



## Desolation and Free Will in Arab Female Stage Narratives

By Eiman Mohammed Saeed Saleh Tunsi

Orcid ID: 00003-1925-4492

Associate Professor in Comparative Drama and Theatre

English Language

University of Jeddah,

Saudi Arabia.

[emtunsi@uj.edu.sa](mailto:emtunsi@uj.edu.sa)

### Abstract:

This paper aims to investigate those stage confessions delivered by female theatre practitioners in *States of Pain* and *Provocative Silence: Awaiting for Speech*. Both plays are female monodramas published in one collection entitled *Provocative Silence*. The Moroccan playwright, Abdul Rahman Ben Zeydan (b 1947) gives, in a lengthy Preface, considerable attention to female development from stillness and desolation to free will and determination. Casting major states in the life of females has been focal throughout the collection. With their ostensible different backgrounds, the two women are involved in outward confessions tending to unfold their subdued inquiries, concerns and aspirations. However, the question in this paper is “How do women, in theatre, proceed into, what the playwright calls, ‘levels of knowledge’ to construct their own reality? Aided by different techniques, women are determined for a hopeful future.

**Keywords:** Arab woman; Desolation; Shadow; Darkness; Free Will



## 1. Introduction:

When I first read the title *Provocative Silence* (2013) I had “that shiver of anticipation” which Kate Mosse described in her forward to *100 Great Plays for Women*. (2013: xxi) My anticipation increases with a lengthy Preface entitled “Woman: Disguise and Reality for Arabic Theatre.” This Preface is forwarded by the Moroccan playwright, Abdul Rahman Ben Zeydan (b 1947). *States of Pain* launches with “State of Birth” and ends with “State of Lights” passing through five subsequent states of “Town”, “Awe”, “Seclusion”, “Reclusion Unification” and “Survival.” Those seven subtitles avow stages in the life of the actress in a one-woman play. On the Fourth page in *Provocative Silence: Awaiting for Speech*, the first subtitle “When Darkness Speaks” appears and “Speech of the Awakening” ends the play.

By communicating their own stories, Ben Zeydan brings this collection of plays close to the post-dramatic theatre, defined by Hans-Thies Lehman, to hold predominance of narration of personal memories and experiences. Ben Zeydan’s woman plays are among those plays which maintain the stage to be “the site of a narrative act” giving “preference to *presence* over rep-resentation”, so that “narration” replaces “scenic representation.” The two monodramas, in this paper, observe Lehman’s “extended passages of narration and only interspersed episodes of dialogue.” (2006: 109)

## 2- Literature Review:

Theatre women are prominent in Janet Suzman’s interview in National Theatre Soundcloud in 2013. She argues in a comment on her book *In Not Hamlet: Meditations on the Frail Position of Women in Drama* that “women are not allowed to share their thoughts too much. Women are not taken seriously as philosophers . . . as people whose thoughts are worth hearing at any length”. Suzman claims that they “share their deepest feelings . . . problems . . . and thoughts.” (Suzman: 2013)



In Lucy Kerbel's 10 one-woman plays published in 2013 in *100 Great Plays for Women*, the traditional female role persists. Female characters are involved in dialogues conveying outlooks on life. They dwell in the "traditionally female domains of family, marriage and motherhood" and never in "war, science and business." (Kerbel, 2013: xxi)

However, woman's silence seems to be a matter of recognition to Moroccan male playwrights. In dedication to his parents, Mohammed Abu al 'Ula acknowledges his mother's grand silence in his book *Moroccan Theatre: Theoretical Question and Finale Questions* (Abu al 'Ula: 2014).

