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Epistolary Memory:
Revisiting Traumas in Women's Writing

Walid El Hamamsy

Introduction
The epistolary form is one that has been employed by writers throughout the history of world literature, and not surprisingly, since letters are intimate and immediate modes of expression and communication (Singer 1). Books written in letter form, whether one letter or a series/exchange of letters, can be found among the works of historically varied writers such as Ibn Hazm (994-1064), Fanny Burney (1752-1840), and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). This article deals with two contemporary novels written in letter form, depicting traumatic contexts—the legacy of slavery in the first, and civil war in the second: The Color Purple by Alice Walker; and Beirut Blues by Hanan al-Shaykh.1

The events of The Color Purple take place in the American South, in Georgia, in 1909. The novel is written entirely in the epistolary form—mainly by Celie, the main protagonist. The first two thirds of the novel comprise letters that Celie writes to God giving Him a sketch of her miserable life, first as subject of torture by an alleged father who rapes her and gets rid of her two children and then as the sex object and servant of a husband to whom she is almost sold off. It is in this section that Celie shows the patriarchal oppression she and other women are exposed to. The remaining third of the novel is a set of letters written by/to Celie and her sister, Nettie, who now lives in Africa with the missionary couple she works with and to whom her sister’s children were given. Even though the sisters write to one another, there is no communication between them as the letters either never arrive, or do arrive but too late. This part of the novel demonstrates Celie’s transformation and liberation through the help of other women like Shug, the Blues singer she is in love with, and Nettie. The novel ends with a letter addressed to no one in particular that shows Celie at her happiest with the final family reunion—her sister and children having come back from Africa.

Beirut Blues, also written in letter form, centers on wartime Beirut in 1985. Asmahan, the protagonist, writes ten letters to people, some of
whom she knows and others she only knows of; she also writes letters to places and entities that show the impact of the civil war. Her first letter is addressed to her best friend, Hayat, who lives in Belgium, telling her about herself and her bitter feelings toward the war. The second letter is addressed to Jill Morrell, the friend of a war hostage Asmahan has never met, in an attempt to identify with the hostage and find refuge somewhere. This is followed by a letter to Naser, the protagonist’s Palestinian ex-lover, in which Asmahan recollects some of their memories together and admits to having had other amorous adventures. The fourth letter is written to her Land in frustrated nostalgia and an attempt to find security in the past, embodied in her village. The following letter is addressed to the Blues singer, Billie Holiday, Asmahan’s song idol, also reminiscent of a happy past. This is followed by an apologetic letter to Asmahan’s grandmother whom she has let down by standing witness to her grandfather’s love affairs. A letter then follows that is addressed to the Lebanese émigré, Jawad, the man Asmahan is sexually attracted to, and who symbolically embodies her hope of escape from Beirut. The eighth letter is written to War itself, showing Asmahan’s ambivalent feelings towards it, wavering between hate, blame, and indifference. This is followed by her letter to Beirut, lamenting its past and showing how hard it is to recognize the city because of the war. It is in the tenth and final letter that Asmahan writes to Hayat—rounding up the novel—that a final reconciliation with the war is reached, and Asmahan gets to accept her situation.

This introduction explores theoretical positions on the epistolary novel and letter writing, showing the various reasons why the letter has frequently been employed as a form of expression in fictional writing and why it has been claimed to be suited to certain types of confession- al writing. Lorna Martens defines letter-journals as “novels . . . addressed to a recipient who is usually also a confidant” (75). They are forms of “writing to the moment” and as such “lay the foundation for an uninhibited confession of intimate feelings and for an unmediated expression of thoughts” (79). The literary epistle came to existence as the natural development of the formal letter writing impulse that Singer proposes mankind has always possessed. The letter writing tradition had already been established as a means of written communication, and one breaking away from oral tradition, by the time of Cicero (Martens 1). Singer cites Hughes discussing four types of letters that had been written before the development of the fictional epistle. These are: the “rifled” post-bag, the “letters of travel”, the “friendly correspondence,” and the “correspondence of lovers” (40).
It was with the writing of Richardson’s *Pamela* that the letter form came into existence as a literary fictional form *per se* in the English-speaking world. The epistle has since been used by different creative writers as a mode of narration. Looking at the reasons why this particular form emerged at the time of Richardson might provide some insight into its popularity. One of these reasons is that the tendency toward realism had already started by 1660: “At this time the desire for some sort of realism began to become strong in the fictional output of the day and the romances were superseded by more realistic stories developed from the French and Spanish *novella*” (Singer 60). The letter thus provided authors with a chance to write realistically, being one of the most credible narrative media due to the first-hand experience it encompasses. This is coupled with another advantage of letter writing, namely, immediacy. Letters are written “to the moment, while the heart is agitated by hopes and fears, on events undecided” (Singer 79). It is this undecidedness that gives the reader the feeling that s/he is taking part in the writing process, a feeling that naturally appeals to her/him, thus making the form become even more popular.

This intimacy attracts both the reader and the writer of the epistle. The reader feels privileged to be able to partake in the thoughts and feelings of the writer which are expressed to her/him and the fictional reader(s) alone. The letter writer, on the other hand, is given a chance to voice feelings and thoughts that s/he might not otherwise have been able to do due to social conventions and the nature of public discourse.

One final advantage of the letter as a form is the insight it provides into the writer’s psyche. Letter writing is one of the sophisticated modes of writing that gives the author the chance to probe certain feelings and emotions that s/he would not be equally able to express in the case of first-/third-person method of narration. The time one takes to write about her/his feelings allows the space needed to discover how one is really feeling at a given moment.

Interestingly in our context, letter writing has almost always been a mode chosen by women writers throughout the history of English literature. Although there have always been men writers resorting to the epistolary form, the genre remains associated with women (Salsini 352-53). Martens goes as far as saying that “some contemporary women writers see fragmentary, open forms like the diary as the readiest possibility for finding a new women’s voice” (182). She accounts for the appeal of that particular form to women by the fact that “as a flexible, open, and non-teleological structure, it complements the nonautobiographical quality of women’s lives and the traditionally dependent, accommodating female

152  

*Alif* 30 (2010)
role. A diary can be written in snatches and with little concentration; it is adaptable to the housewife’s interrupted day” (182). Martens maintains that women are assigned a role subservient to that of men, which conditions the forms and genres used for literary expression. Having started off writing journals “for wholly traditional reasons, which go back to diary keeping as a religious exercise,” women moved on to using the form in expressing the inner feelings and thoughts that society would not otherwise have allowed them to vent (173).

