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Imagining Syria: National Identity in Khalid Khalifa's Novels No Knives in the Kitchens of This City and Death Is Hard Work

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**Imagining Syria: National Identity in Khalid
Khalifa's Novels *No Knives in the Kitchens of This
City and Death Is Hard Work***



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Abstract.

This study investigates the intricate connection between literature and national identity in Syrian society by analysing Khaled Khalifa's two works, namely *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* and *Death Is Hard Work*. More specifically, this study illustrates how both works reflect Syrian reality during transformative periods that correspond to the Ba'ath Party's acquisition of power and the Syrian Civil War. Khalifa's narratives offer extensive material for reflecting on memory, effect of political oppression on people's lives, aspiration for independence and freedom, and family relations. In this way, the novels characterize Syrian national identity throughout a detailed depiction of the characters' experience in the rapidly changing Syrian political and social setting. This reflection employs the academic concepts of Benedict Anderson, James L. Gelvin, Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler to uncover the interconnection between literature, history, and formation of identity. Furthermore, the reflection provides insight into how the Syrian literature has changed to reflect and construct the national identity under the pressure of significant political change.

Introduction.

Exploring national identity through literature helps to get a peek insight into a country's shared unconscious, mostly when it fits into a context of a great deal of social and political transformation. Syrian literature is a perfect means for that because of its diversity, often emerged out of the violence of the nation's narrative.¹ This study focuses on these ideals and narrates how Khaled Khalifa, a significant figure of contemporary Syrian literature, links between narrative and national identity in a culture that is undergoing change.

In 1963, the Ba'ath Party came to power and the social and political life of the country was greatly transformed, characterized by ideals of Arab nationalism, socialism, as well as the idea of Arab unity. Furthermore, the Syrians writers and artists during the following era of increased state surveillance and persecution of the opposition faced a challenging task of precarious speech.² Following the later Syrian civil war, which started in 2011, the country's struggle added significance. The civil war made literature an even more vital carrier of the ruin, the hope, and the despondency of the Syrian people.³

The novels by Khaled Khalifa, specifically *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* and *Death is Hard Work* are essential to this study. Being set against the backdrop of the crucial historical events of the Ba'ath Party's rule and the ongoing Syrian Civil War, both novels represent a heart-wrenching inquest into Syrian identity and its representation. The novels topics incorporate themes such as memory and nostalgia, the impact of political oppression on personal lives, the struggle for autonomy and personal freedom, and family dynamics. It is crucial to point out that more generally, Khalifa's novels reimagine the political role of literature associated with the image of the nation.

Thus, the goal of this research is to investigate the representation of national identity in Khaled Khalifa's novels, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* and *Death Is Hard Work* against political dictatorship and societal struggle in Syria. Through exploring Khalifa's depiction of Syrian existence during the crucial temporal turning points, this study will examine the ways the main characters adjust and adhere to the evolving society of Syria. Moreover, it will think about and consider the national identity during the social struggle and the authoritarian regime.

¹ Nabil Suleiman, "Novelistic and Literary Representations of Political Repression in Syria," *Tabayyun for Philosophical Studies and Critical Theories* 2, no. 6 (November 2013), 77.

² *Ibid.*, 98.

³ Felix Lang, "Transformations of the 'Syrian' Literary Field since 2011," in *Re-Configurations Contextualising Transformation Processes and Lasting Crises in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Rachid Ouassa, Friederike Pannewick, and Alena Strohmaier (Springer VS, 2021), 261.

The reason for this choice is in the importance of both novels in chronological terms. They represent exactly the period of various levels of historical content. In other words, these two novels have been chosen because of their position in reflecting substantial historical eras in the Syrian history. Both novels examine multiple layers of historical material, ranging from the rise to power of the Ba'ath Party all the way up to events in the Syrian civil war. This enables Khalifa's works to function as an instrument for the comprehension and even manipulation of national identity narratives in history when political or social changes occur.

Throughout the novels, there are recurring themes of memory, nostalgia, oppression and autonomy as well as familial relations. All of this is important in the portrayal of characters' movement towards future and thoughts about the past which is at the core of narrative. Memory and nostalgia in these two works act as an element for revealing characters whose desire for freedom go hand in hand with the complexity of familial relationships. In a similar way, Khalifa's narrative stressed on the deep sorrow of one person which is representative of the society's other tragedies as well.

At the same time, novels are good ground on which to project realistic scenarios even amidst a revolution that is always in process. Such efforts by the regime, to transform largely peaceful protests into armed confrontations and then present them as sectarian conflict, only serve to highlight underlying tensions that have existed for decades beneath the surface of such oppressive measures. Khalifa's choice to concentrate on a family that reflects the more extensive Syrian culture, at that point, examines the mental and material afflictions of Syrians.

The Author.

Khaled Khalifa (1964-2003) is a Syrian novelist who retells the tumultuous history of Syria and Aleppo in particular. Called eulogies for Syria, his novels intertwine historical with secular possibilities of the future with the ugly reality.⁴ His well-known novels include *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, which received the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature, and *Death Is Hard Work*, with a finalist for the National Book Award for Translated Literature.⁵ His storytelling was multifaceted for its epic scale, multigenerational narratives, and penchant characterizations of Arab life, women, and authoritarian oppression. Despite censorship and personal danger, Khaled Khalifa refused to leave Damascus. He supported the 2011 revolution and the global dialogue of Arab literature until his death in 2023.⁶

Throughout Khaled Khalifa's writing career, he has unfailingly delved deep into the struggles and aspirations of Syrian society. Raised in the folds of Syria's rich historical cloth, the author writes with a wealth of narratives of individual and national Syrian stories. Individual histories that intertwine with national history, narrated in a gripping narrative style.⁷ His novels have stretched the conceptions of Syrian literature beyond the imagination, and they have also served as anti-censorial and oppression critique.⁸

Khalifa's choice to stay on in Damascus regardless of the individual hazards and professional hurdles brought by censorship demonstrates his commitment to his work and his nation.⁹ By employing character portraits and clever plot turns, Khalifa has offered outsider onlookers a means of witnessing the Syrian peoples' resilience and torment, positioning him as a prominent writer of the Arab and international literary industry.

⁴ Ella Creamer, "Celebrated Syrian Author, Poet and Screenwriter Khaled Khalifa Dies Aged 59," *The Guardian*, October 2, 2023, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/oct/02/celebrated-syrian-author-poet-and-screenwriter-khaled-khalifa-dies-aged-59>.

⁵ Fadia Faqir, "Khaled Khalifa Obituary," *The Guardian*, November 27, 2023, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/nov/27/khaled-khalifa-obituary>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lina Sinjab, "Khaled Khalifa: 'Larger than Life' Famed Syrian Writer Mourned," *Www.bbc.com*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-66997816>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Fadia Faqir, "Khaled Khalifa Obituary," *The Guardian*, November 27, 2023, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/nov/27/khaled-khalifa-obituary>.

Theoretical Framework.

In order to disentangle the complex web of the effect of literature on the national identity of Syrian society, the research follows a multifaceted theoretical path. More specifically, the foundational work of Benedict Anderson on Imagined Communities, the commentary by James L. Gelvin on nationalist movements in Syria occurring in the early 20th century, and Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler's examination of memory composition are integrated into the framework.

On the one hand, Anderson's theory functions as a fundamental framework for the formation of nations, as they are underpinned by shared stories and collective imagination, while, therefore, facilitating the understanding of the way Syrian life is presented in Khaled Khalifa's works. On the other hand, Gelvin's contribution is situated in the symbolic dimension of nationalism and the role of literature in the formation of collective identity. Lastly, Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler's layer of analysis focuses on the role of memory in self-representation, drawing the readers' attention to another function of memory. By combining these theoretical viewpoints, the research will seek to investigate the way Syrian society is expressed through literature by forming an understanding of the role of Khalifa's works against the historical, political changes that have taken place and considering the holistic understanding of the way it happened.

According to Anderson's Imagined Communities, a nation is: An "imagined political community" – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.¹⁰ This understanding is critical to national identity as a socio-cultural concept because it is defined by the manner in which real or fake structures are conceived rather than by their existence.¹¹ In applying Anderson's theory to Syrian literature, Khaled Khalifa's works, particularly *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* and *Death Is Hard Work*, offer a poignant exploration of Syrian identity, representing the collective experiences and the shared, yet imagined, sense of community and identity among Syrians. Moreover, they reflect the shape of the imagined Syrian national identity that has been influenced by various historical events or social and cultural processes. Thus, the notion of imagined communities is important for the Syrian case since such upheavals linked to their historical and political aspects have affected the Syrian

¹⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 5-7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

national identity. In this regard, the concept of the imagined community illustrates how the national identity represents both individual and collective threads of the same tapestry.¹²

In addition, political movements and events in the country such as the rise of the Ba'ath Party and the Civil War in Syria are essential for the formation of a national identity.¹³ literature serves as an effective tool of community imagination.¹⁴ According to Khalifa's narratives, the Syrians encapsulate their shared history, cultural norms, and experiences, indicating how people could feel that they belong to one and the same national identity. This observation corresponds to Anderson's perception of nations. In that work, he described nations as deep, horizontal comradeship made national identity.¹⁵ Moreover, Syrian national identity can also be described following Anderson's concept of a mosaic model. It emphasizes that national identity is not homogeneous, but is composed of a large number of experiences, memories, and stories that help create the image of the nation.¹⁶ Anderson emphasizes the role of "simultaneous, calendrical time" in the imagination of the nation.¹⁷ Frequently, Khalifa's pieces contrast distinct times and areas in Syria that depict how national identity is more extensive than individuals' experiences and flows through the past, current, and future.

The weaving of temporal and spatial elements in Khalifa's narration reflects the imagined community in which Syrians remain wherever they are. Particularly relevant in Anderson is the conflict, exemplified by the Syrian Civil War's creation, as it stands at an important element of Anderson's theory making.¹⁸ Khalifa's portrayal of resilience, desperation, and memory amidst conflict foregrounds a continuing struggle constituting and reconstituting Syrian identity through the formation of its national character. In the story, readers see the community through the characters' lenses, observing how it is continually being imagined anew in times of trouble. To conclude, Anderson's idea offers a profound basis for interpreting the Syrian national identity in fiction, drawing attention to the importance of literature, language, and historical context in cultivating the national imagination. Khalifa's novels illustrate the process of reflection of the national identity, which was changing due to historic circumstances.