Ben Zeydan is grouped with those Moroccan playwrights who "seek to develop Moroccan theatre through new forms and intellectual themes" in order to "conform with cultural and civilized expectations in the Moroccan theatergoers. Ben Zeydan argues the potentiality in theatre for the "change" His theatrical approach is cherished through "freeing the self, bringing the change and renewal launching into self-building." (Ferah 2000: 35-6, 47, 74)

The playwright and critic, Ben Zeydan, is occupied with the question of transition and time. In his book *Moroccan Theatre: At the Crossroads of Reading* (2002), Ben Zeydan admits realizing the transformation he has undergone from "steadiness in vision to motion in perception . . . from the confined to the absolute and from the local to the universal." He is the playwright who is attentive to "humanity, the globe, history, society, reverie, imagination and beauty." He roves in "those moments of reading the play text and watching the theatrical performance." (2002: 6)



Characters' monologues are classified in two types by Behgagi in his book *Shadows of the Text* (1991). Through one type of monologue, the character justifies the selfhood while in another type the character recounts consciously or unconsciously the presence of the recipient and the audience." (2000: 97)

### **3- Aim of the Study:**

This paper aims to investigate woman's journey from desolation to free will and determination in Ben Zeydan's two woman plays. The study of the lengthy Preface forwarded by the playwright, Ben Zeydan, seems crucial in order to explore further insights into the life of Arab women in theatre. Woman's tendency towards desolation is justified in her consecutive monologues. Her proceeding into self-recognition is unfolded through several scenes named either as states or speech-relevant subtitles. To trace woman's progress into 'levels of knowledge' casts light on her concerns and aspirations throughout.

What aids a woman in her journey varies according to her role as an actress or as a mother. A considerable attention will be given to the shadow, darkness, dream, memory as tentative companions in the journey of awakening.

### **4- Methodology:**

I opt to begin with the playwright's Preface and demonstrate in tables his deep concern with the actual and symbolic significance of woman in history, in literature, in arts, in theatre, and in a life surmounted with actions, reactions and circumstances. The different states in woman's stage life will be presented in diagrams. References to Ben Zeydan's theatrical approach will be provided when relevant. His argument of 'levels of knowledge' in theatre is rudimentary in the comparison of those techniques incorporated in the two plays. The presence of companions will be discussed in the light of Hegelian concept of self-recognition.



Provocative Silence is a collection of two woman plays featuring woman’s journey in Arab theatre. The two plays and their Preface are written in Arabic and all quotes from Arabic publications in this study are my own translations into English.

### 5- Woman’s Prominence:

The Preface in Ben Zeydan’s collection of monodramas seems to be one of those forms sought by Moroccan playwrights to embrace “the intellectual content relevant to scholarly and cultural heritage.” (Ferah 2000: 35)

Ben Zeydan manifests in his Preface “Woman: Disguise and Reality for Arabic Theatre” the significance of woman’s speech in an attempt to decipher clues and mystery implied. He lists her symbolic relationships through different perspectives:

Relationship	To Life	To Existence	To Light	To Fertility	To Growth
Woman	Ignites and grants it with vigor	Emanates peace	Endows meaning	Endows meaning	Endows meaning

Table (1) Woman’s relations (2013: 4)

Ben Zeydan explains woman’s actions and reactions in different situations:

Situation	Life	Existence	The Missing	Presence and Decay
Woman	Generating	Changing	Searching	Inquiring

Table (2) Woman’s action and reaction: (2013: 4)

He pinpoints woman’s representational value throughout:

Phase	In Time	All Eras	Life
Woman	Legendary	idol	Heroism, Sacrifice and Motherhood

Table (3) Woman’s valuable presence: (2013: 5)



In history, woman takes different routes in different circumstances:

Circumstances	In Life	In Society	On Land	With Nobility	In Thought
Woman	Heroic	Rebellious	Queen	The beloved	The Intellect

Table (4) Woman’s different routes in history: (2013: 5)

Considerable attention is given to the woman, the intellect who voices her brilliance in different human experiences:

Human Experience	In thought	In Literature	In Poetry	In Pain
Woman	Scholar	Author	Poetess	Prudent

Table (5) Woman’s different talents: (2013: 5)

In Literature and art, Ben Zeydan classifies the distinct parts taken by the woman “away from misconception or disguise”:

Literature & Arts	In Epics	In Tragedies	In Novels	In Arts
Woman	Sets the image	Develops the plot	Cultivates conflict and shifts	Creates harmony

Table (6) Woman’s different roles: (2013: 6)

In theatre, woman is not only the subject-matter, but she is also the producer, the designer, or the moderator.