Rebecca Hogan holds similar ideas on the nature of letter writing, while offering different reasons why more women than men writers resort to the epistolary form. The first factor she mentions is the detailedness of the letter form, one based on “inclusion” rather than exclusion (103). This detailedness is often “gendered and doubly gendered as feminine” (98). Like Martens, Hogan believes that this idea is one propagated by men, especially as the use of too many details supposedly leads to “anarchy” in a text (98).

Another reason why the diary form has always been associated with women is one that relates to the nature of the letter form itself:

[The diary is] private, secret, locked—the paradoxical idea of a writing which will remain unread, a sort of “silent” text. If we see “feminine” as a cultural signifier, standing for the historically determined social construction of feminine behavior, psychological characteristics, and the like, then the diary is a feminine form. (Hogan 99)

In this view, the diary form becomes one where women find a medium of expression that they can identify with, one that is most readily accessible. Hogan’s concept of the process of identification is telling:

Like l’écriture féminine . . . diary-writing can perhaps be seen as a potentially subversive form of writing because it tends to cross and blur the boundaries between things traditionally kept separate. . . . [I]t crosses the boundaries between self and other . . . between author and reader . . . between text and experience, art and life. (100)

The letter thus suits “new feminine writing” which Hogan characterizes as “open, non-linear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, polysemic” (100).² Letter writing becomes a question of identity that has

Alif 30 (2010)
to do with a whole gender’s choice to speak, instead of being silent, and to subvert, instead of being subservient.

Epistolary Presences

To turn to an application of the above views on both texts, it is interesting to note that both protagonists, Celie in *The Color Purple* and Asmahan in *Beirut Blues*, are exposed to involuntary circumstances that lead to a state of psychological, if not physical, isolation. Naturally wanting to keep contact with the outside world, they resort to letter writing, a process that keeps them alive.

Celia in *The Color Purple* is initially portrayed as a fourteen-year-old girl who is physically/sexually abused by her father—who turns out later to be her step-father. Being a barely literate southern woman, and forsaken by those she loves—her mother dead; her two children taken away from her; and her sister forced by oppressive circumstances to leave the country with a missionary group seeking a better life—Celia finds no way out of her dilemma but writing letters which, isolated and desperate, she initially addresses to God. This becomes Celia’s readiest solution when she is advised by her step-father to keep silent about it: “you better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (1). The letter becomes Celia’s first step towards getting out of the vortex of silence into which the step-father forces her.

The state of isolation suffered by Celia is doubled later by the forced marriage she has to go through to the unnamed Mr.____, a man who originally wanted to marry her sister. In an attempt to get rid of Celia, both “ugly” and not “fresh” (having already given birth), the step-father convinces Albert to marry Celia, instead of her sister, and entices him with a cow that will leave the house together with Celia. The same patriarchal oppression that dehumanizes and objectifies Celia, putting her on the same level as a cow, is later demonstrated more brutally in Mr.____’s treatment. In Mr.____’s house, Celia acts as maid, baby-sitter, object of sexual gratification, and target for sadistic tendencies: “He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don’t never hardly beat them. He say, Celia, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celia, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear men” (23). Being objectified once again, she finds no way out of her plight except by writing letters.

The letter acts as a medium through which Celic can voice her thoughts and feelings which no one else would be interested to know about. Her only solace becomes the pen and paper she uses to write her
letters. They thus provide her with an interlocutor and an outlet. However, she is totally alone even during the process of letter writing: “There is no description of Celie with pen in hand, no discussion of where and when she writes. She must remain invisible so as not to expose this essential contradiction—that as dehumanized object she projects a self in the act of writing even as she records her inability to be self-defining” (hooks 293). Celie does, however, become self-defining through the only medium of contact available to her, namely, the letter.

Letter writing assumes a different role later in the course of the novel. As Celie starts to accept her circumstances submissively, Shug—the Blues singer Mr.____ has always been in love with—appears in her life. Celie’s fascination with Shug since she saw her photograph by accident prepares the reader for the homoerotic attraction Celie develops for her. Although Celie’s love for Shug performs the redemptive role of making her a whole person, and though she admits that she does not hate Mr.____ partly because he loved Shug and partly because Shug loved him—Celic’s feelings are so complicated and difficult to grasp that she feels burdened by them. Celie’s inability to understand why she does not enjoy her marital/sexual relationship, or why she feels sexually aroused by Shug, is what motivates her to find a companion to share these feelings with, an area where she can feel secure. Letters thus become her way of combating her traumatizing situation.

It is important to examine how Celie’s relation to the letters themselves changes from one stage to another. Celie, who initially starts writing a letter to God to let someone know what had happened to her, later gets emotionally attached to the letters in which she finds acceptance—of her blackness, womanness, ugliness, and sexuality. Celie’s letters, while providing an addressee, do not provide an interlocutor who responds to them; rather it is Celie writing and responding to herself, reflecting on her own situation. Thus, letter writing starts assuming a different role, becoming an end in itself.

This phenomenon is first demonstrated in the (f)act of ceasing to write letters to God, and writing to Nettie instead:

I don’t write to God no more, I write to you.  
What happen to God? Ast Shug.  
Who that? I say.  
She look at me serious. (199)

This development shows the change in attitude that Celie undergoes towards her letter-companions. Celie’s main aim in writing to God was not
really to write to God but rather to write. It is the need to write that makes Celie compose her letters and that makes her substitute Nettie for God. This is only possible through Nettie’s appearance in her life and the realization that God is not the only available addressee. This is shown more clearly when she eventually addresses her last letter to “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (292). Celie is willing to talk to anyone/anything that will listen to her. This desperate need is more openly expressed when she finds out that her sister does not receive her letters, and still goes on writing them. The response does not matter any longer; it is the process of writing itself that counts.

