

## The Narrative of Reconciliation

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The paper I am presenting aims to explore the notion of reconciliation in the context of Lebanese fiction, or more precisely, post-civil war fictions by Elias Khoury, Rashid Al-Daif, Charif Majdalani and Houda Barakat. This discussion on memory and reconciliation is twofold: first, I am interested in the relation between memory and confession and the attempt to establish a reconciliatory narrative; and second, how the notion of reconciliation interacts with the conditions of displacement and ephemerality. I hope, also, to explore the dialectical relationship between theological and secular aspects of these literary works.

I have observed this notion of reconciliation in the various forms of confession that occur within post-war Lebanese novels. The practice of confession is, due to religious traditions, more dominant with writers from a Christian background. Concentrating on writers with a particular religious background carries with it a certain risk: the risk of establishing or reinforcing divisions when dealing with sectarian Lebanese politics. However, my intention is not to highlight religious, nationalist, or cultural differences in Lebanon, nor to contribute to the fractures of an already polarised society, but to show how, in the context of a society like ours, religion (but not necessarily religiosity) precipitates and manifests in our literature and culture. Moreover, I must emphasise that this paper is neither a criticism nor an endorsement of theological manifestations. Rather this is my exploration of a thin theological thread that remains visible in many writers' works, and the inevitability, perhaps, of this thread.

The seed of these reflections came to me many years ago while reading the novel *Yalo* by Elias Khoury.

*Yalo* takes place in Lebanon, specifically within the Syriac community: a community and, to a certain extent, a language, which is on the brink of extinction from the region. The receding of this community has been going on for many centuries, and the latest political events in Iraq and Syria, mainly the birth of ISIS, have accelerated the collective exodus of the Syriac community. In Khoury's novel, a man named Yalo, who is from a Syriac background, commits a murder. Yalo is captured and forced by the local authority to confess his crime by writing and rewriting his confessions.

Decades ago, when Elias Khoury visited Montreal, he and I had an in-depth conversation about *Yalo*, the novel; Khoury's interest in the Syriac community; and the linguistic influences of Syriac on various dialects in the region. In preparation for the novel, Khoury enrolled in Syriac language classes and immersed himself in the community's daily life. At the time, I wondered if the choice to focus on a community that was in the process of disappearing was the decision to explore, through literature, ideas around culpability and ephemerality. Since then, in my readings of various postwar novels by Lebanese authors, I have encountered many traces of religion, usually subtle and seldom overt, which hold literary meaning. What I characterise as "confessions" include such things as an authors' use of varieties of incantation, interior monologues in the first person voice, and the admittance of wrongdoing.

I must stress that the writers I am about to discuss advocate, without exception, the establishment of a non-sectarian, secular Lebanon. Their political views outside of their creative work are a testament to this fact. Rashid Al-Daif was a communist from a Christian background; Khoury was a member of the PLO and later the Social Democratic Party; and Majdalani and Barakat have spoken eloquently about a secular Lebanon.