Theatre	Text	Text & Performance	Performance	Character	Scene
Woman	Playwright	Critic	Director	Actress	Scenographer

Table (7) Woman’s diverse theatrical tasks: (2013: 7)



Through recounting her different tasks in theatre, the playwright argues woman's potentiality to "overcome social constraints and narrow-mindedness." To him, "she is no longer the female confined by male restrictions." She enacts those claims "in civil society to accomplish, to take part in enlightenment, and to promote aspects of modernism which never contradict with originality in her Arab society when proceeding towards development and improvement." (2013: 7)

Ben Zeydan, in the same Preface, traces the history of woman's journey in Arab theatre noting that once the "relationship between man and woman was freed from every tutelage that restricts civilized communication between them, the female actress proves able to connect with herself and with the enlightened world." And yet, her "historical, artistic and social awareness enables her to influence the recipient with captivating discourses." Referring to autobiographies of female practitioners in theatre, Ben Zeydan pinpoints those "burdens, hardships . . . folded in their personal experiences." Life to those women is scattered between moments of social responsibility, days of theatrical responsibilities and extended pains existent in the human experience." (2013: 7-8, 10)

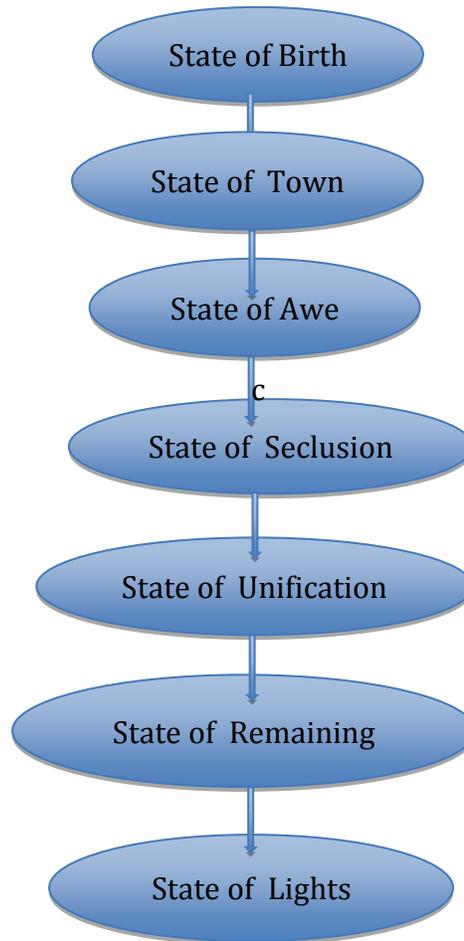
He gives their names, nationalities and their different aching experiences. Inspired by stories told by the Algerian actress Linda Sallam, the Lebanese scenographer Shadia Zaytoun and the Omani actress Fakhreyya Khamis, Ben Zeydan writes his two monodramas revealing realities woman as an actress and as a mother.

## **6- Theatre and "levels of knowledge."**

Ben Zeydan argues the potentiality in theatre for "levels of knowledge." By setting his plays, *Provocative Silence*, in scenes with subtitles, he seems to indicate the character's proceeding into the course of knowledge going through states. In those states each woman retells remarkable experiences in her life which refine her awareness and lead her into another level of knowledge. (Ben Zeydan 2002: 12)



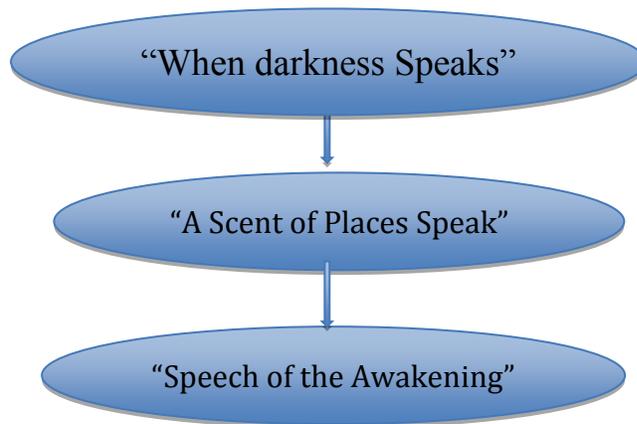
In *States of Pain*, the actress proceeds through the following phases to reach light:



