet, Sharif turns her attention to his discarded body. The image of the corpse eliminates the futurity of the Middle East, with the corpse incapable of mental and emotional embodiment. In this sense, the corpse is an instance of triple consciousness; the reader views him as a disembodied corpse, the Middle East views him as a martyr, and the West views him as a terrorist.

In *Precarious Life*, Butler’s distinction between a “liveable life and a grievable death” and a life that is neither of these provides a conceptual framework for Sharif’s mention of corpses in *Look*. The corpses in *Look* did not have “liveable” lives and as a result, will not have “grievable” deaths. While the plethora of corpses visually demonstrates the ungrievability of Middle Eastern people’s deaths for the West, Sharif’s referral to the corpse as a martyr makes his death grievable. For people in the West, the tendency of Middle Eastern people to consider fallen soldiers and exploders of terrorist bombs as “martyrs,” is horrific if not ungrievable. The scene of mourning the martyr, who

from a Western perspective would be identified as a “terrorist” and thus ungrievable, elicits triple consciousness. The way in which the racialized soldier is viewed from the perspective of Americans imposes an inability to grieve for him for Middle Eastern people. This inability to grieve someone's death challenges the humanity of those who are unable to grieve, indicating the distinction between how Eastern bodies are perceived in relation to Western bodies.

Butler highlights the homogenization of Middle Eastern bodies and deaths, indicating the eradication of their individuality. Without a sense of individuality, the Middle Eastern bodies become mere casualties, faceless and nameless for the West. Butler identifies the fact that Western bodies, once dead, have obituaries that state their names, their professions, their families, and the quality of their lives, oftentimes indicating their former happiness and success, whereas Middle Eastern bodies, particularly bodies that are casualties of war, die unpronounced, often anonymously (34). As a result of the West's refusal to acknowledge these bodies as important, individual, and deserving of recognition, in *Look*, Sharif pronounces the unpronounceable, forgotten names of Middle Eastern people who have died as a result of conflict in the Middle East. Her poetry gives the dead a voice, a sort of “obituary” that challenges the “worthlessness” of their bodies from the perspective of the West. In doing so, she grieves the loss of Middle Eastern people, and makes their loss grievable to the readers, creating a communal, collective mourning through her poetry.

In *Look*, Sharif addresses the complex and conflicted nature of embodiment. While she inhabits her body, as well as the body of others, oftentimes, she does not

inhabit a body. She is both embodied and disembodied in the East and the West. While she is embodied in the East through her connection with her people, she is disembodied as a result of her distance from her place of birth. In the West, she is embodied as a Middle Eastern woman, yet disembodied as an American. Consequently, Sharif, much like Hammad, occupies an imaginary space in which she is neither in the East nor the West. She is constantly enacting a performance of her racial identity and sense of belonging, aware of the double (and triple) consciousness she possesses.

In this chapter, the themes of embodiment, disembodiment, war, and intimacy from Solmaz Sharif's *Look* were discussed. The themes in *Look* echo the themes from the previous chapter on Suheir Hammad's *Breaking Poems*. Both of these chapters work together to challenge the (mis)identification of Middle Eastern people and complicate the notion of embodiment to reveal the multidimensional and complex notion of Middle Eastern "identity." Both chapters also discuss the perpetual disembodiment of Sharif and Hammad as a result of their diasporic subjectivity. In the Conclusion Chapter of this thesis, I will discuss the contemporary problems facing Middle Eastern women as embodied beings and turn to the emergence of empowered women and the shift in women's rights in the Middle East.