¹² Manal Al Natour, "Home, Identity, and Place in Syrian Literature: Maha Hassan's *Drums of Love* and Ghassan Jubba'i's *Qahwat Al-General*," *Contemporary Levant* 7, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 66.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 24-26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

When exploring the complex patterns of literature and national identity that are woven into the Syrian context, it is important to think about the intricate patterns of memory explored in literature discourse. According to Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler, until recent expansionist moves in conceptions of memory, the most familiar single idea of memory at once the most general evokes the personal level.¹⁹ Also, memory is conscious recurrence of some element of past experience – a continuous living available version of a past experience. Therefore, memory became the core element of the modern era when personal identity as the core of the psychological self-first occurred.²⁰

This discourse highlighted above proves that memory is far from a clear and stable body preserving past events in a one-sided manner: it is rather a site of struggle, practice and ideology, a multidimensional construct mediated at the level of personal experience and social projections. Viewed in light of Ana Douglass's and Thomas Vogler's hypotheses, memory is not a passive storage of data but a complex mechanism, constantly subject to the social context shaping it and of a multiple management at both micro and macro levels.²¹ Using this theoretical ground to analyse Khaled Khalifa's works allows to produce an adequate explanation of memory's workings within literature's structures of the construction of Syrian national identity.

In this most complex mosaic of Syrian national identity and discourse, Gelvin delves into the early 20th century nationalist movement to lay the groundwork for understanding how historical instances fed into the tapestry that is national identity and define it in all its complexities. Specifically, in this regard, Gelvin's work illustrates how cultural symbols and mass politics were essential tools in creating publicity across clashing ideologies of nationalism in early 20th century Syria.²² In other words, Gelvin's work idealizes the critical dependence on the symbolic sphere of nationalism – slogans, key symbols, and public demonstrations not only express, but also create the understanding of common identity.²³ This perspective investigates how literature functions as a powerful channel of expressing national identity. Thus, literature serves as a space of symbolic battles for the face of the nation.

¹⁹ Ibid., 14-15.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 18-19.

²² James L Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties* (Univ of California Press, 1999), 147-150.

²³ Ibid.

Methodology.

Informed by the multifaceted theoretical framework, the methodology adopted in this thesis is a close reading approach. The analysis will scrutinize the English translations of Khaled Khalifa's novels, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* and *Death Is Hard Work*. This close reading will focus on thematic analysis. The thematic analysis will explore Khalifa's characters' development and their reflections of societal changes in Syria, focusing on their motivations, transformations, and interactions within the socio-political landscape. Besides, it aims to dissect the portrayal of national identity within Khalifa's narratives, contextualizing these within the broader historical events and societal transformations, to provide a multi-dimensional view of national identity. This methodology is designed to explore several key themes that emerge from Khalifa's work in light of the theoretical framework:

Memory and Nostalgia: This theme will delve into the pivotal role of memory in shaping individual and collective experiences, drawing from Douglass and Vogler's insights. The analysis will explore how characters navigate their existence amidst political and social upheaval. It will also investigate the theme of nostalgia for a lost past and efforts to preserve memories against the backdrop of societal decay. This approach aims to highlight the complex interplay between memory and nostalgia, examining their significance in resisting the erasure of cultural and personal histories under oppressive regimes.

Impact of Political Oppression on Personal Lives: By exploring this theme, the thesis will look at how the political climate under the Ba'ath Party's authoritarian rule deeply affects the characters' lives, aligning with Anderson and Gelvin's frameworks on how oppressive regimes shape collective experiences and national identity.

Struggle for Autonomy and Personal Freedom: This theme will investigate personal rebellion against societal expectations, exploring how literature reflects and challenges socio-political constraints on autonomy, informed by Gelvin's framework.

Family Dynamics: This theme will examine the complex relationships and dynamics within families reflecting on how these familial structures mirror and are impacted by the larger socio-political changes within Syria. Utilizing Benedict Anderson's concept, this theme will explore how families serve as microcosms of the nation, where individual family members navigate their roles against a backdrop of national turmoil and transformation.

Chapters overview.

Chapter one will present a literature review that focuses on critical works and analyses of Syrian literature that presented the formation of national identity narratives in Syria's socio-political climate. The chapter integrates perspectives of various scholars, each of which offers various observations concerning the Syrian literature, including novels, poetry, and prison literature. Such review contains various themes and points related to the influence of Syrian literature over national identity.

Chapter two will provide the historical context for the changes in the Syrian society and its literature. More precisely, it will focus on the period from the Ba'ath Party's seizure of power in 1963 to the outbreak of the Syrian Revolution in 2011. Capitalizing on the Ba'ath's permanent rule, it will analyse the party's impact on societal relations and their reflection in Syrian literature. Also, It will demonstrate the correlation between political repression and cultural development. Moreover, the second chapter will also consider the Syrian Revolution's effects on literature.

Chapter three will discuss the novel *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*. It will address how the portrayal of a family in Aleppo during the 1960s and the early 2000s affected by political oppression and societal changes operate as a metaphor of the broader socio-political atmosphere in Syria. The themes of memory and nostalgia, the impact of political oppression on personal lives, the historical struggle for autonomy and personal freedom, and family relations all demonstrate the broader social and political context of Syria.

Death is Hard Work will be the primary text for analysis in chapter four. The novel features a story about three siblings honouring their father's only wish, thereby denouncing political oppression as the doorway it opens into one's private life. The analysis will reflect also on the same themes discussed before, revealing the intricate socialites of Syrian life in a battle context.

Finally, a conclusion will be drawn that synthesizes the findings from the previous chapters.

Chapter one: literature review.

In the following chapter, a literature review is conducted in an attempt to investigate the manner in which Syrian literature in its multiple forms and its differing periods has participated in the shaping of national identity narratives and how it has been shaped by the intricate sociopolitical web of Syria. Informed by a variety of academic scholar's opinion such as the one of Judith Naeff, Arief Budiman, Mohammad Ihssan Zabadi, Anne-Marie McManus, Daniel Behar, Linda Istanbuli Miriam Cooke and R. Shareah Taleghani, this review tries to uncover the complex and multidimensional interplay between literature and national identity in the case of Syria. Authors that have conducted extensive analysis of novels, poetry, prison literature, and other forms have often touched upon layers that run through Syrian writings and across the overall national collective conscience.

Judith Naeff's *Writing Shame in Asad's Syria* is a critical piece of literature that helps comprehend Khalifa's take on the Syrian society. This adds to the existing knowledge of utilizing national identitarian narratives in the context of Syrian literature.²⁴ According to Naeff, her reading of *No Knives in the Kitchens of this City* contextualizes the sense of collective shame within the framework of the novel, which makes her study an important part of the examination of the Ba'ath Party era in Syria.²⁵ Naeff primarily makes an argument about how Khalifa constructs shame differently, from that caused by transgressing social norms and the one caused by submission to authoritarian rule.²⁶ Furthermore, Naeff's analysis of Khalifa's narrative strategies, including his narrative organization and use of metaphors, contributes to understanding how such strategies help create a picture of Syrian national identity.²⁷

On the other hand, while the emotional concern of shame in Naeff's works is worth attention from an individual perspective, it involves a slight narrowing focus on narrowly personal emotional experience. Considering the multi-dimensional nature of the research question regarding national identity, this concern could be expanded from a narrow individual aspect to the broader examination of society.

Arief Budiman's research on Khalid Khalifah's *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* is instrumental in approaching Syrian national identity narrative inquiry. Arief Budiman examines the characters' different responses in the novel to the conflicts and related issues.²⁸ Budiman employs a literary sociological perspective, concentrating on the ideological and

²⁴ J.A Naeff, "Writing Shame in Asads Syria.," *Arab Studies Journal* 26, no. 2 (December 31, 2018): 131-145.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 138-142.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Arief Budiman, "The Strategies in Dealing with Political Conflict in Syria : Study of Khalid Khalifa's *La Sakakin Fi Matabikhi Hazihil-Madinah* ," *Humaniora* 28, no. 3 (2016), 293-297.

political undertones in the narration of the conflict in novel.²⁹ The study concludes that characters applied different defensive strategies in their response to the conflicts and obstacles, mirroring the multifaceted nature of individual and collective realities in a politically and ideologically packed climate.³⁰

Nevertheless, a possible criticism of Budiman's analysis refers to the question of establishing an explicit connection between a number of individual experiences and the overall framework of the nation's identity. Although the sociological analysis allows for gaining sufficient insights into how the people engaged in multiple violent occurrences reacted, this analysis need to provide a proper integration approach, which features how these several narratives reflect or contribute to Syria's national identity. The sociological approach remains very generalized. Therefore, the analysis could benefit from a broader use of related sources, such as theoretical constructs providing an understanding of a national identity.

Another work along similar lines that provides analytical points regarding portraying the Syrian society in literature and the formation of identity narratives of nations is Mohammad Ihssan Zabadi's study on the translation of Khalid Khalifa's novel *Madīh Alkarāhiyya* into English. Zabadi names the translation process as a means of cultural exchange and a consecrating practice, employing socionarrative theory and para-text theories to study textual frameworks and necessary peritextual social frames for the novel to be circulated.³¹ The study uncovers the narrative strategies employed when translating the text from a peripheral language into a dominant one.³²

Such an investigation becomes important in evaluating how translated works of Syrian authors such as Khalifa are marketed and understood in the world literary scene and how they shape and reflect narratives of national identity in Syria. Although this research sheds new light on the ways in which translating a work of literature transforms its perception and meaning to the audience, it does not integrate the aspects of how themes and strategies of writing used in the original Arabic language also contribute to the formation of national identity in Syria.

An argument that Anne-Marie McManus makes in her article on the contemporary Syrian novel in translation revolves around the increased interest in Syrian literature in the

²⁹ Ibid., 292.

³⁰ Ibid., 298.

³¹ Mohammad Ihssan Zabadi, "Translation from the Peripheries of World Literature: The Case of Khalid Khalifa's *Madīh Alkarāhiyya*," *Translation & Interpreting* 15, no. 1 (February 28, 2023): 257-258.

³² Ibid., 272.

English-speaking world, which has been facilitated by the Arab Spring.³³ She observes that while earlier prominent Syrian writers remain largely undertranslated, novels from the post-2000 era are experiencing a notable boom in translation.³⁴ This development indicates a perceived Western desire to learn more about Syrian life and the country's society and psyche, particularly considering the uprising.³⁵ She argues that this is possible due to novels such as *In Praise of Hatred* by Khalid Khalifa and others, which are believed to provide valuable insights into the nature of Syrian society and may be described as pre-2001 opposition literature.³⁶

Yet, as she emphasizes, those novels are published before the revolution, and one should be cautious about interpreting them in the context of present or recent events, which do not always have direct ties to the previous ones. The second piece of criticism that can be applied to McManus's argument refers to research on Khalifa's portrayal of Syrian national identity. Even though McManus's point about growing translations and interest in Syrian novels is valid, concentrating mostly on their Western reception and depiction might inadvertently push the original context and goal of their creation to the margin.