The playwright retells the story of Sallam in seven states beginning “with the general” state of birth and ending “with the particular” state of lights in her life. In *States of Pain*, a lonely woman tends to “present her pains and disclose those moments that instigate her sleeplessness.” She has “survived the comma caused by the violent attack on her and her theatre group.” Whenever she wishes to “arrange her ideas, narration retrieves those evasive moments in her injured memory. (2013: 10-4)



*Provocative Silence: Awaiting Speech* seeks to articulate the heroine’s sufferings. The play begins with “the specific” darkness, throughout her dream, “reaching to the ultimate” in her awakening. The first subtitle in the play “When darkness Speaks” appears in the fourth page in the monodrama. Other subtitles ensue depicting the particular in the mother’s life proceeding from darkness to awakening. (2013:14)

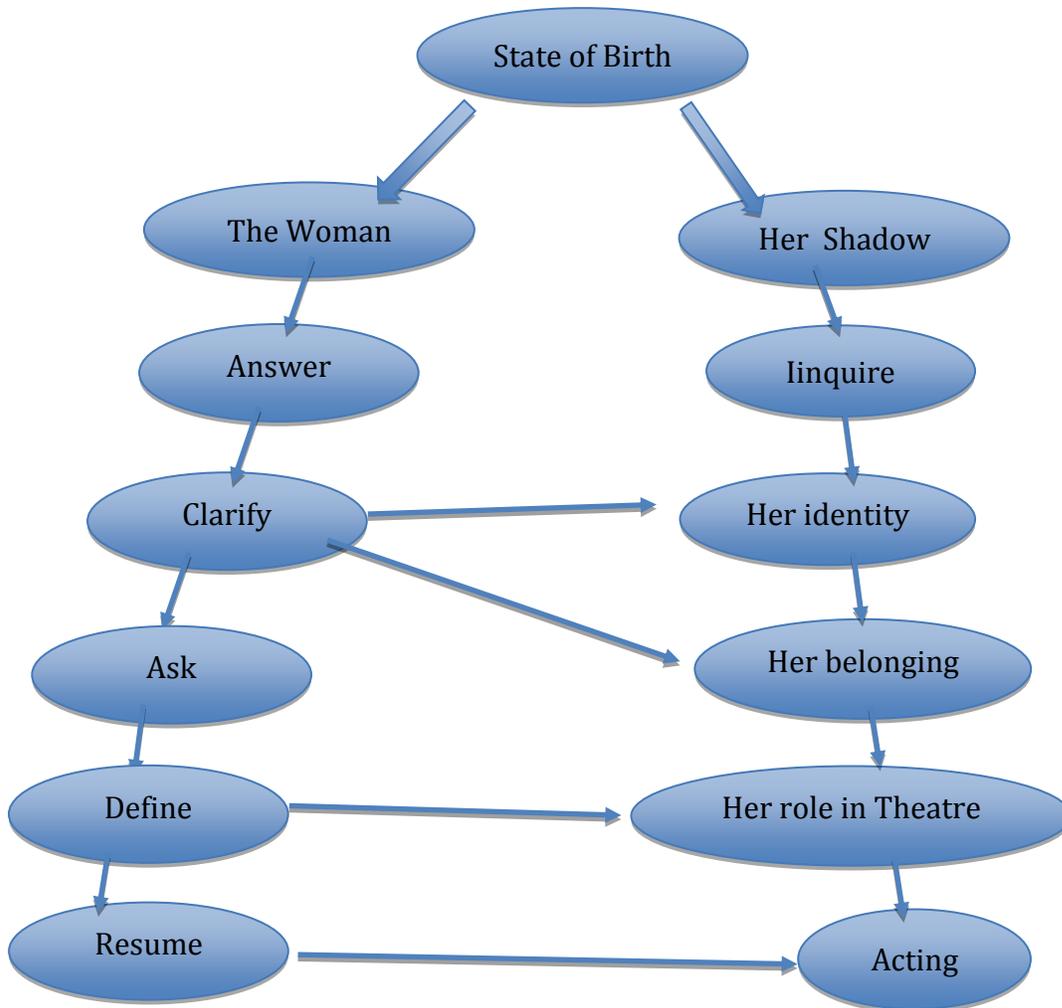


In *States of Pain*, the actress, Lindah Sallam first appears onstage in “State of Birth”, on a wheelchair following her sole escort, the shadow which always follows her. She addresses her shadow and, later, her memories raising intriguing questions. In *Provocative Silence: Awaiting for Speech*, the mother, also addresses the darkness, her first companion, and, subsequently, the distance.

Women’s early confidants seem to act the role of the other in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s hypothesis (1770-1831). Each companion is a tentative assistant into “self-knowledge”. Questions regarding one’s identity such as “What kind of a thing am I?” and “Am I X?” are usually “tested in reality with other people.” Those companions, in *Provocative Silence*, provide the women with chances for “self-assertions” which “must be verified by others.” (Arel: 2014: 136)



The following diagram explains the mutual roles played by the actress and her shadow in her first state into self- knowledge:



It seems that the shadow is an incentive for her incessant narratives. Her Shadow helps her raise such questions as “Who am I?”, “Where do I belong?” and “Why am I here?” She proceeds to disclose her attitude and relationships. (2013: 17)



Involved in monologue allows the actress to “narrate, mimic or disclose” as proposed by Nehad Selaiha, the Egyptian female theatre critic, (2003:4) And Ben Zeydan observes that “listening to woman’s words, circumstances and spontaneous expressions of fears will always be more memorable than written words.” (2013: 5)