Hanan al-Shaykh’s protagonist, Asmahan, is portrayed as a woman at odds with her situation and reality. She starts writing from the midst of chaos forced upon her and others by the civil war taking place between political and religious sects, tearing the country apart. Her fragmented letters reflect “the war-weary life in Lebanon. Asmahan’s voice, alternating passion and cynicism, despair and exultation, is that of a woman unwilling and unable to surrender” (Hussein 20). In addition to Asmahan’s psychological/emotional isolation due to the war, she experiences a state of physical isolation.

The novel opens with Asmahan writing a letter to her friend, Hayat, telling her how impossible it has become to maintain contact with the outside world even on the level of telecommunication:

I know you’re trying to contact me now, since our telephone’s been dead for a month. . . . You’re trying to contact me, for the battles between Hizbullah and Amal must be all over the front pages in Belgium. Instead of feeling—as I normally do—that I don’t want you constantly worrying about me during the fighting, I must admit that this time I’m comforted by the thought. (5-6 [6])

Living among her grandmother, maid, and neighbors, Asmahan still feels lonely. She is unable to find a companion among people who have always been familiar and close. Each of the individuals Asmahan encounters during the war period has her/his own fears and worries. No one cares any more how others feel, or what they are suffering. It is this fact that makes Asmahan identify with the hostage to whose friend she writes her second letter. Like him, she feels like a hostage in a land that no more resembles the old Beirut she had always known. She is a “stranger here” and even the language that people speak “has different meanings
which are unfamiliar to me” (34-35 [31-32]). It is this estrangement and unfamiliarity that makes Asmahan unable to recognize her city:

    How can I recognize a city which only lets me hear a faint echo of what it thinks as it dances and fights, fights and dances? I hear the sound of its breathing mingled with Arabic and Western music. . . . I’ve grown used to the dark and I no longer see shadows or reflections. . . . I’ve made friends with the darkness since there’s no escaping it. (36 [32-33])

    Naturally, Asmahan seeks refuge from her loneliness, her sense of exile and loss, in letter writing. Letters also seem the most suitable medium of communication she has, simply since she has no other option. The letters Asmahan writes thus act as a space where she can feel secure, finding something that is still familiar, something she can identify with. In addition to this, what al-Shaykh herself says about her reasons for the letter writing technique is illuminating: “I wanted Beirut to become a place cut off from everything: from communications such as telephones, telegrams, planes, etc. . . . completely removed from reality so that only Asmahan’s voice, the writer of these letters, is heard” (Sunderman 302).

    Asmahan thus replaces the missing company of her friends and familiar land with that of the letter. This is most explicitly shown when she visits her grandfather’s village, her last remaining hope, and the object of her nostalgia until this point. When she actually sees her land, Asmahan is devastated by the degree of deterioration. The land is no longer owned by her family—like Beirut is no longer owned by its people—and, instead of the familiar beautiful green, all she can see is the opium and hashish sticks all over the place—an observation that is both realistic, as people were growing grass, and symbolic, of the state of unconsciousness prevalent in wartime Lebanon. Asmahan’s frustrated expectations, as well as being forsaken by all and cut off from all, lead her to take full refuge in letter writing. Her letters are “at pains to record these political obstructions and historical disruptions if only to chart an itinerary through to their other side” (Harlow 894). It is partly the need to express these traumatizing “obstructions” and “disruptions” that motivates Asmahan to write. Letter writing thus becomes a mode of resistance against despair.

    Asmahan’s letters now assume an existence of their own. She reaches a point where she writes letters for the sake of letter writing itself. It does not matter then who reads her letters or whether they are read at all. Like Celie’s, hers are one-sided letters, and she does not get a single
letter in response—hearing only “their own resounding echoes” (“Beirut Blues” 1). Asmahan’s lament becomes an end in itself.

Asmahan is not just content to write without getting an answer; she even seeks to erase the act of writing itself. Towards the end of the novel, the reader is shocked to find out that even the one-sided letters that she gets no answer to are not written (296 [349]). Asmahan thinks her letters rather than writes them: “That’s what I needed in this country, to receive letters, to sit down and write letters and get replies instead of composing them in my mind. Like a heroine in a novel, I’d tell . . . about what went on in the atmosphere of war and cease-fires, I would be a martyr or a witness” (296 [349]).

Though neither protagonist writes for a reader, the difference is that, whereas Celie does have hopes of being read and responded to, Asmahan knows from the start she is not going to get a reaction, since no action is taken to start with. However, neither Celie’s frustration nor Asmahan’s knowledge stops them from writing. Both novels “celebrate the resilience of the human spirit and . . . [its] dogged determination” (Milani 2). Asmahan’s letters “bear witness and celebrate writing as a record of memory and desire,” and that is precisely what sets her apart from “victimized, submissive women in other Arab fictions” (Hussein 20). Celie, likewise, writes a narrative that becomes “the space where the voice of an oppressed black female can be heard” (hooks 293). In writing letters to tell addressees what they already know, Celie and Asmahan (read Walker and al-Shaykh) mainly subvert, deconstruct, and—consequently—reconstruct the patriarchal/canonized narrative system that has excluded them for so long.

**Confessional Therapies**

Having examined the motives of both characters for writing their letters, it remains now to look into the function these letters perform and the sense of emotional/psychological gratification they provide both protagonists with, exploring the therapeutic, cathartic role that the letters play in the two women’s lives. This relates closely to the confessional nature of the letters themselves. For in writing letters, both Celie and Asmahan confess feelings and thoughts that they are otherwise unable to tell anyone.

Confession is often connected with an act of deviance from the normal that leads to feelings of guilt. The deviance norm is seen as “one which treats forms of social control as a system of rituals of exclusion and which explains social order in terms of the consensual imposition of deviant labels on actions or persons threatening the existing moral order”
Confession is thus a “private act of contrition for wrong-doing” during the space and period of which “an individual accepts responsibility for his offense,” thus being able to share a sense of conscience and moral status with fellow human beings (145). It is an act of ridding oneself of feelings of guilt, obtaining forgiveness, and regaining self-image—in short, a form of liberation.