While Behar analyses the changes in the field of Syrian poetry, especially modernity's issues and concerns in the transformation from hope and dreams to fear and catastrophe, he gives a comprehensive idea of learning a different kind of poetry and a new culture among poets.³⁷ Behar's claim is linking those changes to the situation in the whole country due to the struggles that pass throughout the second half of the 20th century.³⁸ Behar also highlights the diversity within Syrian witness poetry and their contribution to a collective narrative of witnessing and responding to national crises.³⁹ He calls this phenomenon "stylistically polar approaches" that unified them.⁴⁰

This perspective is highly relevant to research on Syrian national identity narratives as it offers an understanding of how traumatic experiences and catastrophic events are embedded in the cultural and literary fabric of Syria. Behar's approach of situating Syrian poetry within a global context of literature emerging from conflict zones is particularly insightful. This enables a comparative analysis of the Syrian literary experience with trauma and catastrophe

³³ Anne-Marie McManus, "The Contemporary Syrian Novel in Translation," ed. Samar Yazbek et al., *The Arab Studies Journal* 22, no. 1 (2014): 333.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 323.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 332-333.

³⁷ Daniel Behar, "In the Shadow-Imagination: A Brief Literary History of Syrian Poetry of Witness," *Contemporary Levant* 7, no. 1 (March 3, 2022): 22.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 22-24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

as a trend within global literature, situating the Syrian attempts of such kind in an international perspective in terms of nationality and cultural consciousness.⁴¹

However, to research national identity narratives in various literary genres, one cannot limit this area of study to the insights about poetry. In this case, it is necessary to integrate several sources of literature such as poetry, novels, and apply to other manufacturing cultural production. Such an extended approach will characterize the Syrian response in literature and other domains to the identified main socio-political events and will demonstrate how the various genres embody and contribute to changing the national identity narratives of Syria.

Linda Istanbuli examines the symbol of the intellectual in Syrian literature and fiction and how it has changed and evolved as a character.⁴² Using the characters of Mihyar, Haydar Haydar and Rosa Yasin Hasan by works of Adonis, it is possible to trace how the image of the intellectual develops along the trajectory defined by the author, marking how the framework of the cultural-political background in Syria changes.⁴³ In more general terms, Istanbuli believes that the evolution of such transition is an indicator of the broader reconsideration of the view of the societal worth of the intellectual, the refusal of large narratives and patronizing stances.⁴⁴

One criticism is that while the article is important in terms of unravelling the subtleties of the Syrian national identity through literature, focusing on individual literary figures diminishes analysing their role in the broader context of societal or the national identity narrative. Nevertheless, it may be addressed, while at the same time increasing the level of discourse on the relationship between the literature and the national identity in Syria.

Miriam Cooke's article offers an examination of what prison literature is capable of depicting about the rule of Hafiz Asad in Syria. By presenting and commenting specifically powerful excerpts from various Syrian writers who have lived through prison, Cooke reveals how extremely imprisonment influences an individual's subjectivity and the socio-political sphere.⁴⁵ The article by Cooke opens with the contradiction of the prison as a playground for the imagination.⁴⁶ The author presents a description of Ibrahim Samuil and Faraj Bairaqqdar's works where the writers had to face an existential struggle and the boundaries of life and death

⁴¹ Ibid., 36.

⁴² Linda Istanbuli, "Mihyar's Precarious Journey: Imagining the Intellectual in Modern Syrian Literature," *Contemporary Levant* 7, no. 1 (March 10, 2022): 1–17.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 5-7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ miriam cooke, "The Cell Story: Syrian Prison Stories after Hafiz Asad," *Middle East Critique* 20, no. 2 (June 2011): 169–187.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 169-171.

distorted by the power of prison.⁴⁷ The prison literature serves as evidence to the horrors inflicted upon intellectuals and as a glimpse of life from behind the bars.⁴⁸

Furthermore, she also points out special attempts by intellectuals such as Mamduh Adwan and Muhammad Malas to validate prison narratives as expressions of everyday life, of human solidarity beneath the fears of imprisonment.⁴⁹ Thus, the narratives of confinement are commonly of the dark and unfulfilled, expressions of a unique sort of production.⁵⁰ In addition, Cooke questions the change in framing of prison experiences between Hafiz Asad's time and his son's, Bashar. She provides important explanations regarding the possible unfolding of the political and social situation in Syria and to what extent expression and opposition are tolerated under Bashar.⁵¹

Therefore, the essence of Cooke's article is that the human spirit is primarily sensitive to suppression, but more importantly, that this literature has the status of a tool for showing everything that is inconvenient to show. Through the prison narratives, Cooke identifies what questions these simple words voice. And it concerns not only Syria but refers to the simple essence of political imprisonment. Thus, Cooke's article on prison literature reveals that imprisonment can be a creativity catalyst and suffocative trap at the same moment. On the other hand, the article could have extended to a broader explanation of how the socio-political justification of that time contributed to the emergence of these narratives. A deeper contextualization by historical and political influences would facilitate the explanation of the problems that made writing under the repressive regime of Syria more challenging, especially considering the severe limitations imposed by the censorship of the state.

In a related area, R. Shareah Taleghani undertakes a compelling exploration of the complex relations between vulnerability, recognition, and human rights in Syrian prison literature.⁵² Taleghani's work offers an analysis of how political detainment narratives are intense and critical expressions of the need for dignity and justice on the individual and communal levels when oppressed governments in power.⁵³ By situating these narratives within

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 170-171.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 179-181.

⁵² R. Shareah Taleghani, "VULNERABILITY and RECOGNITION in SYRIAN PRISON LITERATURE," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 1 (January 20, 2017): 91-109.

⁵³ Ibid., 92-97.

broader discourses of human rights theory, Taleghani offers valuable insights into the poetics and politics inherent in this literary genre.⁵⁴

By contextualizing Syrian prison literature in a historical and literary sense, she indicates the 1970s as the period within which it made itself known as a unique genre.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Taleghani provides a meticulously explanation concerning the possible content of the Syrian prison literature novels.⁵⁶ It includes a wide range of literary forms such as testimonies and memoirs, showing the people's life in political detention and the way of their families navigates during the rule under an authoritarian regime.⁵⁷ Therefore, Taleghani in her article uncovers the idea of how valuable this narrative is for people who can be counted as witnesses of such level of the value of human life.⁵⁸

Although R. Shareah Taleghani's article *Vulnerability and Recognition in Syrian Prison Literature* provides profound analysis of the complex relationships among vulnerability, recognition, and human rights in Syrian literature, a more thorough analysis of the way in which the authors develop their characters may better help to comprehend the means by which the texts convey their message about vulnerability and recognition.

The synthesis of perspectives from Judith Naeff, Arief Budiman, Mohammad Ihssan Zabadi, Anne-Marie McManus, Daniel Behar, Linda Istanbuli, Miriam Cooke, and R. Shareah Taleghani, any of Syrian literature exploration is represented as multi-dimensional and addressing its national identity narratives. This collection confirms the deep linkages between personal narratives and the macro, including social and political, changes in Syria, which is even more critical due to this country's complex history and the tumultuous period of the Ba'ath Party era. From the sociological to literary and from the specific to the general, each scholar, employing their respective distinct analytical lenses, helps develop what is a collection of perspectives on how literature in the production and reception works as a reflective and constitutive. The theme of shame or conflict, definition, translation, poetic development, intellectual biography, and the brutal realities of being interred in Syrian literature offers multiple means to develop how exactly these works push against and work alongside national and identity and expression. While their singular richness is inspiring, contextualizing their findings with others is still a matter of development.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 92-93.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 94-96.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Ibid., 98-101.

Thus, the recognized gap in associating individual emotional experiences, sociopolitical critique, and broader historical contexts into a single narrative of national identity remains a crucial area for further studies. What is more, other kinds of criticism of the existing analysis, based on its possible restrictions such as an excessive focus on personal emotional experience, the treatment of translated works in a primarily Western-centric way, and ignoring the socio-political forces that work behind the produced literature, shows signs of a necessity for such an integrated perspective. Such a perspective should connect the individual and communal narratives mentioned above with the awareness of various socio-historical forces that work to shape literature and thus notions of national identity.

Finally, my thesis speaks to the existing gaps in previous research through better integration of individual narratives into the overarching framework of national identity. To be more precise, while many previous scholars have made important contributions in this regard, my thesis builds further on their work by more explicitly linking the individual experiences, as described in Khalifa's novels, with the broader socio-political context and national identity formation. Namely, it underscores the impact of political oppression, the struggle for personal freedom, the role of memory and nostalgia and family dynamics in resisting the attempts at cultural eradication. By that account, my thesis may contribute to a wider understanding of the issue by unveiling the complex interaction between individual stories and overarching socio-political forces.

Chapter Two: Historical Overview.

In this chapter, I will provide a historical overview that will guide the reader through the main changes of the Syrian society and its literature from the rise of the Ba'ath Party to power, through the events of 2011, up to the contemporary period.

2.1 The Ba'ath Party's Control in Syria.

After the separation of Syria from Egypt in 1961, the country has experienced significant political disintegration and domestic discord. Firstly, in Syria itself, the military split into numerous factions, including Baathists, nationalists, and Nasserites members.⁵⁹ In 1963, a group of six military officers, including Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Assad, staged a coup to rectify that two-year period of unrest. The victorious officers formed the Military Committee of the Ba'ath Party, which was to govern Syria for the next decade.⁶⁰ The coup of 1963 radically changed the political configuration of Syria at that time: it destroyed the current ruling coalition and replaced it with its own power, identified with the Baath Party and controlled the Military Committee.

Thus, the Military Committee went from participant in the coup to the primary power in Syria, receiving all controls in its hands.⁶¹ Taking advantage of their new position, the Military Committee took the necessary actions to ensure the consolidation of their power in the army. They spend a great deal of time to promoting and appointing the officers from the armed forces, whose views truly identified with their own.⁶² In addition, the committee followed the necessary steps to provide the reserves officers having rural origins to occupy key positions since these people will be the community they can rely on without any doubt. Without a doubt, such a biased rearrangement demonstrated the committee's determination to create an army that will fight for their ideals.⁶³

Since it came to power in 1963, the Baath Party has been the undisputed political power in Syria, dominating the country's political and social spheres of influence. Ever since the party took office for decades, it eradicated every institution of civil society and every voice that sought to challenge its authoritarian rule systematically.⁶⁴ To that end, the Baath Party

⁵⁹ Kamal Dīb, *Tārīkh Sūriyā Al-Mu'āṣir Min Al-Intidāb Al-Faransī Ilā Ṣayf 2011* (Beirut: Dār al-Nahār, 2011), 236-238.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 239.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Nikolaos van Dam, *Tadmīr Waṭan: al-Harb al-Ahliyya fī Sūriyā*, trans. Lamia Bouadie, Aḥmad Bashārah, Antoine Bassil, and Kamal Dīb (Beirut: Dār Jannā Tamīr lil-Nashr wa al-Dirāsāt, 2018), 90.

employed extensive censorship and coercive measures to eradicate freedom of expression and systematically spy and harass the citizens through surveillance. The party also used torture to extract information in addition to intimidating the population, executing arbitrary detention to suppress dissent and opposition.⁶⁵ Hence, as many as presented tools of oppression Baath Party has utilized for securing power, one could state there is no space left for democratic discourse and oppositional activities in the Syrian polity.⁶⁶ Thus, Baath Party's governance has transformed Syria into an authoritarian regime. Indeed, its citizens have always experienced political instability. Furthermore, they did not welcome the pursued ideological, political, or economic reforms since the beginning, as many of its elements did not fulfil their expectations. Furthermore, even during the periods of reform, the rhetoric utilized by the authorities to dominate and outcompete other factions over the mechanisms of governance dominated.⁶⁷

