# *The Fragmenting Force of Memory: Self, Literary Style, and Civil War in Lebanon*

Norman Saadi Nikro
204 pages, 2012, $59.34 USD (hardcover)
Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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Norman Saadi Nikro's *The Fragmenting Force of Memory: Self, Literary Style, and Civil War in Lebanon* is a groundbreaking intervention into the fields of Lebanese film and literary studies. From an interdisciplinary perspective, it critically examines a selection of cultural production about the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), primarily through the lenses of memory studies and gender, literary, postcolonial, and psychoanalytic theory. Nikro examines a varied selection of literature, autobiography, and memoir, including works by Jean Said Makdisi, Rashid al-Daif, Elias Khoury, and Mai Ghoussoub, as well as a trilogy of documentary films by Mohamed Soueid, in an attempt to unravel the working of what he calls "the fragmenting force of memory."

In addition to a seminal introduction entitled "Departure," Nikro divides the book into five chapters. The introduction paves the way for the understanding of the multifarious works that can ostensibly be read as variations on the theme of the fragmenting force of memory. Nikro accounts for the choice of authors whose works comprise this study, a wise move as the literature on the Lebanese civil war is abundant. His selection, he says, is based on several aspects. First, the works are highly experimental in form. Second, the authors give account of themselves as leftovers, that is, as undigested remains of the civil war. Third, their attachments and affiliations to progressive leftist political and resistance movements associated with Palestinian and socialist parties shape their identities and self-understanding. Fourth, the authors' work unravels their disillusion with the ideologies of these movements, (dis)locating themselves through the fragmenting force of memory.

Nikro defines seminal concepts that constitute the core of his thesis at the beginning of the book and revisits them in the ensuing chapters. Inspired by Toni Morrison's term "disremembered," he coins the term "dismemory" to encompass "the glaring absence of any state initiatives to engage a public inquiry into the war, as well as state-supported museums, memorials or commemorative practices that could be studied as contested sites of memorialization" (1). For Nikro, dismemory is key for the understanding of the fragmenting force of memory. Nikro carefully defines the latter and reveals its mechanism, arguing that it "does not only work to re-collect past experiences, but situates them in a way that the present itself is dislocated and prised open, employing memory to articulate a departure of dismemory" (6).

In Chapter One, "Disrupting Dismemory: The Memoir of Jean Makdisi," Nikro reads Makdisi's memoir as an alternative to dismemory by drawing on multifarious theories, essays, and documentary films by authors such as Paul Ricoeur, Martin Heidegger, Akram Zaatari, and Hannah Arendt. His framework of investigation includes concepts such as Ricoeur's amnesty and amnesia, Heidegger's memory dwelling, Zaatari's memory of an event and event of memory, and Arendt's distinction between self-identification as a "what" and the telling of oneself as "who." Nikro argues that "Makdisi's memoir works to render the present open to the past, situates the present in a way that it can receive the address of residues and remainders that may well work to destabilize the present as an investment in dismemory secured through the political currency of reconciliation" (35).

In the second chapter, "I Confess: Rachid al-Daif between History and Memory," Nikro turns to Rachid al-Daif's autobiographically charged novel *Dear Mr. Kawabata* (Azizi al-Sayyid Kawabata). Nikro's reading of the novel is innovative. Unlike other critics, he does not read it as a fictional autobiography but as a confession. He demonstrates that "al-Daif thematizes *history* as both poison and cure, as a *pharmakon* whose supplementary hues and hesitations, whose excesses and rhetorical extravagances—though also persistence and endurance—emerge through the fragmenting force of memory" (66). He draws in his analysis on some critical literature on confession and Jacques Lacan's notion of "encounter" to analyze the confrontation between Rachid the protagonist and Rachid the narrator. In his conclusion, Nikro asserts that "the confessional mode of al-Daif's novel-memoir is preoccupied not merely with a personal scope of dis-integration/reintegration, but also in respect to a political culture undertaking the same process, if the personal is to afford a public hearing—'other potential readers of this novel'" (92-3).

In Chapter Three, "Anachronic Tensions: Memory and Story in the Work of Elias Khoury," Nikro addresses several works by Elias Khoury. He draws his theoretical framework mainly from literary studies, whereas in many of the other chapters he makes use of concepts he borrows from the social sciences. As the subtitles in his chapter indicate, Nikro takes up Khoury's tackling of seminal topics: "Dis-Covering the Present"; "Memory and Story: Circles of Truth"; "Tapestries: Reactivating the Present"; "Iltizām"; and "Third Worlding Aesthetic Production." Still, Nikro's focus is on Khoury's preoccupation with memory and story, particularly in relation to *anachronic tensions*. Nikro argues that the fragmentation and continuity, as well as the rupture and discontinuity characteristic of Khoury's style, stems from and foregrounds an irremediable *anachronic tension* at an interstice "between self-understanding and history, narrative and story, or else present and past" (97).

The penultimate chapter, "Between Mourning and Melancholia: Memory and Nurture in Mohamed Soueid's *Tango of Yearning*," is the only chapter in this book where the object of analysis is a film: *Tango of Yearning* (1998), the first of Soueid's civil war trilogy of documentary films. Here Nikro focuses on the themes of yearning,

melancholy, and longing, as well as romantic love and friendship. Nikro posits that the memory of the civil war consists of an overlapping exchange between melancholy and mourning. He suggests that "Soueid's films initiate the possibility of posing the question of nurture as a *dwelling in the present*, as a political modality of anticipation and expectation" (28). He draws on the work of Freud, as well as Judith Butler's work on "precarity" and "grievability." He asserts that in Soueid's films, especially in *Tango*, the fragmenting force of memory is valued as a transformative capacity to mourn and nurture.

The final chapter in the book, "History and/or The Traumatic Clamour of Memory: Mai Ghoussoub's *Leaving Beirut*," addresses Ghoussoub's essayistic novel-memoir *Leaving Beirut: Women and the Wars Within.* Borrowing from trauma studies, specifically from the work of Cathy Caruth, Nikro calls attention to Ghoussoub's conception of memory as a transformative practice. He underscores her preoccupation with articulating a non-redemptive, non-scapegoating consideration of trauma and memory, as well as her concern with exploring ethical means for the comprehension of how the civil war can be potentially remembered and memorialized.

In this richly detailed study, Nikro excels in the analysis of what he rightly calls the fragmenting force of memory. His approach is quite novel as he diverges from the trend in memory studies whereby the present is seen as a stabilizing recovery of the past. Although Nikro's use of theory is well-worked, leaving no theoretical terms unsituated and undefined, he occasionally, as he himself acknowledges, moves rather rapidly over an intense and critically complex theoretical terrain. Such a rapid move might pose some challenges for undergraduate students. Nikro's frequent recapitulations of his theses nonetheless offer some remedy. The divisions of each chapter into subsections, each having a thematic subtitle that summarizes the content of the section, also comes to the aid of the inexperienced student. The book's organizaion is quite useful in light of the plethora of approaches and arguments Nikro explores. Some of the chapters contain illuminating comparisons between the literary works discussed. More in this vein would have been quite fruitful. All in all, however, Nikro's analysis is evocative and engaging. He opens new venues for students, readers, and researchers interested in both Lebanese literature on the civil war and memory studies.