## **Conclusion**

### **“The Muslim Ban”: The Current State of Middle Eastern Women in Trump’s America**

Presently in the United States, Middle Eastern women are facing pressing challenges concerning their cultural and religious practices and beliefs. During the 2016 presidential election campaign, Donald Trump called for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,” which was his first step towards initiating a travel ban on Muslims (Johnson n.p.). As I have discussed in the past three chapters with reference to Judith Butler, Middle Eastern people’s lives have become precarious because their lives and deaths are ungrievable within mainstream Western society. Trump’s “Muslim Ban” is yet another example of the precarity of Middle Eastern lives; they matter so little that they are prevented from entering the United States as refugees seeking asylum from the wars in the Middle East. For instance, the Syrian Civil War has led to the displacement of nearly 12 million Syrian people, yet Syrians are banned from entering the United States (Lynch 141). Despite the fact that many Syrians are Christians, atheists, and members of other faiths, Trump’s banning of them as Muslims and comparison of Islam to “a malignant cancer” characterizes Muslims as disposable bodies, infected with disease and inevitably prone to deterioration (Zurcher). This “diseased” body is not productive for the United States, but rather, is capable of infecting and debilitating American society. The dehumanization that occurs as a result of characterizing the Middle Eastern body as diseased allows their precarity to be intensified.

Disembodiment results from a divide between how Middle Eastern people view themselves and how they are viewed by society. As we saw in the previous chapters, Du Bois claims that this divide results in the formation of a double consciousness, meaning that Middle Eastern people view themselves from both their perspectives and from the perspective of Islamophobia. When the way Middle Eastern people see themselves and each other does not match, but rather, contradicts the way Western society sees them, a rift in one's sense of being occurs. This is best exemplified in Hammad's chapter where I described the rupture in one's identity that results in a sense of loss, of wandering, and of unbelonging. In that case, both the forced removal of Middle Eastern people from their homes and the imposed identification of Middle Eastern people by Americans results in their disembodiment.

As demonstrated in the preceding chapters, embodiment is rooted in a sense of belonging to a land and to a community. Hammad and Sharif explain their sense of embodiment in relation to a space, a particular moment in time, and within a community. Their sense of belonging is vital in maintaining their embodiment since their embodiments were crafted with a connection to a place. However, because Sharif and Hammad have been (mis)located, they experience disembodiment – a sense of disconnection from their roots. In this sense, it is essential to maintain a relationship with the space which one inhabited in the past and inhabits in the present, through a means of negotiation and living *between* them both in order to feel a sense of connection to not only a particular location and a group of people, but to oneself as well.

In the Introduction Chapter of this thesis, I stated my reasoning for why I chose to write about the experiences of diasporic Middle Eastern women and not Muslim women or non-diasporic women. The introduction also provided a reason for why I focused explicitly on poetry for my literary analysis. In the first chapter of this thesis, I introduced the theoretical framework of scholars Edward Said, Judith Butler, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Sherene Razack in order to elaborate upon the themes of embodiment, precarity, double consciousness, and orientalism, which, when combined provide a conceptual understanding of the poetry of Suheir Hammad and Solmaz Sharif. Chapter One also discussed the racialization process of Middle Eastern and Muslim women in the United States throughout recent history. The goal of the first chapter was to establish the foundation of the theory that I would be using throughout the thesis. I also wanted the first chapter to ease into the difficult context of Suheir Hammad's *Breaking Poems* and Solmaz Sharif's *Look*, since the poetry collections discuss uncensored, raw depictions of mutilated Middle Eastern bodies.

As we saw in Chapter Two, Suheir Hammad's collection *Breaking Poems* placed an emphasis on the disorientation of the diasporic body. In her writing, Hammad expresses her feelings of displacement and disembodiment as a result of her experience of war and the constant relocation of her family. Hammad describes her relationship to several cities in both the West and the East, where in the West, she feels dislocated and, in the East, she feels at home. Hammad's feelings are characteristic of diasporic subjects – her yearning for her home, a space to belong to, is amplified in her poetry collection. Hammad's spoken word poem "What I Will" acts as an anthem (due to its strong spirit,

rhythmic words, and emphasized pronunciation) for Middle Eastern women against Western induced wars and Islamophobia. This anthem encourages Middle Eastern women to unite, give courage to one another, and find their voice that was forcefully buried inside in order to reclaim their bodies for themselves.