As a result, the key principles of democracy, diversity, representative governance, and economic development were purposefully missing in the Baath Party's agenda. Instead of nurturing them in the right direction, they were used as the tools of enforcing power and ideology of complete saturation with the all-encompassing grip on society. The regime in Baath Party showed absolutely no tolerance for opposition, resorting to a comprehensive campaign to eliminate all voices that dared to challenge its legitimacy. This allowed for no alternative in terms of democratic discussion or shared leadership.⁶⁸

2.2 Syrian Literature Under Ba'ath Rule.

Syria was not characterized by an ethnic cohesive nature in historical context. Instead, it is a complex set of diverse ethnic communities making up the multi-ethnic and cultural mosaic. Combined with a complex state development and numerous political issues, this negates the possible notion of a single Syrian literature. In contrast, it always points out to the Syrian influence on the Arab literary tradition as a whole.⁶⁹ Therefore, Syrian literature can be described as a component of a diverse body that is Arab literary tradition or the Arabic literary universe. In this frame, it acquires its peculiarities most vividly expressed in poetry, short

⁶⁵ Kamal Dīb, *Tārīkh Sūriyā Al-Mu'āṣir Min Al-Intidāb Al-Faransī Ilā Şayf 2011* (Beirut: Dār al-Nahār, 2011), 405.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Patrick Seale and Maureen Mcconville, *Asad of Syria : The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1988), 172-173.

⁶⁸ Nikolaos van Dam, *Tadmīr Waṭan: al-Ḥarb al-Ahliyya fī Sūriyā*, trans. Lamia Bouadie, Aḥmad Bashārah, Antoine Bassil, and Kamal Dīb (Beirut: Dār Jannā Tamīr lil-Nashr wa al-Dirāsāt, 2018), 116.

⁶⁹ MOHJA KAHF, "The Silence of Contemporary Syrian Literature," *WORLD LITERATURE TODAY* 75, no. 2 (2001), 225.

stories, and novels. Moreover, the Syrian literary scene is a reflection of the country's diverse multi-ethnic mesh. Syrian literature is comprised of the voices of Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, Circassians, Chechens, Daghestans, Turks, Jews, Assyrians among others.⁷⁰ The result of this *mélange*, though, is that the Arabic literary sphere is enriched, and that Syrian literature gets new notes and stories that can be determined only as inherently Syrian.⁷¹ More so, the cultural and political environment of Syria itself plays a role in the formation of this literature. The overtone of regional and international conflict by the state results in a massive siege mentality that made most of the writers and thinkers very careful in their work. The sensitive topics, such as human rights and state politics, require cautious treatment and self-censorship.⁷²

The multifaceted political reality in Syria, and its interaction with the creative process, results in a genre of literature that carefully treads double power relations – state surveillance and censorship, personal and collective quest for freedom. Aside from the authors' dissidence, language and structure themselves participate in silent protesting. The writers enter into a dialog with the authority using allegory and metaphor.⁷³ In this way, Syrian literature adapts to an unpleasant situation with political repression, resists, and revalorizes. Thus, the short form achieves a double role of resistance and working through the violence.⁷⁴ Regardless, their journey from free expression to censorship, Syrian writers of the modern era offer a rare and valuable glimpse into the life, aspirations, and struggles of the Syrians. The works they bring to the profound, yet diverse literary field of the Arab world add an indelible contribution, as they add the voices of their bold yet earnest experience to the complex medium where human voices are often muffled under government repression.⁷⁵

A unique genre of literature has developed in this period within Syrian literature, namely the “*mukhābarāt* novel”, a narrative collection set around the life of state security agencies and the devastating effects of surveillance on the individual's experience.⁷⁶ These novels mirror the endless climate of surveillance and repression, but also the ability of Syrian authors to keep their creative spirits alive by telling stories of resistance, space, and human nature.⁷⁷ The charge against the state security agency is leading here. Emerging against over more than forty years of Ba'athist regime, the genre sheds light on the consequences of

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 231-232.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 226

⁷⁶ Max Weiss, “Sight, Sound, and Surveillance in Ba'athist Syria: The Fiction of Politics in Rūzā Yāsīn Ḥasan's Rough Draft and Samar Yazbik's *Her Mirrors*,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 48, no. 3 (2017): 212.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 212-213.

surveillance and state oppression for the cultural and narrative forms of Syrians.⁷⁸ One term highly important for interpretation of the novels is “mukhābarāt,” which stands for state security network, symbolizing the totality and intensity of state surveillance. Under conditions of repression authors disclosed their tales of resistance, human nature, and character.⁷⁹

Thus, there is an interrelation between the development of the Syrian literature and the state policies during the reign of Ba’ath regime. At the same time, the ways society has found a source of unity and resistance has been kept through literary works. In the high time of censorship, many Syrian writers and authors contributed to the Arab literature a new layer.⁸⁰ This time in the Syrian literature history can be seen as the examples of the stories’ strength, which systems desperately attempt to suppress.

2.3 The Syrian Revolution in 2011.

The outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011 has caused consequences that have had an immense impact not only on the Middle East but on the entire international community. This long-lasting fight has killed hundreds of thousands while causing millions of others to leave their homes hence creating one of the most severe humanitarian crises of our time.⁸¹ This crisis has also caused a global refugee crisis that challenges the resources and strategies of countries in regions far beyond Syria’s borders.⁸²

The protests began in response to the government’s detention and torture of a group of teenage boys who had protested by spray-painting “The people demand the fall of the regime” on a wall in the city of Daraa. This brutal torture for teenagers' rebellion fuelled national and international indignation, turning it into an uprising against the repressive and unlawful rules and acts of the government.⁸³ This event revealed the population’s long-standing irritation and inaugurated a period of intense civil disruption.⁸⁴ The protests quickly spread from Daraa to different parts of the country and extended to people of all social classes. In standing against the continued and oppressive rule of the Baath Party, they called for democratic reforms, civil rights protections, and the elimination of corruption.⁸⁵ The protests indicate a shared aspiration

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 240-242.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Nikolaos van Dam, *Tadmīr Waṭan: al-Ḥarb al-Ahliyya fī Sūriyā*, trans. Lamia Bouadie, Aḥmad Bashārah, Antoine Bassil, and Kamal Dīb (Beirut: Dār Jannā Tamīr lil-Nashr wa al-Dirāsāt, 2018), 145.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 143.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 144-145.

for fundamental political and social reform, a direct attack on a system that maintained an uninterrupted hold on power for several decades through rigorous repression and legal infringement.⁸⁶

Moreover, the Syrian conflict is distinct for the complexity of its dimensions, in which the same occur several domestic and foreign sides with different interests and goals. The formation of the conflict relies on several factors that include political, economic, social, and religious arguments. Such a large set of reasons and subjects define a reason for Syria not only to be seen as a local and nationwide conflict but as well as a major attraction for the whole world, proving the fact that this conflict is fixed within a particular global political reality.⁸⁷

2.4 Syrian literature post-2011.

The year 2011 was not merely a time of political revolution; it was also a moment when a revolution of expression took place in the field of the Syrian literature. Writers and artists began immediately producing literature. The writers utilized digital platforms to relate their tales in real time about the crisis unfolding.⁸⁸ This was an indication of the democratization of writing in different digital platforms without state surveillance.⁸⁹ While these works were spontaneous and immediate, they also reflected the immediacy and intensity of the conflict, giving one a glimpse into a nation's collective psyche in tumult.⁹⁰ Furthermore, the revolution and war that followed created a sense of urgency in literary and artistic expression.⁹¹

The literature of this time is notable for its creative resistance. Specifically, an allegory, metaphor, and symbol demonstrate, used to avoid censorship.⁹² In other words, the fictionalization of the narrative shows a high level of awareness of the political situation in Syria.⁹³ Therefore, Syrian literature is characterized by the integration of local and global narratives. Furthermore, global translation and distribution of Syrian works made the context of the conflict better known and framed Syrian literature in a wider reach of global resistance literature.⁹⁴ In other words, in a global sense, the issues of struggle, survival, and fight for

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Anne-Marie McManus, "The Contemporary Syrian Novel in Translation," ed. Samar Yazbek et al., *The Arab Studies Journal* 22, no. 1 (2014): 202.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 205.

⁹² Ibid., 205-206.

⁹³ Ibid., 217.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

liberation are universal in nature, leading to the resonance of some much-loved Syrian works and making Syrian literature an integral part of the global cultural process.⁹⁵

The literature that followed in the wake of 2011 moves beyond physical displacement to explore the psychological and existential dislocations of the Syrians. The geography in many literary works not only follows the physical trajectory of the protagonists but also their internal wandering toward understanding and accepting their realities. In other words, the narratives identify how displacement impacts people's relationship to time, memory, and self. The works reflect the very reimagining of the term home in the diaspora; in many respects, it is permeated with the memories of the past or, conversely, with cruel life experience.⁹⁶ Regarding identity, the Syrian literature of the time demonstrates an intense negotiation between loss and the construction of new selves.⁹⁷ Literature during this period, however, neither claims that identity is destroyed during times of war. Instead, it shows that they were rebuilt despite the surrounding chaos.⁹⁸ Using the example of protagonists who wander the ruins of their previous lives and mourn for their uncertain future, this literature demonstrates that identity is restored. In addition, literature show that identity and the identities of people are affected both by actions to save each other and by actions to resist. Ultimately, they offer a more nuanced interpretation of identity in times of crisis.⁹⁹

These extended details in Syrian literature after 2011 highlight how these themes of displacement, freedom and memory and indeed the act of storytelling are layered. These narratives provide an understanding of the Syrian experience during times of revolution, demonstrating how literature can be a tool for witnessing, healing, and connecting.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Max Weiss, "Sight, Sound, and Surveillance in Ba'thist Syria: The Fiction of Politics in Rūzā Yāsīn Ḥasan's Rough Draft and Samar Yazbik's in Her Mirrors," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 48, no. 3 (2017): 243.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 241-242.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Chapter Three: Analysing *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*.