Before answering those upcoming inquiries, she declares the significant presence of the shadow in her state of ‘Birth’ “Let me wear my courage and obtain strength from you, my shadow.” She states that she is “the reality of the shadow impersonated in an entity of clay, a human of substance and soul.” She is “a laughing, thoughtful and curious human.” She goes further “I love, I get ill, I recover, I travel and return then I come back in order to leave.” She argues her belonging “I belong to myself, to others who departed suddenly without taking my permission, I belong to this world, to life, to death, to nihilism.” (2013: 16-7)

Moving from the inward to the outward, the actress casts the argument held by external authorities raising her own questions “Is it because I am a female that they forbid me from the body, mind, sense and logic? Is it because in their mindset I am a blemish, a bed for their erotic whims?” She declares “since my birth, I was in their viewpoint a blotch to bury alive and rid their life from. They claim I should vanish” (2013: 19)

In the presence of the shadow, she speaks out the distracting conditions dominating her life. She shifts between “the voice or voices in the past and her reflections in the present” in an attempt to redeem meaning for the states she intends to present onstage. (2013: 22) The shadow is the voice that resounds “pain and intimidation.” Through the shadow, her “subjective knowledge” is avowed and the voice of “a woman of silence” grows “infallible”. (Belenky et al: 1997: 52)



She resumes her intent to act and consequently asks for spotlight which serves to kindle her inner light. She is willing to act in spite of her ailment and the wheelchair facilitates her movement. She claims for lights “You, absent light come and shine my route, my words, my heartbeats. I want to speak, I want to uncover all that has been in those long moments of silence, desperation, pain, comma and frailness.” (2013:21-2)

Even though her Shadow seems reluctant to her intention for theatrical articulation, the motion-disabled actress begins to realize that stage light is substantial to “overcome silence, terror, oblivion and infirmity.” She proceeds to acknowledge that acting grants “her life with invigorating meaning for telling the story of those deceased fellows in her theatre group.” She argues that “acting is her twin which lost her through disability when she became entwined with her wheelchair.” (2013:23)

Within her first state of “Birth,” the actress passes through consequent phases before she features her self-fulfilled profession. Her growing confidence eliminates the significance of the shadow. Memory seems a better companion. Occupied with the past, she transfers her narratives to her life the city.

