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Writing the Body as subversion in Alexandra Chreiteh's *Always Coca-Cola*

By Luma Balaa¹

Abstract

Women in *Always Coca-Cola* are oppressed by multiple intersectional forces of oppression, such as patriarchy, the male gaze, colonialism, and the beauty myth. Although some women in the novella are caught in a state in between rebellion and conformism, *Always Coca-Cola* largely subverts patriarchy. By the end of the novella, the female protagonist is able to break free from some of her chains of oppression. Through a close textual analysis, this paper draws on many theories such as the "male gaze," Hélène Cixous's "writing the body," and Naomi Wolf's "the beauty myth" to argue that Alexandra Chreiteh's *Always Coca-Cola* attempts to subvert the male and colonial gaze, the beauty myth, and heteronormativity through writing the body.

Keywords: Male gaze, Writing the body, *Always Coca-Cola*, Chreiteh

Introduction

Alexandra Chreiteh's *Always Coca-Cola*, *Dāyman Coca-Cola*, is a novella which was originally written in Arabic and was later translated into English by Hartman. This novella is set in 21st century Lebanon and tells the story of three women, Abeer, Yana, and Yasmine, who are friends living in Beirut. Abeer Ward (whose name means "Fragrant Rose") is a Lebanese Sunni Muslim studying business at the Lebanese American University. She is raped by Yana's lover and contemplates undergoing hymen repair. Yana, who is Romanian, leaves her country to get married in Beirut. Later, she feels disappointed in her ex-husband, and in Lebanon itself, so she decides to get a divorce. She becomes a model for Coca-Cola advertisements and then falls in love with the manager of the company she works for. She becomes pregnant, but her lover, the manager, does not want the child and threatens to break up with her. She later realizes that he is not serious about her, and she decides to keep her child and go back to Romania. Yasmine, whose mother is German, and father is Lebanese, studies at the Lebanese American University. She does not care about her feminine looks.

This novella belongs to the tradition of modern postwar Lebanese writing in translation. There have been many famous contemporary canonical Lebanese Arab female writers who write in Arabic, such as Hanan Al-Shaykh, Etel Adnan, Ghada Al Samman, Emily Nasrallah, Laila Usairan, and many others whom Miriam Cooke calls the Beirut Decentralists. They are a group of Lebanese female writers who have "shared Beirut as their home and the war as their experience" (Cooke 26). These Lebanese novels have usually been about the civil war and its memory (Lang 131), but recently there has been a "fatigue of the memory discourse" of the war in Lebanese fiction and cinema (Halabi). For example, Sahar Mandour and Hilal Chouman wrote novels which

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revolve around the ordinary lives of characters without following the war's cultural legacy. The plots of these novels "reel across the mundane, often incoherent lives of mostly middle-class, twenty- and thirty-something urban professionals in Ras Beirut [city center]" (Hayek 9). Likewise, *Always Coca-Cola* attempts to ignore the memory of the civil war and focuses instead on women's issues, the body, sexuality, and youth concerns.

Not many critics have written about *Always Coca-Cola*. Sinno argues that this text shows that the discourses of Orientalism, postcolonialism, and globalization claim and produce the city (122). She contends that the novel critiques each discourse by "excavating the interpersonal and structural violence" that these oppressive forces produce on the characters' lives (Sinno 124). She has focused on the impact of these discourses on the female protagonists. Samira Aghacy, in her book *Writing Beirut: Mappings of the City in the Modern Arabic Novel*, utilizing a geographical/spatial approach, considers how the author of *Always Coca-Cola* represents the city, Beirut. She contends that the novella focuses on the city as protagonist, where "the setting takes precedence over character" (Aghacy 111). She views the city as caught between modernity and traditions. Moreover, in a chapter in her book entitled "Sexualizing the City," she dedicates a section to how women in *Dāyman Coca-Cola* are subjects of the gaze (Aghacy 100-122). However, no research so far has focused on the theme of writing the body in this novella. Through a close textual analysis, this paper draws on many theories such as the "male gaze," Hélène Cixous's "writing the body," and Naomi Wolf's "the beauty myth" to argue that Alexandra Chreiteh's *Always Coca-Cola* attempts to subvert the male and colonial gaze, the beauty myth, and heteronormativity through writing the body.