No Knives in the Kitchens of This City by Khaled Khalifa offers a penetrating look into the heart of Aleppo in Syria, through the experiences of a family living under the oppressive regimes from the 1960s to the early 2000s. The novel explores the destructive effects of political tyranny not only on the city's physical landscape but more profoundly on the private lives of its residents.¹⁰⁰

The family at the focus of the novel is characterized by both their personal hardships and the larger social and political upheavals they live in. In the past, the mother was an

¹⁰⁰ Khalid Khalifa, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, trans. Leri Price (Hoopoe, an imprint of AUC Press, 2016).

ambitious and dreamy lady. However, the cruel reality of her current situation, the mother becomes imprisoned by her memory of a better time. As a kind of resistance to the state-imposed narratives, she hangs on to her cultural identity and personal background. Themes of memory, struggle for autonomy and impact of political oppression on personal life are all addressed as her children: Sawsan, Rashid, and Nizar, traverse their own paths. Sawsan moves from a passive acceptance of social norms to an active opposition of them in an effort to carve out her autonomy within a culture that restricts the expression of women. Nizar, on the one side, grapples with his own freedom as homosexual and societal acceptance, reflects on the struggle for personal freedom in a hard society. Rashid, on the other side, who at first, found his identity and solace in music, ends up joining a group of armed fighters, showing how individual dreams succumb to political realities¹⁰¹¹⁰²

In this chapter, I will analyse *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* through an examination of the themes previously discussed. In addition, I will draw on the theoretical frameworks that have been outlined. In *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, Khalifa weaves the lives of its characters against the backdrop of Syria's complex socio-political landscape.

3.1 Memory and Nostalgia.

Against the backdrop of Syria's turbulent socio-political landscape, memory and nostalgia play a crucial role as the narrative in Khaled Khalifa's *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, providing an examination of how these factors shape both individual and collective identities. This analysis explores how memory is portrayed in the novel as both a haven from and a site of conflict against the forces of political oppression and cultural deterioration, drawing on the theoretical insights of Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler regarding memory's role in creating historical narratives and identities.

The mother, being a crucial figure of this story, represents the struggle to seek justice for individual and common history from the government that wants to change history. In this regard, Douglass and Vogler's position on memory as a means of resistance is justified by the ways in which she resorts to memory, as evinced in her refusal to let go of her past and her scepticism of the government-sanctioned narratives. Importantly, this seeks justice is dynamic,

¹⁰² Ibid.

not passive, as it initiates an effect of change in her homestead.¹⁰³ This resistance is active rather than passive, acting as a trigger for transformation within her household. The mother works hard to teach her children about culture and sophistication, even though they are living in tough times. She wants to keep a link to a better, more elegant past. This shows how remembering the good old days can be comforting but also reminds them of what they have lost. This can be seen, in how the mother interacts with the headmaster in the school where she worked as teacher, where she insists on who she used to be as well as what she used to value in contrast the current oppressive regime:

"She drank her coffee coolly, recovering her strength, then in a ringing tone reminded the headmaster that she had been a teacher who won the respect of her pupils and tried to teach them to listen to themselves. Finally, she added that she had returned to her beloved Aleppo on account of her children, and in a series of contradictory phrases she both praised and cursed the inhabitants of the village she had just left. When she saw that the head teacher comprehended her suffering, she added that the ascent of the military inspired anything but confidence..... The noise caused my mother much frustration, and her desperation only increased after she discovered that most of her childhood friends were now Party members. On the first page of their notebooks, they would write an aphorism attributed to the President Leader, and they had committed to memory all the songs which glorified him."¹⁰⁴

In addition, Nizar's story illustrates how crucial memories can be. He went from being a musician to a man who reminds people of the past and how it connects them. It demonstrates the importance of cultural history and collective memories in preserving person's identity in a crisis. When Nizar holds musical gatherings that honour and share the past, it's like a small example of the bigger challenge that society faces in trying to keep their identity and community alive despite many difficulties. This idea matches what Douglass and Vogler say about how remembering the past helps people stay strong and keep going.¹⁰⁵ In other words, conscious repetition of some aspects of past life experience provides continuous version of events in daily lives.¹⁰⁶ This is evident in his distress over the cheap sale of his music, highlighting the deep emotional connection to his art and memories:

¹⁰³ Ana Douglass and Thomas A Vogler, *Witness and Memory : The Discourse of Trauma* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 15-16.

¹⁰⁴ Khalid Khalifa, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, trans. Leri Price (Hoopoe, an imprint of AUC Press, 2016), pp. 13,14,16,17.

¹⁰⁵ Ana Douglass and Thomas A Vogler, *Witness and Memory : The Discourse of Trauma* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 14-16.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

"Nizar returned to his vagrant lifestyle. He tried to write music like “Shadows of Regret” but it just didn’t have the same emotional power. He regretted selling his music so cheaply—and was distressed whenever he heard his pieces on the radio.”¹⁰⁷

The narrative displays also how the old and deteriorated buildings of the city become a metaphor for the dying memories and identities. Moreover, it relates to the choices made, the losses experienced, and the desire for a different existence. The loss of hope, including not achieved dreams, as well as the strong nostalgia, drives the loss of a sense of existence or potential. The relationship between the ruins of the city and the human state of sorrow showcases how memories and the yearning for them are associated with the place itself. Therefore, this idea is consistent with what Douglass and Vogler argue remembering can undermine and transform the narrative we construct about the past; thus, it may act as a weapon to combat the factors attempting to erase a self or heritage.¹⁰⁸ This connection is illustrated in the following passage:

"Death was spreading through the desolate streets of Aleppo, oppressive and unbearable.....At the time I had started to enjoy walking in the stillness of King Faisal Street, where I would reflect that Aleppo itself was as ephemeral as the act of forgetting; anything which remained of its true form would become a lie, rein-vented by us day after day, so as not to die.”¹⁰⁹

Further, Jean's mother, Mary Abdel-Nour, symbolizes older people who have realized that the world is passing them by, and the nostalgia for the past. Her blindness is not to be taken in the literal sense; it is actually a metaphor for her not being able to acknowledge how bad things have become in her country. Hoping for death so as not to witness more ruin illustrates the pressure of living under harsh rule. The fact that Mary considers suicide demonstrates the extent of her grief and the level of nostalgia for a past that disappeared long ago. That is shown in the scene where she says that she wants to die:

"She sat at the dining table this time, determined to die. She demanded that Jean bring her poison and add it to the stuffed cabbage prepared by the maid he had finally agreed to hire.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Khalid Khalifa, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, trans. Leri Price (Hoopoe, an imprint of AUC Press, 2016), 106.

¹⁰⁸ Ana Douglass and Thomas A Vogler, *Witness and Memory : The Discourse of Trauma* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 15-16.

¹⁰⁹ Khalid Khalifa, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, trans. Leri Price (Hoopoe, an imprint of AUC Press, 2016), pp. 7, 12.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

3.2 Impact of Political Oppression on Personal Lives.

The lives of characters like Sawsan, Rashid, and Jean Abdel-Mesih in *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* were deeply affected by political control against the backdrop of Syria's oppressive government. Through the lens of their life experiences as interconnected with the state, the oppressive regime profoundly shapes personal destinies and collective life paths.

Sawsan's story is a good example of how to fight for freedom against strict rules from one's government. She appears to be appropriately guided at the beginning, doing what is expected of her by her family and society. However, she slowly begins to resist that. In other words, Sawsan's change of heart was more than a change of mind. Her own reaction is a reaction to the socialization she went through. It is not only about survival – it's about the way she gets through at first, being forced to give up her own idea of freedom. Then, as the story unfolds, we notice a change in Sawsan's behaviour and choices; it is not easy, and it is not fast; it is a meaningful change that derives from her understanding she doesn't have to fit others' patterns.

This realization is painful and difficult because it defies everything what she has been conditioned to think is appropriate. Her personal life is more apparent from the actions she takes to suggest that she is departing from social conventions, such as challenging roles and conduct regularly expected of her. Each rejection of the norm enables her to establish her individuality and her reservations in a system designed to hold her and everyone else down. However, her outward appearance of following the rules slowly changes to a more rebellious attitude, showing her increasing frustration with the political and social rules that restrict her. This change is evinced when she performs rebellious acts such as burning her clothes that society uses to define how a woman should look and behave. Her actions are not solely independent of her but are representation of other people's attempts to control her identity and her struggle for freedom. This shift in her behaviour is illustrated in the scene when she decides to burn the clothes that symbolize societal expectations:

"I suddenly realized she was repeating the very same words my mother used about death and, like our mother, was using slow, affected hand gestures. I felt sad that Sawsan had begun to imitate our mother; I nearly asked her what it felt like to resemble a woman she hated so much.... She opened her wardrobe and all the things which she had selected with a whore's taste—tight, stretchy trousers, low-cut blouses which showed off her stomach and navel, short skirts, knee-high leather boots, earrings in the shape of devils which she had loved

after returning from her tour of duty with the paratroopers—she took them all out, threw them into the middle of the living room, and set them on fire"¹¹¹

Furthermore, Sawsan's rebellion connects with Benedict Anderson's concept of "Imagined Communities", as demonstrated in the way in which states implement their national identities, prioritizing the needs of the regime over individual freedom and the ability to form personal identity.¹¹² Thus, when she refuses to play the part designated for her, she not only rejects the tale told by the state but also changes her community. Her rebellion is a way to break free from the strict limits on national identity set by a harsh regime, and she looks for a place where she can be herself without the government's rules. Furthermore, Sawsan's changes and acts of defiance highlight the conflict between what she wants, and the restrictions placed by society under this regime. Therefore, her story not only shows her own fight for independence and self-identity. It also represents the larger struggle of people under oppressive governments to find their own freedom and ways to resist.

Rashid's character offers a deep and moving look into how difficult political conditions can influence and sometimes even warp people's personal paths and dreams. From the beginning, Rashid's deep connection to music acts as a way for him to express himself and his ambitions, which are very much a part of his identity. For him, music is more than just an art form; it's a link to a deep, cultural story that exists beyond the immediate political chaos he finds himself in. This part of Rashid's story, where he finds comfort and meaning in music, demonstrates how personal talents and passions can develop and thrive even in oppressive settings. This is illustrated in the following passage:

"No one took to the music lessons except Rashid; after five months he could play several challenging exercises with ease..... He continued his lessons with Uncle Nizar, was able to gather six musicians and form a group that played in cultural centres to audiences whose members who were all known to Nizar. At night the same group performed in Cabaret Casbah, playing raucous backup for vulgar singers who serenaded drunks. Rashid saw none of the audience and was delighted to find he could lose his vision as well as his hearing."¹¹³

However, Rashid's transformation from hopeful dreamer into a disillusioned fighter is again a sign of how the political issues in his life are affecting his idealism and humanity. This

¹¹¹ Ibid., pp. 11, 72, 73.

¹¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 108.

¹¹³ Khalid Khalifa, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, trans. Leri Price (Hoopoe, an imprint of AUC Press, 2016), pp. 22, 40.

example of going to conflict brought about by the pursuit of belonging and purpose clearly illustrates how tenuous personal aims are in light of strong politically and socially directed forces. How one ends up going from a musician to a fighter shows how external societal pressures can take an individual down paths that do not match their real self and beliefs. Rashid's dreams and beliefs contrasting with the role he ends up playing are a reflection of the deep conflict many experiences in oppressive societies, between asserting their identity and giving in to the expectation to participate in nationalist or political strife. Gelvin's reading of the impact of nationalist movements and the rule of oppressive regimes on the lives of people, their personalities, rings true to Rashid's story. Gelvin suggests that such political contexts can profoundly distort personal identities and aspirations.¹¹⁴ At the end, the conflict, which Rashid joined to achieve connectedness and sensemaking, ends up of being a source of estrangement and disillusionment. This internal conflict and disillusionment are shown in the following passage:

"Standing at Sheikh Abu Bakr's door, Rashid told him calmly that he wanted to leave with the next consignment, to do his duty and defend the lands of Islam against the new crusaders.

