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Absurdity as Resistance in Arab Literature

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2011 Wyndham Robertson Library Undergraduate Research Awards

*Essay by Melissa Hammond
"Absurdity as Resistance in Arab Literature"*

My preliminary research included searches on the library's website on humor as a literary tool. I searched about five to eight different databases and used dozens of word combinations to find information relevant to my topic. What surprised me about my database research was that even though I thought I only wanted to research humor in literature, I discovered several significant psychology sources that related to my topic. Though hesitant at first, I finally allowed myself to diverge from my original plan and delve into the less-familiar field of scientific study. My project headed in a new direction, transformed for the better. One thing I have learned from this experience is that research never progresses as planned, but unexpected findings can lead to breakthroughs.

I also conducted subject searches on the library catalogue for humor, satire, absurdity, and irony. This search was frustrating because of the high number of irrelevant results. I wrote down the call numbers for several titles and found them in the library, and then manually searched the surrounding shelves for relevant books. I did not end up using any of these books in my research paper, though glancing through their bibliographies inspired me to look at famous humor novels, including Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Having an example of a classic work of absurd fiction grounded my analysis of the three pieces of Arab literature I had chosen from the class reading.

My final research effort included asking my friends if they had read any novels that used humor to make a point. I felt my research paper needed a second, more modern example of absurd fiction to back up the claim that authors can use humor as a tool. Finally I found and read Jonathon Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Not only did this novel inform my research and analysis, it remains one of my favorite works of fiction.

As I wrote, of course I realized that some of the books and articles I had found were unnecessary for my paper. Some were good stepping stones as I delved deeper into my subject matter, but in the end I realized they did not add any insight to my final body of research. My final paper includes eight sources, but I searched and read dozens more to find exactly what my research paper needed.

Melissa Hammond

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Absurdity as Resistance in Arab Literature

Many Arab women writers struggle with finding a method to express the horrors of war and the injustice of oppression in a way that will impact and change readers. Writers in recent history have explored absurd humor, a non-traditional style of writing, as a vessel for conveying a stronger message than traditional narrative can. Some notable absurd novels from the United States include *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, which criticizes war, and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathon Safran Foer, which highlights the horrific aftermath of the September eleventh attacks. *Beirut Fragments* by Jean Said Makdisi, *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* by Suad Amiry, and “Thirty-One Beautiful Green Trees” by Salwa Bakr all exhibit varying levels of absurdity. These authors use absurd humor as a form of resistance against oppression, because this variety of humor has the power to change readers’ perceptions on injustice and move them to action.

The term *absurd* describes situations that are ridiculous or illogical and is closely related to the term *ironic*. Absurd humor in literature uses absurdity and irony as tools and is often satirical in nature, meaning it uses wit to criticize faults in a person, institution, or society. Absurd humor is based on incongruity, such as the discrepancy between what happens and what is expected to happen. In absurd literature, a character may act in a way that seems illogical or inappropriate, or two juxtaposed phrases may seem to contradict each other. Take for example the following line from *Sharon and My Mother-in Law*: “Do you think Saddam will use any

chemical or nuclear warheads?’ Salim asked, trying to lighten the intense atmosphere” (69).

This sentence is absurd because the first seems to contradict the second half; usually discussing warheads would intensify the atmosphere, not lighten it. Amiry intentionally sets up this paradox to emphasize that the lives of the Palestinians are anything but calm; their lives are so chaotic and filled with horror that talk of warheads can lighten the atmosphere at a tea party.

Absurd scenes such as this one are found in each of the three pieces of literature, but in varying quantities.

Beirut Fragments is not a full-fledged work of absurdism; rather, Makdisi scatters absurd elements throughout the memoir when mere narrative essay cannot express the horrors of war. Actually, in the preface she explains the struggles she had with finding a way to tell her story. “As time went on, anger and pain grew far beyond the bonds that mere essay could contain, and then it seemed that only satire, which turns reason and logic inside out in response to a world gone mad, could deal with the problem. But that, too, proved insufficient” (31). Here she explains that an essay does not possess the capacity to communicate the horrors she lives through during the Lebanese Civil War. She then turns to satire, whose boundaries for communicating the madness of the world reach wider than mere essay. Even though she goes on to say that even satire’s capacity as a writing style is not sufficient after a while, inescapable elements of satire and absurdity creep their way into her work. Overall, *Beirut Fragments* could be categorized as a politically-charged, realistic memoir, but close investigation easily uncovers the inherent ridiculousness that is inseparable from her war memoir.