The male gaze and feminism

In film theory, the gaze is important because it describes how the audience, both males and females, view the characters presented in a certain movie. Feminist film theory has been interested in examining this gaze and its relationship to the social power between men and women. According to Mulvey, traditional Hollywood cinema instigates a voyeuristic male gaze and mirrors fetishistic stereotypes of women. "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (Mulvey 62). Mulvey explains that the "gaze" can be categorized as either: the "voyeuristic" or the "fetishistic" where women are viewed as beautiful and virtuous in the former and as sexual objects in the latter. Feminists have borrowed this concept to examine the gaze in relation to the social power between men and women in literary texts.

Alexandra Chreiteh questions the power of the male gaze in *Always Coca-Cola*. Also, she explores how far representations of women reinforce or rebel against dominant patriarchal ideology. In an interview, Chreiteh notes that she is "really frustrated with the way that women are regulated in social and literary space. Women are always there as an erotic body, depicted in sexual ways" (Qualey). There are many instances in the novella which prove that women are seen through the male gaze and as sex objects, and at the same time they have absorbed this vision of themselves. To illustrate, I will focus on the female protagonists: Abeer, Yana, Yasmine, and Hala.

Abeer, who is the main protagonist, is gazed at and fetishized. For example, men on the street gaze at her breasts. The "voyeuristic" look is revealed when the Coca-Cola boss does not interview Abeer when he hires her; his judgement of her is based on her looks though the job is not even for modelling and is secretarial; the look turns fetishistic so he rapes her. Her tailor

sexually harasses her during her fitting; his fingers touch her rear end and his nose touches her breasts (Chreiteh 104).

In turn, Abeer is continuously self-surveying her image through the male gaze perspective as a sex object. Berger comments that “*men act and women appear*”; men stare at women but women watch themselves being stared at (47). He explains that a woman is trained from childhood to survey herself, and her own “sense of being” is dictated by how patriarchy views her (Berger 46). She treasures the mirror and considers it one of the important pieces of furniture in her room. Abeer likes being looked at. “[O]ur positioning as ‘to-be-looked-at’, as object of the gaze, has through our positioning come to be sexually pleasurable” (Kaplan 212). She finds pleasure in looking at herself naked.

Throughout the novella, Coca-Cola is a leitmotif for sexuality, consumerism, and marketing culture. Coca-Cola’s “ominous presence in [Abeer]’s life is also depicted spatially, and it is associated with the motif of gazing and voyeurism” (Sinno 126). Abeer continuously views a Coca-Cola billboard with her friend Yana wearing a red bikini reflected in the mirror in her bedroom. “I’ve seen Yana’s picture reflected in my mirror, behind my own reflection, every day for half of an entire year. Every day I see Yana standing next to a giant bottle of Coke and drinking from the smaller bottle she’s holding” (Chreiteh 40). Yana’s way of posing in the advertisement is very sexual, with her eyes closed, “completely absorbed in what she is doing - as though drinking Coca-Cola were a divine pleasure” (Chreiteh 40). The Coca-Cola bottle is a phallic symbol “of the erotic objectification and commodification of women within modern life in the city” (Aghacy 117). The slogan “Always, Always Coca-Cola” reinforces the ominous presence and power of the advertisement (Chreiteh 28). An advertisement normally stays on the billboard for two months, but the Coca-Cola advertisement stayed for six months. Abeer compares her figure to that of her friend Yana. She tries to exercise to fit into the stereotype presented and adapts the exercise suggested in the magazines she reads. “I repeated that same exercise until my rear end started cramping from so much squeezing and began to hurt” (Chreiteh 42).

Yana is also a victim of the male gaze and sees herself through it, though she is looked at differently because she is from Romania. On the one hand, she is free to do what she wants because “her foreign citizenship empowers her” (Chreiteh 84). She can have premarital sex and she can get pregnant out of wedlock; she can easily get a divorce and live alone, which is frowned upon in Lebanon. On the other hand, she is viewed as a prostitute just because of her nationality. Chreiteh questions racism and prejudice against the “other.” Yana is jeered as a whore when she walks on the beach because a group of men ask her in English: “How much?” (Chreiteh 10). When Yana first bought a parrot, she did not realize that he was saying “prostitute” in Arabic and thought he was good at reciting Arabic poetry. Yana’s parrot is symbolic of the racist patriarchal male gaze. Yana got so used to the word “sharmouta” (prostitute) in Arabic that she does not get angry when a man called her this on Hamra Street. Also, Yana is as well considered a prostitute by the Lebanese General Security Office. She goes to renew her working visa, and one of the employees laughs at her and belittles her because she is residing as “an artist,” which has negative connotations in Lebanon associated with dancers and whores.