Chapter Three addressed Sharif's poetry collection *Look* to nuance the themes discussed in Hammad's chapter. Sharif's *Look* introduced intimacy to the already established themes of embodiment, disembodiment, war, and diaspora to demonstrate that despite the physical location of the external body, intimacy allows diasporic subjects to feel connected to their homes. Expressing these intimate thoughts, despite how vulnerable they can make the speaker, is vital in establishing human connection in a space where the speaker is ostracized. In Chapter Three, the theme of double consciousness was discussed in greater detail as a result of Sharif's encounters with Western and non-Western bodies and how these encounters affected her understanding of herself. This thesis concluded with Sharif's chapter not only because it makes chronological sense (*Look* was published more recently than *Breaking Poems*) but also because *Look* places an emphasis on communal Middle Eastern experiences. While Hammad's *Breaking Poems* is more individualized, Sharif's *Look* discusses the broader ideas of dislocation.

The purpose of this thesis was to address the different ways in which diasporic Middle Eastern women have been subjected to racism and sexism in the United States and to highlight how Middle Eastern women (through poetry) express their experiences. As mentioned in the first chapter, I discussed poetry due to its intimate, political, and interpersonal nature. Given poetry's multi-modality, poetry can be read aloud and can



inspire activism by conveying experiences directly and intimately, without opening it to the logics of explication or narrative. Writing this thesis has provided me with a broader sense of understanding of Middle Eastern women's subjection in the West. It has allowed me to be able to identify, understand, and process the racial subjection I face as a Middle Eastern woman in North America. Before this thesis, I would not have known to call the feelings that I have experienced "disembodiment"—the feeling of experiencing an understanding of yourself that does not match your physical body. However, I must disclose the fact that I did not flee from a war, nor was I in a position of being refugeeed. Yet, I did feel a sense of longing for home, believing that my "home" was the country in which I was born. Over time, I have come to consider Canada as my home and the feelings I have, which are associated with being a diasporic subject, are in the process of dissipating. Nevertheless, I know that is not the case for every diasporic subject; these feelings are almost always unique to individual subjects. As we saw in Hammad and Sharif's case, they still long for their countries, despite the fact that they have spent almost their entire lives in the United States.

While Islamophobia has intensified over the past few decades and Middle Eastern peoples have been subjected to unlawful treatment by the West (and by the East<sup>2</sup>), Middle Eastern women have been making significant gains in their human rights. In an article on the Human Rights Watch website, Rothna Begum writes:

Despite setbacks for women's rights around the globe in 2017, some of the most exciting reforms and positive momentum emerged from the Middle East and

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<sup>2</sup> Here, I am referencing the (mis)treatment of Kurdish, Syrian, Libyan, Yemeni, Palestinian and Iranian people as a result of wars, inter-ethnic conflict, and political unrest in their countries of residence.

North Africa. Tunisian women have new protections against violence. Migrant domestic workers in the Gulf are armed with new labor protections. And the Saudi ban on women driving was lifted. This is an exciting time for women in the Middle East, but... the road to women's human rights in the region remains long... Since December, several women in Iran have faced arrest for peacefully protesting the mandatory hijab laws. Saudi Arabia detains and charges women who seek to end the male guardianship system. Some women live in exile while other prominent activists...in Egypt remain trapped under travel bans. (Begum "The Middle East's Women")

I completely agree with Begum, that although a lot of rights are being achieved, there are still a plethora of obstacles facing Middle Eastern women in the present-day Middle East. The works of poets such as Hammad and Sharif attempt to empower Middle Eastern women and provide them with representation that they would not otherwise have in the West.

In their poems, Sharif and particularly Hammad appear to be speaking to an audience in the United States. Although Sharif switches between the people she addresses in the United States and in Iran, her audience is still mostly American. So, in that sense, both poets are calling out to Middle Eastern women in the United States, that is, diasporic women, in an attempt to encourage them to remember their roots and fight for their deserved rights. It is through powerful Middle Eastern women such as Suheir Hammad and Solmaz Sharif that the West should view Middle Eastern female embodiment. As discussed throughout the thesis, Middle Eastern women are not simply passive victims in

ongoing wars in the Middle East, subject to maltreatment by Middle Eastern men or by American “liberators,” but rather, embodied agents capable of protecting themselves, “saving” themselves, and crafting their own identities. That is the very purpose of this thesis, to discuss the empowering voice of Middle Eastern writers in an attempt to subvert the narratives of their victimization.

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