Going through levels of self-knowledge, companions vary to the same woman and to different women in male-authored plays. Those companions are addressed to help women answer their recurrent questions.

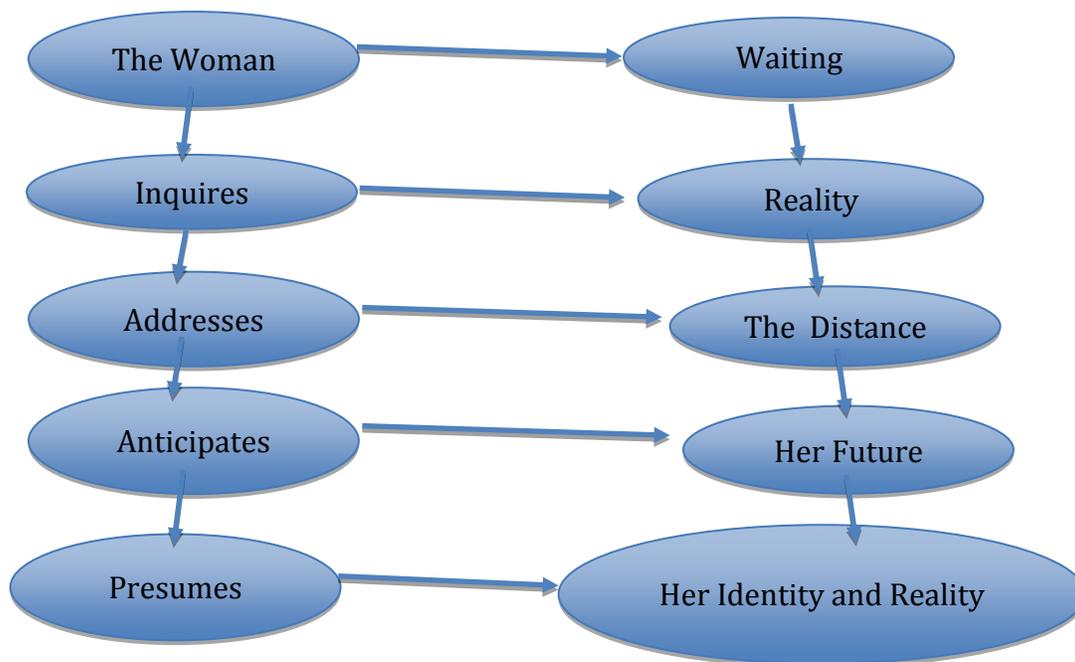
*Provocative Silence: Awaiting Speech* casts the narrative of the mother. The woman, who seems detained to waiting, hesitates to tell her story of defeat. Restrained by waiting, she fails to fulfill her dream and reach her goal. Her questions are “How long?”, “Which reality do I seek?”, “How many questions?” and “How many answers?”.



She is aware that throughout her long waiting numerous questions arise and escort her wherever she goes and at all times. She argues that these questions are keys for her “fortune, luck, safety, warmth and comfort.” (2013: 58-60)

After waiting, she turns to the distance ahead. She tries to anticipate her future through the distance. The unknown distance becomes her companion, her reflection and her refuge from fear and sorrow. Restrained from moving forward into her future, she believes that all women are predestined to such fate. (2013: 61)

The following diagrams demonstrate her companions along with her proceeding in the awaiting state.



Her inquisition provides her with insight into her selfhood. She confesses that she is the image of all women. She is the mother who begets every woman who, like her, tolerates her mysterious destiny. (2013: 60-1)



Her advancement into self-knowledge is accomplished in the last scene in the play entitled “Speech of the Awakening.” The woman awakens and realizes her being swayed by extreme pessimism that governs her subconscious and confounds her reality. She decides to leave the cave of nightmares and avows her enthusiasm to behold a rosy future with the upcoming Spring. (2013: 69)

The actress is accompanied by the shadow, in the first play, and the mother, in the second play, is escorted by a nightmare of darkness and waiting. However, they are, both, led into states of self-knowledge through declaration of memories which reveal the past shaping their reality.