Being half German, Yasmine is the one who has mostly evaded the Lebanese male gaze. Nevertheless, she is labelled as “lesbian”; she does not see herself as a sex object and does not take care of her ‘feminine’ looks, but at times she regrets that and seems to get caught again by the male gaze. She practices kickboxing (which is normally labelled as a masculine sport), and she does not care about the gender roles prescribed for her. She is sexually free because it is hinted at

that she is extremely knowledgeable about pregnancy tests. She tries to attack the male gaze. Yasmine is disgusted by the bright pink color and thinks it is a symbol of exaggerated femininity. When Abeer is caught in a traffic jam in the car with Yasmine and Yana, a man riding a motorbike comes close to Abeer's window, stares at her unbuttoned shirt, and calls her "Horse!" However, her friend Yasmine calls him a "donkey" and opens the door against his motorbike, which makes him fall off. However, Yasmine cannot totally escape the male gaze because she is stared at when she is at the gym. The "voyeuristic" look is revealed when the men stare at her nipples because she did not wear a bra (Chreiteh 100). She cannot help but be affected by some of the patriarchal beliefs and the media, such as believing that having flat breasts is ugly and unfeminine. She, like Abeer, looks at herself in the mirror but more specifically at her lost breasts to the extent that she buys lotions to make them grow bigger. "Oh, they're lost in a haze, the olden days..." (Chreiteh 99).

Last but not least, Hala, Abeer's cousin, is completely trapped in the male gaze. She is viewed as a sex object and sees herself this way. She is also viewed as a lesbian and spinster because she is thirty years old and not married.

The Colonial Gaze and imperialism

Abeer and Hala are influenced by globalization, American cultural hegemony and the colonial patriarchal gaze. For instance, the influence of the Coca-Cola product on the East is highlighted to show American cultural imperialism. The Lebanese are losing many of their habits and also picking up American habits, such as drinking Coca-Cola or frequenting Starbucks. Abeer's mother while pregnant craves Coca-Cola but her husband does not allow her to drink it even if she is very thirsty. (Chreiteh 3). When Abeer and Hala define themselves, they use Eurocentric imperial values. This influence is partly due to the French colonization of Lebanon. They are made to believe that they have to comply with certain rigid beauty standards, such as: to be thin and blond, to have big lips and a small nose, and so forth. For example, Abeer wants to have a body like the Coca-Cola models. Aghacy comments that Abeer's beauty is connected to the media which presents products as a necessity (Aghacy 118). One example of how some Lebanese women are affected by the patriarchal ideologies presented in these magazines is when Abeer runs to buy a lip balm from the pharmacy straight after reading a magazine which recommends that all females use it to help them protect their lips from dryness and "thereby protect their femininity" (Chreiteh 4). Abeer believes that women's lips are "the most important symbol of a woman's femininity and attractiveness" (Chreiteh 4). However, Abeer discovers the inefficiency of this lip balm when she tries it and the dust sticks to her lips (Chreiteh 5). Abeer's use of the language of women's magazines shows how she internalized the ideologies perpetuated in them, such as "orange-peel skin" (Chreiteh 41). Hala dyes her hair blond but whenever she bleaches her skin white, her brown skin comes back. "She dreams of people comparing her to a foreign movie star, because those actresses are, in her opinion, the very pinnacle of beauty, a peak that Hala always dreams of ascending!" (Chreiteh 73). No matter what she does, the brown color of her hair keeps reappearing after she bleaches it, as though "it's resisting the suppression of its real color by the blonde dye with which she suffocates it" (Chreiteh 73). She even tries to conceal the color of her eyes with green contact lenses that do not completely conceal the real color. Hala dreams of being a foreign movie star, so she invites Yana to her wedding because "she considers it a great honor to

have a foreign fashion model who appeared in a Coca-Cola ad attend her wedding” (Chreiteh 22). She even wants to copy her dresses, so she goes to the same dressmaker as Yana (Chreiteh 22).