He added that he needed advice on whether going to Baghdad was in defence of the Iraqi wing of the Baath Party, which he hated, or of the lands of Islam... Alone in the empty streets of Baghdad, his soldier's uniform betraying his loyalties, his long beard attesting to his identity in a way that brooked no doubt, he quickly realized he wasn't safe. He could hardly sit in a café and start discussing Iraqi poetry, which he loved and could recite at length."¹¹⁵

Further, the story of Jean Abdel-Mesih shows the confrontation of intelligent people with living under the dictatorship regime. His example integrates within the common idea of revolution against power and making tough choices when searching for the truth is impossible in the world where one cannot speak their mind without negative consequences. Jean's choice not to repeat official slogans and anthems has a political and private weight behind it. Jean's story is also a part of a common fight of intellectuals against dictatorships. He fights for his system of values and beliefs by opposing the government. It also symbolizes the common fight so that the intellectual people could finally think and say something opposing the truth of the state. This internal struggle and act of defiance are illustrated in the following passage:

"For the first time at work he refused to repeat the Party songs in the morning meeting. He stood silently, observed by his colleagues, who were perplexed at his transformation. He was haunted by his moment of courage, when he looked at the flag and refused to repeat the Party

¹¹⁴ James L Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties* (Univ of California Press, 1999), 147-150.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 204. 210.

slogans, and it became mingled with the hideous fear he had felt when he sat in the corridors of the secret police branch for seven days, waiting for an unknown fate. His shame never left him, but he thought for the first time that he was aware of the city, and life itself."¹¹⁶

In addition, Jean's story highlights oppression and stagnation in societies with powerful leaders, where people feel trapped and unable to identify their goals or selves, resulting in constant vigilance and struggle to find their true calling.

"Jean spent seven days in the corridor of the Military Security branch, and he realized that all the things Emilie had told him about life in Aleppo were merely stories made up by a spinster lacking in imagination."¹¹⁷

3.3 Struggle for Autonomy and Personal Freedom.

No Knives in the Kitchens of This City showcases Nizar's story about how it is to be yourself in the sense of who you are and having freedom in a state that just doesn't want you to be free on your own. This relates directly to how Gelvin exclaims that oppressive social structures might prevent personal rebellion and self-expression.¹¹⁸ Moreover, Nizar's path to himself in both ways – figuring himself out and finding courage to go against what society wants – shows how difficult it might be to be yourself when society doesn't think you can.

Nizar's main struggle is inside himself, dealing with who he is and how society sees him. It's not just his own problem. Rather, it shows how society's rules make it hard for people to be themselves and express who they are. His secret acts of wearing his sister's underwear and his emotional turmoil depicted through his tears reflect a desperate quest for self-acceptance that is stifled by societal rejection and misunderstanding. These moments are crucial in understanding the intense personal rebellion Nizar experiences as he confronts the entrenched norms and sexual orientations that his community rigidly enforces.

"Nizar possessed fingers made of silk, and a soul which roved far away from the earth-bound worlds whose cruelty he found unbearable. Laughing, he would tell my mother that he was going to live on the moon before throwing himself on the bed beside her and crying silently.

¹¹⁶ Khalid Khalifa, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, trans. Leri Price (Hoopoe, an imprint of AUC Press, 2016), pp. 56, 59.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹¹⁸ James L Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties* (Univ of California Press, 1999), 147-150.

No one knew why Nizar wept. He would steal my mother's underwear and dress himself up in front of the mirror, before returning it to its place."¹¹⁹

Nizar's story exemplifies the brutal aftermath of nonconformity to societal norms that were put by the state, which included incarceration, abuse, and expulsion. His trip from Aleppo to Beirut offered him some hope for freedom. However, after obtaining the freedom he expected, his time in Beirut remains intricate, which exemplifies the struggle for acceptance. This passage of his conversation with his sister, describing the conditions and the times when he was in prison, depict that:

"Nizar slipped into bed next to my mother and told her about the death he had passionately longed for all the time he was in prison... He added that prison was like a jungle where the beasts screamed eternally. Having no money and no family asking after him had made him an easy target."¹²⁰

Moreover, Nizar's interactions with many individuals illustrate the emotional turbulence frequently associated with life on the fringes of societal expectations. These connections, marked by treachery and fleeting bonds, intensify the theme of personal freedom and highlight the continuous battle to discover secure and validating environments in one's life. This struggle is vividly depicted in the following passage:

"Hunger and cold tore at him and he could no longer pay the rent even of his poor little room. He thought he saw Hussein on the falling autumn leaves, on the glass windows where he stood and looked at the low-cut silk evening gowns. He was lost in the details of lingerie shops for hours. He went back to Aleppo and arrived, exhausted..."¹²¹

3.4 Family Dynamics.

The examination of family dynamics in *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* reveals the complex interaction of family relationships with socio-political phenomena occurring in Syria. Using Benedict Anderson's concept of an imagined community, the family described in

¹¹⁹ Khalid Khalifa, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, trans. Leri Price (Hoopoe, an imprint of AUC Press, 2016), 28.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-104.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

Khalifa's narrative appeared to be a microcosm of the nation¹²², illustrating the problematic nature of personal identification in the context of national destruction.

Familial relationships in the narrative are deeply entwined with the socio-political context of Syria, with each member embodying different responses to the pressures and changes imposed by external events. The father's character, transitioning from an active participant in the socio-political scene to eventually abandoning his family, symbolizes the disintegration of traditional family structures under the weight of political and personal crises. An example of that is shown in this passage where it describes the feeling of a father and his reaction:

"When my father used to come home drunk, he would knock everything in the room over and wake us up, not caring if he frightened us. He would spit on the family picture hung reverently on the wall, and ask, "What is the point of the same moments being repeated over and over in the same place?" He complained of being suffocated and heaped bitter indignation on the train station where he worked as well as on the Party and its informers. Even after the strong coffee my mother brought him, he would not be calm. She would convince him to go out into the courtyard where there was a refreshing breeze, stroke his hand gently, and wait for him to finish ranting about anything and everything. As usual he cursed God for having flung him into a Godforsaken station that stank of bleach and idiot railroad workers, insisting that he deserved a better place where he could realize his dreams."¹²³

Furthermore, his leaving also reflects the prevalent wish to escape, lead a better life separate from ugly realities, as well as indifference leading among everywhere. However, as symbolic as it is, it refers to the national disquiet and personal emergence of the identity and some balance in a turbulent socio-political environment. This desire for the father to have a better life is reflected in this scene:

"I remember my father's worried face before he left, the last image I had of a father who soon after ceased to exist. He would get up from his bed in the middle of the night and go to the courtyard to smoke and think about how Elena was his only chance of changing his life. He felt that his life had ground to a halt the very moment he became a public official who had to

¹²² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 143-144.

¹²³ Khalid Khalifa, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, trans. Leri Price (Hoopoe, an imprint of AUC Press, 2016), 18.

proffer up eternal adoration to the Party and the President-Leader, for the sole purpose of upholding this state of misery."¹²⁴

In such context, the protagonist's grandfather's tragic death can serve as a type of symbol that emphasizes family dynamics and tradition. Considering the fact that the grandfather followed a daily practice of dressing in a striped suit and sitting at the train station, waiting for his friends, his story appears to be somewhat tragic. However, the grandfather's commitment to the family's identity ultimately leads to his death on a freight train. It seems like the train was used as an object of scenarios; that is, the final injury came from using the train, but the predetermined death in this way includes suicide by an unnatural means. This tragic end is illustrated in the following passage:

"In later years she lost her desire to return to her family's house; she had stopped missing it, and no one noticed her absence apart from Nizar. She felt stifled there. Nizar told her in his letters that their father still woke up every morning, put on his striped suit, went to the train station, and sat on the platform to wait for old friends who no longer existed. He would point out every time the workers violated a regulation, reminding them of the medal hung on his chest. His comments irritated every single worker and they did not grieve when he fell beneath the wheels of a slow freight train."¹²⁵

Suad's journey through loss and grief takes the early stages in the narrative, illustrating how personal grief connect with shared community sorrows, shaping both her family's reactions and those of the wider community when faced with challenges. As Suad nears the end, the different ways her family members care for her took a detailed picture of their relationships. Sawsan is constantly at her side, offering gentle touches and soothing words, trying to ease Suad's pain. In contrast, their mother holds back, her withdrawal possibly rooted in a mixture of shame about Suad's declining health and fear of gossip. This difference in approach underscores the varied ways people handle grief. At Suad's death, the intensity of Sawsan's emotional response contrasts markedly with their mother's more calculated, distant manner. This is depicted in the following passage:

"In Suad's final days my mother forgot her completely, like a puppy left alone all night in a small, cold room. Sawsan spent as much time as she could with her and tried to alleviate her suffering by stroking her and hugging her."¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Ibid., 35.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 33.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 39.

Moreover, the mother's choice to incinerate the dead child's belongings, including such as medicine, clothes, and other things that retained the smell of a sick person, appears to be an endeavour to rid herself of the gossip around her daughter's battle and death and perhaps the scorn she had from her family. While this might be a way for the mother to cope, it could also look like she's denying the grief that the family ought to confront together. This act further points to the emotional gap within the family, showing how both personal and societal pressures shape the way they handle and express their sorrow. The dynamics within the family, marked by deep emotional rifts and varied approaches to mourning, highlight the difficulties families face in staying united and understanding each other amid personal and shared tragedies. This is depicted in the following passage:

"Sawsan stayed beside Suad on her last night. She never forgot the moment her body grew cold. Suad rested against the wall and leaned toward Sawsan's lap, her body quivered for the final time, a string of foam left her mouth, and she died so quietly that Sawsan couldn't believe it, any more than she could believe my mother's neutral reaction, as if nothing had happened. My mother returned from the cemetery and burned everything that was left of Suad—her medicines, her few clothes, her sheets, and a quilt that smelled of urine."¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Ibid., 39.

Chapter four: Analysing *Death is hard work*.

Khaled Khalifa's novel *Death is Hard Work* discusses the complex balance between the personal and political during the Syrian civil war. From start to finish, the three siblings, Bolbol, Hussein, and Fatima, travel across the war-torn country to make their father, Abdel Latif's, last request come true: to be buried in the family homeland of Anabiya. With an intricate mixture of individuals' perspectives, thoughts, and the impact of a brutal regime on families, the novel offers a profound consideration of everyday life under an autocracy.