On different levels, Celie’s and Asmahan’s letters can be seen as forms of confession. *The Color Purple* has been labeled by some critics a “narrative of sexual confession” because of the graphic, detailed language that it uses in describing sexual acts (hooks 284)—a fact that explains the controversy that attended the publication of the novel (George 357). Descriptions such as “he grab hold of my titties” and “he push this thing inside my pussy” are not uncommon in the novel (1). It must be noted, however, that Celie’s main aim in initially writing to God is to confess the sense of guilt that she experiences after being raped by her so-called father. As a fourteen-year-old, Celie can hardly cope with her feelings and thus needs an outlet.

Another major component of Celie’s confessional narrative is her sexuality, yet another form of ‘deviance’ that the protagonist needs to confess and for which epistolarity is most suited (Garlinger). Puzzled and intrigued by her homosexual love for Shug, Celie has a need to confess that feeling, better understood within the context of seeing lesbianism as a stigmatized and offensive act against society’s imposed heterosexuality. The “bias of compulsory heterosexuality” makes lesbianism an “experience perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent, or simply rendered invisible” and, consequently, establishes it as a “taboo” or “rejection of a compulsory way of life” (Rich 22-23).

It is the sense of wrong-doing and tabooed action, on the levels of both incest and sexual orientation, that leads to Celie’s confessional act. Celie’s need to confess is even doubled later with the new understanding that she reaches, with the help of Shug, of God—one that deviates from the normal concept that most people adopt. Shug helps Celie deconstruct the original image she had of God as a “graybearded” “white” “man” with “blue eyes” (201). It is Shug who shows her that God is not to be found in churches, but is more a pantheistic concept: “[God] don’t look like nothing.... It ain’t something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything.... Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you’ve found it” (202-03).
As sophisticated as Asmahan is compared to naïve Celie, guilt takes up a vast area of her conscience, too. Asmahan’s first letter is a confession of guilt to Hayat, guilt at begrudging her friend the life of peace and security she is having in Belgium: “Can I really be irritated with Hayat, whose name was so closely linked with mine that our two names were spoken as one?” (3-4 [7]). Unable to cope with the guilt, Asmahan chooses to vent it. This is coupled with other feelings of guilt that she has for Naser, her former lover who joined the Palestinian resistance (69 [71]). In ‘voicing’ her feelings of guilt to Naser for having been sexually and emotionally attracted to other men, Asmahan performs a similar act of confession, on a deeper level, to the reader, as women’s sexuality is often seen as a tabooed subject in Arab culture. This is the reason why “daring” has been the term most commonly used by critics to describe al-Shaykh’s work. 5 Among other things, Asmahan feels guilty for having watched her grandfather flirt with other women without protesting.

In examining Celie’s and Asmahan’s ‘confessions,’ one should bear in mind that there is one factor that sets them out as different from standard confessions, that is, neither Celie nor Asmahan has the free will to decide whether or not they should confess what they do, or whether they should do it to begin with. Both protagonists are portrayed as objects, rather than subjects, succumbing rather than doing, except towards the end. Celie is raped and married off by her step-father, left by her sister, and abandoned by Shug. Asmahan too, has to wait for the war to end, for something to happen, having been forsaken by her best friend and her lover.

This is reflected on the linguistic level as well. Hardly ever does the reader see Celie or Asmahan occupying the space of subject in the sentences that constitute their letters. On the first page of the novel, Celie wants God “to give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me”; her mother “left [her] to see after the others”; her father “never had a kine word to say to [her]” (1). She naturally sees herself as the object of other people’s actions, never taking the initiative to do things herself. Asmahan is also a linguistic object in her letters; one example is when she waits for Naser: “I waited for him in Tunis, burning like a hot coal with the sun and longing. My craving for him made a fool of me, and I kept lying there, deluding myself that he was watching me from a distance, enjoying the sight of me waiting for him” (41 [36]). Waiting is symptomatic of Asmahan’s writing; “lying there” being the only thing she can do, for the war has made it impossible for anything else to be done. This linguistic representation of Celie and Asmahan is highly in keeping with the portrayal they are given in the two novels as oppressed, silenced individuals. Celie’s silence makes her unable
to react to Shug’s decision to leave her for a man, except by getting a scrap of paper and writing her a note (257), while Asmahan’s sense of oppression makes her feel “like a big soap bubble, rolling along, not touching anything around me until I meet up with other bubbles” (35 [32]).

Letter writing also becomes a medium through which the two protagonists avoid resorting to darker thoughts of destruction. The sense of isolation and futility that they experience can lead to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, which in turn may cause suicidal feelings:

At the beginning of life the common emotion is probably randomised general excitement. In the suicidal state it is a pervasive feeling of helplessness-hopelessness . . . [associated with] shame, guilt, frustrated dependency. But underlying all of these is that emotion of active, impotent ennui, the feeling of helplessness-hopelessness. (Varah 75)

The distinction between guilt and shame is quite an important one, and particularly relevant in the cases of the two protagonists. Celie is primarily troubled by the feeling of guilt she experiences after her rape and at similar moments, when she reaches her new understanding of God or when she asks her step-son Harpo to beat his wife Sofia.6 Her conscience carries the entire burden. Asmahan’s main concern, on the other hand, is to remain hidden; she feels more ashamed of herself than guilty. For instance, it is not Asmahan’s guilt that causes the awkwardness in dealing with her grandmother, having stood as witness to her grandfather’s flirtations, but rather the fear of being found out. This difference between the nature of the two feelings may be explained culturally: Celie’s American culture is one that places much emphasis on the individual and her/his feelings, whereas Asmahan’s Arab culture is one that marginalizes individuals for the sake of the community/society.