Further, Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* helps explain why some of the female protagonists in the novella always want to copy the Eurocentric model of beauty. Fanon claims that colonialism makes the colonized feel inferior, and the colonized are always measuring themselves against the ego-ideal of the other. The women are depicted as having internalized racist conceptualizations about the inherent inferiority of Arabs in comparison with their European and American counterparts” (Sinno 134). Fanon explains that “the intellectual throws himself in frenzied fashion into the frantic acquisition of the culture of the occupying power and takes every opportunity of unfavourably criticizing his own national culture” (Fanon 236-237). Many women in this novella are not happy with their looks and try to wear a white mask.

Trapped in the Beauty Myth

Wolf argues that images of women are used as a political weapon against women’s advancement and many women are trapped by the beauty myth (1st ed. 10). Concepts of beauty change over time and from one culture to another. Unfortunately, nowadays a woman’s self-image is more a result of the needs of the marketplace than that of sexual competition. Wolf views this ideology as a cultural conspiracy perpetuated through patriarchy, the advertising companies, and beauty product companies (1st ed. 49). “[Wo]men’s identity must be premised upon [their] ‘beauty’ so that [they] will remain vulnerable to outside approval, carrying the vital sensitive organ of self-esteem exposed to the air” (Wolf, 1st ed. 14). The beauty myth tells women that the quality “beauty” “objectively and universally exists” (Wolf, 1st ed. 12). Wolf refutes the above and argues that beauty is not universal or changeless (1st ed. 12). Wolf does not believe that it is wrong for women to shave their legs or to wear lipstick, but she believes in a woman’s right to be able to choose the look she wants to adopt without being coerced to follow the forces of advertising and consumerism (2nd ed. 2). These stereotypical images of beauty are perpetuated mainly through the media, such as advertisements, films, the Internet, and magazines.

Abeer, Yana, and Hala are caught up in the beauty myth in various ways. These women suffer from “self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control” (Wolf, 1st ed. 10). Their whole lives revolve around their looks, and they feel bad if they have curves or body fat. As Wolf argues, “women are so well schooled in the beauty myth that [they] often internalize it” (1st ed. 84). These stereotypes are imprisoning women and making them focus on outer beauty instead of inner beauty. Instead of trying to achieve self-fulfillment and feed their intellect, they are caught up with appearances. The beauty myth acts as a form of “social control” which might lead to dread of lost control (Wolf, 1st ed. 10). Women are controlled by stereotypes and ideals. “*The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance*” (Wolf, 1st ed. 14, original emphasis). The novella shows us that these women who are caught in the beauty myth are being prescribed certain behaviors in order to look a certain way and in turn to behave in a certain fashion. The beauty myth dictates “how women live and how they do not live” (Wolf, 1st ed. 172). The PBQ [Professional Beauty Qualification] “keeps women materially and psychologically poor” (Wolf, 1st ed. 52). They devote so much money to “beauty maintenance” and consider this as a necessary investment (Wolf, 1st ed. 52). In the novella most of the women feel compelled to go to a beauty salon, wax their body hair, diet, wear certain shoes, wear fashionable clothes, and partake in exercise.

Self-hatred

The media and advertising play a role in making women feel inadequate or “ugly” when they do not buy certain products, so that they rush out and buy them. “The beauty myth generates low self-esteem for women and high profits for corporations as a result” (Wolf, 1st ed. 49). Abeer hates her body when she compares it to Yana. Yana in turn hates her body when she gets pregnant; she will not be able to fit the male gaze stereotypical image of a model because “her body will swell up like a ripe watermelon and cellulite will strike her with the speed of a rocket” (Chreiteh 42). Abeer comments that it will be difficult for her to lose this extra fat after childbirth. She adds that Yana will no longer be beautiful, thus passing judgment on her friend, imagining that when pregnant she will lose her “beauty.” “Her beauty will be sucked out of her, as weeds suck up the rose’s share of water and nourishment, so that it wilts and its fragrance dissipates” (Chreiteh 42). She then says “Shame!” which reinforces her entrapment in the beauty myth. Yana is scared of getting old and she adores the Lebanese singer Sabah, wishing she could “preserve her own beauty as this singer has preserved hers and to look in as good condition when she reaches the same age” (Chreiteh 48).