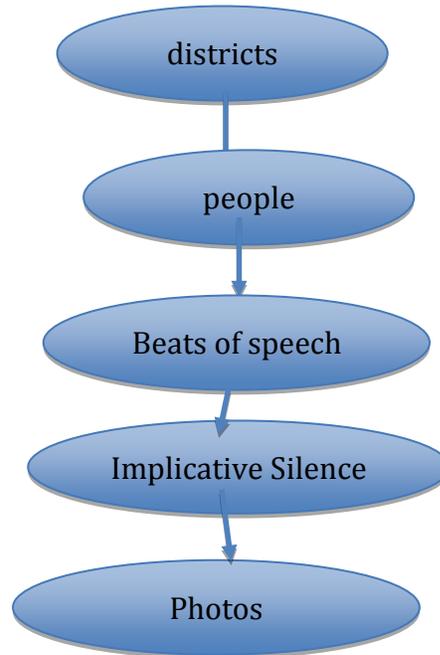
## 7- Memories:

By telling their memories, the two women tend to “reliving multisensory experiences.” They are both involved in the “episodic memory, or autobiographical memory” which embraces a “collection of past experiences” that “occurred at a particular time and place.” Since memories are defined as “a more or less accurate mental representation of something that actually happened,” their predominance in *Provocative Silence*, may be ascribed to their being “the true root of your ‘you-ness’” and the notion that they “form the bedrock of our identities” and “the very foundations of who we are.” (2016: xiv, xi-xii)

The actress opts to “conjure the fragmented and the forgotten” relying on her experience in the “magical world of theatre.” she states “I shall write with my body and voice the improbable” and talk to “those memories to unfold their implication, to move the fixed, to reconstruct relations and to build bridges among them in order to show the elegance of the picture.”



Recalling the city in which she was born and brought up, memories follow:



Memories of the city helps the actress realize that the city she recollects is no longer there. The city becomes desolate and empty since people and voices have departed due to the lack of freedom of expression in the land of independence. Her memory helps her to observe the change in the state of the city. During her provisional absence, the city has undergone a terrible transformation. The city is swamped with corruption. All the efforts to maintain purity for the city are swept away. (2013: 31)

The actress tells her memories of performing in the spacious yards in the city where she is arrested for being a threat on national security. She is interrogated and imprisoned. She argues that her ancestors are those true rebels who have been slayed in the dark. Her plight culminates with the betrayal of an offensive spouse who condemns her to solitary confinement because of her beauty. She comments on the corrupt politicians increasing their wealth with fancy cars and young wives dying their grey hair to maintain young looks.

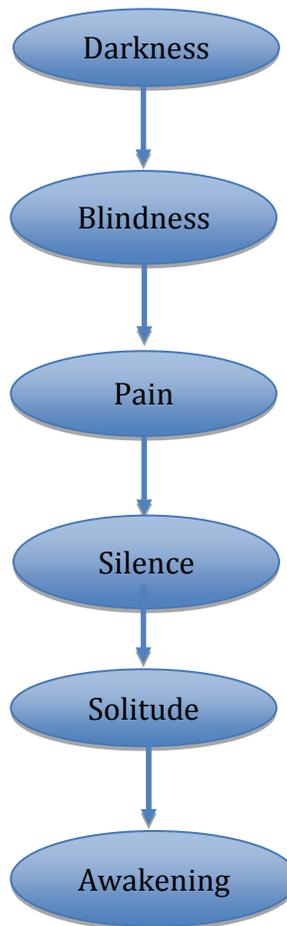


They are the officers who misuse national wealth by wearing those military masks of brotherhood to curse female performers calling them names. When she discloses political vices, the actress recounts their comment after her car accident that she lost before launching the round. (2013: 31, 44)