Both protagonists experience some of the feelings cited as danger signs of acute suicide risk.7 Among these are the feelings of “isolation, loneliness and uprooting” (Varah 111). Although all three are felt by both protagonists, the sense of uprootedness is one that is especially felt by Asmahan due to the state of devastation that the war has led to. Both experience the severe feeling of “having to live with few human contacts” (Varah 111). Even though the two protagonists have people around them, there is hardly any real contact or communication, a factor that leads to a worse state of emotional/psychological isolation. Finally, lacking “a philosophy of life such as a comforting type of religious faith” is a factor that enhances the potential for developing suicidal feelings (Varah 111). An
implied sense of disbelief lies at the heart of Beirut Blues, the war having made it impossible for one to maintain belief in anything. Celie, on the other hand, breaks away from the conventional view of God, a sign of disbelief in orthodox faith which leads to a feeling of uprootedness, even though it is replaced by another quasi-mystical belief.

Both protagonists express ideas related to self/other destruction more than once in the course of their letters. For instance, Celie’s anger at discovering that Mr.____ has been hiding her sister’s letters from her—which, together with her feelings of guilt, could have led to self destruction—makes her initially want to kill her husband: “I watch him so close, I begin to feel a lightening in the head. Fore I know anything I’m standing hind his chair with his razor open. . . . All day long . . . I stutter. I mutter to myself. I stumble bout the house crazy for Mr.____ blood” (125). Yet letter writing gives vent to these feelings and thus purges Celie of them. Because she is able to write these feelings down, she no longer wants to enact them in reality.

Asmahan mentions suicide more explicitly in Beirut Blues when she remembers Naser saying that he wanted at many points to commit suicide but could not, simply because “it is a gesture of pride which I’m not fit to make” (79 [84]). Suicide is thus established as part of Asmahan’s subconscious, a factor that increases the potential for developing suicidal thoughts (Varah 111). This is echoed in the novel by Asmahan’s own thoughts about death. The nothingness, futility, and loss of identity that Asmahan experiences lead her to think of death as a solution: “All the same, I’m always thinking about death. It’s there, and sometimes it’s coming towards me. I open my eyes or keep them closed, depending on whether I’m interested in seeing and eating and staying alive or indifferent and without hope” (38 [34]). Indifference towards life and loss of hope are factors indicative of a sense of withdrawal that a suicidal person must experience. Like in Celie’s case, the letters Asmahan writes play the role of the emotional sponge that absorbs her suicidal feelings and thus rid her of them. Again, the letter performs a cathartic function.

Both characters seek therapy in letter writing. Finding no one to share one’s feelings with except a piece of paper that is not even replied to, sometimes never sent, reveals the state of despair the two characters go through. Lindberg-Seyersted mentions this “desperate need” in reference to Nettie’s letters to Celie: “Nettie has a desperate need to maintain even an imaginary contact with her sister. Her correspondence functions as the same kind of therapy against loneliness that drives Celie to maintain her correspondence to God although he, as far as she can tell, never answers by act or vision” (82). The same could be said about Asmahan who knows
from the start that her letters are not going to be answered. Walker herself mentions in an interview that she is able to imagine Celie’s thoughts and feelings while writing to God: “Celie is able to write, ‘Dear God, this has happened to me and I have to tell somebody and so I write to you’” (Wilson 325). “Having” to tell somebody and finding nobody to tell, either because no one cares or because others are too busy healing their own wounds, the two protagonists set out to write letters that eventually assume the role of companion—a process that saves their sanity.

**Writing Identities**

In light of the therapeutic view of letter writing, it is worth considering how these letters help their writers gain a better understanding of themselves. In both novels, letter writing becomes a process of self-discovery, ending in a better understanding of oneself as well as one’s surroundings and situations. The one-sidedness of the letter writing process allows for more space within which the two characters can reflect on their lives. The usual interaction that takes place in letter writing, between addresser and addressee, is replaced by another kind of interaction between the addresser and herself, a dialogue of a monologic nature that eventually leads to the protagonists’ liberation from their oppressive circumstances. As Hogan notes, what happens to the self in letter writing is a process of “reflection and self-discovery,” similar to that of retreating from the world or the public sphere into a letter (97-99).

In *The Color Purple*, Celie’s letters to both God and her sister help her find out more about herself and about life in a variety of ways. First, on the cognitive level, the letters Celie receives from Nettie constitute a learning experience that makes up for the education she was deprived of. What Celie asks for at the beginning of her letter sequence is a sign from God letting her know what is happening to her and that indeed is what she gets. Nettie’s letters from Africa, which Celie tellingly obtains with Shug’s help, perform the role of widening Celie’s horizons by telling her about places she has never visited, probably never heard of. Nettie’s role as instructor/informant had already been established earlier in the course of the novel. It is Nettie who teaches Celie that “the way you know who discover America...is think bout cucumbers. That what Columbus sound like. I learned all about Columbus in first grade, but look like he the first thing I forgot. She say Columbus come here in boats called the Neater, the Peter, and the Sanomareater” (10). The reader is thus prepared for Nettie’s role as teacher.

Nettie’s letters also perform a more practical function. Apart from learning about other ways of life, Celie is also able to use the knowledge
she receives through the letters in her everyday life. When Henrietta falls sick with the blood disease, Celie’s mind goes back to one of the letters that Nettie had sent her: “Then I think back to one of Nettie’s letters bout the sickness children have where she at in Africa. Seem like to me she mention something bout blood clots. I try to remember what she say African peoples do” (230). Celie is not only taught the lesson but learns it and tries to use it. This in itself is a sign of the change in personality that she undergoes. This is a far cry from the representation of the fourteen-year-old Celie that the reader gets at the opening of the book. At school, Celie cannot remember the name of the person who discovered America, and cannot be bothered; now she is willing to exert effort and remember things Nettie teaches her. Obviously, Celie is developing a taste for knowledge.