This engages with the notion of how the political unrest in Syria is central to the lives of these people, defining not only the way they experience the world internally, but the way they engage with others and the world around them. Although this is a very serious case, the process of a long walk to give their father a burial that would be handled without any problems in peacetime seems to summarize the concept well. The crushing reality can be expressed as the bureaucratic procedure, the presence of society and the image-world, and the militarized space. In addition, the novel also discusses memory and nostalgia as a form of identity and relationship-building. Bolbol, Hussein, and Fatima come to terms how the shared past affects them and deal with their father's death and the loss of the civilization that framed their family.

In this chapter, I will analyse *Death is Hard Work* by Khaled Khalifa, through an examination of the themes that have been discussed. In addition, I will draw on the theoretical frameworks that have been explained.

4.1 Memory and Nostalgia.

The theme of memory and nostalgia in *Death is Hard Work* operates as a powerful tool that gives depth to the narrative, revealing the inner lives of its characters amid the chaos of the Syrian civil war. The theoretical frameworks of Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler on the role of memory in identity and resistance to cultural and political erasure are well reflected in this thematic exploration. Through the characters' journeys and reflections, Khalifa manages to get to the heart of the matter of memory and nostalgia in the context of survival and identity in times of crisis. The story of Abdel Latif's unrequited love for Nevine and his eventual reunion with her on the frontlines is a compelling illustration of personal memory's survival amid collective amnesia driven by conflict. Thus, this narrative goes hand by hand with

Douglass and Vogler's concept of memory as resistance.¹²⁸ This is illustrated in the following passage when Abdel Latif did not let his love towards Nevine to vanish:

"Abdel Latif didn't dare to be frank about his feelings, much less his ambition to marry her. He lay awake at night, feeling as though he were drowning in a grey and indescribable space, somewhere between love and desire."¹²⁹

The characters' experiences explicitly show the nostalgia as comfort and loss. Clearly, the warm nostalgia that characterizes Abdel Latif's memories of Nevine, as his deep nostalgia at the years of separation and grateful nostalgia at their subsequent reunion, emphasizes the two-way function of nostalgia at times of war. Specifically, such memories become a place for the individual to retreat mentally and emotionally for succor and strength. Nonetheless, the same nostalgic memories are a source of pain remembering what was lost, and still could have been lost. His silent years of cherishing such love until they were united in marriage is an act of defiance against the war's fight to erase personal histories and total identities. Their relationship in the war's misery memory proves that personal memory is capable of defying conflict's disarrays of time and space. The memories anchor the characters to self and continuity through the numerous and far distances of past and present. This appears in the following passage about the wedding and Abdul Latif's feelings:

"— the front lines were relatively quiet that night, so there was no need for every man to be at his post. The wedding was perfectly ordinary, and not in the least bit strange, as Nevine had feared—it was simply an occasion for joy. Fighters fired into the air to celebrate the newlyweds, and no one who remained in the town—sharing their hunger, thirst, and cold, caring for the graves of the martyrs—refused Ustadh Abdel Latif's invitation. He felt a powerful sense of renewed connection to everything, and there were new, different feelings now, too, driving away the image of himself he'd been nursing all these years—an elderly man killing time as he waited to die. He took up once more all his old and powerful ideals about revolution and living an honourable life. Deep down he felt himself to be fortunate; he would witness the end of a regime that had brought him nothing but shame since his youth. His former party comrades had betrayed every principle and pounced upon every advantage, had imprisoned their old friends for years at a time, and hadn't hesitated to sell out their cause to stay in power."¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Ana Douglass and Thomas A Vogler, *Witness and Memory : The Discourse of Trauma* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 16-18.

¹²⁹ Khaled Khalifa, *Death Is Hard Work*, trans. Leri Price (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 77.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

Lastly, it is the need to embark on the gruelling journey to fulfil their father's last wish that fully demonstrates this struggle. More than just the fulfilment of their father's final desire, it is a case of reclamation and affirmation of their familial history – their origin and their identity. It highlights the issue of remembrance and nostalgia as more than just emotional issues. Rather, it is a reminder of character's binding to this phenomenon in the face of disintegration. This is reflected in Bulbul's conflicting feelings in this passage:

"Bolbol could tell that Hussein wasn't joking this time; he wanted an answer, wanted his brother and sister to make a decision. Bolbol wanted to ignore him, but suddenly a great strength welled up inside him, and he declared he wouldn't abandon his father's body before his last wish was carried out."¹³¹

4.2 Impact of Political Oppression on Personal Lives.

The omnipresence of political oppression and the way this impact permeates through every aspect of personal life are grimly yet realistically depicted. As a result, this novel perfectly captures how much the violent practices and the all-encompassing control enforced by the state condition the contours of people's personal freedom and their agency, reducing their most personal and intimate moments and rituals to the battleground of resistance against state bureaucracy and surveillance. This is shown in the following passage when members of the army try to arrest their father's body:

"Bolbol saw Hussein coming back, escorted by an agent waving his gun and gesturing to the rest of the family to get out of the van. Hussein stood next to Bolbol and whispered, "They're going to arrest the body." Bolbol assumed there must have been some mistake, but no, when the agent led them to a tiled, windowless room, opened the door, and pushed them roughly inside, he understood that things were serious. It was true: they had placed the corpse under arrest. Their father had been wanted by more than one branch of the Mukhabarat for more than two years now."¹³²

The possibility of arresting a dead body because of warrants is a good example of the reality that the characters live in. Apart from emphasizing the ridiculousness of bureaucratic power that follows him past his death, it is a metaphor for the invading nature of the state. Indeed, in certain scenes of the narrative, there is a distinct lack of line between the political

¹³¹ Ibid., 41.

¹³² Ibid., 31-32.

and the personal – it is impossible to tell where someone’s private life ends and his other life under the state begins. As shown in the following passage:

"He was brought to an officer who couldn't have been more than thirty. All of the family's documents were in his hands: their identity cards and the death certificate signed in accordance with the proper regulations. The officer asked Bolbol for details of every single family member and friend of his father. He said he would transfer them to the main facility for questioning and detain the body, likewise in accordance with the proper regulations.... The officer explained that according to their records, Bol Bol's father was still alive and still wants. It doesn't matter if he had in the meantime turned into a cadaver."¹³³

Also, the journey of Bolbol, Hussein, and Fatima to fulfil the last demand of their father becomes an intense experience in experiencing the consequences of political oppression on the human scale. This appearance of defiance is tragic when conducted against a state that is still making an attempt to dominate its citizens existentially and politically. As they travel past checkpoints constantly staffed with soldiers, and through zones that resonate with the aftermaths of fights, the interior battle against a state is become a witness of their attempt to shape an identity. This is evident in the following passage when the siblings plan how to avoid crowded checkpoints:

"The streets would be clogged with traffic at this time of the morning, and the many checkpoints would be jammed; it might take hours to clear the city limits. His calculations proceeded based on his experience spending whole days in traffic as a minibus driver. The road through Abbasiyin Square would be best, although the security checkpoints had a particularly bad reputation in that area. Even trying to cross Sabaa Bahrat Square in downtown would be a disaster, he told himself.....He tried to sneak in between two of the vehicles, but an angry yell and a cocked weapon from one of their furious occupants returned him to the line of civilian vehicles. When the last ambulance in the queue pulled up alongside the minibus, it slowed down, and a soldier leaned out of the window to spit copiously on him and berate him in the foulest possible language."¹³⁴

For Abdel Latif's narrative, it can be read as a historical continuum outlining the process of political activism, disillusionment, and the subsequent rebellion that emerged due to the authoritarian degree of the Ba'ath party. His life story highlights the delicate balance between individual dreams and aspirations and the reality with which they crashed in the face of politics.

¹³³ Ibid., 35.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 11-12.

This is evident in the scene in which Abdel Latif ignores the truth of Bulbul's statement that the revolution has ended and has become a civil war:

" When Bolbol made his opinion clear, saying that the revolution was over and had become a civil war, and how the regime's superior army would win in the end, his father made do with shaking his head and smoking voraciously without comment, ignoring what his son was telling him. Bolbol was irritated at being ignored and wanted to add that the international community—Russia, America, and all the West was agreed that the regime should stay and that it would outlast this orphaned revolution, but Abdel Latif was done with the conversation, seeing how it would only corrupt his dreams."¹³⁵

As for the role of cultural symbols, James L. Gelvin's emphasis on the role of cultural symbols and mass politics in fostering a sense of shared identity among Syrians resonates personally in Abdel Latif's story.¹³⁶ In some ways, Abdel Latif's personal sacrifices and his involvement in political activism featured in the novel embody resistance to the regime's intent to suppress all voices of disagreement and resistance.

4.3 Struggle for Autonomy and Personal Freedom.

The theme of autonomy and personal freedom is another area of focus in *Death is Hard Work* that relates to the analysed theoretical frameworks and one of the aspects that can help understand the core of Syrian society during the time of conflict. It is reflected how the situation affected various sides of life and changed several patterns of behaviours.

From the demonstrations of wealth to mass graves for the unidentified, the transformation of the funeral rites of a person in Syria has been, in many ways, formed by the war that stamped out the identical character of the dead as a category. More than just a practical necessity, the impossibility to determine the identities of the vast majority of deceased Syrians was an index of the megadeath both as a category and as a sociological experience. In his writing, Gelvin highlights how war and military instruments of power destroy traditional practices and collective memory.¹³⁷ Gelvin suggests that such disruptions are indicative of a deeper societal transformation where traditional symbols of identity, dignity, and communal cohesion are undermined or erased by the exigencies of conflict and the authoritarian state's

¹³⁵ Ibid., 85.

¹³⁶ James L Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties* (Univ of California Press, 1999), 147-148.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 219.

mechanisms of control.¹³⁸ This appears in this passage that tells how the ritual of burying bodies properly became a task that must be fought and pursued and how it became an extraordinary symbol of personal freedom:

"He remembered how passionate his coworkers had been when they used to tell their horror stories: searching for bodies that had been lost or buried improperly, through hospitals stuffed with corpses ... Tracking down the remains of a loved one had become hard work—even more so when a family, immediately upon being informed of the death of a son, was forced to go over to the battlefield and dig through a mass grave, or else among various devastated buildings and the iron skeletons of tanks and burned-out guns. But the bloom went off even these sorts of stories, eventually, and no one bothered to tell them anymore. The exceptional had become habitual, and tragedies were simply mundane—perhaps that was the worst part of this war."¹³⁹

As for Nevine, her transformation from a rebellious art student to a conforming mother and teacher is a strong take on the ways life takes away one's identity and own life in the face of societal and familial pressures. This narrative is reflective of the way people have lost their unique voice and dreams to fit into roles the tumultuous society has placed them. Nevine's loss of self is also related to how conflict and societal demands silence one's dreams and wishes. This creates an extremely difficult road to autonomy or the liberation of self. In the context of Nevine's story, Anderson's framework helps us understand how war and societal turmoil compel individuals to adopt roles that ensure survival and conformity, often at the cost of personal aspirations and identities.¹⁴⁰ Nevine's journey reflects a broader societal narrative where the conflict has forced a reimagining of community identities, prioritizing collective survival over individual expression and dreams. This appears in this passage that describes Nevine's social background and appearance:

"Quite simply, she was a middle-class girl from an educated family, conservative in most things, despite her clothes, which spoke of a liberality and particularity that, nonetheless, no one found especially provocative. When she wandered around S, which at that time was a small town of no more than ten thousand people, she seemed the archetypal Fellaha from some distant village, rather than a painter fighting against tradition..... Nevine told him she

¹³⁸ Ibid., 219-220.