She rejects crooked shortcuts observing that “honesty takes only to deprivation, prison, lunacy and graveyard.” She admits that Abdul Quader Allolah and Ezzedine Mejjobi are murdered in her same car accident where she is saved but ailed. She carries on her memories of the past in her subsequent state “of Unification” recollecting those fearful days where she hides with her theatre group in the cellar sharing little water and bread after the slaying of other members. Through ongoing theatrical rehearsals, the actress realizes that theatre acts can never be banned amid stifling circumstances. (2013:51)

*Provocative Silence: Awaiting Speech* implies the relation between silence and dream in woman’s life. Only in awakening, the mother realizes that she dreamt of being blind helped only with her young daughter, “wealth,” who was lost in death. Her dream is wrapped with darkness and misconceptions of the unknown distance and destination. She casts her fears and bafflement in the darkness and her pains of loss and solitude. (2013: 61)

“Multisensory experiences” of scent, sound and touching are her aids into memories of places and people. “A Scent of Places Speaks” explains the impact of odor on the mother’s awareness when she begins to rely on scent emitted in places.



When she awakens from such a nightmare, she declares her self-assertive attitude towards life and future. Her introspection in silence and desolation aids her into self-knowledge. Grasping her dream, the mother resolves, in awakening, to change and live a better life. The death of her loved ones incites her memories and develops her determination enhanced survival. No matter whether these memories are introspection in the past or mere delusions in sleep, they help women live better their reality and plan their future. (2013: 67-8)



## **8- Free Will:**

According to the playwright, women choose desolation because it is “one type of rejecting the world, its noise, its violence and its overlapping globalization.” (2002: 10) Through her desolation, the actress seeks to unify with her deceased fellows recollecting their words while she watch pictures of destruction in Palestine and Iraq. In “State of unification,” she identifies herself with those struggling for survival in other Arab nations. Supported by such unification with her fellows and others who encounter similar circumstances, the actress grows hopeful and strong. She undertakes to exchange her place with the shadow addressing the empty wheelchair to liberate her from confinement and illness. The actress is determined “I shall break the iceberg between me and my free will” and overcome disability. (2013:52) (2013:48-52)

By doing so, her free will exists “if not in ultimate reality, then at least in the operational sense necessary for sanity and thereby for the perpetuation of the human species.” (Wilson: 2014: 170) The actress is able to address the martyr’s monument in “State of Survival” recalling his list of choices where his homeland is prior to all other appealing choices in life. she opts to follow his steps and stay in her hometown. She explains her likelihood to stay and survive in “State of Lights.” Then, she recognizes that the memory of those deceased fellows reminds her of their urge for survival and, yet, charges her with vigor and intent to overcome all constraints to her mobility and action.

Passing through different states of self-knowledge, both the actress and the mother develop their free will and replace desolation with determination. Helped with memories triggered by illusion or reality, women break their silence and enjoy living. Although memories “shape what we think we have experienced, and as such, what we believe we are capable of in the future,” their impact is helpful. (2016: XI)



The actress opts to construct not only the present moment and drop all masks, clear the ambiguity, silence all the disturbing sounds, purify the devastating images of the homeland but also feature hopeful upcoming opportunities as well. She aspires for feasible happiness in her birthplace where she feels safe and secured. The mother awakens and admits regaining her consciousness to see, look around, forget the past and look forward to a vivid promising future.” (2013:54-6, 69)

## **9- Conclusion:**

By devoting two plays and their lengthy preface to woman in Arabic theatre, Ben Zeydan highlights another corner where female silence resides. Theatre practitioners proceed through levels of knowledge throughout their career life. Arab females, who opt for desolation, fulfil their self-knowledge as well. Whoever their companions are, it is their responsibility to change from remembering and lamenting to acting and living. Narration is their companion in desolation. Through narration, she observes her surroundings, inquires her selfhood and chooses her companions and memories. Whether in reality or in dream, she sees her past projected before her and she develops an attitude to see opportunities ahead. She realizes that much of her constraints are self-generated. She acknowledges her free will to break up with all restraining beliefs and to construct her personal and general knowledge of reality.



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