On a more abstract level, the letter writing process gives Celie the chance to find out more about herself by comparison. Nettie’s letters about Africa, the Olinka tribe, and such people as Tashi and her parents subconsciously sink into Celie’s psychology, and in a sense reform her. The Olinka tribe’s traditions are the objective correlative of the patriarchal oppression that Celie and other black women are exposed to. Being immersed in her oppressive circumstances, Celie cannot theorize about her state and decide she needs to change. It is only when she finds out about other women like Olivia and her love of learning that she changes. Only when she is made aware of the existence of other women living under oppressive circumstances and fighting against them does she take responsibility for her actions. It is these letters that make Celie reflect on her own circumstances and reach the final stage of tranquility. In this way, letter writing becomes a process of self-discovery, learning, and liberation. It is through her letters that Celie manages to regain her identity, an identity crushed by a society which rejects all that is black, then crushed further by a patriarchy that dominates women and their existence.

It would be interesting to consider Celie’s change within the context of Walker’s views of black women. Walker’s protagonists are often seen in relation to her historical division of all black women into three cycles. The women of the first cycle are those “suspended” women, of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, who were not given the ability to express their creativity in any way and thus ended up being crushed and silenced (Washington 39). Following these are the women of the second cycle of the 1940s and 1950s. This cycle is characterized by the break away from values of ethnicity, propagated and advocated by whites, that made the women experience a sense of uprootedness and non-belonging (44). Celie belongs to the third cycle: women of the 1960s who were
given the chance for the first time to become creative and take part in the process of change African-Americans went through. What characterizes these women is that “although they are more fully conscious of their political and psychological oppression and more capable of creating new options for themselves, they must undergo a harsh initiation before they are ready to occupy and claim a new territory” (Washington 46).

Celie does indeed go through such a process of “harsh initiation.” It is one exemplified in a society that feeds Celie misrepresentations of her body, teaching her that she has less right to live due to her ugliness; a society that suppresses her sexuality in favor of an imposed heterosexuality that she does not/cannot identify with; a society that teaches her to take what is there and be content. What the letters do to Celie is teach her that other modes of life exist. Through writing and receiving letters, Celie gets a better chance to think and find out for herself what she wants out of life. The letter becomes a mediator enhancing Celie’s process of liberation. Having liberated her, the letter also gives Celie an identity.

Asmahan goes through a similar process of liberation and self-discovery in Beirut Blues. Living in a war-torn city, Asmahan’s identity is, consequently, fragmented. The protagonist experiences a state of alienation, living like a hostage in her own country, as she writes in her letter to Jill Morrell. Asmahan’s identity is torn between the two parts of the city, between the Palestinians and the Israelis, between the different political parties and the opposing religious sects. Al-Shaykh herself, in an interview, describes the state of Beirut during the war as follows:

The war was still going on and continuing to affect the people in the streets. The city became a city of hostages, whether they were foreigners or Lebanese; it was torn into two sections: East and West. Other militias emerged and became powerful. . . . In addition, the military from Syria, Israel and Iran invaded Lebanon. (Sunderman 305)

It is almost impossible to expect one to have a sense of identity, or even to preserve one, amidst all this chaos. For Asmahan sees the war “dragging a Persian carpet from under my feet thread by thread and then weaving it together again from one moment to the next” (230 [274]). She is unable to understand what is going on, and she has lost her sense of security. What Asmahan tries to do is make sense of her life and find an identity where she can feel secure through letter writing.
And indeed she does. Asmahan’s letters constitute a learning process, at the end of which the protagonist is liberated and given a better understanding of herself, even though she follows a different route than the one Celie takes. For there is a basic difference between the two cases. Whereas Celie’s letter writing process allows her the psychological space needed to retreat from the world and think about herself and her situation, Asmahan’s letters represent an attempt to belong and be part of the outside world she has been cut off from because of the war. It is the state of retreat from the world that Asmahan is trying to escape by writing her letters. She has already realized that the war has made individuals atomized, unable to partake in the existence of others; sharing a state of “separatedness” (230 [274]). In the letters, she can enjoy human relations which have been denied to her by her environment. Unlike Celie, she does not seek her identity within, for that is an area that has already proved frustrating. There is only a vacuum inside, a self on the verge of madness.

Asmahan is aware that a fragmented, distorted self can only be restored through a fragmented, distorted search. As Hussein puts it, “Asmahan defines herself . . . through her feelings for those who receive her letters. . . . As she addresses them in turn, relentlessly and lyrically, Asmahan analyses her own emotions, past and present; the written word is her record and her weapon of sanity” (20). One has to imagine the kind of devastated identity that would lead one to define oneself in reference to how one feels about others, this being the only means available of reaching self-understanding.

Asmahan does not only define herself by how she feels about others, but by also comparing herself to them. In writing to Hayat, she tries to see how similar to/different than her friend she is, thinking what choices she would have made, had she been in her place. In writing to her grandmother, she tries to put her finger on the things that she has inherited from her. In writing to the land, Asmahan tries to identify with it in terms of how the war has affected both of them. In writing to Jill Morrell, she tries to discover the relation between her friend’s situation and her own. Asmahan is constantly and desperately seeking a space where she can feel secure, an area where she can find echoes of herself. This despair is nowhere more explicitly shown than in her attempt to identify even with her mother, a mother who had left her and the whole country to get married to another man, without even thinking about what would happen to her daughter.

From the beginning of the novel, Asmahan is shown as more concerned with her own feelings than those of the people she writes to.
She does not really address her letters to others; she, rather, looks for herself in others. She writes to people to tell them how she feels about them and how she would have (not) liked to react to things they did, and, in so doing, gains a degree of understanding of the nature of her own feelings. Asmahan is portrayed as a woman holding a mirror to the outside world, craving to be part of it, bent over it, looking at reflections of herself as they appear in the objects of the smashed pieces of glass making that mirror. In doing that, she pieces together the jigsaw puzzle of the shattered and fragmented self she is.

As Nelson notes, Asmahan’s letters “humanize the non-humanity of the war in ways that international media, academic thinkers in study centers and ideologists are not capable of” (19). This is the only way that Asmahan can cope with this ‘non-human’ war. Her letters become the only way of preserving what is left of old familiar Beirut, for the epistolary exercise importantly challenges genre conventions and political processes and keeps Beirut on the contemporary map as both cultural capital and literary topos. It represents neither a sniper’s perspective nor the coercions of factions, but the necessary message from out of the disorder and disarray of postresistance writing that new directions are still an imperative. (Harlow 896)

In challenging these conventions, Asmahan also challenges the war itself. Nostalgic to the past, Asmahan rediscovers herself through rediscovering her historical heritage (Abdallah 50).