The first absurd realities that Makdisi presents in *Beirut Fragments* are the stories of the rampant car theft in Beirut and the businesses that pop up to resell cars to their owners. She ironically describes one of these businesses as a perfectly reputable establishment. “There you

would be greeted by the redoubtable Abu Shawki, who would accord friendly hospitality, offering cigarettes, coffee, or a cold drink” (27). She goes on to explain a particular situation in which a man puts a briefcase full of money in his trunk right before a thief steals his car.

Horrified to lose both his car and money, he travels to the stolen car lot, locates his car, and finds the trunk empty. When Abu Shawki sees the man’s crestfallen look, he scolds him. “‘You are looking for your money and you think we took it?’ he bellowed. ‘What do you take us for, thieves? *Wallaw!* Is there no trust left in this world? What has the country come to?’” (28).

Abu Shawki then leads the man to a room where he produces the suitcase, which still contains the full sum of money. The absurdity of the scene thrives on the incongruity between what the reader expects—that the thieves will steal the briefcase—and what actually happens—that Abu Shawki returns the briefcase and scolds the man for mistrusting his reputable business. His statement, “What do you take us for, thieves?” is especially ironic and humorous because Shawki and his employees are, in fact, professional thieves.

Another instance of absurdity in *Beirut Fragments* can be found where Makdisi describes the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier near the National Museum. She explains, “Today, of course, the tomb is an ironic redundancy, as so many equally unknown but less-honored people have fallen here” (74). Giving such a glorified and well-protected tomb to an unknown soldier may have seemed like an honorable act before the Civil War, but now that so many other unidentified people—both soldiers and civilians—have fallen in Beirut, the idea that a single tomb should be adorned with such ceremony becomes ridiculous. The absurd tomb is a symbol for society’s out-of-date conventions and rituals that have no meaning during a time of war and chaos. Makdisi’s use of absurdity here highlights that chaos and fills her readers with indignation at the unremembered deaths of countless people.

This section brings to mind a similar theme presented in Joseph Heller's classic work of World War Two absurdist fiction. As *Beirut Fragments* strives to do in the preceding passage, *Catch-22* highlights the anonymity of the soldiers that die in battle and the meaninglessness of their deaths. The following is a form letter sent to the wife of the character Dr. Daneeka that best highlights this theme in *Catch-22*: "*Dear Mrs., Mr., Miss, or Mr. and Mrs. Daneeka: Words cannot express the deep personal grief I experienced when your husband, son, father or brother was killed, wounded or reported missing in action*" (344). The phrase "deep personal grief" is obviously incongruous with the insensitive form letter. Heller uses this contradiction to emphasize the facelessness of the soldiers who die during World War Two and the pointlessness of their deaths. Makdisi's discussion of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier also highlights the senselessness and anonymity of the soldiers dying in Beirut, the only difference being that Heller fabricates his absurd letter to make a point, whereas Makdisi is just recording a fact about her war-torn city.

What sets *Beirut Fragments* apart from a piece of absurd anti-war literature such as *Catch-22* is, of course, that it only exhibits scattered examples of absurdity, whereas Joseph Heller wrote *Catch-22* thoroughly in absurdist style. As Makdisi states in the preface to *Beirut Fragments*, she did not set out to write an ironic or satirical book; satire was just one form that she struggled with on her journey toward expressing her war experience. She did not purposely incorporate absurd elements into her memoir; absurdity is inherent in the reality she tries to express. Midway through the book, Makdisi comes to this conclusion herself. "In Beirut, of course, irony and literalness are often indistinguishable, for the primary quality of irony, improbability, is one of the qualities of Beirut realities" (50). In her war-ravaged country,

improbable, nonsensical, and absurd events take place every day, making irony and literalness identical. For this reason, Makdisi cannot avoid incorporating absurd elements into her work.

Suad Amiry's absurd passages in *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* are much more deliberate than Makdisi's. Makdisi never steps outside of the reality of her situation; her absurd passages are byproducts of trying to write about a city in chaos. Amiry, on the other hand, uses absurdity deliberately to interpret and break-down her frustrating experiences in Palestine. In her preface she explains this technique: "Only through taking 'one step to the side of life' could I observe and recount the absurdity of my life and the lives of others" (xii). Her view from "the side of life" allows her to see her situation from an objective perspective. Without taking this vital step to the side during vexing situations, she would feel overwhelmed by anger and frustration and would not be able to effectively articulate a powerful message in her book. Amiry is able to write about her experiences ironically because of her ability to view her experiences objectively, and these absurd passages convey a more powerful anti-war message to her readers than straight narrative could.