Physical Obsessions

Yana, Abeer, and Hala are obsessed about their body image. Hala never leaves her house without looking perfect, and her appearance is arranged “totally à la perfection” (Chreiteh 73). Yana still expects that her boyfriend will make up with her after he has abandoned her with child; as a result, she visits a beauty salon “to implement a rigorous beauty program so that her body would always be well-maintained” (Chreiteh 71). Even when Abeer is being raped, she is worried about her looks, how her boss can spot her unplucked moustache, rather than suffering from the trauma of the rape (Chreiteh 81). When Abeer is worried about her family finding out that she has lost her virginity, she does not dare cry because she will ruin her makeup.

The beauty myth teaches that there is some correlation between pain and beauty so that women will purchase products such as high or pointed shoes, tight skirts or pants, or uncomfortable bras. Most of the women in the novella have to suffer to keep up with the beauty myth. Yana reminds Abeer that “il faut souffrir pour être belle!” (Chreiteh 42). Abeer has to suffer in order to get into shape, and she feels inferior compared to her friend Yana’s body (Chreiteh 41). Yana has to keep her cellulite to 10% in order to remain a model and keep her job. She has to be a model twenty-four hours a day even when she is on a break. She wears uncomfortable high heels at all times except when sleeping (Chreiteh 69). Unfortunately, most women in *Coca-Cola* force other females to follow these “rituals,” and anyone who rebels is condemned. Hala tells Abeer that she needs to get her eyebrows plucked. “How long have you gone without plucking your eyebrows? The hair on them is almost as thick as the shrubbery in Sanayeh Park!” (Chreiteh 58). Hala tries to remove Abeer’s mustache. Abeer is angry with Yasmine because she refuses to take care of her feminine looks; she believes that practising kickboxing strips a woman of her femininity (Chreiteh 18-19). Despite the solidarity, the ideology of the beauty myth at times leads to competition and jealousy between women in this novella. “Competition between women has been made part of the myth so that women will be divided from one another” (Wolf, 1st ed. 14). Because many women are stuck in the beauty myth, they try to compete with each other for men’s attention. Abeer is jealous of Yana’s beauty and figure. She hates walking with her because she does not get the

attention that Yana gets from men (Chreiteh 70). Abeer even thinks that the woman who got the job for another advertisement, Yana's adversary, is much more beautiful than Yana (Chreiteh 103).

Virginity Kept Intact

As part of the beauty myth, virginity is linked to beauty in this novella because virgin women "stand for experiential and sexual ignorance" (Wolf, 1st ed. 14). This is no longer the case in the West, but in Lebanon it is still common and one of the core themes in this text. Women are made to believe that women's virginity should be intact before marriage. In Lebanon, virginity is associated with the honor of the family and linked to men's sexuality (Elias 1). Abeer's male friend, Ashraf, tells her: "A girl is like a flower, she can only be plucked once!" (Chreiteh 67). Hala's mother says that her daughter reached thirty years old and she has not found a husband. "Isn't it a shame that this flower will wilt before anyone's inhaled its fragrance?" (Chreiteh 55). If women are non-virgins, they would be considered as "inadequate" or second-hand brides. Also, Ashraf limits the role of females in his society by arguing that a girl "must be a virgin, a wife, and a mother – in that order, of course!" (Chreiteh 68).

Abeer is afraid of losing her virginity and obsesses about it. She resists using tampons because they will "pop up her cherry" when she puts one inside her (Chreiteh 28). She says that "honor has to be of the utmost importance: I am an authentic Lebanese woman in every sense" (Chreiteh 84). When Abeer goes with her friend Yana to the gynecologist in Achrafieh, even though it is far away from her home, she is still worried that someone might spot her. When Abeer loses her virginity, she is afraid that she will be murdered by her family because she might be pregnant out of wedlock (Chreiteh 88). Abeer refuses to go to a doctor to find out if she is pregnant because of the high risk that her family might find out, and "this could lead to even more shame and disgrace" (Chreiteh 90) Abeer says that "they would chop me into pieces – they would chop me up in the... Moulinex mixer" (Chreiteh 90). Perhaps Abeer is exaggerating, but honor crime still exists in some parts of the Arab world, especially in villages. A girl losing her virginity in the Arab world is punished by her society, and it limits her chances to get married. In some cases, they might even become outcasts or commit suicide (Elias 2).