Letter writing thus becomes the two protagonists’ only way out of their dilemmas. Both are faced with incredible forces of oppression. However, each of the two characters calls upon some force deep inside herself that guides her out of her trauma, using the letter as a reliable medium of expression. Both write letters in order to reach knowledge, understanding, and identity—the quest itself becoming a celebration of the powers of resistance and of the resilience to which their letters stand as witness. Letters provide Celie and Asmahan with a number of abilities, but, above all, they endow them with insight and ‘clairvoyance’ that make them see who they really are, and how they can become who they want to be. As Walker puts it:

This . . . is the only hope. Because it’s as if this world is constructed almost entirely of lies, and so we can’t help but be lost. We are . . . trying to find the path, and they have delib-
erately said East where it’s West, North where it’s South, up where it’s down, green where it’s blue. And all the time they are wrong. These signposts have been deliberately put on the path to send us off somewhere else. So clear seeing, clear speaking—that is our responsibility. (qtd. in McLeod 4)

Both Celie and Asmahan try to find the truth about what has been misrepresented while speaking up to express themselves. Each follows her own path, but both eventually reach what they set out to reach.

**Conclusion**

Having examined the letters’ roles as companion and therapist in the traumatic situations of the two protagonists’ lives and the way they help them attain a better understanding of self, it is worthwhile now to try and see the letters Celie and Asmahan write within the context of their character development. The letters written by the two protagonists act as mirror-images of their final reconciliations with the world on several levels. The letters that Celie writes, patching together her own self, reflect on a deeper level the process of quilting that brings women characters in the novel together. Throughout, the female characters of the novel are seen at different points making quilts. One could almost argue that quilting becomes the most solid act that unifies all of them and brings them together. Quilting and letter writing become synonymous acts, both based on a process of piecing together cloth and words. Just like quilting and sewing give meaning to Celie’s life, the letters give her an identity and understanding with which to grasp this meaning. Interestingly, this act of quilting that Walker’s characters resort to has been used to describe her own work. Walker’s writing itself has often been seen by a number of critics as a quilt where she puts together parts of herself, her heritage, and *her*story: “Alice Walker’s works are quilts—bits and pieces of used material rescued from oblivion for everyday use. She takes seemingly ragged edges and arranges them into works of functional though terrifying beauty” (Christian 180). Quilting itself as it appears in the novel is a reflection of another process that takes place among the female characters, namely, that of female bonding, a phenomenon that Walker uses to bring her women—all exposed to involuntarily severe and oppressive circumstances—together: “*The Color Purple* is about the struggle between redemption and revenge. And the chief agency of redemption, Walker is saying, is the strength of the relationships between women: their friendship, their love, their shared oppression” (Smith 20). This act of female bonding is a crucial factor in Walker’s “womanist” philosophy. It is *womanist* because it is essen-
ially and primarily based on women coming together, sharing their experiences, reaching out for one another and, in doing so, guiding each other toward the light of liberation and self-understanding.

Celim’s letters reflect and enhance the acts of quilting and female bonding in the novel, for part of her awareness that something has to be done comes from the understanding she gains through writing her letters. It is these letters that cause Celim’s final crescendo of forgiveness and her ultimate reconciliation with the world. She is back in Mr.’s house, a different person, however, sitting out on his porch, writing a letter to “Dear Everything” (292) and feeling “the youngest us ever felt” (295).

Asmahan’s letters celebrate a similar process of reconciliation with the world, reflecting the sense of transformation that she experiences. Asmahan changes from a shattered, isolated, confused woman to one who knows she wants to stay in Beirut with all its wars and cease-fires and contradictions. Her struggle with the war ends, as the novel ends, with the realization that she has “become addicted to this war” (367 [424]). Surprisingly, it is a realization that she can now easily cope with, having come to terms with the war, her letters having already made the war understandable. It is precisely this realization and this acceptance that give Asmahan the courage to utter her last statement: “I went to confront the city which has made its war die of weariness” (370 [427]; emphasis added). Confrontation is made possible through writing letters.

What the letters do, among other things, is give Beirut, the only remaining subject Asmahan can identify with in her surroundings, a voice. Beirut becomes as important a character in Beirut Blues as Asmahan. The strength that Asmahan gets from giving the war-torn city that voice, as well as from humanizing the people involved in civil strife, helps her eventually realize that the war is an entity that she can react to, rather than a scary incomprehensible happening. Together with this realization comes another: Asmahan knows by the end of the novel that “success and asylum sought elsewhere is illusory. Fulfillment and identity can only be achieved in Lebanon, and especially during this war. The war has recuperated the women’s escape. Their loneliness and alienation in Beirut is as nothing compared with the greater alienation of the emigrants” (Cooke 160). Only when Asmahan reaches that realization is she able to let go of Jawad, her émigré friend, and to stay in Lebanon. It is her letters that make Asmahan reach this state of reconciliation with the world and this understanding of the war.

The letters Celie and Asmahan write constitute a liberating process by restoring both characters to the state of healthy human beings and pulling them out of the abyss of insanity as they confront their traumas of rape and
The sets of letters become much more peaceful in tone by the end. The two novels end on cheerful optimistic notes, giving one hope that the protagonists will then start teaching others what they had been taught. One has great expectations of Celie going on with the act of quilting and showing other women the light of truth and self-respect. One also hopes that Asmahan, having preserved her sanity, will help others out of their dilemmas. For it is in times of crisis that the individual submerges her/himself in others and becomes one with them, assuming “responsibility for the maintenance of public as well as private orders” (Cooke 150).