The most full-fledged absurd scene of *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* takes place in the first chapter when Amiry tries to navigate airport security. This situation clearly frustrates her, as she keeps repeating, "I was not in the mood..." (3-10), which is why she approaches this section with absurd humor. After slinging a tiresome string of questions at Amiry, the Israeli officer asks her what she has been doing in London, to which she replies, "'I went dancing'..."(8). This answer is absurd because it so deeply contrasts the serious nature of the interrogation procedure. The Israeli officers take the proceedings extremely seriously, taking time to investigate Amiry's birth and family history (4-6) and threatening to arrest her if she does not cooperate (9). "I went dancing" is an answer that takes everyone—the officers and the

readers—by surprise because of its simplicity and frivolity, and because she does not elaborate on it. Her absurd response makes the scene humorous as well as cracks open the ridiculousness of the interrogation procedure. It makes the reader realize that “What were you doing in London?” is a ridiculous question; how does what Amiry did during her vacation affect Israeli security, and why should the officers question only her, while tourists navigate the airport with ease? To emphasize the situation’s ridiculousness, Amiry repeats “I went dancing” several times, even when a more-intimidating officer questions her (9). Her actions rip the interrogation proceedings wide open, exposing their ridiculousness and filling the readers with indignation that Amiry should be forced to endure them.

Amiry includes many other absurd passages in her memoir, such as the incident in which she continually stares at an Israeli soldier (72-75) and the scene in which an entire bus full of Palestinians bursts into hysterical laughter (91). Though *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* contains more absurd elements than *Beirut Fragments*, the memoir is still limited by its necessary allegiance to non-fiction; Amiry cannot fabricate ironic incidences to enhance her anti-war message. Because *Thirty-One Beautiful Green Trees* is fictional, Salwa Bakr is not obligated to retell actual events and is therefore able to create a short story as absurd as she wishes. For this reason, she uses absurdity more freely and deliberately than do Amiry and Makdisi and makes a powerful statement about society’s expectations about women and the conventions of the business world.

One absurd passage comes after the narrator attends work without a brassiere. When her boss, Mr. Aziz, notices that her breasts are hanging loose, his reaction seems completely ridiculous and over-the-top. “...[Mr. Aziz] was overcome by a sudden fit of embarrassment and... the tips of his ears began to go a bright red, after which he started to sweat profusely”(19).

Mr. Aziz becomes too embarrassed to even talk to the narrator about her lack of a brassiere and sends Nadia, a higher-ranking coworker, to scold her privately. Nadia tells the narrator that Mr. Aziz "...regarded [her lack of brassiere] as a dangerous precedent in the company which he could not pass over in silence and that he would punish [the narrator] for behaving in an indecent manner" (19). Mr. Aziz's reaction to the situation seems to the reader excessive and ridiculous. Why should an act as simple as not wearing a brassiere evoke such chaos at the Water Company? The reader is able to see that underwear is not a "dangerous precedent in the company" and that for the narrator's boss and coworkers to take her lack of underwear so seriously is absurd. By writing absurdly, Bakr breaks down the societal assumption that women's breasts should always be upright and stationary. She exposes the expectation for its ridiculousness, and fills readers with indignation that women should be forced to wear brassieres at all. She makes the reader realize the oppression that exists, and then she breaks down the logic that perpetuates society's unwritten dress code for females.

One thing these works of literature all have in common is that their main characters are imprisoned by varying forms of oppression. Makdisi and Amiry are both imprisoned by the ongoing violence in their cities, and the narrator in "Thirty-One Beautiful Green Trees" is trapped by society's expectations of her as both a woman and an employee of the Water Company. Because the characters have this oppression in common, the fact that each of their stories contains absurd elements is no surprise. Anthropologist Ivette Cardena has published two essays analyzing humorous interactions in a Mexican slum. She suggests that "...absurdity, irony and paradox are tools to impinge upon the anxiety, frustration, impotence, confusion and devalorisation that result from chronic deprivation and oppression" ("On humor and Pathology" 138). She discusses the ironic and humorous discourses the inhabitants of the slum have used

to joke about and deal with their disadvantaged living conditions. Overall, Cardeña found that when a person feels a loss of control in his or her life, absurdity offers an escape (127-131). Absurdity stretches the limits of what Makdisi, Amiry, and Bakr can accomplish in their writing because this type of humor transcends conventional narrative. Using absurdity as an outlet for expression, these three women are able to temporarily escape the bonds of oppression, prejudice, and violence, as well as regain control over their situations.