Writing the body

In order to release the Lebanese female body from the beauty myth trap and the male gaze, women should wake up and view themselves differently. "If we are to free ourselves from the dead weight that has once again been made out of femaleness, it is not ballots or lobbyists or placards that women will need first; it is a new way to see" (Wolf, 1st ed. 19). Therefore, by writing about women's bodies from a new perspective, which is normally a taboo, novelists can rebel against the male, colonial gaze and the beauty myth. Chreiteh comments that she tries "to portray the ways in which women's agency is complicated or lacking because of certain attitudes towards their bodies" (Qualey). A woman's body is no longer seen as a sex object but as a physiological one that shows its human functions. Cixous sees a connection between writing, the biological processes, and the unconscious (Chrystian 16). Patriarchal culture is phallogocentric, and female subjectivity is "derived from women's physiology and bodily instincts as they affect sexual experience and the unconscious" (Jones 247). Women historically, especially in Arabic literature, have been silenced and prevented from expressing their sexualities and bodies from their own

point of view. Malti-Douglas in her book, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*, argues that for the Arab female writer of the late twentieth century to achieve her voice, she must be able to do so by writing through her body (8).

By writing the body, the author of *Always Coca-Cola* occupies a ground outside phallogocentric ideology. The author describes physiological activities where she is speaking from the body in reference to stress and hormonal changes. She invokes many of the characters' bodily drives such as perspiring, passing water, menstruation, removing body hair, pregnancy, and having cravings. The author comments that women's bodies are "given a sort of sanctity... and this sanctity is harmful" (Qualey). In Arab culture, it is normally taboo to mention bodily aspects. The author argues that "we, as Lebanese women, and I think as women in general, have to hide these things [such as periods and urination], we have to be ashamed of these things" (Qualey). She explains that in reality women deal with these issues on a daily basis. By exploring these issues, she "deal[s] with the female body in a way that was explored not through someone else's gaze" (Qualey).

Subverting the various forms of oppression starts with self-awareness; for example, when Abeer describes her perspiration, she decolonizes herself from the male gaze because she sees herself through her bodily functions. "When I finally reached the landing in front of the apartment I was panting from exhaustion and my shirt was damp under the arms with perspiration, producing an odor like a fishmonger's shop at noon" (Chreiteh 51). The novella at one stage is set in a ladies' toilet, which is usually a taboo. This is similar to a play entitled *CUT* written by Emmanuelle Marie in 2003, which is located entirely in a woman's toilet. This play, like *Always Coca-Cola*, is "undoing the hygienic and linguistic policing to which female bodies are so often subject" (Chrystian 7). Abeer describes how she has the urge to pass water. She has to hold herself until the kickboxing match ends because there is no ladies' toilet in the gymnasium and her bladder is about to explode (Chreiteh 102). Further, the details of removing body hair are described, such as when Yana is ready to "remove all of the hair on her body with wax, to make her arms, legs, upper lip, eyebrows, underarms, and even her 'private parts' smooth and silky, ready to be touched and caressed" (Chreiteh 72).

Menstruation dominates Chreiteh's novella. In the Arab world, menstrual blood is viewed as unclean and impure. Girls are made to feel disgusted with themselves when they are menstruating. The author describes the blood that comes out when Abeer is raped when she loses her virginity. She compares it to that from menstruation. She says it is ironic that the blood of virginity is "pure," whereas the blood of menstruation is impure (Chreiteh 83). Abeer is ashamed that she is in need of "Always," a brand name for sanitary pads, and she hushes her friends at Starbucks in case the waiter or anyone hears her. Hanadi, Abeer's uncle's wife, sends the children to go to the grocery store to get her sanitary pads because she is embarrassed to get them herself (Chreiteh 53). Abeer describes her shame when the dressmaker senses that she is menstruating. She describes how her abdomen bloats and it is difficult for her to suck her belly in (Chreiteh 105).

Chreiteh describes how the body feels and the hormonal changes the females go through, mainly Abeer and Yasmine. Abeer describes in detail how she feels during her menstruation. She explains that the

dress was tight because of my huge belly and after I zipped it up I felt that the blood from my period would be pressed out of my uterus like lotion being squeezed out

of a tube. I could feel blood violently bursting out onto my pad! This great burst was accompanied by an even greater amount of pain (Chreiteh 105).