¹³⁹ Khaled Khalifa, *Death Is Hard Work*, trans. Leri Price (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 15.

¹⁴⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 35-36.

was no longer afraid. Nothing in this life mattered to her anymore. He asked her to leave all the affairs of the graveyard to him and freed her from it completely"¹⁴¹

For Layla, her narrative offers a direct examination of the ways in which the desire for autonomy becomes manifest in enormously oppressive societies. Her rejection of the marriage to Hamdan and the act of self-immolation are both embodiments of rejection against limitations for individuals. In other words, it shows how desperate people could become in their attempt for autonomy. The following scene describes her rejection and the way she committed suicide:

"Layla couldn't accept this; she went to her father's room and told him outright she would never marry Hamdan. Then she asked to speak with her brother Abdel Latif and told him that he had to intervene, adding that she wouldn't be turned into a cow in the house of a man she didn't love, and she wouldn't live as her mother had lived.... Then she put on her white dress, went up to the roof, and pulled up the stepladder behind her. She had prepared everything the day before: the bottle of kerosene and the matches. She looked down at the revelers in the courtyard, where the party was at its height, before she began to laugh, and set herself alight.

Her body was extinguished amid the stupefaction of the men and the weeping of the women, who couldn't believe they had lost their dear friend forever."¹⁴²

4.4 Family Dynamics.

While the narrative places the theme of filial obligation at its forefront, presented through the journey to honour that obligation, the narrative's true legacy parallels the journey of the Syrian people through the war. This journey illustrates the war between societal identifications and withering family systems in the fact that the increasingly grotesque decay of the father's body as they progress is a symbol paralleling the disintegration of societal cohesion and traditional family bonds. However, it is the horrific humiliation of the father's corpse that makes brothers and sister to think about themselves, their ancestors, and their belonging.

Using Anderson's "Imagined Communities," the narrative transcends the boundaries of individual responsibility to illustrate the Syrian people's shared endeavor in a time of war-induced chaos. The siblings' pursuit of their father's final resting place is a journey that serves as a metaphor for the Syrian community's struggle to remain cohesive and retain an identity in

¹⁴¹ Khaled Khalifa, *Death Is Hard Work*, trans. Leri Price (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019). pp. 77,160.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 138-139.

the face of societal disintegration. The decomposition of the father, symbolizing the breakdown of societal customs, empowers the siblings to reimagining the nation's identity. Implicitly, although societal structures are breaking down, the core is maintained through joint experience and historical consciousness.¹⁴³ The following scene describes the condition of the father's body and the sibling's fear that it will be eaten by wild animals due to its rot

"Bolbol was disgusted and frustrated. He knew that if the dogs reached the corpse, they would tear it to pieces, and he began to feel genuine terror for his father, now reduced to little more than some carrion to be lusted after by wild animals. This was surely the utmost level of decay. After half an hour the dogs had only become more frantic, new ones had arrived, and now a whole pack was laying siege to the minibus."¹⁴⁴

In the narrative, the siblings proposed to abandon their father's body. On one side, it seems like a symbol of the emotional and moral burden that the conflict imposes on personal ties. In addition, the proposal is constitutive of what seems to be a collapse of society at large. That is what could be the nature of the failure of familial and communal ties. On the other hand, by examining the characters' internal processes, one can also detect what appears to be a social rift of a much more substantial nature, one between the characters themselves. Thus, the narrative carries implications regarding the family and, to a more substantial extent, familial and communal dynamics. As the narrative progresses, the family's collapse becomes ideological and emotional, and their journey with the body of their father stands as the struggle to pass through those ideological and emotional rifts, to make peace with the end of their father, but also with the end of their shared past. Their exchanges are what provides society with the direction of survival, loss, and quest for peace in the aftermath of the conflict.

Anderson's theory posits that nations are constructed through shared languages, histories, and experiences, creating a deep sense of connection among people who will likely never meet.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, the plan to abandon the body is a representation of how the war dislocated people and families, not only physically but mentally disrupted the imagined community that connected them. The external struggles, as well as the internal debates and emotional stress of this action, signify the disintegration of social cohesion the war causes, as well as the idea that the demands of survival place people under too much pressure to abandon

¹⁴³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 35-36.

¹⁴⁴ Khaled Khalifa, *Death Is Hard Work*, trans. Leri Price (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 148.

¹⁴⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 5-7.

cultural and familial commitments. The following scene embodies the suggestion of throwing the father's body on the side of the road and ignoring its subsequent fate:

"Hussein didn't say it—but neither could he keep quiet. In fact, he soon suggested that they toss the body out on the roadside, asking his brother and sister how confident they were that they would pass other checkpoints without trouble. They would be right back where they started if the next checkpoint agents discovered that their father was a wanted man. He added that dogs were eating plenty of bodies nowadays, so what difference did it make? Why didn't they just leave it or bury it anywhere and go back to Damascus?"¹⁴⁶

Final analysis and conclusions.

¹⁴⁶ Khaled Khalifa, *Death Is Hard Work*, trans. Leri Price (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 41.

This thesis has undertaken a thorough investigation of how Khalifa's novels, and particularly *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* and *Death Is Hard Work*, reflect and contribute to the narrative of Syrian national identity. With textual analysis and intersection of literature and history and identity formation, the research has managed to reveal the gap and connection between the creation of national identity and the nation that undergoes socio-political disruption. The conceptual prism that helped to understand the national identity was presented that was based on Anderson's concept of the nation and other identity theory constructs. This allowed to understand the role of literature Khalifa plays in both reflecting and producing the social imaginary of life under a political tyranny in the imagined communities of Syria.

Chapter One has laid the foundation for this research, which began with a review of the literature of the Syrian literature and the narrative of national identity formation. Stated supported by numerous scholars, the works in question, such as novels, poetry, and prison literature, are reviewed from a variety of perspectives to confirm their vital role in the formation of the national identity. The works of such researchers as Judith Naeff, Arief Budiman, Mohammad Ihssan Zabadi, Anne-Marie McManus, Daniel Behar, Linda Istanbuli Miriam Cooke and R. Shareah Taleghani are important for understanding how literary works, influenced by the sociopolitical context, captures the Syrian collective and the individual identity. The analysis shows that literary works healed various contradictions and helpless resistance addressing the laboratory of the Syrians, who live their lives under authoritarian rule and in the shadow of the conflict.

Chapter two offered a sufficient historical background that contributes to a deeper knowledge of the socio-political background that governs Khalifa's work. By outlining the conceptual framework of the historical processes that had been influential in the making of modern Syrian reality, including the Ba'ath party and subsequent revolution, this chapter pointed out to the critical milestones that enhanced the position of literature as the state and as the latter's critic

Chapter Three and Chapter Four consider the thematic and narrative analysis of Khalifa's chosen novels. In these chapters, the thesis deciphers how memory, nostalgia, and identity, are reconstructed within the novels as acts of resistance against political suppression and cultural amnesia. Khalifa's description of his characters fighting just by surviving in circumstances of civilizational collapse and war expands on deep understanding to that identical Syrian kind, as effectively illustrating the novels as actively participating in the contemporaneous negotiation of what it suggests becoming in present times of far crisis.

Khaled Khalifa's novels *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* and *Death is Hard Work* intertwine the personal and the political, demonstrating how Syria's socio-political situation deeply impacts the lives and identities of individuals. In *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, the story of an Aleppo family in the 1960s-2000s, the political climate's oppressive nature is shown to be reflected in both the city's landscape as well as the lives of its residents. In *Death is Hard Work*, the story of three siblings during the Syrian civil war, it explores how the state's enforced control can penetrate even the most personal family moments by turning their every expression of personal freedom and agency into a battlefield against the state. The siblings' interactions at checkpoints and navigation in the zones marred by war reveal the significant impact that political turmoil has had on the Syrian society. In addition, both the mother in *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* and the father in *Death is Hard Work* are significantly impacted by the Syria's socio-political scene throughout the Ba'ath Party rule. They were raised during a period when political oppression dominated the country, hence their lives and identities were shaped due to these circumstances. Again, this historical context serves an important connection between the two characters, highlighting the all-encompassing spread of influence that Ba'ath Party had in both private and family life.

The theme of memory and nostalgia is crucial in both novels on how these two determine personal identity and history's continuity. In *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* the mother is the one who remembers the happiest time in the past, which is her double-faceted haven and conflict due to its loss and contradistinction with the current political repression. Similarly, Nizar's shift from a humble musician to a cultured saviour demonstrates how the shared memory and the cultural memory connect populations to a previous experience and background. The stories of memory and nostalgia in *Death is Hard Work* all imply that past interaction and frequent past experiences have the potential to bind oneself and a desire for the future. Thus, personal memory was continually driven and demonstrated against the dictates and amnesias of violent cultures. The siblings' travel to bury their father's bones resembles both the present image of inheritance and the unbroken search for reparation.

Both novels explore the devastating impact of political oppression on personal life. *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* shows the journey of Sawsan from passive to active resistance of the oppressive society that deprives its citizens of their freedom. Rashid's path from a talented musician to a militant who struggles for the political rights of his nation illuminates how political system can crush individual aspirations turning the whole nation's hopes into extremist delusions and efforts. The story of Jean depicts the difficult life of intellectuals living under oppressive regimes, embodying the struggle for free thought and free

speech. While in *Death is hard work*, the siblings' trip is the mirror image of the disruption of familial dynamics resulting from state-enforced control. The chance to have the body arrested demonstrates the state's absurd strength, which flows far beyond life to disrupt both the personal and the political.

In addition, both novels reflect the family as a mirror of change in society. *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* illustrates the tensions within the family as members negotiate their individual identities in the face of a national crisis. With the father's leaving and the mother's desperate attempts to enforce their families' connection to their cultural heritage, the story demonstrates how political and personal crises can destabilize traditional family dynamics. In *Death is Hard Work* the siblings' task to bury their father thus turned into the main image reflecting the impact of the Syrian war on the familial level. The father's body falling down the chute is a larger metaphor, of course, for the collapse of traditional family ties.

In conclusion, the two novels present varying perspectives, yet chronological, on national identity. In *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, the narrative presents the development of individual identities over time under political oppression and the constraints posed by societal norms. Consequently, the challenges faced by the family are an indication of the broader societal changes in terms of political oppression corroding personal dreams and aspirations. On the other hand, *Death is Hard Work* posits that the Syrian civil war developed a new form of national identity. The sibling's journey shows the struggle to uphold familial and societal cohesion in the face of disintegration. Therefore, the narrative provides how the conflict has resulted in the need to reimagine Syrian society and its identity.

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