More than a means of escaping oppression, the authors use absurd humor as a form of resistance against injustice. Makdisi relates how she uses humor as a form of resistance against a preacher delivering an offensive message relating the book of Exodus to the Suez War and exhibiting blatant prejudice toward Egyptians. “Our outrage was lessened by the comedy...; our sense of the ridiculous over-shadowed our sense of the wrong done in the name of righteousness and divine authority. The comedy took the malignant edge off the words... [L]aughter was our great sword” (116). By allowing herself to step back from the situation and recognize its ridiculousness, Makdisi fights against the offensive sting of the preacher’s words, and his insults do not permeate her as they would if she took his message seriously. She uses humor for her own psychological survival.

In her second article on the subject of humor in disadvantaged communities, Cardeña discusses the ways in which Blacks in Trinidad have used humor for psychological survival since the time of slavery. “By drawing humour out of the most painful circumstances associated with discrimination, prejudice and exploitation, this population has managed to gain perspective and alter the perception and the impact of an engulfing environment” (“Humour as Resistance” 290). One way they did this was with tongue-in-cheek self-deprecation—describing themselves with the same disrespectful language their slave owners used to refer to them—which mocked the

assumed supremacy of the Whites, as well as the institution of slavery (290). The key of absurd humor is to alter the reader's perception of what Cardeña refers to as "an engulfing environment." In "Thirty-One Beautiful Green Trees" the narrator's changing landscape and bureaucratic workplace constitutes her "engulfing environment." Bakr uses absurd passages to change the reader's perception of what an average workplace like the Water Company should be. Take for example the scene in which she orders herself a red desk. The reader at first perceives this action as strange and illogical. Why would she buy a desk when the Water Company already provides one for her? Why would she order a red one that would stand out from the normal grey desks? Bakr soon alters the reader's perception by rationalizing the narrator's absurd actions. The narrator argues to her boss, "... 'Why do we have to have grey desks? What would be wrong if one employee were to be seated at a red desk, another at a green desk, and a third at a yellow desk, and so on? Wouldn't this make everyone feel jolly?'" (21). These lines make the reader realize that multi-colored desks aren't a silly idea at all; in fact, a more colorful workplace would boost the morale of the Water Company employees.

After establishing this new perception, Bakr provides insight as to where the real absurdity of the situation lies: in the boss's firm opposition to colored desks. Even though the narrator has already paid for the red desk, the boss orders the security officer not to allow the desk to be brought in (21). He treats her like an unruly employee and regards the red desk as a threat to the workplace. Within three paragraphs, Bakr alters the reader's perception from viewing the narrator's actions as strange to perceiving Mr. Aziz's actions as absurd. Why does he think grey desks are so essential? Why is he so afraid of a red desk? The reader realizes that it is absurd for Mr. Aziz to command that all the desks in the building must be grey.

The ultimate effect of these three authors' use of absurdity is that it moves readers to action in a way that non-humorous writing cannot. In an article analyzing the effectiveness of *Catch-22* in inspiring social action, Alberto Cacicedo brings up the importance of "...engag[ing] the reader in a dialogue that might produce the *saeva indignation* (savage indignation) that Jonathan Swift, for example, considered the affective preliminary to ethical social action" (357). Cacicedo goes on to say that, "...Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* leads to such a vision of human responsibility issuing from indignation" (357). Basically, the reader feels indignant and then feels a responsibility to change the injustice. Look again at this line from *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law*: "Do you think Saddam will use any chemical or nuclear warheads?" Salim asked, trying to lighten the intense atmosphere" (69). Absurdity is such a useful tool here because the paradox strikes readers as humorous at first. When they realize what Amiry is suggesting—that her life is so full of horror that talk of warheads can lighten the atmosphere at a tea party—the readers feel guilty for laughing. This guilt, along with the indignation the readers feel towards Palestine's oppression, is ultimately the force that inspires action.

The absurd humor in *Beirut Fragments*, *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law*, and "Thirty-One Beautiful Green Trees" inspires social change and acts as a form of resistance against oppression. Regardless of the amount of absurd humor in the piece, each work is made more powerful by every ironic element it contains. None of these pieces is written completely in the absurdist style, and none could be classified as true absurdist fiction, but this fact does not lessen the strength and effectiveness of the few ironic elements each work contains. *Catch-22* is a powerful anti-war novel that uses the tool of absurdity to a fuller potential than do the three works discussed here; however, *Catch-22* had already been written by the time Makdisi, Amiry, and Bakr were writing their own stories. Instead of copying Joseph Heller's classic, the authors

found new ways to incorporate absurdity into their writing. Analyzing elements of absurdity in relatively realistic literature reveals that a story does not have to be completely ridiculous or completely serious; authors can use elements of absurdity to enhance their message in any style of writing.

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