She says that the sharp pain is a sign that the blood will flow out “violently, like water pouring out of a broken faucet that you can’t stop!” (Chreiteh 26). Then she describes how her period starts in detail: “I felt a strong spasm in my lower belly and something hot starting to move between my thighs and I went into one of the stalls and discovered a huge bloodstain that had just seeped into my underwear” (Chreiteh 30). Yasmine describes her experience of kickboxing while menstruating. Ali hits her so hard that she has to stop the match. Yasmine blames her weak body on menstruation (Chreiteh 101-102). Nevertheless, she is not discouraged from exercising or going to her kickboxing lessons when she is menstruating, and Abeer is surprised, remarking that “these are two things that don’t go together, since for most women period pains are really powerful and totally incapacitate the body” (Chreiteh 25).

Despite being a member of a strict Muslim family, on several occasions Abeer decolonizes her body and shows agency. The major epiphany is when Abeer loses her virginity and does not develop serious psychological problems. She is able to talk to her friend about her secret, and she realizes that losing her virginity is not a big deal after all. She realizes that she has not really changed at all after losing her virginity. Abeer is surprised that she didn’t feel any change. I had always thought that the moment you lose your virginity is a turning point in life and that for me, of all people, everything would change at that moment... I would surely transform into another woman, in all the different meanings the word implies (Chreiteh 107).

The male gaze is blocked when Abeer draws the curtains so as not to view the Coca-Cola advertisement (Chreiteh 82). She stops gazing at herself to check whether she fits in with the stereotypical thin model image in the Coca-Cola advertisement. One day someone paints the Coca-Cola advertisement black over Yana’s naked body and covers her hair up. This is symbolic of how the male gaze has been subverted. Later, she looks at the billboard in front of her building and realizes that the Coca-Cola advertisement has disappeared. She has been freed from internalizing Eurocentric notions of beauty. She has woken up and no longer wants to have the figure of a model or to try to punish herself. “For the first time in six months the advertisement wasn’t reflected behind my own image. Instead the shiny metal that the billboard was made of was reflected in its place, and I felt a strange sense of relief!” (Chreiteh 85).

She refuses to follow many of the norms of her society. Abeer rides behind a student on a motorbike even though it is not acceptable for her in her culture. She even questions why it is considered a shameful act. Also, she is able to hang on tight to a man when normally her culture does not allow her to come close to one. “I was forced to wrap my arms around his waist, with my chest touching his back, to keep from falling off” (Chreiteh 80). She justifies her deed by saying that “[t]hough he was a stranger, I accepted the ride on this young man’s motorbike because firstly, he seemed trustworthy and also because it was my only way to reach the office (and where’s the shame in that?)” (Chreiteh 79-80). Further, Abeer mocks traditions when she describes how some of the men do not shake hands due to religious reasons. She tells us that her cousin Muhammad prevented her from shaking hands with him all of a sudden. “When I walked over to say hello and shake his hand as I usually do, he took a quick step backwards and put his hand on his heart, preventing me from shaking it. This really surprised me – he’d shaken my hand no problem only one week before” (Chreiteh 60). However, when it was time to have lunch because of the crowded table, her cousin is allowed to touch thighs with her (Chreiteh 61).

Chreiteh further re-writes the body when she breaks the binary divides of sexuality on several other occasions. By showing that Yasmine and her trainer are physically strong, she is questioning stereotypes of femininity and masculinity and their binary oppositions. “The training center where Yasmine has boxing exercises is a heterotopia of contestation where women’s association with physical weakness and inferiority in relation to men is [challenged]” (Aghacy 113). For instance, in the gymnasium the boxing coach is a four months’ pregnant woman. As part of re-thinking views of the body, the author attempts to resist the hegemony of heterosexuality.