The letters become catalysts that help both protagonists reach an understanding of life and of themselves that they would probably have never been able to gain otherwise. Writing letters is moved from the sphere of the physical act of holding a pen and writing on a piece of paper into that of human projection and mediated reflection. It is moved from the realm of realism and immediacy to that of self-expression and subversiveness that Hogan refers to, shedding a new light on the epistolary form and the reasons why it has been used throughout history. In subverting their realities, the writers also subvert the whole genre and its rules, for the letters both characters write become not only a narrative mode but a life-giving force, a raison d’être. They constitute a psychological and emotional experience that turns the protagonists’ written words into voices they use to rebel against the legacy of dispossession and the confusion of war. The ability to articulate restores both protagonists to life. It is no wonder they both identify with singers: Shug Avery and Squeak in The Color Purple; Billie Holiday, Ruhyyia, and Asmahan (after whom the protagonist was named) in Beirut Blues, for it is their sad experiences that these singers express in their Blues and lament songs. The same happens with Celie and Asmahan who are “speaking on behalf of other individuals, probing a private existential problem” (Cooke 162). In addition to their roles of caring and healing, the letters the two protagonists write have an ultimate effect on them that is quite similar to that of the story-telling of Shahrazad who is not freed, and does not manage to free other women, until she is given a voice with which to express herself and to be heard.

Notes

1 I would like to express my deepest thanks to Hanan al-Shaykh and Catherine Cobham for their encouragement and support during the material collecting stage for this research.
2 For more on these qualities in relation to feminist writing, see Christiane Makward's "To Be or Not to Be ... A Feminist Speaker."

3 All references to Beirut Blues are from Catherine Cobham's English translation. The corresponding page number(s) in the original Arabic will be given between square brackets throughout.

4 In a telephone interview (August 8, 1997), Hanan al-Shaykh explained to the author the reasons why she chose the epistolary form as a medium of expression in this novel. Having written the first draft of Beirut Blues in a more traditional narrative form, and while revising it, al-Shaykh did not feel comfortable with its "artificiality." In her words: "I wanted to create a distance between me—living in London—and the war in Lebanon." She wanted the letter to act as "mediator" between her and Lebanon, as well as between Asmahan and her fictional/real readers. She added: "There is always correspondence at war times." Letters, in her opinion, are what connects people. She gave an example of her communication with a close friend who was in Beirut during the war, and how phone calls meant nothing compared to their written contact: "The eye takes the written word more seriously than the ear does the spoken."

5 Labeling al-Shaykh's work "daring" can be noted in most criticism written on her work. Most critics refer to al-Shaykh primarily as a non-conformist, breaking the taboos of politics, sex, and religion—so firmly ingrained in the Arab world. The writer herself refers to this attitude, saying that it is typical of "us, Arabs, to overreact to things, especially when it comes to these deep human relations that we do not fully understand yet" (al-Shaykh, "Al-riwa’iyya al-libnaniyya" 11). For more on the subject, see Hanan al-Shaykh's interview in Ros Al Youssef, "Katiba ‘arabiyya jadida". Interesting in this respect is how Richard Jacquemond places this attitude within the context of Arab women writers flouting norms typically associated with the East, and refusing to adhere to a male voyeuristic attitude: "les œuvres des romancières arabes les plus traduites et les plus populaires sont aussi celles qui sont le plus marquées par l'opposition entre les valeurs modernes (associées à l'OCCIDENT) d’émancipation et de liberté défendues par ces auteurs, et l’oppression sexuelle du ‘mâle oriental’ qu’elles dénoncent—à quoi s’ajoute . . . le plaisir voyeur d’accéder aux ‘secrets d’alcôve’ du harem (29). Aghacy’s assertion that “[Lebanese] women’s fiction fastens on city life as a way to counter stereotypes that align them with the restrictive past with more liberating images of women’s experience within the unchartered urban space” (505) is particularly relevant to our discussion of Beirut Blues in this article.
6 For an interesting discussion on Celie’s reasons for advising Harpo to beat Sofia, thus enacting “horizontal violence,” see Floyd-Thomas and Gillman, pp. 536-37.
7 For a detailed analytical study of the psychology of the suicidal person and the way s/he does (not) relate to social factors and surroundings, see Emile Durkheim’s Suicide.
8 “Fragmented” is a term frequently used to describe most of al-Shaykh’s work. It has been noted that her work verges more on the psychological than the realistic, especially in Beirut Blues and The Story of Zahra. For a detailed analysis of this aspect of al-Shaykh’s writing, see al-Ra’iy’s article and al-Shaykh’s interview with Liana Badr. Ann Marie Adams sees this fragmentation as dictated by al-Shaykh’s representation of space: “Asmahan’s country is both real and imagined, personal and communal, at war and at peace, eastern and western, hurtling toward destruction and on the brink of rebirth. Mapped, charted, and signified in so many contradictory ways, it necessarily defies coherent representation” (210).
9 Rediscovering Lebanon’s heritage and rewriting history are two factors that critics refer to when discussing the work of Hanan al-Shaykh. For more analysis of these two phenomena, see Ghandour’s article which particularly analyzes al-Shaykh’s novel The Story of Zahra.
10 For an interesting analysis of the processes of quilting and sewing as factors that move Celie toward agency, and their relations to traditional black gender roles, see Grobman, pp. 85-86. For more on this point in relation to rape vs. empowerment, see Cutter’s “Philomela Speaks” and her assertion that “Celie’s sewing functions as an alternative methodology of language that moves her away from violence and victimization and into self-empowerment and subjectivity. . . . In Walker’s text rape leads not to erasure, but rather to the start of a prolonged struggle toward subjectivity and voice” (163-67).
11 For a detailed discussion of Walker’s womanist philosophy and its four-part definition, see Donald McCravy’s “Womanist Theology and Its Efficacy for the Writing Classroom,” especially pp. 528-29. For more on how Walker’s womanist philosophy has come to represent a paradigm of resistance and can be seen in the larger context of Walker’s attempt to write a multicultural text, see Marilyn Edelstein’s “Multiculturalisms Past, Present, and Future.” Relevant in this context is E. Shelly Reid’s “Looking Good and Looking Forward in Contemporary Black Women’s Stories” which traces the influence of Walker’s work in shaping the consciousness of a new generation of black writers.
Works Cited