By making gay characters visible alongside the homophobia they face, the author is rebelling against heteronormativity. The author resorts to showing the insult and abuse gay people get exposed to. Abeer, Yasmine, and Hala are all homophobic. Abeer suspects Hala of being a lesbian because she is over thirty and not married. She also avoids being seen with Yasmine so that she would not be labelled as “lesbian” as well. A gay man named Walid always stands at the entrance of Yasmine’s building as if he is waiting for someone who never comes. He has an enormous body and seems to control who comes and goes. Abeer talks about Walid in a negative way. She says that Walid “isn’t a normal man, or even a man at all—which is why even looking at him bothers me so much” (Chreiteh 21). When Yasmine sees a gay man, called Ali, at the gym wearing bright pink boxing gloves, “she says it disgusts her, that in her opinion it’s a symbol of exaggerated femininity” (Chreiteh 98). The gay man’s teammates made fun of him by chanting “Legs so long and lanky... Whoa, that bitch is skanky!” and asking him, “Did you wax recently?” (Chreiteh 98). They are saying that he is not a man and has feminine qualities. Also, the kickboxing coach is homophobic; she bullies Ali and says he is not hitting hard enough. “Clearly she screamed at him, ‘Ali, punch more powerfully! What do you think you are a cabaret dancer?!’” (Chreiteh 98). Because she challenged his masculinity, he finally punched so hard that “he broke the jaw of his opponent, who then had to be rushed to the hospital” (Chreiteh 98). When Ali spars with Yasmine, he normally reduces his power since he is playing with a woman, but when she took advantage of this situation and hit him powerfully, he hit her very hard in the face, “which jolted her as though she had been stunned by an electric current!” (Chreiteh 98). Hala views her future husband as a homosexual just because he does not fit the macho image of her Mr. Right in her mind.

Chreiteh shows some of these gay characters cross-dressing, and that can be subversive according to Judith Butler. Gender is a performative act, and these acts, such as dressing up in drag, are “subversive bodily acts” that question patriarchal notions of femininity and masculinity (Butler 79). Abeer describes Walid as wearing “a finely embroidered satin dressing gown with open-toed pumps that display the vivid shade of red painted on the toenails of his giant feet!” (Chreiteh 21). She further comments that despite “his enormous size, femininity just oozes out of him, the way Coca-Cola overflows out of a bottle that’s been shaken and meticulously plucked; his face is covered by a thick layer of makeup” (Chreiteh 21).

Ending the novella with Abeer thinking of restoring her hymen is ambivalent. This can be interpreted in three possible ways. She could be conforming to her traditions because she is scared that when she gets married, her husband might find out that he was not the first. On the other hand, the surgery can be read as signifying power and rebellion because she is able to fool patriarchy since when she restores her virginity, no one will know the truth. There is a third possibility, which would further empower her, which is that she will not undergo this surgery and will instead stand up to her culture; this is left open in the air, especially when her friend Yasmine disapproves of the surgery. She tells her, “everything that you’re going to restore you’ll just go and break again!”

(Chreiteh 109). She accuses her of losing her mind and then tells her not to be hasty since she does not have any hasty plans to get married.

One might argue that at times the male gaze and beauty myth revert back. When she reads the slogan “Beirut, Mother of the World,” which accompanies an advertisement, she wonders, if Beirut really were a woman, “would she [have] been worried about cellulite?” (Chreiteh 103). Nevertheless, Abeer automatically changes the topic when she realizes that she should not still think this way, especially after upsetting her friend Yasmine. Sinno argues that in Lebanon, “tradition and modernity inevitably converge” (134). She gives the example of how Abeer and Hala are sometimes represented as being effected by “globalization’s glitz and glamour” and at other times their “essentialist Lebanese identity takes over” (Sinno 134). This is true. But towards the end of the novella, Abeer has trespassed her borders in many ways, especially when she has opened her eyes to a new way of viewing herself and body.

Women in *Always Coca-Cola* are oppressed by multiple intersectional forces of oppression, such as patriarchy, the male gaze, colonialism, the beauty myth, and heteronormativity. Through writing the body, the author is successful in subverting some of these forces. Women fight the colonial gaze and the beauty myth by changing their self-perceptions of their bodies. Instead of viewing their bodies as sex objects, they begin to view them in a different light. For instance, the author, through the female characters, describes bodily functions that are normally taboo, such as menstruation, perspiration, and urination. By re-thinking views of the body and sexuality, the author questions heteronormativity. Also, some female characters rebel against the norms of their society. At the end of the novella, most importantly, Abeer views herself differently, decolonizes her body, shows agency, and is able to break free from some of the chains of oppression.

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